BLACK FOCUSED SCHOOLS IN TORONTO: 
WHAT DO AFRICAN-CANADIAN PARENTS SAY? 

By 

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine how parents of African descent understand the African-centered school concept as an alternative education to the mainstream public school in Toronto. While we cannot ignore the success stories of some Black students in the school system, the reality remains that the academic performance of some shows a downward trend. Hence, concerned educators and members of the African-Canadian community suggest the need for the establishment of a Black focused or African-centered school as an alternative to the mainstream public school. This will allow students to learn more effectively because they are culturally grounded and will be able to link issues of individual or group identities with what goes on at school.

This qualitative research relied principally on in-depth interviews with twenty African-Canadian parents who have children in the mainstream public schools in Toronto. It assumes that parents are important stakeholders in their children’s education so their views on problems and the need for an alternative form of schooling have significant implications for the academic performance of Black youth.

The data from my study and available literature make it evident that despite the introduction of African heritage and multicultural programs and anti-racist education,
profound problems still exist for Black youth in the mainstream public schools. The findings indicate that out of twenty, a majority of seventeen African-Canadian parents support the establishment of African-centered schools as an alternative to the mainstream public school. All participants interviewed agree that discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping in mainstream public schools are major problems for their children. The parents’ narratives show that the establishment of an African-centered school as an alternative to the mainstream public school is a way to combat the discrimination and prejudice Black youth encounter at school. The parents believe Black focused schools should be a major preoccupation of educational personnel, school boards and policy makers. Finally the implications of establishing an African-centered school to address the needs of Black youth and directions for future research are discussed.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The Black focused school is intended to address a problem, youth disengagement from school, where do we want them? … on the street or in an alternative educational place (Dei, 2005; p. 5).

1.1 Introduction

There has been much discussion among African-Canadian educators, parents and community members about minority youth and how they perform in the mainstream public school. The quote above echoes their frustration on the need for an alternative educational outlet such as a Black focused school that can engage students within their communities at the emotional, spiritual, cultural, psychological, material and political levels. As research shows, the academic underachievement and dropout rates among Black\(^1\) youth in the Greater Toronto area remains unacceptably high. The statistics show that about 40\% of them drop out of school each year compared to their White counterparts (Brown and Sinay, (TDSB) 2008; Falconer Report, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2003; Brown, 1993). Hence, concerned educators and parents argue that the mainstream educational system in Toronto has “failed” and is unable to meet the needs of Black youth today. Some educators argue that the statistics on Black youth disengagement and dropout from school are not reliable mainly because they do not tell the whole story. These educators suggest that Black students disengage and fade out of the school system for a number of reasons. Among these are: the inability of the mainstream public

\(^{1}\) In this work, the term “Black” refers to Canadians of African descent and those who identify themselves culturally as Blacks or Africans within the Canadian national and socio-cultural framework. It is used synonymously with the term “African-Canadian.”
schools to meet the needs of Black students because there are too few teachers of colour, few courses on Black thought and a zero tolerance code that hits Black students the hardest (Dei, 2005; 1996 Solomon, 2006; James and Braithwaite, 1996). Educators point out that Black students who eventually drop out may “appear to be in school in body but are absent in mind and soul” (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, and Zine, 1997; p. 6).

There is a long history of community activism in Black education in Toronto. In November, 1992, a multi-level government task force, the "African-Canadian Community Working Group,” proposed that one predominant Black junior high school should be set up in each of the six Metropolitan Toronto municipalities. The 15-member working group was appointed by the four levels of government-federal, provincial, City of Toronto, and Metro Toronto (Black Educators Working Group [BEWG], 1992). Together with a series of other recommendations, the report suggested a five-year pilot scheme, to establishing a Black focused institution (African-centered school) where Black history and culture would be taught.

In 1994, the Royal Commission on Learning (also set up by the Ontario provincial government) after extensive consultations with educators, researchers, students, parents and policy-makers also recommended setting up “demonstrated schools” along the same lines as the Working Group’s recommendations to deal with the problem of African-Canadian youth ‘underachievement’ (see RCOL, 1994). Members of the Organization of Parents of Black Children [OPBC] made a submission on the school to the RCOL and they became convinced of the need for such a school. Unfortunately, this policy recommendation was shelved for fear of a public outcry. However, the community outcry from those whose children were being failed continued unabated.
Meanwhile pressure was growing on the part of community and critical educators to give serious consideration to these schools, as documented in the advocacy and extensive writings on the efficacy of the school in the Canadian context. In fact, this was well before these recommendations were made public (Dei, 1993, 1995; 1997; see also Dei, 1996 and 2008; and Pieters, 2003).

In November 2004, Clyde McNeil, a broadcaster at CHIN radio reviewed a report from the Toronto District School Board about the number of Black students (mainly of Caribbean origin) who were at risk of dropping out of school. He wrote an editorial on the issue which generated a lot of debate and negative reactions among African-Canadian parents and concerned Canadians who felt the system was failing their children. This led to a town hall meeting in March 2005 at St Lawrence Center, sponsored by CHIN Radio & TV. One should, however, not lose sight of the fact that Clyde McNeil’s forum simply picked up on the long and relentless Black advocacy and existing research which at least the Black community already knew about.

The purpose of the meeting was to identify a solution to the educational crisis among Black youth in Canada. The forum, entitled “Making the Grade: Are We Failing Our Black Youth?” was made up of a panel of educators and some members of the African-Canadian community. The panel discussed the educational underachievement and the high dropout rates among Black students in Toronto high schools. The African-Canadian educators and members of the community on the panel suggested the establishment of a Black focused school on an experimental basis as an alternative to the mainstream public school for Black youth who do not seem to engage academically. This school would have more Black teachers, guidance counsellors, an African-centered
curriculum, a more open discussion of race and would help Black youth succeed in their schooling. Their suggestion (to establish a Black focused school on an experimental basis) generated an ongoing heated debate among educators, scholars, researchers, parents, students and the media about the need for establishing such a school and its potential to help Black students succeed in school. For example, the 2005 public forum where educators like Dei explicitly made reference to the Black focused school was just a continuation of such advocacy that began as far back as the late 1980s. Dei, et al’s (1995, 1997) study on Black youth school disengagement complemented findings of the school board indicating high dropout rates of Black youth.

Many critics of the establishment of Black focused schools fear that the idea of establishing such a school is a reversion to the days of segregation where Black youth were segregated from the mainstream public schools. This argument is however, not sustainable because, as discussed later in this study, separating Black students from the mainstream to help them succeed in school cannot be equated with segregation. This form of separation is a preferred choice of some African-Canadian parents which they believe, will better serve the educational needs of their children. The proposal to establish Black focused schools is nothing new because for many years, the Black community has advocated for schools where their children will learn about their culture, and where teachers will work collectively with students and parents in educating Black

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students about academic and social success, community belonging, social responsibility, mutual interdependence, respect for oneself and peers, and the wisdom of elders but has been ignored by the Toronto District School Board. Despite that, parents and members of the African-Canadian community have initiated their own programs, (e.g. African Heritage programs and the Saturday youth tutoring program organized by the Canadian Association of Black Educators) and continued to advocate consistently to the school boards and provincial government for change with very little results (Brathwaite and James, 1996; Dei, 1995; Dei et al. 1997; 2003; 2005; OPBC, 1993; BEWG, 1993; RCOL, 1994). The call for Black focused schooling by African-Canadian educators and parents has continued to re-emerge as a result of a deep frustration over the inability of the current public school system to effectively educate students from diverse backgrounds, and particularly the failure of the Toronto District School Board to set up Black focused schools as subsequently recommended by the African-Canadian Working Group and the Royal Commission on Learning in 1992 and 1994 (RCOL, 1992; 1994).

1.2 Statement of Problem

The Black population and other visible minority groups in Canada continue to increase but research shows that the culture of schools remains ethno-racially White (King, 2005 Dei, 2008; 1996 Stedman, 1997). The inability of the Canadian educational system to properly address the cultural and educational needs of Black youth is one of the most urgent problems in Toronto today.

Education is a major public investment that shapes social change in almost all societies and helps in the transmission of values and accumulated knowledge from one
generation to the other (Akbar, 1994). It guides children to learn a culture, shapes their behaviour and directs them towards their eventual roles in society. The ultimate goal of education, therefore, is to develop the thinking skills and knowledge base by which further learning can be advanced (Asante, 2003; Dickerson, 1995; Akbar, 1994; Ghee, 1990). As a major social institution, education socializes children to fit into a specific image of the social order and function in roles meant to realize projected trajectories for the development of that order (Friere, 1993; Akbar, 1994; Dei, 1998 and Shujaa 1994). Thus, education plays a major role in helping children learn who they are, what they are expected to do, and are motivated to reach their goals which are grounded in the knowledge of the past and propelled by hopes for an envisaged future (Akbar, 1998; Dickerson, 1995; Ghee, 1990; Kunjufu, 2000). But many African-Canadian educators and parents are concerned about their children’s education in the Ontario public school system and wonder what the future holds for them in this regard because research, reports and the statistics on Black youth education show that the number of Black youth dropouts in the Toronto District public school system remains unacceptable (Statistics Canada, 1991; Brown, 1993; The Royal Commission on Learning [RCOL], 1994; Dei et al., 1997). Researchers argue that the education system has failed, and is still failing to meet the needs of African-Canadian youth. In the past few years, African-Canadians have voiced their concerns about the high dropout rate of their youth in the public school system, emphasizing the social, economic, and political implications of this situation for society, but not much has been done to attend to their concerns (Report of the Royal Commission on Learning, 1994; Codjoe, 2001; Education of Black Students
While we cannot deny that some Black students do well in the educational system, it is important to recognize that a great number of them are also failing. Many educators, African-Canadian parents and the Black community are frustrated about the state of their children’s education in Canadian mainstream public schools, and wonder what they can do to help their children engage and achieve success in their schooling. Questions that are central to this research are:

1. Many educators and researchers argue that institutional and systemic structures in the mainstream public educational system in Toronto do not favour Black youth and prevent them from succeeding in school. Some educators and members of the African-Canadian community suggest that establishing Black focused schools on an experimental basis can help address these issues. In what ways do African-Canadian parents conceptualize African-centered schooling as a more adequate way to serve their children’s educational needs?

2. Segregated school practices were in operation in the United States and Canada until the Civil Rights movement fought to end it. The Supreme Court of the United States made it unconstitutional in 1954 and in Canada, segregated school practices “ended” around the mid 1960s. An important issue raised during the 2005 debates on the establishment of African-centered schools was the issue of segregation. Do African-Canadian parents perceive Black focused schools as segregating their children from the mainstream school as was practiced in the past?
3. What educational transformations, policies and practices do African-Canadian parents see as necessary to address the issues that affect Black youth education?

4. What do African-Canadian parents see as some of the possibilities; challenges and risks to be encountered if Black focused schools are established in Toronto?

The issue of Black youth disengagement from school has become an urgent concern for educators, researchers, African-Canadian parents and their community, some of whom argue for a holistic integrated education for African-Canadian youth. Using reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1988) and resistance (Solomon, 1992; Giroux, 1983a; 1983b) theories of schooling, anti-racist (Dei, 2000; 1996; Lee, 1985) and Afrocentric (Asante, 1991; Dei, 1995) discursive frameworks, this study examines how African-Canadian parents conceptualize African-centered schooling and the basis for creating such a school for Black youth. The call for African-centered schools recognizes the importance of providing education that speaks to the lived material and social realities of African-Canadian youth in a White dominated society (Dei, 1996; Lee, 1994; Karenga, 1993; Henry, 1992). Most research (e.g. such as Dei et al., 1997) on Black youth experiences, while providing useful insights, focus on public attitudes and student insights into Black youth schooling without providing the parents’ views. Beyond the rhetoric and academic debates about African-centered schooling, one fact that emerges from a closer scrutiny of relevant literature is a paucity of Canadian research on the Black focused schooling and how
parents understand the concept. It is this gap in the existing literature that this study seeks to fill. I now discuss the purpose of study.

1.3 Purpose of Study

This study is an exploration of the different perceptions, views, and attitudes of African-Canadian parents to the call for the establishment of African-centered schools in the Greater Toronto Area. It is now common knowledge supported by critical educational research that problems exist in the Canadian educational system, and this explains why some Black students “disengage” or “dropout” of school. The failure of the mainstream school system to interrogate issues around the teaching, learning and administration of education has led many Black students to disengage and drop out (Solomon, 1992; Palmer, 1997; Dei and Razack, 1995; Robinson 1998; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac & Zine, 1997; Fine, 1991). Dei (2003) explains that being “pushed out” is not the exercise of physical threat or force to exclude other bodies from the school community. It is the subtle messages sent through the school’s refusal to address questions of inclusivity such as ensuring that histories, knowledges and experiences of diverse youth are taken into account in schooling or ensuring that teaching staff are representative of the diverse groups in the society. Answering the questions posed earlier, this dissertation attempts to meet the broad learning objectives of this study:

1. To examine African-Canadian parents’ perceptions and understanding of the African-centered school concept as an alternative to the mainstream public school within the Canadian context.
2. To explore the background, through a theoretical analysis, of the Black focused school concept and to examine how debates about Black focused schooling fit into the current argument for educational transformation.

3. To examine how implementing an alternative educational outlet can enhance Black youth achievement and success in school.

In the last few years, there has been a lot of research promoting the idea that parents should be more involved in schools, in demanding accountability from schools, and in choosing schools that their children attend (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training 1995; Epstein, 1990; 1997; Brathwaite, 1989; Dehli et al. 1988; Radawski, 1987; 1988; Zeigler, 1987). What is lacking is addressing the issue of parental right to choose a form of schooling that would enhance the educational achievements and resulting social prospects for their children. The paucity of relevant research literature on African-Canadian parents, the community and African-centered schooling, is a clear indication that this important aspect of educating Black youth in the community has been neglected by Canadian scholars. It is my hope that this research will contribute to the literature on the Black focused school concept and the parental right to choose a school that is best for their children.

The learning objective is to listen to the views of African-Canadian parents, hear the vantage points of the participants and their concerns about mainstream public schooling and the change they want for their children. The aim is to examine how they understand the Black focused school concept and, whether in their view, establishing
African-centered schools as an alternative to the mainstream public school will be a solution to some of the problems Black youth face in the public school system in Toronto. Studies related to schooling for Black youth in Canada offer little insight into African-Canadian parents’ points of view. This study allows African-Canadian parents to articulate problems of their children in the mainstream school in their own language and experiences. It also gives them the opportunity to construct, give meaning to the issues, and shed light on how they understand the Back-focused or African-centered schooling concept.

1.4 Significance of Study

The significance of this research is seen in the need for the continuation, development and expansion of meaningful enquiries into the Canadian educational system. Some educators, African-Canadian parents and community members are calling for the establishment of Black focused schools as an alternative to mainstream schools because of the deep frustration with the inability of the Canadian educational system to address the cultural and educational needs of Black youth which has led to an increase in their dropout rates from school. In the 1990s, the Every Secondary Student survey of the old Toronto Board of Education revealed a disturbing dropout rate for Black, Portuguese, and Aboriginal students. The graduation rate for Black students was 44%, and the dropout rate was 42% compared to their White counterparts whose graduation and dropout rates were 59% and 31% respectively (Brown, 1993). In 1994, the Royal Commission on Learning (1994) also described “a crisis among Black youth with respect to education and achievement.” The situation in the 1990s has not changed. The
Eurocentric nature of the educational system holds different expectations for minorities which also affects them negatively in their schooling (Dei, 1994; Brathwaite and James, 1996). Thus, this study is significant because it examines some of the challenges that confront African-Canadian parents and their children’s education and the strategies needed to improve and enhance Black youth education. Canadian society is diverse but Eurocentricity is the focal point around which everything seems to revolve. It is important for our children to make sense of who they are, in positive and affirming ways, within an educational environment that is conducive to promoting the quest for that understanding.

Although some work has been done on African-centered schooling in Toronto, there is a dearth of critical educational research specifically on African-Canadian parents and how they understand African-centered schooling. Literature available on the subject of Black focused or African-centered schooling indicates that most of the research in this area has been done outside Canada, especially in Britain and the United States. We therefore tend to rely on research conducted in other countries to solve problems in Canada without taking Canada’s unique cultural and historical factors into consideration. This makes it urgent to look at the educational needs of Black youth by seeking parental views on what changes they would want in the mainstream schools to help Black children who may be at risk of dropping out of the school system. Listening to the views of African-Canadian parents for their understanding of the African-centered school concept would make school or educational authorities aware of the problems that African-Canadian or Black youth face in the mainstream public school system. This can hopefully, help educators and the community to find solutions to the problem of Black
youth disengagement and eventual dropout from school, and effect the changes that African-Canadian parents want to see in the school system.

This research contributes to the current educational discourse on African-centered schooling in Toronto, Ontario. It will also add to the body of knowledge that seeks to find solutions to the problems faced by Black youth in school and how they can learn effectively. As already noted, I do this by exploring the experiences and knowledge of African-Canadian parents who have children in the mainstream public schools. The study has practical implications in that it will help to change how educators teach Black youth in Toronto schools. The study covered the Greater Toronto Area because of the large number of African-Canadians who reside in the area.

1.5 Personal Location: Finding my Voice

It is necessary to specify who I am and what brings me to do a study on how African-Canadian parents and their community articulate the problems affecting their children’s education, and their perceptions and understanding of the Black focused school concept. I realize my personal location and social position has a significant bearing on how I see and understand the complex issues of African-centered schools, and Black youth education and dropout from school. I share the view of Dei et al. (1997) and other researchers that as a social and educational researcher, the issues of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, culture and history provide a specific vantage point for understanding and interpreting research data. Knowledge is necessarily informed by one’s subject location, politics, desires and interests. My personal journey reflects and influences how I read and interpret the world around me. I approach this research from
my location as a middle class, married, African-Canadian woman, a parent, researcher and educator. Educated in Ghana and Canada, I share a concern about the academic achievement and success of African-Canadian youth. As a mother with three children in the mainstream public school, this research is important for me because the problem of Black youth underachievement and dropout from school is well documented (Dei et al, 1997; Brathwaite and James, 1996). As a parent, I have concern for my own children because of what the research shows and the dismal chances for my children and other Black children in the public school system. I have great support for the mainstream public school. However, I also consider it necessary to interrogate the merits and demerits of an alternative Black focused school as one of the means for addressing the educational needs of Black youth with the aim of helping them succeed in school.

African-Canadian parents have an essential role to play in their children’s education to help them get ahead in society since schooling is a very important part of our lives. We spend a considerable amount of our lives in the educational setting and if there are problems, I believe it is our collective responsibility as parents, educators, researchers, social activists and community to ensure that the problems are addressed. Our school system has an important role in providing all youth with hope and opportunity. Indeed research suggests that children are best educated in an atmosphere of close co-operation between their parents and their school (Radwanski, 1988; Gelfer, 1991; Beresford, 1992; Duncan, 1992; Campbell, 1992; Goodall, 1996; Brathwaite, 1996).

This work is important for me because, as a parent and educator, I believe it is necessary for the School board to create choices or alternatives for Black youth schooling
and African-Canadian parents should have the right to decide what schooling they think is best for their children which would help them succeed in their educational pursuits. As a researcher and educator, I am aware of how issues of race, identity, representation and social difference continue to play significant roles in the process of delivering education in Euro-American contexts. I am also interested in seeing the educational system work to the benefit of all students. As an educator, I believe the search for an educational system that can address some of the complex and sophisticated issues affecting human growth and development in any society should not be limited to a Eurocentric system of thought since Eurocentricism is not the only lens through which to view the world. This is because the world can be viewed from so many perspectives. Thus, this research is not simply about interviewing parents, it is about educating them and learning from them as well.

Anti-racist and Afrocentric educators suggest that an important way to address issues of marginality, particularly for subordinated youth, is to center individual and collective experiences and social knowledge in the organizational life, curriculum and pedagogy of the school. It might be contentious to argue that there should be no centering of cultures and experiences in the learning processes because such an academic posture fails to take account of the asymmetrical power relations that govern the lives of minority students in the conventional school system (Asante, 2003; 1994; Shujaa, 1994; Dei, 1994; Lee, 1994). I share the view of scholars who believe that “centering of cultures” should be the prism for an interrogation of the idea of African-centered schools rather than critiques about schools going back to educational segregation and social separation (Asante, 2003; Dei, 1997; Lee, 1994). Furthermore, it would also seem obvious that
mixing students is not by itself a sufficient guarantee for integration and social acceptance in our society (Dei, 2008).

As an African-Canadian parent engaged in post graduate education and living in fairly comfortable material conditions, I do recognize my own position of privilege in relation to many other African-Canadian parents. In researching and writing therefore, I proceed in a manner that concedes that knowledge production, including my own, is always situated in particular locations of social relations of power. Thus, as I engage in this research, I proceed as a sociologist, and my personal and cultural history, as well as my political interests and desires, guide my understanding of the issues I will be studying. It is also important to note that most of the literature used for this study is built on my supervisor’s and other pioneering work in the field (in a Canadian context for example, Dei, 2008; 2007; 2005; 1997 Dei et al. 1997; Brathwaite and James, 1996). Writing on this topic has been a challenge considering the fact that my academic supervisor is a main proponent of the idea of Black focused schooling. The main challenge has been that he has written extensively on the topic and that makes it difficult to get away with much.

Knowing the perceptions of failure imposed on students who drop out of school and how it affects their parents, I hope this study will provide some useful insight for educators and policy makers. Doing this research is a way of assisting African-Canadian parents to find a possible solution to the problems Black youth face in school, and helping to work towards achieving equity and social justice for Black youth in this respect. I am convinced this research will shed some light on some of the complex issues surrounding the debate on African-centered schools and help African-Canadian parents
to make informed decisions regarding the schooling arrangement they choose for their children. It is my hope that this work will contribute to the research on alternative pedagogic and instructional strategies which will help deliver effective education to African-Canadian youth and thus, help to increase their chances of academic success in schools. This study then, helps to bring the voices of African-Canadian parents into the discourse.

1.6 Conceptualizing Black focused or African-centered Schooling

Many critical educators argue that educational institutions are the primary socializing agents in society and have a vital influence on how we view the world, others and ourselves; but mainstream schools have silenced and negated the voices, histories and lived experiences of minorities. These scholars see schools as influential agents in society that perpetuate inequities through its colonial system of education and Eurocentric world views and argue for radical changes to be made for alternative perspectives to be included in the way Black youth are educated (Asante, 2003; Schiele, 1994; Hilliard, 1992).

The Black focused or Afrocentric School is an alternative system of education whose objective is to promote student engagement by providing an atmosphere which is more culturally congruent and free from negative racial and cultural biases (Dei, 2008; 2005; Dei et al., 1997; Lee, 1994; Asante, 1991). This alternative educational environment emphasizes Afrocentric epistemologies in the teaching of Black youth (Asante, 1991).
An African-centered education centers a student in his or her own culture, history, personal location and spiritual identity. It seeks to ground students’ educational and social experiences emotionally and spiritually (Dei, 2005; 1994; 1995; 1996; Murrell, 2002). Afrocentric educators believe that centering students within their own cultural frames of reference helps them to connect emotionally, politically, socially, ideologically and spiritually to the learning process. These educators emphasize that in that context students are in a better position to learn effectively because they see themselves as part of the learning environment and are thus able to contribute to the learning process (Asante, 2003; Conyers, 2003; Akbar; 1998).

Dei (1994) argues that the basic principles of African-centered schools are that the social, political, cultural and spiritual affirmation of Africa and her historical ties with the Diaspora is crucial to the educational objectives of African-centered schools. He contends that culture is not frozen, fixed or timeless but dynamic and historical, so it is necessary for students to be culturally situated and grounded in order to learn effectively. While these principles are not exclusive to school, researchers argue that they provide a model for holistic, socially integrated schooling from which all students may benefit (Conyers, 2003; Asante, 2003; 1991; Dei, 2005; 1997; Wane, 2002; Murrell, 2002; Kunjufu, 2000). An African-centered education proposes that Black youth do not have to occupy the margins (Asante, 1991). A Black focused school will strive for high academic excellence and meet provincial standards. The African-centered school would encourage the social, physical, spiritual and academic development of students (Dei, 2005; Murrell, 2002; Madhubuti, 1994; Henry, 1992).
Altogether, an African-centered curriculum challenges the universality of Eurocentric concepts. It is based on the premise that human actions cannot be understood apart from the emotions and cultural definitions of a given context. As Murtadha (1995), explains, “the African-centered school seeks to facilitate the internalisation of value systems useful in the transformation of Africans in the Diaspora from a state of psychological, social, political and spiritual disempowerment to one of awareness, knowledge and empowerment for change” (p. 349).

Kenyatta (1998) argues that African-centered schools are important in North America because of the need to establish the political and spiritual connection between Africans in the Diaspora and those Africans back home. He concludes that “African-Centered Education is truly an “ACE” (meaning excellent way) for cleansing, filtering and reversing dangerous and debilitating dogmas which have too long been tools of destruction among African people in the Diaspora.”(p. 66). Thus the concept is that African-centered schools would be guided by classroom pedagogical styles that stress holistic learning and teaching about African cultures historically, ideologically, politically and spiritually. The schools would be structured around the African traditional values of community, co-operation, reciprocity and mutual interdependence (Dei, 2008b; 1996).

The African-centered school will be “organized around communal principles and non-hierarchical structures. It would also make the totality of Black-lived experience relevant to all parts of the curriculum.” Afrocentric educators point out that an African-centered school “challenges the conventional educational environment and stresses the principles of responsibility, interdependence, respect for elders, transparency and
accountability”. The schools would also emphasize that “individual learning is for self-
improvement, community upliftment and empowerment” (Dei, 1996, p. 299).

African-centered educators emphasize the need to restructure the education system to make it possible for Black youth to be taught by people with a similar ethnic background and be guided by curricula that are centered in their own experiences (Asante, 2003; 1991; Woodson, 1933). African-centered education involves the act of making the education Black youth receive, relevant and meaningful to the African-Canadian community in particular. It is therefore necessary for teachers to take on the task of conducting careful and historical cultural studies of Africans (Asante, 1990). For teachers to grasp the history of Black education, and anything related to Blacks, they must first of all understand the African roots (Akoto, 1992; Asante, 1990; Hilliard, 1997; Shujaa, 1994). Teachers need to learn about the effects of slavery on Blacks as human beings and the learning styles of Black youth so that they can understand who they (Black students) are as learners. By so doing, they are able to help Black youth achieve success in their schooling (Hilliard, 1997; Hale-Benson, 1982).

Teachers will be encouraged to have co-operative, egalitarian interactions and dialogue with their students. In effect, the African-centered school calls for imagining new forms of teaching, learning and administration. It calls for new ways of fostering student-peer and student-teacher interactions, as well as developing new and alternative strategies for inclusiveness in the curriculum. Students’ cultures can and must be important pedagogic and communicative tools; therefore students would and must be allowed to learn in diverse and multiple ways and be taught about cultures in which their daily lives are grounded. The schools would also open up broader definitions of
students’ success beyond strictly academic ones. The performance of civic duty and social responsibility would be part of the evaluation of students’ academic and social success (Dei, 2005; 1996).

The African-centered schools would also place a high value on the teachings of parents, care-givers, community workers and elders in the holistic education of the youth. The schools would create sites for parents, community workers and elders to come in to teach and learn from students. Teaching, learning and social interaction must revolve around allowing the child, adult and community to see the social and natural worlds from the view-points which ensure that community issues are the primary concern of all.

The concept of African-centered schooling provides another strategy for addressing the challenges of educating African-Canadian youth. Many African-Canadian educators argue that it should not be a question of whether African-Canadian youth should continue to be mainstreamed or removed from that system in order to ensure their academic and social success. The concept of “alternatives” and “choice”, being significant in debates about African-centered schools, demands that students should have the right to be exposed to alternative learning environments, and parents must also have a right to choose which schools they want their children to attend (Dei, 1996; Farrell, 1994). In practice, this means African-centered schools would and must be established alongside conventional schools, and both forms of schooling must work together to address the concerns of parents, teachers, community workers about the education of Black youth.

Advocates of African-centered schools argue that they are not calling for Black youth to be segregated from mainstream public schools (Dei, 2005; 1996; Adjei, 2005;
Brown, 2005). Dei (2008) contends that advocates realize it is important to stress that the arguments and concerns of those who advocate the setting up of African-centered schools or those who favour Black youth remaining in a structurally transformed public school system cannot be easily dismissed. He further notes that many critics who question the establishment of African-centered schools raise some legitimate questions, such as: “How can it be ensured that establishing an African-centered school will not distract from legitimate pressures emanating from some educators (Black and non-Black), students and community workers for mainstream schools to change their historic and Eurocentric focus? Do all Black parents and students share a sense of a common ancestral heritage? How can a single school cater to the different cultures, histories and spiritual identities of the students? If students do not share a common ancestral heritage, how can it be ensured that teaching about Black heritage does not merely feed on Black students’ sense of alienation in one way or another? How do we ensure that a Black focused school is not stigmatized in any manner or form by society (Dei, 2008, p. 122)? Dei (2008) notes that these questions are significant but should not in any way diminish the importance of African-centered schools. The call for African-centered schooling is an outward manifestation of the larger problems facing the Canadian public school system. Dei (1994) contends that the establishment of African-centered schools will create a way of being and thinking that is congruent with positive African traditions and values. Studies indicate that African knowledge is not only important for the intellectual and social growth of Black students, but that it plays an important part in the education of all students. In an Afrocentric setting, students learn that Eurocentric ways of knowing are not the only ways of knowing and that there are other perspectives of learning as well.
Studying the history and contributions of Black/African people to contemporary society is a way to educate people about the contributions that ancestors of the Black/African community have made to society. Students are able to study multiple histories, perspectives and events that omitted from or not available in their textbooks. They are also able to develop critical thinking skills in analyzing racism and other oppressions as they play out in the “real” world. Students are made aware of the status quo in society and can critique the established social order to work for change. Afrocentric education has the potential to help students learn that everyone in society, regardless of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, etc. has something to offer when given the opportunity. (Asante, 2003; Dei, 1996; Akbar, 1998).

The African-centered schools concept calls for situating the African-Canadian child in his or her cultural and spiritual context to facilitate learning: offering an alternative pedagogical tool by which to ensure Black academic, social, economic and political success in North America; ensuring that this alternative is neither exclusively focused on the African minority nor function as an inferior academic stream, not be irrelevant in the North American context in which it must successfully train and empower African-Canadian youth.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

Certain key terms and ideas in this thesis need defining to give clear understanding of how they are used in this thesis. In this study, ‘Black’ is defined or used collectively to refer to people of African descent or who identify themselves as Black or African-Canadian and, were either born in Africa or in the Diaspora and remain
minorities in Canadian society (Dei, 1997). Black or African-Canadian parents are not a homogeneous group, but there are some commonalities in the experiences of the children of those parents born in Africa and the Diaspora, including those of mixed parenthood. Many of the educational problems that African-Canadian parents contend with in their children’s schooling “may stem from the exigencies of being Black in a White dominated society” (Henry, 1992; Dei, Mazucca, McIsaac and Zine, 1997, p. 28).

**Systemic discrimination or racism** is racism that is embedded within policies and practices of an institution. It is the institutionalization of discrimination through policies and practices which have become historically entrenched in systems (systemic), resulting in barriers to equality of opportunity for members of minority groups (Daenzar, 1983). Henry, Tator, Mattis and Rees (1995) argue that there is a form of systemic racism in North America and Europe that is insidious because it manifests itself unconsciously in the minds of individuals and often plays a role in the development of organizational policies. Systemic racism in schools refers to established school practices, rules and regulations which systematically reflect and produce differential treatment and outcomes for students, in this case, Black students (James, 1995, p. 139).

**Equality of Opportunity** means having opportunities without unfair barriers or irrelevant criteria getting in the way. This means that every student’s results will be the same. The term “inequality” means different and unequal treatment resulting in injustice. As discussed above, inequality needs to be distinguished in terms of its manifestation. Thus a distinction needs to be made between inequality of access and inequality of outcome. If there are barriers (such as skin colour, sex, or social background) which ought to be irrelevant but which prevent particular children from getting into school or
receiving its benefits, then on the face of it, this constitutes unequal access. Unequal access can be quite subtle; it is much more than a crude (and usually an unlawful) exclusion from an entire school. It can operate through the curriculum that is offered, the style of interaction in classrooms and the atmosphere in corridors. Inequality of access would include all aspects of schooling which bring about unequal outcomes.

**Equity** refers to the qualitative value of justice. It means treating people equally but sometimes there may be the need to make other considerations. It refers to fairness and taking into consideration individual differences, background or race (Dei 1993). Equity is a “concept that flows directly from our concern for equality and social justice in a democratic society” (Schmidt and Leacock, 2010, p. 12). Educational equity refers to a condition and fairness with respect to educational opportunities, access, and outcomes for all people (Diversity and Equity in Education, 2003). It is a way to interrogate the barriers that categories like race, class, gender, ability and age etcetera create in society for some people to not have access to the social, political and economic opportunities available in society. Equity is an attempt to level the playing field and the equality of outcome and not necessarily equality of treatment (Karumanchery, 2005; Dei, 2003).

An **“inclusive curriculum”** is associated with equity, justice and representation. Inclusive education refers specifically to educational practices that make for genuine inclusion of all students by addressing equity issues and promoting successful learning outcomes, particularly for students of racial and ethnic minority backgrounds (Dei, 2000; Dei and Razack, 1995). Inclusive education is making “excellence” accessible and equitable for all students. The idea of inclusive education is to develop schools, colleges and universities into “working communities” and to bring the notions of community and
social responsibility into the center of Euro-American education (Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, Zine 2000; Dei and Razack; 1995). Dei, (1996) points out that “inclusivity requires pedagogies that respond to the social construction of differences in the school system, and also in society at large (issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and ability). Inclusivity requires spaces for alternatives and sometimes oppositional paradigms to flourish in the schools” (Dei, 1996 p. 176). An inclusive curriculum will require a reform of existing teaching practices to create new alternative teaching and learning practices in the schools. These will include strategies for co-operative education, which also emphasizes collaborative group learning among students and teachers in a diverse school environment.

The term “parent” refers to a father, mother, or caregiver of a person. Parents come from a variety of ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds. The term may be interpreted differently in different cultural settings and in different situations. It is, therefore, problematic to attach a single and stable meaning to the term "parent" (Dehli, 1994). For the purpose of this research, however, a parent is a mother, father, step parent, a legal guardian or any member of the extended family who acts as a primary caregiver of a child or student in the public school. In this case it extends beyond the biological parent of a child. In this context, parents are not seen as a unified group with shared values, concerns and access to privileges. Research amply demonstrates that class, within class, racial, single parent or ‘traditional’ heterosexual nuclear family and ethnic differences come into play when discussing parents, the kind of access they have to schools, and the assumptions teachers make about them (Dei,
This study is mainly concerned with African-Canadian parents.

**Parental involvement** is a combination of commitment and active participation on the part of the parent to the school and the student. Some researchers argue that parents who show interest and get involved in their children’s education, help their children realize their full potential (Epstein, 1990; Final Report of Parental Involvement Committee, 1991; Ziegler, 1987). A distinction is usually made between the terms parental “participation” and “involvement.” Irvine (1991), citing Slaughter (1986), makes a distinction between “parental participation” and “parental involvement”. She defines participation as direct engagement in school activities and involvement as support of the child’s schooling. Most schools value both activities, but focus only on the participation dimension. She further argues that schools measure the success of parent participation by counting the numbers of parents that attend events like parent conferences, Parent Teacher Association meetings, open houses, fund raisers, sports events, musical and dramatic festivals. Where there is communication on these occasions, it is usually one-way teachers and school officials telling parents about their children’s progress or students’ performance to admiring parents.

**Dominant or majority group** is that group of people within a given society which is largest in number, or which successfully shapes or controls other groups through social, economic, cultural, political or religious power. The term suggests superior social position. In parts of Canada, the term refers to White, English-speaking, Christian, middle-to-upper income, able-bodied men.
**Visible Minority** in this study refers to ethno-cultural and racial groups of people who do not identify as either English or French origin and are physically, socially or culturally different from the people who claim majority in the population. These differences tend to serve as grounds for discrimination, exclusion or subjugation. Dehli and Januario (1994) point out that the term *visible minority* is somewhat misleading in the context of a diverse city like Toronto where so-called minorities comprise a majority of inhabitants and a majority of students attending public schools. Dominant groups are in fact the minority even though they “name themselves as ‘the majority’ while positioning ‘others’ as though they were marginal minors” (p. 6).

**Hegemony** refers to social, cultural, religious or moral traditions and ideas that reinforce the power of the dominant group at the expense of other groups (Henry and Tator, 2006; Reynolds, 1990). It refers to the maintenance of domination, especially, that of a state or nation or a group of people over others. “It is a struggle in which the powerful win the consent of those who are oppressed, with the oppressed unknowingly participating in their own oppression” (Hill, D. and King, J., 2005; p. 368). The term is often associated with the Italian Marxist theorist and political activist Antonio Gramsci. He described this system of maintaining control by dominant groups through the state and social institutions as Ideological hegemony. Gramsci saw ideology as the driving force of society. However, he argues that individuals are not passive agents and have the potential to put up resistance against the ideological colonization in order to change oppressive groups and social structures (Gramsci, 1971).

**Hegemonic Curriculum** refers to the way in which “schools are organized around a particular organization of learning and content … The crucial features of this
curriculum are hierarchically organized bodies of academic knowledge appropriated in individual competition” (Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, and Dowsett, p. 120). The curriculum is hegemonic in that it functions to exclude large numbers of students who are from subordinate classes.

**Centricity** refers to a perspective that involves locating students within the contexts of their own cultural references so that they can relate socially and psychologically to other cultural perspectives. Centricity is a concept that can be applied to any culture. In Asante’s view, “the centrist paradigm is supported by research and shows that the most productive method of teaching any student is to place his or her group within the center of the context of knowledge” (Asante, 2003, p. 38).

The term “centric” in education refers to how the individual learner’s culture, values, knowledge, and worldviews become the lenses through which he or she sees the world. Afrocentricity assumes that many Black students have suffered identity crises in the Eurocentric classroom, and so it helps to shape school curricula to enable them rediscover their African philosophies, culture, worldview, values and knowledge. Such a change holds the promise of cultural transformation (Karenga 1986, Asante 1987, Asante 1991, Dei 1994).

Traditionally, a "**community**" has been defined as “a group of people living in a common location”. However, the definition of the word "community" has evolved to mean individuals who share characteristics, regardless of their location or degree of interaction ([http://www.yourdictionary.com](http://www.yourdictionary.com)). Education is therefore for the entire community: parents, guardians, children, caregivers, young and old. In this sense, there is no separation of education from local politics, economics, social ecology and spirituality.
In community based schooling, education is seen broadly to include strategies, processes and structures through which individuals and communities or groups come to know and understand the world and act within it. Community based schooling takes place in multiple sites, not just in the school and involves a diverse body of participants. It includes formal and informal learning practices, networks, structures and systems operating outside school environments which are useful tools in reforming education. Dei (1996) points out that any school that has the community involved provides a nurturing environment for learning because the community is involved in education to promote the intellectual, emotional and spiritual development of the learner. The strength of this involvement lies in the mutual solidarity and partnership of educators, learners, community workers, parents, guardians and caregivers. The notion of community is rooted in Afrocentric modes of thought. The community school combines the individual rights of learners with their corresponding social responsibilities (Dei, 2008).

The postmodernist view argues that differences among social groups mean that the concept of community cannot be used meaningfully. This position is very problematic. This is because communities do not require sameness. We can have a community of difference (Dei 2008). The metaphor of a forest resonates with the idea of community. At a distance, a forest appears to be one big bush, but when one gets closer, the individual trees begin to emerge. In the same way, commonalities in a community may make one assume that differences do not exist, an assumption which belies the complexity of social networks and relationships that constitute a “community”. One criticism of the postmodernist view is it fails to challenge dominant definitions of
community while denying this capacity to minority and less powerful groups. In contrast, anti-racists, argue that communities exist in any society because there is nothing like a homogeneous society (Dei, 2008).

**Eurocentricity** is an ideology or body of myths, symbols, ideas and practices that exclusively or predominantly values the worldview, existence and cultural manifestations (such as history, politics, art, language, music, literature, technology, economics) of people of European origin and devalues and subordinates the cultural expressions of people from other lands. Eurocentricity is based on White supremacist notions whose purpose is to protect White privilege and advantage in education, economics, politics et cetera. It imposes Eurocentric realities as “universal”; that which is ‘White’ is presented as applying to the human condition in general, while that which is non-White is viewed as group-specific and, therefore, not “human”. This explains why some people of African descent rush to deny their Blackness because they believe that to exist as a Black person is not to exist as a universal human being (Asante, 2003, p. 39).

The term **Afrocentricity** is a philosophical theory that refers to the study of the phenomena grounded in the perspectives and epistemological constructs of all peoples of African descent (Asante, 1991). Afrocentricism places African value systems, culture and experiences at the center of any study. It is a call to examine phenomena with Africa and African peoples as subjects at the center of a study, instead of, at the margins (Asante, 1991; Karenga, 1993; Schiele, 1994; Mazama, 2001; Conyers, 2003). In education, this means that teachers provide students the opportunity to study the world, its people, concepts and history from the context of an African world view.
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 objects of education—whether the discipline is biology, literature or social studies—African students come to see themselves not merely as seekers of knowledge but as integral participants in producing knowledge (Asante, 2003).

1.8 Organization of the Thesis

This study is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One introduces the research problem, outlines the purpose and the significance of the research. It also discusses the historical background and the call for setting up Black focused schools in Toronto. The chapter also discusses the Black focused schooling concept and looks at some of the differences between Black focused schooling and mainstream education. Some key terms of the study are defined for conceptual clarity.

Chapter Two is a review of the literature on the academic achievement of minority students in North America. It examines the question of educational transformation in the mainstream public schooling and the need for alternative schooling. Attention is given to the recent debates, arguments for and against establishing African-centered schools as an alternative educational site for Black youth. It also discusses the points of convergence and divergence, my point of departure and its implications for pedagogy and future research.

Chapter Three is a discussion of the discursive frameworks used for the study. It examines some theories on the school as a social institution with a focus on theories of
reproduction (cultural and economic capital), and resistance theory. It also discusses the anti-racist and Afrocentric discursive frameworks and how racism, power and oppression can be challenged within the educational system and society.

Chapter Four discusses the methodology employed in this study and how the study’s approach provides interpretations for research data. It also discusses the profile of the research participants and the challenges and limitations of the research.

Chapter Five focuses on the voices of participants. It is a discussion on the findings of the study as reported by participants themselves; especially their perceptions of the mainstream school and their understanding of the African-centered school concept and its prospects of helping their children achieve success in their schooling.

Chapter Six is an analysis of the major findings of the study in relation to views drawn from relevant academic literature and research. It discusses the need for educational transformation, the role and relevance of alternative schooling in Toronto, the challenges and possibilities of establishing African-centered schooling in the Greater Toronto Area. It draws a conclusion based on the major findings of the study, points to the broad implications for pedagogy and directions for future research for reorganizing and restructuring mainstream public schooling to ensure equitable outcomes for African-Canadian youth.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is a literature review of the educational experiences of ethnic minority students in North America (Canada and the United States). It is an overview of works that identify, analyze and explain some of the barriers that affect minority students especially Black youth education. It is presented in the following sub-categories a) The academic achievement of minority students b) The question of educational transformation c) The consideration of the establishment of alternative African-centered schools for Black youth d) The policy, practice implications for education in Canada. e) The strengths, gaps, points of convergence and divergence in the literature and my point of departure. Most of the research on the academic achievement of minority students and alternative schooling discussed in this study are based in Canada and the United States and provide insight for the examination of minority schooling in Canada. This review is important for this study on African-Canadian parents’ perceptions on the establishment of Black focused schooling in Toronto.

2.2 Academic Achievement of Minority Students

North American society as a whole is experiencing an increase of racial and ethnic diversity. These demographic trends are also apparent in the enrolment patterns of mainstream schools. Currently, ethnic minorities account for more than half of student enrolment in schools in some communities. However, North American education is dominated by a Eurocentric curriculum which reflects the cultural hegemony of the
British and French. The continued diversification of student population while the mainstream educational curriculum remains unchanged has created problems in the educational attainment and retention of ethnic minority students in schools (Sanchez, 2000; p. 35).

Much has been written on minority education and the challenges ethnic minority students face in the North American educational system. A number of studies identify various factors affecting educational progress of ethnic minorities in the North American educational system. Some of these issues include racial hostility, cultural differences, migration stress, family disorganization, domestic responsibilities (Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, 1986), speaking in a different dialect, low self esteem, low teacher expectations (Cummins, 1986, 1989), unsuitable curricula, culturally biased standardized tests, labeling and streaming and how low socio-economic class status affect academic achievement (Curtis, Livingstone and Smaller, 1992; Appel, 1988; Verma, 1987, 1989). Researchers like Ogbu, (1978) and Dei et al. (1997) argue that due to social and economic discrimination and the marginalization experienced by ethnic minorities in North America many “minorities internalize the inferior status ascribed to them by the dominant culture” in the society. This “inferior status” goes a long way to adversely impact their level of academic performance (Dei et al 1997; p. 12). Studies like Dei et al., (1997), Mackay and Myles, (1998; 1995) highlight family economic and educational background, personal characteristics and attributes such as age, gender, and psychosocial characteristics, academic achievement and school climate as significant variables in explaining why minority students drop out of school in Ontario. Many of these early ideas on academic achievement of ethnic minorities continue to bear some degree of
importance in confronting the challenges of minority education in Europe and North American contexts (Dei et al. 1997) Current debates about culturally contextualized education recognize that it is “relevant for educators to critically interrogate minority students’ home and school cultures in order to empower minority students to succeed in school” (Dei et al., 1997; p. 12). Unfortunately, as Dehli and Januario (1994) note, critical debates in the 1980’s and 1990’s related to empowering minority youth to succeed have been sidetracked by powerful political interests and agenda. Since the 1980s, public debates about schooling in North America and Europe “have shifted from concerns about equality in educational opportunity, to arguments about quality, performance, standards, efficiency, accountability and parental “choice”” (Dehli and Januario, 1994 p. 8). Citing researchers in North America (Calvert and Kuehn, 1993; Clandfield, 1993; Lawton, 1992; Cookson, 1992; Apple, 1993) and in Europe (Woods, 1992; Vincent, 1992 and Ball, 1993), Dehli and Januario (1994) point out that in public debates about education, the language of the ‘market’ has replaced concerns about educational equity and social justice. I share Dehli and Januario’s (1994) view that that “in some social circles, there is a lack of understanding of how issues of equity are inextricably linked to academic excellence and quality education” (p. 8).

In addition, critical educational researchers and practitioners like Fine, (1993) and Blair (2001) articulate concerns about minority education in Europe and North America and see schools as “contested public spheres” (Fine, 1993; p. 682), and as “political sites for the reproduction of power and social inequality” (Apple and Weis, 1983). These researchers see “structural poverty, racism, and sexism, and social and cultural differences as significant factors in the schooling outcomes of minority youth.” They
argue that the “structural processes of schooling and education” provide unequal opportunities which create differential outcomes for racial minorities and students from low socio-economic family backgrounds (Dei et al., 1997; Curtis, Livingstone and Smaller, 1992; Willis, 1983). The arguments of these researchers bring complex and multi-dimensional readings to academic achievement. Over the years ethnic minority students and their parents have been pathologized as being irresponsible hence the low achievement of minority students. But these authors considered offer a new reading to academic achievement and recognize that the issues are multi-layered and relate to structural and institutional practises which have worked against achievement of minority students. In fact, Bowles and Gintis, (1976) and Young and Apple, (1979) have argued in their various works that the education system in Euro-American/Canadian have served primarily to reproduce systems of structured social inequality rather than offer equal opportunities for achievement of all students. Also, educational critics such as Giroux, (1983a, 1983b); Apple (1986); McCarthy, (1990); Connel, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett, (1982) have poignantly argued that schools have functioned to reproduce the dominant ideologies of society. These critics have further examined differential power relations within society and how they implicate the processes of delivering education. They have also demonstrated that the ideology of public schools works to maintain the status quo and by this, have served the needs and dictates of capital. One can assume from the comments of these critical educators that while the education system has provided or offered limited upward mobility for some marginalized and racialized individuals, it has generally favoured those from the dominant and privileged members of society. Thus, the discussions on academic achievement of students must include
alternative to the broader structural and systemic practices that further hinder students’
performances in the school.

focus on streaming in Ontario and its effects on minority students. These studies identify school related, economic and personal factors that contribute to students’ disengagement and dropout and call for the elimination of streaming.

Dei *et al.*, (1997) and Dei (1996) explore how the school system works to place some ethnic minority students in a marginal position, eventually leaving them to drop out. These researchers examined the varying degrees in surveys on questions of the relevance of school courses, attendance and disengagement from classes to explain why students drop out of school. Hargreaves and Earl, (1990) and Hargreaves, Leithwood *et al.* (1993) explored specific issues around transition through grades. Watson (1977), among others, discusses the specific reasons why students drop out from Ontario schools, and some like Quirouette, Saint-Denis and Hout (1989) discuss intervention programs for students in French language schools such as individual and group counseling measures and mentoring for “dropouts” or students “at risk” of dropping out. Some studies like Desnoyers and Pauker, (1988) surveyed some of the methods and programs being implemented by school boards to increase school attendance to deal with the problem of school dropout.
The educational concerns that specifically affect Black youth were articulated in the report of the Ontario Royal Commission on learning (RCOL, 1994). Many state sponsored studies and community initiated research in Ontario question the absence of an inclusive school environment, which makes it difficult for some youth to connect or identify with the mainstream public school (Organization of Parents of Black Children (OPBC), 1988; Black Educators Working Group (BEWG), 1993; The Canadian Alliance of Black Educators (CABE), 1992). In response to the expressed concerns and community pressure, the provincial government undertook a number of policy initiatives between 1993 and 1995 to rectify the situation (Wright and Allingham, 1994). Some of the most notable government policy documents that deal with education in Ontario are Changing Perspectives: A Resource Guide for Race and Ethnocultural Equity, K-13 (MEO 1992), The Common Curriculum (MET, 1993b), Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation (MET 1993a) and Violence Free Schools (1993c). These documents provide the general frameworks within which Ontario school boards and schools can act. The provincial Ministry of Citizenship in conjunction with the Ontario Anti-racism Secretariat and some school boards initiated specific programs to address educational issues affecting minority youth who were considering dropping out of school (Ministry of Citizenship, 1994).

Henry, (1992) and Dei, (1997) indicate that many of the provincial documents aim to meet the challenge of inclusive schooling has been difficult to implement because it has been a difficult task to convert policy statements into concrete and practical action.

Lareau (2003); Dehli and Januario, (1994; Glick and White, (2004) identify low socio-economic status, linguistic barriers, and discrimination based on class, gender and
race, and ethnic origin as some of the challenges facing many immigrant youth in Canada. There are also diverging findings that suggest that the ways Black youth adapt to the educational system do not follow the same trajectory for youth from other racial or ethnic groups (Glick et al., 2004). Dei (1996) noted in his research among Black students that many of them felt unwelcome in the current education system. Dei (1996) therefore contends that the fact that some Black youth do well in spite of feelings of social marginalization and masked frustration should not give comfort or elusive ideas to anyone that all is well with the education system. In other words, the surviving and coping strategies of successful Black youth should not be misrepresented as logical pathways for other students to follow. This is important because in most cases, the success stories of some racialized students have served as a reference point to blame and pathologize those who are failing in the school system. Thus, if some minority students are able to do well in the school system in spite of similar challenges, then there is no justification for the failure of “others.” The danger of such uncritical use of academic success is that it conveniently ignores the complexity of students’ experiences. Also, it deflects any attention from the structural and institutional complicity. This particular issue has become a prominent concern not only for educators and researchers but for African-Canadian parents I interviewed in my research. While parents and members of the African-Canadian community have consistently called on school boards and the provincial government to address the challenges facing Black students, little appears to have been done to address these challenges (Brand and Bhagyaidatta, 1986; Ontario Parents of The Black Community [OPBC]; James and Brathwaite, 1996; Dei, 1995; Dei et al., 1997; 2003; 2005). Admittedly, problems contributing to the underachievement of
Black students cannot be left at the doorsteps of only the federal and provincial governments. Indeed, and as scholars like Codjoe (2001) have argued teachers, parents, and school administrators also have roles to play in the academic performances of Black students. However, what we have seen in most of the cases is that whenever there is a failure, parents are singled out and blamed for their students’ failure. In this research, I am not particularly concerned about the ways Black parents are singled out and blamed for the academic failure of their children. Rather, I bring multi-layered readings to factors that cumulatively inhibit the academic performances of Black students. For instance, Lee, (1985, 1994); Dei, (1995, 1996); Dei and Razack, (1995), Dei et al., (1997); Dei (2005), Dei, (2008); Brathwaite (1989); James (1990); Solomon, (1992); Black Educators Working Group (BEWG), (1993); Canadian Alliance of Black Educators (CABE), (1992); Little, (1992) have cited the Eurocentric curricular practices, the lack of Black representation in terms of teachers and administrative personnel, biased assessment and placement procedures, tensions between dominant and minority cultures in the schools, and conflicts between diverse learning and teaching styles and techniques as some of the factors that cumulatively work to hinder Black students’ academic achievements. Thus, in the face of these incontrovertible evidential supports, whose interest do we serve when we constantly single out Black parents as the main cause of their children academic failure?

Educators (Dei, 2007; Codjoe, 2001; Dei et al., 1997; Henry, 1994) observe that the psychological effects of racism on the education of ethnic minorities tend to be underestimated and show ways in which racism and other forms of discrimination affect ethnic minority and Black students’ academic achievement. One major role of education
and schooling should be to empower all children. This means giving all children the knowledge they need to succeed in school and in their adult life (Moodley, 1992). However, ethnic minority children have been disempowered because they face discriminatory treatment from a public school system (teachers, counsellors, administrators) which not only excludes them from the mainstream curriculum but also expects little of them (Dei, 2005; 2008). Discriminatory barriers such as individual, systemic and everyday racism manifest themselves in ways which impede the academic achievement of ethnic minority students. Henry (2004) describes individual racism as “the attitudes held by an individual and the overt behaviour prompted by those attitudes.” Systemic racism refers to “the laws, rules, and norms woven into the social system that result in an unequal distribution of economic, political, and social resources and rewards among various racial social groups.” Everyday racism refers to “the many and sometimes small ways in which racism is experienced by people of colour” (p. 5). Scholars and educators on minority education support this view and propose that the best way to address the problem is for stakeholders in education to confront the issue of racism and the negative thoughts associated with it. In order to confront this issue, anti-racist education would be essential to tackle race and ensure that the barriers of racism are dismantled in the mainstream public school (Dei, 2003; 1996; Wane, 2003; Codjoe, 2001, p. 344).

A significant source of inequity in schools is the pedagogy and low expectations of some teachers (Dei, 2008; 1996; Henry et al., 1995; Thomas, 1984). Scholars and educators like Solomon (1992) and Dei (2008; 1996) argue that many of the learning difficulties that minority students experience in mainstream public schooling can be
attributed to different assumptions, attitudes and teaching techniques of teachers. Logan (1990) and Dei (1996) note that low teacher expectations is a central factor in the negative educational experiences of minority students. They argue that Black students are often pathologized as ‘trouble makers’ and ‘at risk’ within the school environment. For example, Dei (1996) notes the marginalizing effects of social labels applied in the school system and argues that students of African heritage, particularly males, are usually identified as “trouble makers,” “violent”, “criminal” and “possessing unique physical prowess” (p. 40). In their research, Reconstructing Drop Out, Dei et al. (1997) contend that low teacher expectations coupled with negative stereotypes is what leads many Black students to disengage from school. Dei (1996) and Solomon (1992) argue that such perceptions about ethnic minorities often result in the relegation of Black students to lower level programs which steer them toward “dead end” school programs. This fosters their sense of alienation in school which eventually leads to “dead end” jobs. Cheng, Yau and Ziegler (1987) did a study of grade seven and eight students in the Toronto District. Their findings show that Black Caribbean students born outside of Canada were more likely to be placed in basic level programs. The Black students had lower marks and achieved fewer credits that were required to graduate high school compared to other students. Researchers (Dei, 2008; Wane 2004; Dei et al., 1997; Dei, 1996) argue that some mainstream teachers fail to have the same academic expectations for Black students as they have for White students. What happens then is that low teacher expectations are internalized by many ethnic minority students which seriously affects their academic achievement.
It is important to note that it is not only students of African heritage who are stereotyped by teachers in mainstream public schools. Ryan (1999) and Maclear (1994) did a study on ethnic minority students and their findings show that Asian-Canadian students are stereotyped as the “model minority.” They are expected to be “well behaved,” “passive,” and “high academic achievers” in subjects like science, mathematics and technology. As a result, Asian-Canadians also experience frustration and pressure to achieve in the mainstream. This stereotyping of students may appear to be relatively benign but a critical examination reveals that characterizing Asian-Canadian students as uniformly successful has masked problems and struggles that these students face (Lee 1994). It allows educators and administrators to ignore the diverse educational needs and barriers faced not by just Asian-Canadian but ethnic minority students in general. Although positive, such generalizations also reaffirm the liberal democratic belief in meritocracy and that it is possible for ethnic minorities to achieve success if they “work hard”. This generalization encourages a “blame the victim” attitude towards students who fail to succeed (Maclear, 1994 p. 57). As Dei (2003c) argues some educators fail to examine how the principle of meritocracy can be a way of denying access to institutions by certain groups. “What constitutes merit is culturally, ideologically and politically defined as well as context bound” (p. 4). He further adds that this observation is vehemently denied or challenged by a large segment of our society but this critique does not mean that we abandon merit or standards. What it means is for educators to critically examine what has conventionally stood for merit, meritocracy and excellence and particularly how our definitions exclude other ways of knowing or doing things. As educators, working with limited definitions and understanding only contribute
to limit the chances and ability of disadvantaged groups to participate in and obtain a fair share of the valued social and economic goods of society (Dei, 2003c).

Ethnic minority students also face problems in the mainstream school as a result of preconceived notions of some teachers and administrators who attribute their academic problems to the cultures they come from or the family situations in which they were raised. As well, they have to contend with negative assumptions about their academic ability in mainstream public schools. Dei et al. (1997) contend that teachers stereotype ethnic minority students as having limited academic ability and the labelling from school staff is one of the factors related to the prevalence of Black students’ disengagement from school. Codjoe (1997) also asserts that stereotyping is an “endemic devaluation many Blacks face in our society and schools” (p. 363). He further adds that our society has placed ethnic minority students in a position that makes them feel they are not supposed to succeed. The few who are able to succeed are those who are conscious of these stereotypes about their intellectual capabilities but still strive towards overcoming these labels or stereotypes. The above criticism of teachers and their role in undermining the educational achievement of Blacks and other ethnic minority students is not meant to stereotype them into a homogeneous group. There are many innovative teachers who work tirelessly to ensure that their teaching practices are inclusive.

Rezai-Rashti (1995) notes that administrators, educators and school personnel are influenced by the ideology of colonialism when dealing with ethnic minority students because they operate under the false belief that Western schools are superior to schools in other cultures. This treatment is especially meted out to children of recent immigrants. Wane (2003) argues that instead of teachers or educators developing cultural sensitivity
or cultural awareness, they rather interpret and deal with their students’ problems based on stereotypical discourses. By so doing, educators proceed from “culturally inappropriate assumptions without considering the multiple factors that inform their students’ dilemmas” (p. 37). She further notes that it is not only individual teachers, but that the educational system in general fails to recognize that students enter the classrooms with “different learning styles, reservoirs of cultural or political knowledge, expertise, mindset and understanding of their social conditions” (p. 33). Many ethnic minority students accept the dominant beliefs and ways of knowing as superior to their own and devalue their own cultural beliefs and customs as inappropriate or detrimental to their advancement in Canada (Wane, 2004). Many schools believe that parental involvement in their children’s education is one way to help students achieve academic success.

Research on parental involvement in schools shows that it results in increased academic achievement for students (Goodall, 1996; Gelfer 1991; Ziegler, 1987; Epstein, 1987). Tangri and Moles (1987), in an article entitled, Parents and the Community discuss the effects of different kinds of parent involvement on student outcomes. The authors associate positive attendance, behaviour and attitudes with parents serving as paid classroom aides, working as volunteers, home-school communications, phone contacts, home visits, parent-teacher conferences, homework assistance, home tutoring, and home educational environment. Dei et al. (1997) also discuss in their research Reconstructing Drop-out: A Critical Ethnography of the Dynamics of Black Students’ Disengagement that many Black students see home support as an integral part of their educational success. The students interviewed in the study confirmed that when parents
showed interest in children’s education, “it gave them moral support and encouragement” (Dei et al. 1997, p. 190). Educators contend that a school that is inclusive utilizes the cultural knowledge of parents and community to create a pedagogical connection between home, school and the wider community (Dei. 2008; 1993; Tangri and Moles, 1987). However, a number of factors such as structural and systemic constraints limit the involvement of ethnic minority parents in their children’s education (Dei, 1993). Tangri and Moles, (1987) discovered in their research that minority or low-income parents are often underrepresented among the ranks of parents involved with the schools and provide numerous reasons for this. Many minority parents do not have access to economic rewards like those in the dominant society. As a result, they have to work low paid jobs which result in their children living below the poverty line. Long hours of heavy physical labour result in a loss of energy and lack of time to attend to the school work of their kids. Additionally, the low level of some parents’ level of education results in an embarrassment or shyness about their own educational or linguistic abilities when dealing the child’s school authorities. The authors also note that a perceived lack of welcome by teachers and administrators and schools’ assumptions of parents' disinterest or inability to help with children's schooling also go a long way to discourage parents from getting actively involved in the children’s education. Interestingly, Tangri and Moles (1987) found that parents of disadvantaged and minority children can and do make a positive contribution to their children's achievement in school if they receive adequate training and encouragement in the types of parent involvement that can make a difference. Even more significant, the research dispels a popular myth by revealing, as noted above, that parents can make a difference regardless of their own levels of
education. Indeed, disadvantaged children have the most to gain from parent involvement programs.

Parent groups such as the Organization of the Parents of Black children (OPBC) have effectively engaged in anti-racist struggles by mobilizing and educating Black parents about the school system. These parent groups have and continue to advocate for change in the educational system by addressing issues related to Black students (Brathwaite, 1996). In the Greater Toronto Area, Black parent groups have been instrumental in lobbying for social and policy change in education and this has positively affected the academic performance of Black youth. Research (Dei et al.1997; Blair, 2001) shows that the school environment can be alienating and bureaucratic for some Black parents, so it is necessary for schools to have support systems for parental involvement in school. This is necessary because when ethnic minority parents are knowledgeable of school policies, the provincial curriculum expectations and evaluation methods teachers tend to be more accountable to students and this ensures academic achievement (Wane, 2004).

As the research indicates, with the diversity in North American societies minorities are not adequately represented in the curriculum or institutional leadership (Hilliard, 1992; Dei, 1996; 1997; 2000). The reluctance to include diversity perspectives in the curriculum is a further cause for alarm because that inclusiveness would make learning culturally relevant to minority students and help them to improve their educational performance. Another factor that interferes with the academic performance of minority students in school is the verbal and pictorial images that appear in classroom teaching materials such as posters, readings, textbooks and exercises. This puts minority
students at a distance and makes it difficult for them to identify with the curriculum because the text and pictures portray distorted images of ethnic and minority students and the Eurocentric approach does not speak to them (Allen, 2000). Scholars like Dei (1996) and Henry (1999) note that mainstream curricula and classroom resources continue to be dominated by a Eurocentric discourse that focuses on historical achievements of a certain group of people to the exclusion of the contribution of ethnic minorities. Educators and scholars like Dei (1996) and Henry et al. (1995) point out that the writing of curriculum for schools reflects the forms of knowledge and approaches that lend meaning to the way we understand the world. So the failure to include more comprehensive information relating to the field of study contributes toward the fallacy of the intrinsic superiority of the dominant groups socially and intellectually and that by dismissing the alternative perspective and life realities of a diverse student group legitimizes and perpetuates prejudice and discrimination in schools. This eventually alienates and creates significant impediments to the desire and motivation of ethnic minority students to succeed academically (Dei, et al., 1997). As a result some disengage and eventually drop out of school. The Eurocentric curriculum in mainstream schools fails to legitimize and validate their knowledge and history (Dei, James, James-Wilson, Karumanchery, and Zine, 2000). In their work Challenges and Possibilities of Inclusive schooling, Dei et al (2000) note that education “involves the opportunity to engage in a variety of learning experiences which often take place outside of the traditional classroom” (p. 151). They further argue that “the experiences of knowledge acquired within the various sites should be integrated into the school curriculum and engage the cultural knowledge of traditionally marginalized people in the society” (p. 151). It is the responsibility of educators to
develop a holistic curriculum that deals with all aspects of a child’s well-being which includes the cognitive, emotional and psychological development. A holistic curriculum validates the experiences of all students, incorporates life in the community, the environment, the spiritual and utilizes stories, folklore and the supernatural to produce other ways of knowing (Crooks, 2004).

Some researchers (Tai and Kenyatta, 1999; Osborne 1994) point out that teachers within mainstream schools do not realize the impact that educational institutions have on Black students. Some teachers do not realize that by imparting Eurocentric knowledge, skills, information and experiences, and reinforcing the fallacious notion of democracy and inclusion, traditional educational practices construct race and produce inequality. Thus, it is important for educators to examine how certain teaching practices reinforce the marginalization of minority students and render them powerless.

Crooks (2004) contends that the “failure to learn is constructed in subtle ways in and by the learning context of the school.” As such, students have very little power to change the situation and are forced to conform to the demands of the system and structure of the school (p. 38). She goes on to argue that this process interferes with the learning activities of minorities. What happens is that for a greater part of the time in the classroom, students are not dealing with subject matters but with the situation of being in a context that excludes and discriminates against them as learners. Time that should be used in studying, working with concepts and developing critical thinking skills is used to try and situate oneself and understand oneself as a capable learner. As Lima and Lima (1978) in Crooks (2004) argue, trying to locate and understand a person’s self in an environment that is adverse is an enormously difficult and emotionally demanding task.
Educators may have to adopt different educational approaches to learning. Some researchers (Heath, 1983; Tharp 1989) have identified the important role that culture plays in the transmission of knowledge and its effect on the way children learn. Some researchers (Vogt, Jordan and Tharp, 1987) argue that the way some students learn depends on how they are taught at home. So even though some cultures may value certain modes of learning over others, it does not necessarily mean one method is better than the other. Houlton (1986) notes that cultural diversity in the classroom is improved when teachers establish a welcoming classroom that provides children with an opportunity to speak freely, learn collaboratively, and incorporate their out-of-school experiences in the classroom. He adds that cultural diversity is established through the constant use of multicultural visual materials in classrooms, the valuing of children’s parents knowledge, skills and experiences and the open critical discussion of race and racism (p. 58).

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education initiated policies and programs aimed at fostering the sensitivity and relevance of culture to school materials, respect for difference, and the integration of the minority student into the mainstream (James and Brathwaite, 1996; McAndrew, 1991). The public school boards across Canada attempted to address the existing inequities in the education system. The Toronto Board of Education being the first school board in Canada to set in place an official policy on race relations thereafter many school boards in other provinces approved policies concerning race and ethnic relations (Wright, 2000; Rezai-Rashti, 1995). Many attempts have since been made to promote ethnic diversity at the administrative level and hire consultants and advisers on race relations to set up and implement the boards’ official policy.
Educators have looked for ways to use more inclusive teaching techniques and learning programs that were designed to improve both the self image and behaviour of individual students. Gibbs (1987) in Wane (2004) notes that these cooperative skills were based on old democratic values such as respect for individual differences whether cultural, racial, religious or unique lifestyles (Gibbs, 1987; p. 7). He adds that incorporating those basics in educational settings was to set “new goals for the personal development of all individuals and their capacity to effect systemic change.” It also meant working from a multicultural perspective to include not just those disempowered but also to “develop the capacity of critical thinking in all young people so that they are empowered to assess and improve conditions around them.” (p. 7).

Multiculturalism recognized the need to promote Canada’s cultural diversity and help overcome barriers to full participation in society by ethnic minorities. Critical theorists argue that multicultural education tends to unduly focus on the material and exotic dimensions of a given culture such as food, dress and festivals rather than the cultures’ underlying values and belief systems (Rezai-Rashti, 1995, Thomas, 1984; Wright, 2000). They argue that the celebration of differences tends to ignore more important factors that shape cultural identity such as racial, linguistic, religious, gender, and socioeconomic differences and systematic inequalities faced by ethnic minorities (Bramble, 2000). Wane (2004) and Rezai-Rashti (1995) argue that multicultural initiatives have been accorded low levels of priority by the various school boards but that ‘multicultural education is more concerned with social control rather than real change’ (Rezai-Rashti, 1995; p. 4.). The aim of Multiculturalism was to facilitate changes that the
policy on race relations implied but the reorganizing of schooling has not changed and remained fundamentally the same (Rezai-Rashti, 1995; p. 10).

Wane (2004) argues that despite attempts to promote ethnic diversity in schools, there is still misinformation and a lack of understanding about other cultures which inadvertently leads some teachers and students to trivialize certain ethnic groups. Thomas (1984) notes that liberal educational policies which appear to promote cultural diversity and appreciation have done little to address systemic racial inequities. These policies have been criticized for not challenging the endemic discrimination across the Canadian school system (Wane, 2004; Olneck, 1990; Thomas, 1984). The liberal approach to diversity and racial inequity led to growing dissent and disenchantment over multiculturalism. Educators, scholars, researchers and ethnic minority parents continue to push schools to move beyond multiculturalism to a framework that would openly express and expose the problems of inequality, exclusion and discrimination in education (Bramble, 2000; Wright, 2000; Cheng and Soudack, 1994).

Educators and researchers argue that despite the much heralded multiculturalism in Canada, racism exists in our society (and schools continue to be affected by racism in various ways) and have called for anti-racist education in schools to counteract its negative impact on minority students (Lee, 1985; Dei, 1996). The 1990’s was characterized by the demand for Afrocentric and anti-racist education (Asante, 1991; Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) 1994; Dei, 1995a; 1995b; James, 1995; Lee, 1985). Educators argue that anti-racist education will “equip teachers and students with the analytical tools to critically examine the origin of racist ideas and practices.” It will also help them to “understand the implications of their own race and actions in the
promotion of the struggle against racism” (Lee, 1985; p. 8). Scholars and researchers believe that racism and inequality in schools is a result of some educators’ inability or refusal to recognize and question their own biases and privileged positions in the schools (Wane, 2004). For many White teachers and administrators, it is argued that their “racial and cultural identities are generally invincible” and as authorities, they hardly resist, challenge or deconstruct racism in the educational system (Henry and Tator, Mattis, and Rees, 1995, p. 182). Wane (2004) argues that the schools’ suppression of the salience of race in the lives and opportunities of ethnic minority children, not only serves to dismiss the hardships and difficulties they face but “also denies the systemic forces that discriminate against them” (p. 40). Research shows that although the suppression of the salience of race may be unconscious, it can have a negative impact on classroom practice, where educators are not able or willing to take responsibility for the effects that their pedagogical and curricular decisions may produce (Henry et al., 1995). On the other hand, resisting racism and trying to implement equity policies cannot be placed solely on the shoulders of individual teachers. This is because an approach to implement equity which considers the issue solely from the perspective of individuals will be limited in many ways. Wane (2004) notes that in order for schools to develop a more holistic understanding of the situation, educators must acknowledge that “often the virulence of such resistance is fuelled by the educational system itself at both macro and micro levels.” She further argues that it is only when racism is examined at a myriad of levels that we can begin to develop a comprehensive assessment of the phenomenon (p. 40).

One other problem with multiculturalism is that the dominant culture does not value or recognize varied experiences of minority students and for change to occur,
society and schools will have to accept diversity as a cultural value so that it can become an effective cultural practice (Li and Bolaria, 1985; p. 335). Thus multiculturalism did not address the subtle and sometimes blatant forms of structural and systemic racism inherent in the educational system which affected the interactions of parents, students, teachers and administrators (James and Brathwaite, 1996; Committee on the education of Black Students in Toronto, 1988; Lee, 1994).

From the foregoing, one can surmise that a better and more just order is required in the Ontario educational system to produce an education that values all children and eliminates systemic barriers to the educational achievement of ethnic minorities especially Blacks. Educators are calling for a more democratic educational system which is equitable and will be able to deal with issues that relate to difference among students, especially those from other cultures. They are also advocating for alternative approaches such as integrative anti-racist education and alternative schooling. Anti-racist education acknowledges the reality of racism and other forms of social oppression such as class, sexual orientation, and gender oppression in the organizational life of the school and the potential for change (Dei, 1996). Anti-racist education will link the dynamics of the school curriculum to the larger issues of social relations outside the school (Dei and Calliste, 2000; Dei, 2000; 1996). Teachers trained in anti-racist education will be able to help ethnic minority students more effectively because they help them develop broad critical understanding of the Canadian indigenous history and social conditions as well as race and difference in school and society (Hesch, 1979; Carr and Klassen, 1997). This will be taken up in detail in the next chapter where I discuss the discursive framework for this thesis.

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2.3 The Question of Educational Transformation

Educators argue that for any meaningful educational transformation to take place in Toronto, it must be informed by effective and pragmatic policy decisions. Accountability must be central part of any strategy for educational access and inclusion in schools. Policy makers, school administrators and the African-Canadian community must examine the institutional and structural powers of the current educational system that impact directly and indirectly on Black youth education (Dei, 2008; Shockley, 2007). Dei et al (1997) argue that rethinking Black youth education will mean finding an appropriate way to address the inequities in the educational system because race is a key area of educational inequity in the mainstream public school. They further argue that transformative education policies will have to focus on the value of all children to the cause of nation-building. That is how successful teams triumph and great societies are built- by making everyone count in education, economic, social and community life. As Galabuzi (2007, p.2) points out, our youth must be a central component in renewing the promise of Canada: “hope lives in the belief that there can be real opportunity for them in the future and parents participating fully in the lives of their children, instead of being away at multiple jobs all hours of the day just to make ends meet.” Dei (2008) argues that an educator’s awareness of her or his cultural heritage, coupled with an involvement in community activism may be a powerful source of knowledge, shaping classroom pedagogy and instruction. Some researchers such as Henry, (1992); and Ladson-Billings, (1994) explore how some African-American and Canadian teachers have generated unique perspectives from their historical and cultural backgrounds and lived experiences to improve on their pedagogic relationships with students. Dei (1996, p.10) contends that
as educators develop pedagogical practices that celebrate and validate students’ diverse cultures and ancestral heritages, they are simultaneously involved in a transformative educational projects that destabilize and break down oppressive structures of schooling.

Many educators advocate for a transformative social change, which will be a “politico-pedagogic instrument” directed at redressing the structural imbalances inherent in the educational system (Dei, 1996; Hall, 1993 pg. ix). Educators point out that it is our responsibility as African-Canadian parents, educators, and citizens to develop formal and informal educational settings where understanding of political, historical, literary, technological, financial, health, law and other phenomena are transmitted not accidentally but within a cultural matrix designed to facilitate the search for a meaningful African-centered education (Shujaa, 1994; Madhubuti, 1994). These arguments are very essential to this research because they foreground the discussion for African-centred schools in Toronto.

The fight for equity and a just order in the educational system has not been fruitless. In November 1992, a multi-level government task force in Ontario, the “African-Canadian Community Working Group,” proposed that one predominantly Black junior high school be set up in each of the six Metropolitan Toronto municipalities. This 15 member group was appointed by the four levels of government (federal, provincial, municipal and Metro Toronto). Dei writes that among other recommendations, the group suggested a five-year pilot scheme to establish Black focused schools (Working Group, Toronto 1992). The schools would consist of predominantly Black and racial minority teaching staff and would treat Black history and culture as an integral part of the regular curriculum. This would be a way to redress the
problems of isolation and the frustration of many Black youth. It would also help them develop their sense of identity and belonging in a school environment. The students would come from a wide range of social backgrounds—racial/ethnic, socio-economic, and immigrant, even though a majority of them would be Black (Dei, 2005). The discussion that follows throws more light on this issue.

2.4 Alternative Schooling

The educational needs of Black youth is a long standing issue and concerns in North America because the educational system has been unable to properly address the cultural and educational needs of Black youth (Shockley, 2008; Dei, 2005; 2008; Hilliard, 1997). As mentioned earlier, many Black youth and other cultural groups comprise a sizeable proportion of the population in urban school districts, yet the educational system remains Eurocentric (Asante, 1991; Hale-Benson, 1982; Kunjufu, 2001). While the number of minority students in public schools continues to increase, Black youth especially face the mitigating problems of disproportionate interface with the criminal justice system (Solomon and Palmer 2006; Lawson, 2003). Consequently, Black students fall far behind their White counterparts in educational achievements. In order for Black children to be able to produce and compete in today’s global world, proponents of Afrocentric education have called for a complete socio-educational change for Black youth and their communities. These educators argue that African-centered education will be a comprehensive solution to the problems Black youth face in the current school system (Dei, 2008; 2005; Galabuzi, 2008; Akoto, 1999; 1992; Asante, 1999; 1980; Hilliard, 1997; Lomotey, 1992; Murrel, 2002; Ratteray, 1990).
Opponents of culture specific or African-centered schooling argue that claims for culturally separated schooling are a rejection of liberal democratic values and discourage positive possibilities of cultural pluralism (Gutmann, 1996). They contend that all culturally based schools are a part of a “separatist multicultural perspective and are designed primarily to sustain the separatist cultural identities of minorities and bolster the self-esteem of students on the basis of their membership in a separatist culture (Gutmann, 1996, p. 158). What they fail to realize is that the different perspectives and the nature of schooling and society in a liberal democratic society are hardly analyzed from an anti-racist or Afrocentric perspective that includes the voices of stakeholders in the on-going debates. So far the debates on Afrocentric schooling have been complex. There have been moments of tension, contention, contradiction, contestation, and nuance, yet what has stood out in all the editorials and public responses in newspapers is the concern that African-centered school borders on segregation. These critics have poignantly argued that African-centered schools mirrors the dreaded days of segregation of Blacks in the Southern parts of the United States (Noble, 2005; Akande, 2005). However, Dei (2005) counters this argument by explaining that there is a qualitative difference between ‘forced segregation’ and ‘separation by choice.’ He further argues that forced segregation in the first half of the twentieth century was intended to discriminate against Blacks and exclude them from meaningful participation in society but African-centered School is to address the problem of youth disengagement from school and help them succeed. He adds that integration, however has not guaranteed equitable educational outcomes for all youth and that quality education for all is possible only when equity issues are addressed. The aim is to have the best thinkers or educators in the community structure a system of
learning that is intended to educate rather than “miseducate” our youth. More than a
decade ago, Dei (1996) posed questions to critics, who thought African-centered school
is a segregated school, and I think these questions are still relevant today: How different
are African-centered schools from the all-girls or all-boys literacy programs in the junior
grades? Or should we say the stigma of segregation only achieves political currency
when the issue involves racial groups? Besides, there are examples of other ethnic
communities who have developed schools for their youth and as Akbar (1998) points out
examples from these communities like the Jewish community who have their schools of
self-affirmation does not presuppose the negation of other groups. Spence (2005) argues
in support of African-centered schools and cites an example of a similar school in Detroit
where there was no sense of segregation but rather a sense of support from the
community and a sense of racial pride and identity among the students. He argues that if
a Black focused school can build a sense of self esteem in the youth in the community
then they can step out and be successful in society. Murrell (2002) counted more than
four hundred African-centered charter schools and over one hundred independent schools
in the United States. Most of these schools are a result of increasing activism in African-
American communities organized to redress the failures of the public school system to
promote and sustain achievement for children of those communities. These charter
schools are within the public school system in the United States but have exceptions from
certain school restrictions to teach from an African-centered perspective.

Opponents also question how such schools will contend with the backlash and
social stigmatization that will be attached to the school. While these concerns are
legitimate, it should be directed to those who may want to stigmatize and backlash
students who attend the school. These concerns speak volumes about our society and further justify the need for alternative education. While we cannot change the perception of everybody about Black community, we at least, need to educate Black children on how to deal and navigate through the complex structural and systemic barriers that most work to disadvantage racialized bodies. The call for African-centered schools is a response to the larger structural problems facing the Ontario public school system. The diverse nature of Ontario’s communities and classrooms necessitates educational inclusion in terms of who teaches, what is taught, how it is taught and outreach to the larger society (Dei, 2005; Wane, 2002; Solomon, 1996; Henry, 1992; Ladson-Billings and Henry, 1990). It must be noted that advocates of the African-centered school concept are not calling for the withdrawal of Black students from the mainstream public school system. They stress that the decision to enrol a child should be purely voluntary and in consultation with the parent, teacher(s), and the student (OPBC, 1993; Dei, 2005; Galabuzi, 2008).

Another concern about African-centered education for the mainstream discourse is that a Black focused school contravenes the spirit of multiculturalism, which Canada seeks to promote among its diverse citizens. The concern expressed here is that children who attend such schools will not be able to interact with people from different backgrounds. It is indisputable that schools serve as major sites for inter-relation among people of diverse backgrounds but it must also be stressed that schools are not the only sites for social interaction. Although alternative schools may not be for all Black youth, it will be a key to success in education for some of them. Availability of choices should not be seen as destructive but rather a more open approach for alternatives in the education
system. Dei (2005) argues that students should have the right to be exposed to alternative environments, especially when it is established that conventional education is not meeting their individual needs. Despite criticism from opponents and the media and lack of support even among sections of the African-Canadian community, Afrocentric educators continue to argue that African-centered education is a critical imperative for Black youth to succeed in their education and society (Shockley, 2007). Scholars (Murrell, 2002; Asante, 1996) argue that educational reform efforts such as multiculturalism have not been strong solutions to end what Afrocentric educators call “community powerlessness”. Afrocentric educators point out that “knowing about diverse people and experiences should not supersede a child’s own understanding of self and culture when they are learning to read the world” (Murrell, 2002; p. xxi).

African-centered education is a holistic approach to bring about a sense of agency for Black youth, by using education as one vehicle for such a change. Educators like Dei (2008) and Shockley (2007) among others, note that African-centered education attempts to equip Black youth with self knowledge and instils in them a sense of agency for the purpose of nation building. By this, Black youth are taught about their responsibility to their families and society. As Asante (1998) points out, “Afrocentricity as the total use of method, affects the psychological, cultural and economic conditions in the African-American community” (p. 4). He notes that African-centered education must be understood not only simply as improving educational conditions but as a tool for holistic change in the Black community.
2.5 Discussion

The main and reiterative message of the literature is that minorities; especially African-Canadian youth, continue to be adversely affected by ‘systemic power and racism’ in the educational system and the broader Canadian social system. The literature is also clear that the present education system continues to obstruct and undermine the social and academic potentials of many minority students. It is possible that the issue of academic underachievement or student disengagement from school in respect to Black youth and other minority students could be minimized by establishing an alternative educational system that will cater to their needs. After reading the countless research reports, academic studies and anecdotal comments on the education of African youth in North America and Europe (Gaine and George, 1999), America (Ogbu, 1978; 1988) and Canada (Dei, 1994; Dei, et al., 1995; Dei, 1996; Board of Education, 1988; Brathwaite, 1989; Solomon, 1992; CABE, 1992; RCOL, 1994; BEWG, 1993; OPBC, 1993; Henry, 1992; James, 1994; Lewis, 1992), one finds that advocates for the establishment of Black focused or African-centered schools understand the frustration that has led to the push for alternative schooling.

Despite the evidence revealed by the foregoing studies, there still seem to be more questions than answers. Further examination of the experiences and encounters of African-Canadian parents and their children within the education system remains to be addressed by researchers. As Callender (1997) observes, Black researchers have traditionally been excluded from the research process and it is necessary for them to apply their own perspectives on minority experiences in the education system. This research is a way to bring particular history, location, place, experience, context and
situation which, historically have been missing from this discourse. In other words, this research is inserting the voices of African-Canadian parents into the dialectic in order to produce knowledge that legitimizes its historic context by acknowledging its complexities and the political circumstances that continue to shape the academic achievement of minority students.

In examining the literature on the educational achievement on minority education, I noticed that a lot of research has been done on the academic achievement of minority groups in North America and Europe. While some researchers (Ryan, 2006; Lind, 2006; Wane, 2004; Cummings, 2001; Solomon, 1994; David, 1992) suggest a transformation of the mainstream public school system, others like Shockley (2008, 2007), Asante (2003), Dei (1996, 2005, and 2008), Galabuzi (2008), Henry (1994) and Ladson-Billings (1992) suggest the need for alternative forms of education to meet the educational underachievement of Black students.

The selection of literature for this chapter was based on views on the subject of academic achievement of ethnic minority students and alternate or African-centered schooling as schools of achievement for Black youth. There was a wide range of opinions among authors in texts that originated from Europe (Gaine and George, 1999; Tomlinson, 1980; Tronya, 1993; Vincent, 1992; Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997) the United States (Shockley, 2008; Asante, 2003 Akoto, 1994; Dickerson, 1995; Shujaa, 1994; Lee, 1994; Irvine, 1991) and Canada (Dei, 2008; 2005; 2003 Dei et al., 1997; Codjoe; 2005; Wane, 2004; Crooks, 2004; Henry, 1994) and even among those from the same geographic region. The points of commonality and differences affirmed many of my opinions, and broadened my outlook on issues that I may have overlooked. The
authors in the works I examined provided clear and sufficient understanding of the academic achievement of minority students and alternate schooling. There was a clear connection observed in establishing a direct link between alternate schooling and its relevance in improving the academic achievement of minority or Black students. It was a challenge sifting through the wealth of material and interpreting the thoughts of each author to establish a clear connection to the discussion.

Nevertheless, a convergent point for this study and the literature reviewed is that the findings of both (educators who advocate for transformation of mainstream public schools and those who advocate for the establishment alternate schooling) suggest that as a whole racism and other discriminatory practices in mainstream public schools negatively affect ethnic minorities and especially Black youth and hinder their academic success.

In spite of the adequate works that have been done on the subject of Black youth education in Canada I noted a gap in the current literature. There is still inadequate work done on the subject of African-centered or Black focused schooling as an alternative for Black youth education in Toronto. I acknowledge that apart from a few documents and despite the research and several publications by Dei and his call for the implementation of an alternative Afrocentric School in Toronto (Dei 1996; 2004; 2005; 2006; 2008; Dei et al 1997) there is no major research work that broadly examines the Afrocentric schooling concept as alternative to the mainstream in Toronto.

This thesis attempts to address this gap in the research literature and my point of departure is to examine how African-Canadian parents understand the African-centered school concept and how they perceive it as enhancing the academic achievement of their
children. This work gives African-Canadian parents a powerful voice to express their struggle, make sense of their children’s experiences in the mainstream public school system and advocate for schools of their choice. This is made possible by including their views rather than using statistical information or a prior theoretical construct of African-Canadian parents and their concerns about their children’s schooling. The parents’ voices, experiences and reality will enable the formulation of a rich practical educational policy decision with regards to African-cantered schools. It is my hope that this study will add to the body of literature on education and schooling of ethnic minority or Black students to give a better understanding of the African-centred or Black focused school concept and how it can address the inequities that Black youth experience in schooling. The next chapter examines the discursive frameworks used in this thesis to examine how African-Canadian parents understand the Black focused school concept and their advocacy for its establishment for African-Canadian youth in Toronto.
Chapter 3: Discursive Frameworks of Education

3.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses mainly on the discursive frameworks used to discuss the issues under study as well as the structure which will be used to discuss the methods used in this thesis. The study uses an eclectic discursive framework through weaving together a number of discursive frames of analyzing issues in the study. I discuss the need for these multiple frameworks which speak to the variety and complexity of the issues discussed and explain why these discursive frameworks can also be supported together to provide a clearer understanding and more accurate analysis than any one alone. Having clarified the need for multiple lenses, I examine the cultural and economic reproduction; resistance, anti-racist and Afrocentric discursive frameworks which I use to understand the cultural and other social issues affecting the schooling of Black youth in Canada. The use of these frameworks facilitates a critical analysis of the institutional structures that deliver education in the Canadian context.

3.2 Discursive Frameworks

For this research, I choose to use the term “discursive framework” over “theoretical framework” to indicate particular viewpoints that will be used for the examination of the data in this study. It also helps me to understand and explain the phenomena I will be discussing. A theoretical framework may be defined as “a system of ideas or conceptual structures that help us to see the social world in order to understand it, explain it and change it. It guides our thinking, research, action, provides us with a systematic way of
examining social issues and provides recommendations for change” (Connelly, et. al., 1996; p. 53). A theoretical framework articulates the researcher’s basic assumptions of the nature of the social world, how it works and about the nature of people and how they act in the world they live in.

A discursive framework, on the other hand, is a network of broadly defined concepts within which a particular phenomenon may be contemplated and does not prescribe how research data must be understood. A discursive framework is open and flexible and allows the research to propose new relationships among its salient concepts and accommodates new perspectives about the enquiry. As Zine (2004) discusses, a discursive framework provides philosophical principles and foundations for building knowledge through an inductive, explanatory process. In a discursive analysis, knowledge gained from the field is related to the discursive frame as part of an epistemological engagement with the philosophical and ideological grounding that the framework provides and allows a dialogical interface between the data and the framework. Discursive frameworks allow fluid spaces and engage dialogically, resist academic closure and provide an ideological context for data to develop into particular theories. This allows the researcher to examine the tensions as well as intersections of particular historicized and contextualized phenomenon with general philosophical discursive foundations (Howard, 2009; Zine, 2004).
3.3 Employing Multiple Lenses

I use multiple discursive frameworks and each represents an alternative way of looking at the social world, schooling and education. The discursive frameworks used in the analysis of this study include the cultural and economic reproduction (Bourdieu, and Passeron, 1977; Bowles and Gintes, 1976), resistance theory (Giroux, 1983a) anti-racist (Dei, 1996; Lee, 1994) and Afrocentric (Asante, 1980; 2003; Dei, 1995) discursive frameworks. Using these frameworks will allow me to address the variety of complex issues being examined and to articulate the political perspective chosen as a means to interrogate the issues emanating from this research.

Basing the study on these perspectives brings out the strengths, inadequacies and limitations of each framework to explain why Black youth are underachieving in the mainstream public schools. The discursive frameworks used attend to the various social, cultural, political, pedagogical and ideological aspects of the issues under investigation.

This study does not rely on any underlying grand theories. I use an open field of discursive relationships to define new epistemological vantage points by combining multiple, but yet complimentary paradigms. The political imperatives embedded in these paradigms are a conscious choice to view the issues in this study from an anti-oppression stance.

The discursive frameworks I chose to examine the issues for this study are not only organically connected to the data. They are also connected to one other through their common fundamental purpose of unmasking how issues of knowledge, power, race, class and social difference frame the pedagogical issues being investigated. These frameworks are necessary because using a number of lenses or viewpoints facilitates a critical
understanding of the academic underachievement of Black youth and justifies the need to establish an alternative form of education for Black youth in mainstream public schools. In the discussion that follows, I try to outline the philosophical foundations for each discursive framework and articulate their connection or divergence to the issues discussed in this study.

3.4 Reproduction Theories

Researchers and educators argue that schools are institutions of socialization, and as such, reproduce the value system, ideologies and worldviews of the dominant social group. By doing this, schools reinforce existing economic, political and social inequalities to maintain the status quo (Bowles and Gintes, 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Giroux, 1983(a) and Bernstein, 1977). They further argue that schools initiate youth into the economic system by systematically inculcating in them, skills, attitudes and values that correspond to the labour force positions they are expected to occupy in life. In effect, children from certain social classes (middle-class) are trained to occupy leadership positions within the capitalist economy, while other children, usually from the lower class or minorities, are trained to occupy subordinate positions (Bowles and Gintes, 1976). The cultural (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977) and economic (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) reproduction concepts provide frames for analyzing the reproduction theory.
3.4.1 Economic Reproduction

Bowles and Gintis (1976) in their work, argue that schools are social organizations where students learn the attitudes essential for reproducing a society in which competing groups have unequal access to power and or resources, some groups being subordinate to others.

The structure of social relations in education not only inures the student to the discipline of the workplace but develops the type of personal demeanour, modes of self–presentation, self–image and social class identifications which are the crucial ingredients of job adequacy. Specifically, the social relationships of education—the relationship between administrators and teachers, teachers and students and students and students, and students and their work—replicate the hierarchical divisions of labour (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; p. 131).

They explain that schools operate on a “selection and reward system” where students’ expectations of success in life and their attitudes towards institutions are configured through differential treatment by school authorities and the curriculum. Students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds become accustomed to limited roles in society while students who come from high socio-economic backgrounds become accustomed to positions of privilege and domination. They argue further that students learn from an early age, a social order of things and see it as rigid and unchangeable. As a result, students embrace their particular positions in society. According to Bowles and Gintis (1976), schools do not create an equal playing field for students but reproduce social and class inequalities and a hierarchical work force where students are taught to unquestionably accept their class locations. The society then sees students who are not able to succeed in school as a personal fault of their character. The
work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) is important in that it informs educators and stakeholders of education how schools manage and reproduce the social order.

The economic reproduction theory has been criticized as lacking a cultural analysis and overlooks the notion of student agency and resistance (Sheth and Dei, 1995; Giroux, 1983b). Sheth and Dei, (1995) argue that the work of Bowles and Gintis (1976) makes it appear as though it is fruitless to form strategies of resistance and transformation. They further argue that the work provides no hope of social mobility and people in the upper class will continue to have privileges and power over people in the lower class positions since they will have no choice but to accept their positions in society. Sheth and Dei, (1995) argue that the authors failed to examine the practices of social stratification manifested through manipulation of identities such as gender, race, sexuality and ability.

Dei et al. (1997) argue that when power is held only by those in the upper class, it becomes “a reified and destructive force that loses any transformative dynamism. Without change an analysis that operates on multiple levels is impossible.” They further argue that if class is seen as the only site of oppression and that site is seen to be rigid and impervious, then there are no tools to fight the oppressions of racism, heterosexism, ableism and other oppressions. In the same way, there will be no tools to fight the systems of oppression and their permutations that is a reality for students in classrooms and members of the broader society (p. 24). Dei et al (1997) also note that a more complex analysis is needed for one to gain a deeper understanding of schools as sites of multiple oppressions and dominations, resistances and transformations.
Cole (1988) also argues that it gives a passive view of human beings, and Giroux (1983a) argues that it gives an implicit message of futility in any attempt at transforming the social order. Overall, considerable criticism directed at the theory points to its failure to explain resistance and the conflicts inherent in social relationships in schools. According to Giroux (1983a), the economic reproduction theory ignores what is taught in schools, as well as how classroom knowledge is mediated through school culture or how that knowledge is imparted by the teachers and received by the students under study. He further argues that “What we are left with is a theoretical position that reinforces the idea that there is little that educators can do to change circumstances or plight ...[and that] not only do contradictions and tensions disappear in this account but also the promise of critical pedagogy and social change” (Giroux, 1983a, p. 85).

Critics argue that when schools are viewed this way, the hope of empowering minority or Black students through pedagogical reforms, such as African-centered or alternative schooling, disappears. If we should accept the reproduction perspective of schools, it may act as an impediment to the call for an alternative system of education, such as African-centered schools in Ontario, since assimilation and conformity will essentially prevail in all schools.

### 3.4.2 Cultural Reproduction

According to Bourdieu (1987) and Giroux (1983a), cultural capital refers to the linguistic and cultural abilities which are transmitted from one generation to another through familial socialization. These include sets of meaning, qualities of style, modes of thinking, and types of disposition that are valued or devalued based on the conceptions of
the dominant group. It may also be defined as a set of social class-based styles of behaviour that are valued within dominant institutions. It is the total volume of the resources of capital (e.g. cultural, social, symbolic and economic capital) which one has access to through one’s social networks (Bourdieu, 1987; Bernstein, 1977; Lareau, 1989; 2003; Sullivan, 2001). Since schools embody the cultural capital of the dominant class, students whose families do not have a connection to forms of cultural capital highly valued by the dominant society, are at a decided disadvantage (Giroux, 1983a). Children who come from middle class families have the advantage of gaining educational credentials due to their possession of specific cultural capital. This makes it difficult for working class and some groups of minority pupils to succeed in the education system.

The cultural capital theory gives an understanding of how culture is reproduced in schools, and the political and social implications of this reality for marginalized groups. It also exposes how those who control power in society value certain forms of educational knowledge while devaluing others. This has an influence on school teachers, and some tend to view children from the middle class as more intelligent and competent compared to children from lower class backgrounds (Bennett and LeCompte, 1990; Lareau, 1989). Schools reinforce the cognitive skills that middle class children have, and often view working class and racial minorities as lacking access to the valued forms of cultural, social and economic capital. However, like most American Black communities, African-Canadians possess distinct forms of capital that are of value within their communities. For example, within the African-Canadian community, the call-and-response communication and a communal ethos are often valued, and serve as an important resource that facilitates community action (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998).
Unfortunately, most previous works have overlooked the importance of non-dominant forms of capital (Carter, 2003).

Although the cultural reproduction theory offers useful insights regarding how social control, power and domination are replicated in schools through the formal and “hidden curriculum” of schools, it also has its shortcomings. Giroux (1983b) argues that proponents of the cultural capital theory surrender to a version of domination in which the cycle of reproduction appears unbreakable. He further argues that social actors, as possible agents of change, disappear in these accounts. Thus, the proponents of the theory ignore or play down the notions of resistance and counter-hegemonic struggle. As a result, their insights are limited and incomplete.

The economic and cultural reproduction theories are very important for this research because they offer further understanding of the principles of domination and the marginalized status of minority students.

3.5 Resistance Theory

Resistance theories are critical of the philosophical and theoretical stance of the social and cultural reproduction theories. They present a view of schools and schooling which offers emancipatory possibilities for dominated social groups. Resistance theories reject the notion that schools are simply instructional sites devoid of contradictions and

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3 A school’s curriculum is the stipulated practices and procedures that govern the delivery of education (informal or hidden curriculum) as well as the unwritten practices that influence student activities, behaviours and outcomes (informal curriculum). Schools teach students to master a specific curriculum (Dei, 1997; 1995). The traditional or hidden curriculum of schools serves to justify the status quo in that the dominant ideology espouses that there is only one truth and thus justifies, protects and reinforces the social arrangements and power relationships inherent within society (Thompson, 1993; Dei, 1995)
conflicts. As Giroux (1983b) assert, domination is “neither a static process nor one that is ever complete” (p. 108). The oppressed do not passively accept the forces of domination, as the reproduction theory suggests but through certain actions or modes of behaviour, individuals and groups could counter the hegemony of the dominant group. In this sense, resistance theory offers a relevant explanatory framework for discourses related to African-centered schooling.

Historically, the Ontario public school system, as an institution, has served the material, political and ideological interests of the state and social capital formation. This, in the context of education, intensifies the need to redefine its purpose. In Ontario, the struggle to redefine education is seen in the myriad forms of students’ and community groups’ resistance to the operation of the existing structures of mainstream schools. Resisting voices from the African-Canadian community in Ontario demand African-centered schools that will produce more equitable outcomes for Black youth in the public school system (Goldstein, 2008; Dei, 2005; James 2005; Adjei, 2005;).

Resistance theory, like anti-racist and Afrocentric discursive frameworks sees the curriculum as a complex medium that does not perpetuate domination but holds emancipatory possibilities through transformation. While pointing out how schools legitimize existing social and economic inequalities, the theory sees school as an avenue for correcting those imbalances through human agency. One form of resistance in Canada has been the many attempts by various minority groups, such as the Organization of Parents of Black Children (OPBC), The Black Educators Working Group (BEWG) among others, to counteract the reproduction of the dominant culture in schools. This thesis, grounded on the resistance theory is premised on the notion that an alternative
education for Black students, and similar emancipatory paradigms, represent an attempt by minority students and African-Canadian parents to influence the emancipatory change they seek. In effect, schools should not be seen as venues of domination, but also venues where control of power can be negotiated by both majority and minority social groups. Notwithstanding its merits, especially the hope for change it offers to society at large, critics like Mallea (1987) argue that the resistance theory romanticizes issues, overstates its redeeming potential, and does not offer any concrete solutions. This need for concrete solutions presents the opportunity for other frameworks that would facilitate the understanding of, and offer tools to address some of the multiple problems African-Canadian parents and their community face in respect of their children’s education.

As already pointed out, African-Canadian youth are marginalized in many ways in their schooling but their parents and the community do not have much say in the way the children’s educational affairs are structured and administered (Brathwaite and James, 1996). This situation fuels the call for change from anti-racist and Afrocentric scholars (Shockley, 2008; Dei 2008; 1998; 1996; Asante, 1980; 1987; 1991; Schiele, 1994). Anti-racist and African-centered discursive frameworks put into perspective, issues emerging from minorities, especially Black enmeshment within the socio-cultural context of education based on Eurocentric dominance. Naturally, these frameworks interrogate the configurations of power embedded in ideas, culture and history of knowledge production offered by the Eurocentric paradigm. Anti-racist and African-centered educators recognize that while the mainstream school system intends to resolve the dilemma of youth dropout, it could make the necessary changes only by dismantling the structures that allow those schools to function in their current configuration of administration and
knowledge delivery (Dei et al., 1997). The merit of the anti-racist and Afrocentric discursive frameworks is that they help us to see, understand and explain the problems Black youth face in their schooling and enable us to provide recommendations for bringing about the changes that would transform the Eurocentric school structure beyond much semblance to its current form and the assumptions which maintain its supremacy. I now look at the anti-racist discursive framework.

3.6 Anti-racist Discursive Framework

The idea of anti-racist education was initially formulated in Great Britain and the United States, and first appeared in the Canadian educational context in the late 1980s. The shift to a focus on the possibilities of anti-racist education was largely the result of the persistence of minority communities, especially Black parents, who wanted to draw attention to the ways racism limits the academic progress and circumscribes the life chances of their children (Henry and Tator, 2006).

Anti-racism education is an action-oriented educational and communal strategy for institutional and systemic change to address the issues of racism and the interlocking systems of social oppressions. It is a critical discourse of race and racism in society and the continuing advocacy of social groups for fair and equal treatment (Dei, 1996; p. 25). Anti-racist education calls for the creation of space for the alternative and lived experiences of subordinated groups to be incorporated to facilitate and enhance the learner’s engagement in the schooling process. As Dei (1996) points out, this is possible if educators can create space for alternative and oppositional knowledge to flourish in schools. He argues that critiques of the current processes of schooling challenge
educators, administrators, students, parents and communities to work more collaboratively and in genuine power-sharing partnerships to make schools fair for everyone and responsive to societal needs and concerns. Anti-racist education therefore sees the call for African-centered schools as an alternative to the mainstream public school, as a legitimate request to address the needs of the Black community in Canadian society.

Anti-racist education is a proactive educational practice intended to address all forms of racism and the intersections of social difference (race, class, gender, sexuality and disability). Antiracism is more than a discourse. It is a form of education that makes very explicit the intended outcomes to subvert the status quo and bring about change. It is a political education whose credibility rests on action. Anti-racism highlights the material and experiential realities of minorities in dealing with the school system (Dei, 2003. 2000). Dei notes that integrative antiracism is a holistic approach of dealing with the issues of oppression through the lens of race. We cannot understand racism without looking at how it is intersected with questions of class, gender, race, language, religion, age and disability etc and that is why it becomes integrative. African-centered education is an essential part of antiracist education.

The anti-racist discursive framework acknowledges the saliency of race, and points out that it cannot be disregarded in European or Western society. Anti-racist educators argue that those who contest the social meaning of race represent an aspect of the ongoing political attempt to deny the existence of racism as a set of ideological and material practices which serve to differentiate and discriminate among social groups (Dei, 1996; p. 27). Again, some critics use academic scholarship and social practice to deny race and its implications in the social set up. As Troyna (1993) argues, sometimes
the implications of race and ethnicity are deliberately omitted in relevant discussions and that more importantly; racism is omitted from the interpretive and analytical frames found in academic discourse. In the Euro-American context, the denial of race has led to the assumption that racism has no correlation with students who disengage or drop out from school. Institutions then deny responsibility and cannot be held accountable for the injustices perpetrated by racism in the education system. In contrast, the reality of racism and other forms of social oppression (e.g. along the lines of class, sex and gender) in all aspects of mainstream schools is central to anti-racism analysis, offering the potential for change with that reality in view (Dei et al., 1997; Dei, 1995; 1996; Henry and Tator, 2006).

In its effort to understand the processes of public schooling, and to critically examine the role of the educational system in producing and reproducing social inequality, the anti-racist discursive framework links issues of identity with schooling, particularly with the processes of producing knowledge. Institutions or schools are sanctioned by the state to serve the material, political and ideological interests of the state, and to maintain the prevailing paradigm of economic and social formation. The virtue of the anti-racism discursive framework is that it helps one to understand the nature of this interaction between labour demands of our competitive global economy, and the process of schooling that accords differential treatment and educational outcomes for students of diverse racial and economic backgrounds (Dei, 2000).

As noted elsewhere, theories of reproduction emphasize principles of domination and assimilation that underestimate the marginalized status of lower class and minority students in schools. The major aim of anti-racist education, in contrast, is to transform
the established hegemonic social, economic and political interests and forces that underpin domination. “Anti-racist education questions the roles that societal institutions (school, home/family, workplace, justice, media, museum, and arts) play in reproducing inequalities of race, gender, sex and class. It acknowledges the pedagogic need to confront the challenge of diversity and difference in Canadian society and the urgency for an educational system that is more inclusive and capable of responding to minority concerns and public schooling” (Dei et al., 1997, p. 27).

Anti-racism deals foremost with equity; that is, the qualitative value of justice. It also deals with inclusion; which means addressing questions of representation, namely the need to have multiple voices and perspectives involved in the production of mainstream academic knowledge. Anti-racism examines institutional practices to see how institutions “respond to the challenges of diversity and difference, understood as the socially constructed intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, language, culture and religion in the school system” (Dei et al., 1997, p. 28; Dei, 1996; 1995).

The anti-racism discursive framework questions White power and privilege and the accompanying rationality for its dominance in the schooling process. It “problematises the marginalization of certain voices in society and the delegitimization” of the knowledge and experience of subordinate groups in the educational system (Dei, 1996/1997, p.59). The anti-racism discursive framework also questions pathological explanations of the Black “family” or ‘home environment’ (Dei, 1996/1997, p. 59). Researchers (Brathwaite, 1989; Dei, 1996) argue that we dismiss the ‘myth’ of the problem of Black youth, and rather focus attention on education in Canada as a perpetuator of inequality, rather than serve as a mechanism to lessen inequality. But as
Dei (1993) argues, we cannot assume that the “problems” faced by African-Canadian youth in school exist externally to the school unless we wish to negate a critical analysis of the role played by the state’s institutions in the delivery of education. Dei (1996/1997) further argues that this “does not imply that parents or families should not be asked to take responsibility for youth education, but that there is an important conceptual or theoretical distinction between asking parents to take responsibility and blaming parents for the educational failures of their children” (Dei, 1997, p. 2).

In practical terms, the anti-racist discursive framework recognizes “the need for a holistic form of education that must comprise subjective ways through which people come to know and interpret their world. It must include the social, political, cultural, ecological and spiritual aspects of knowledge and experience which serve as sites for learning or resistance” (Dei, 1997; p. 242). Dei (1996) contends that change can come about if individuals and groups believe that they have the spiritual will and power to usher in change. Anti-racist education seeks to draw a connection between the individual and the community in a manner that allows the self to be grounded in a collective consciousness. The central concept of African-centered schooling is to make the community central in school instruction and administration. Anti-racism education considers the development of spiritual consciousness as a relevant tool for social change, to guide actions towards greater responsibility and accountability. This offers room for children to be taught to be respectful to elders, family and community, and to make them accountable for their conduct and actions in society (Dei, 1995).

The anti-racism discourse acknowledges that social diversity must be accommodated within an equitable educational system by inclusiveness and
responsiveness to minority voices. The lack of inclusiveness in mainstream public schools has resulted in many Black students dropping out of school. Anti-racist educators who support the establishment of Black focused or African-centered schooling see it as the alternative structure that would better represent and motivate Black youth to stay in school and achieve success. Indeed, researchers argue that the idea of inclusive schooling is to see schools as “working communities” where the powerful notions of “community” and social responsibility are brought from the margins into the center of the processes of delivering education (Dei, 2008; 1996; p. 33; Ryan, 2006). Educators on inclusive schooling explain that the values taught in schools must reflect the community in such a way that school administrators, parents, students and the community have a mutual relationship of respect and responsibility, and that the school curriculum should be taught from an anti-racism perspective to avoid marginalization of minority viewpoints (Dei and Calliste, 2000).

Dei (1997), citing Sheth (1994), points out that many textual accounts dealing with discursive practices of parents and public schooling can be described as totalizing discourses. Parental roles and responsibilities and concerns about the nature of schooling in multi-ethnic communities are usually presented through the medium of the “disembodied” parent. He argues that to understand the roles of parents, guardians, or caregivers and their responsibilities and concerns about public schooling, their daily experiences and actual lived realities from the margins must be placed in the center of existing mainstream discourse. In his view, this means moving beyond a rarefied notion of “social reality” to explore how the dynamics of social difference affect parents or guardians or caregivers (Dei, 1993, p 50). Doing so brings African-Canadian parents into
the critical discussion of schooling and education in the Canadian context with their bodies, histories and educational experiences. This is significant because the parents’ views and concerns about education are shaped by the dynamics of social difference and the processes of history in a multi-ethnic society. African-Canadian parents do not share similar concerns, nor do they have the same voices, and are definitely not accorded the same roles and responsibilities in the public school system (Dei, 1993).

In sum, the core principle of anti-racist education is an emphasis on the right of marginalized people to look for alternative ways of schooling because in our world, there are, in its view, multiple ways of knowing. This contradicts the conventional thinking that Eurocentric education is the only way of knowing. I use the anti-racist discursive framework to challenge and contest liberal arguments against the establishment of African-centered schools which will enhance the academic success of Black youth. Some liberal theorists argue that establishing separate schools violate civic ethics by creating “separatism” and environments that are not conducive to endangering of key civic values such as tolerance and respect for difference. They also argue that separate schools “hinder the development of a deliberative democracy by promoting a singular framework based on specific cultural or religious ideologies” (Zine, 2004; p. 104). Such a position has to be countered using an anti-racism narrative that shifts the debate to a more complex terrain of racialized politics, social inclusion and exclusion. African-Canadian parents and their community believe, therefore that they must institutionalize an alternative way of schooling so as to enable their children to face and overcome the debilitating challenges that currently obstruct their potential to succeed academically and socially. This composite potential of the theory is further reinforced by the African-
centered discursive lens through which this educational challenge is also unpacked. To this theory I now turn.

3.7 African-Centered Discursive Framework

The Afrocentric or African-centered discursive framework, like the anti-racist framework, recognizes the negative social impacts that race and White privilege have on other social groups. Afrocentricity may be defined as

A mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values and perspectives predominate. In terms of theory, it places Africans or people of African descent in Diasporas in the center of any analysis. In terms of action and behavior, it is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behavior. …Finally it seeks to enshrine the idea that Blackness itself is a trope of ethics. Thus to be Black is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia and White racial domination (Asante, 2003; p. 2).

Afrocentricity is the study of phenomena grounded in the perspectives and epistemological constructs of African people (Asante, 1991). It is an educational philosophy, an educational world view and a paradigm shift that answers questions about the why, how and what of education. An Afrocentric curriculum or pedagogy refers to “an inclusive curriculum that promotes an alternative, non-hegemonic ways of knowing and understanding our world” (Dei, 1996 p. 170). In effect, Afrocentric schooling is not about integrating ideas into an already existing school structure. It is a whole new conception of schooling that challenges much of what conventional schools currently do. Apart from the sustained curricular, texts and instructional initiatives, Afrocentric schooling is about fundamental changes in the organizational lives of the school, including the environment, culture and the school’s climate. Afrocentric education is
education that centers the learner in her or his own experiences, history and complex identities as the base upon which to critically engage the broader knowledge school imparts (Dei, 2005; 1996; 1997).

The argument for the need to adopt an Afrocentric perspective when studying the schooling experiences of children of African descent in Toronto/Canada says that such an approach recognizes the importance of providing an education that speaks to the lived, material and social realities of African youth in White dominated societies. The approach requires educators to structure learning systems in such a way that children learn to respect who they are and to see themselves as allies with the environment in which they learn (Asante, 2003; 1991 Akbar, 1998; Madhubuti, 1994; Tedla, 1995).

One assumption of the Afrocentric discursive framework is that Africans from the continent or those in the Diaspora have culturally grounded perspectives and, despite the influence of European culture, Africans in Canada or the United States operate within the influences of the African worldview (Baldwin, 1984). The social realities of Africans are different from that of Whites, given the way power, privilege and history works in Canadian society. African-centered scholars argue therefore that the African social reality cannot be understood within the parameters of framework that reflect European values and worldview (Asante, 1991; 1994; 2003; Woodson, 1990; Karenga, 1993; Schiele, 1996; 1994; Akbar, 1998; Madhubuhti and Madhubuhti, 1994; Lee, 1994; Shujaa, 1994 Dei, 2005; 1996; 1994). Afrocentric scholars further argue that colonialism creates a duality which the dominant Eurocentric power structure maintains through education. Similar to the anti-racist education theory, African-centered programs examine how mainstream education reproduces racism by assuming that the only valid
and legitimate way of knowing or seeing the world are those of White supremacy, power and nationalism. African-centered education also looks at how White consciousness is always equated with human consciousness. What African-centered education does is to deconstruct Eurocentric perspectives in society and in the educational process that African students have to put up with, in mainstream schooling. The alternative approach of African-centered education attempts to create equal opportunities for all students, and to develop the learner’s agency by underscoring the right of Africans to be subjects rather than objects in the stories of their own lives, and thus, to reject the marginal status in history created by others about Africans. In other words, Afrocentric education ensures that the African learner is able to interpret his or her worlds and to act in ways that are consistent with an African worldview, i.e., to evaluate matters in terms of the interests of Black and African peoples, and to choose the terms of African alliance with other groups.

Afrocentricity is a discourse that resists racism, oppression and power in schools. It resists Whiteness as a site for racial, economic and political privilege (Mackintosh, 1992; Dyer, 2000). Giroux, (1997) points out that Whiteness signifies domination and, as a cultural practice, promotes race-based hierarchies. In most Canadian schools, Whiteness is seen as the norm, and as such, it becomes a place for the perpetuation of minority students’ inferiority complex. As research shows, Black students’ experiences are excluded from the curriculum, resulting in their subordination, marginalization and alienation within the classroom (Woodson, 1990; Freire, 1993; Shor, 1992). Woodson (1990) argues that in mainstream public schools, “the thought of inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters and in almost every book he studies” (p. 2). The African-centered theoretical framework sees the need to challenge
Eurocentric knowledge as being the only way of knowing the world and the standard against which Black students must be judged (Lee, 1994; Akoto, 1994; Dei, 1996; Mazama, 2001).

Afrocentricity takes a pluralist approach to life. It acknowledges that one world view cannot explain the actions of all people across all cultures. Although it does not exclude other viewpoints or worldviews, nor claims that its assumptions and value systems are universally applicable, it asserts the primacy of the African experience for African people (Mazama, 2001). In this way, like the anti-racist educational approach, it promotes critical consciousness. It calls for students to be taught to think critically about the way society is organized, and to be able to question how exclusionary practices promote racist ideals which eventually hinder the full participation of racial or minority people in society. It argues that for critical teaching to occur in schools, what is taught must change and whose knowledge (White/Black) is taken up, and whose voices are heard must be reassessed (Dei, 2005; 2000; 1996). Further, students should also be able to question how exclusionary practices promote racist ideals since these practices hinder them from full participation in education and society.

In the light of the foregoing, the goal of Afrocentric education is to assist the learner to develop a sense of ownership of the schooling process. It is to allow learners to relate to the culture, climate, environment and the socio-organizational lives of the school, including its curricular, textual, pedagogic and communicative practices, and the official and hidden rules and regulations that constitute acceptable norms of the school system. Similar to anti-racist education, an African-centered framework sees the need for changes in the curriculum to include the contributions of Black people that have
otherwise been omitted from the history taught in schools. In this concrete case, the claim is that African history must be included in the curriculum (Asante, 2003; 1994; Dei and Doyle-Wood, 2006; Dei, 2000; 1996; Lee, 1994). The African-centered framework also emphasizes that education should include a “holistic understanding and appreciation of the human experience” (Dei, 1996; Nelson-Brown, 2005). The spiritual aspects of human life are said to be important as the material components. Spirituality from an Afrocentric perspective is defined as “that invincible universal substance that connects all human beings to each other and to a creator or a Supreme Being” (Schiele, 1996, p. 287). In this case, Afrocentricity acknowledges and applauds an education system designed to enhance a learner’s spirituality and spiritual knowing. Such spirituality “is not vested in any one religious tradition. It does not necessarily mean an ascription to a high moral order, nor does it imply that one is powerless in the face of other forces.” Instead, Afrocentric spirituality “hinges on the belief that spirit is invested in everything” (Jackson, 1995, p. 20). Spirituality in education is the promotion of spiritual and intuitive learning in schools and it is an understanding of the self as a basis to engage learning. It is important for students to know that all things are naturally and spiritually connected. A personalized, subjective identification with the learning process makes it possible for the learner to be invested spiritually and emotionally in the cause of educational and social change (Dei, 1996; Yakini, 1998; Wane, 2002). Students need to learn they are connected to one another and everything around them so that they do not view themselves as separate entities in relation to the society they live in. Afrocentric education and schooling is about cooperative learning where success is broadly defined to include social and academic success. It is education without hierarchy.
Afrocentric education uses “African social values of community, responsibility, mutual interdependence, interrelationship, solidarity, spirituality and complex identity consciousness as pedagogic and instructional tools for educational delivery. It recognizes the importance of the role of indigenous, traditional and culturally-based knowledge as a valuable educational resource for the learner” (Dei, 2005, p. 253). Inclusion in the classroom begins when educators honor different ways of knowing, and where various sources of knowledge allow students to write and speak in their own vernacular and employ culturally compatible communication styles (Ryan, 2006; 1999; Solomon-Henry, 2006; Dei, 2005; Hill, 1999). The African-centered education challenges societal ideologies and the hegemonic influences that shape knowledge consciousness and identity for Black students. It projects positive behavioural outcomes for people of African descent, and acknowledges that hegemony has displaced the symbols of the cultural heritage of African people, such as language and philosophy. Afrocentric education recognizes the central role of parents, elders and communities in the education of the African learner.

Like the anti-racist framework, Afrocentricity is concerned with how identity is mediated within school settings. Dei (2005) argues that education is not only about affirming cultures and their values. It is also about strengthening all the myriad identities that students bring to the classroom. These include racial, class, gender, sexual and other identities. Our identities are part of who we are. We may not always agree on what these identities mean, but our disagreement should not lead to a negation of any one of our myriad identities. In mainstream schooling, the power of racial identities that students bring to the school is conveniently negated instead of being affirmed in more positive
ways to enable the learner to deal with the challenges of contemporary education. Instead, as Dei (1996) points out, a student’s identity should be connected to the inner self and the outer self. This commitment should not only occur on special holidays or specific months, but should be part of the student’s daily learning. Black history should not be celebrated once a year but should be part of the curriculum. Students’ identity should be made part of the learning process by eliminating any sense of inferiority based on race, class or gender, so that minority students too can see themselves as capable human beings. Thus, Black students should be aware and have knowledge of their cultural traditions so as to promote a sense of identity and pride in their racial group.

Afrocentric education claims to be transdisciplinary and applicable to studying in such disciplines as mathematics, science, social studies, arts, music and history. It is a philosophy for broadly educating the mind/learner in myriad subjects. Science and mathematics for example, must be taught with this centeredness of the African learner and engaging his or her experience and community knowledge via the schooling pedagogy.

Many principles of the African-centered framework are similar to those of the anti-racist framework. The African-centered and anti-racist education theories emphasize the need for visual and textual knowledge and physical representation in education. They both demand that Black youth be represented and included in the curriculum and in school administration and that teachers should reflect student cultural identities as teachers and educators from different racial, ethnic and gender backgrounds and serve as role models. In that capacity, they are in a position to correct the negative stereotypes and misinformation that exist in schools about minorities. School teachers should also be
committed to opposing fixed expectations based on race and ethno-cultural identity (Solomon and Palmer, 2006; Solomon, 1997; 1994). The anti-racist or African-centered educator does not only have to challenge assumptions in their classrooms, but must also challenge the diversity of difference within Canadian society (Dei, 1996). What teachers teach and students learn in school should apply to everyday situations.

The objective of using these frameworks is to draw points of convergence and divergence. Despite their commonalities, the African-centered framework is distinct from the anti-racist framework in some respect, so that Afrocentric ideas can be used to buttress arguments for anti-racist education (Dei, 1995). The two frameworks are concerned with issues of power, identity and resistance in education. They argue that power is a process that marginalizes students, and that power sharing allows students to gain control over knowledge about their communities and other communities in society (Dei, 1996). Anti-racist and Afrocentric educators critically examine how power hinders racialized students' abilities and deprives Black students of their privileges and rights in their schooling. Afrocentric educators also examine how the Eurocentric approach to power is concentrated in a few hands and does not support the collective fundamentals of African cultural ways of knowing. The African-centered framework focuses mainly on Africans or “Black” people on the continent of Africa and those in the Diasporas because it is built on knowledge that was generated by Africans. The take-off point for Afrocentric analysis is African perspectives which are then connected to other viewpoints from the rest of world. Afrocentricity is informed foremost by African realities. This position draws critics to wrongly accuse Afrocentricity of being self-seeking rather than looking out for the collective interest of the world. However, critics
fail to acknowledge and appreciate that Afrocentricity is not just a discourse, but a political project that seeks to challenge the historical and contemporary exploitation of people of African descent globally. This is why it makes no apology for primarily crusading with issues affecting people of African descent, before looking out for at the interests of other people.

Anti-racist education, on other hand, takes a broader perspective. Its body politic consists of all minoritized or racialized peoples. Thus, it problematizes individual, social and systemic practices that affect the marginalized on the basis of their linguistics, class, gender, racial, ability and age differences from the dominant and other minority groups in a society. Anti-racist education is a political voice against all forms of social oppression. Dei (1996) contends: “There is a contestation that must be accepted and struggled with and against if the fight against oppression is to be successful” (p. 58). As a political activity, with strong academic content, the power of anti-racist education lies in its message which is encapsulated in theoretical language and provides important arguments, references, reviews and antidotes to counter Eurocentric and other hegemonic views and practices (Dei, 1996; 2000).

As mentioned earlier, the anti-racist and Afrocentric discursive frameworks are concerned with how identity is mediated in educational settings. Their aim is to examine how learning can be transformed so that racialized students are no longer disadvantaged within classroom settings. Even so, as forms of resistance, the two frameworks differ, because while Afrocentricity examines the disconnection between African cultural perspectives and mainstream educational practices and its impacts on the education of Black children, anti-racist education does not (Murrell, 2002). African-centered
educators argue that systems which are monocultural cannot promote teaching about Black and African cultural ways of knowing. Further, they argue that it is paradoxical to think that an African-centered perspective can be adopted within the mainstream educational setting since mainstream school culture does not support Black achievement. As Matthews (2003) suggests, this does not mean that African-centered perspectives can only be taught in a private setting, even though it would provide better agency for Black students. However, the reality is that not all African-Canadian parents want their children to attend Black focused or African-centered schools. So it becomes very important that anti-racist and African-centered educators who work in mainstream settings are provided space to facilitate critical learning.

This study is a critical study that uses the resistance, anti-racist and Afrocentric discursive frameworks to reveal instances of resistance from African-Canadian parents and educators to challenge the prevailing culture of dominance in mainstream public schools. Using these frameworks emphasize the need for schools to achieve genuine inclusion where school administrators and educators will develop a demonstrated commitment to power-sharing in schools where students, teachers, parents and local communities will be given effective joint responsibilities over the process of delivering education to students in the mainstream public school (Dei, 2000; Dei et al. 1997).

As I explained earlier, the anti-racism and Afrocentric discursive frameworks see the marginalization of certain voices and ideas in the school system as a problem, and reject the deligitimization of the knowledge and experience of subordinate groups in the pedagogic and communicative practices of the schools (Dei, 2005). The discursive frameworks also view schools as part of an institutional structure sanctioned by society
to serve the material, political and ideological interests of the state in economic and social formation (Dei, 2000). Together, they suggest that any strategies designed to respond to educational change should address questions of power, knowledge and systemic inequality and must explore viable alternative forms of education for the benefit of Black youth (Asante, 2003; 1994; 1991; Akbar, 1998; Dei, 2000; 1996; Hill, 1999).

3.8 Afrocentricity and its Critics

The Afrocentric viewpoint has prompted a lot of criticism. Traditional educators view the Afrocentric perspective as too radical for the North American mainstream schooling. While critics like McLittle, (1991) have called the phenomenon a throwback to the Black awareness movement of the 1960s, others contend that the interest in the drive for self awareness have merely been precipitated by a climate of political correctness. Critics (Tate, 1992; Dyson, 1993) argue that Afrocentric scholars have excluded both European knowledge as an adjunct to Afrocentric knowledge and non-Black people as valid participants in the Afrocentric discourse in their attempt to construct a theory that highlights the ways of knowing of African people.

Another criticism of the concept is that the “eagerness on the part of Afrocentric scholars to identify with a traditional pre-capitalist and pre-colonial Africa romanticizes the Afrocentric discourse and undermines the extent to which European culture has become ingrained in the consciousness of African people” (Moses, 1991; p. 85). These critics of Afrocentricity feel that it is merely a glorified reaction to Eurocentricism and one that needs self criticism because of its perceived failure to criticize its own historical
shortcomings. These critics contend that the Afrocentric view fosters a sense of ‘victimology’ by emphasizing only the positive aspects of African history while glossing over or omitting the negative.

Critics disagree with the particular notion of an African essence that undergirds the notion of center and argue that in search for African-ness, Afrocentricity does not allow for cultural change. They argue that Afrocentricity is not able to deal adequately with cultural change and this prevents it from understanding that being African today also means being at least European (as a result of colonization and widespread Westernization). Afrocentricity is perceived as too restrictive and incapable of grasping the dialectical complexity of modern African identities. Asante’s response to this critique is that “Africans need a place to stand in order to challenge oppressive White structures and systems of knowledge and therefore cannot afford postmodern, evanescent, fluid selves”. Many Afrocentrists point out that far from denying Westernization of the African consciousness, they recognize it as a destructive force that must be circumvented.⁴

Schlesinger (1991) in Dickerson (1995) points out that because the Afrocentric view fails to acknowledge the flaws in non-European cultures, these cultures are portrayed as the means of societal salvation while European cultures are portrayed as the source of all the world’s evils. He cautions that Afrocentric educators must be careful not to engage in the same denigrating discourse and practice that Eurocentrists participate in. He, as well as other critics, believes that Afrocentrism is merely a reaction to Eurocentricism and calls for an amalgamation of not only the two centric concepts but all
the centric concepts. Schlesinger, (1991) questions whether the other centricities are not relevant to the liberation of the minds of all people who must survive in our plural society. Marriott (1991) argues that Afrocentricity is one strategy among other centricisms such as Asian or Latino. It is not an “either or” proposition as so many may seem to think it is. He further adds that Asante, in defence of his position states that “to replace Eurocentric with Afrocentric is simply committing another crime, replacing one orthodoxy with another orthodoxy” but that “in a multicultural society, the Afrocentric curriculum becomes an organic piece that is fused into the general curriculum” (cited in Marriott, 1991; p. 2) The Afrocentric scholar’s answer to this is that the Afrocentric discourse does not exclude Eurocentric knowledge but offers an alternative frame of reference with which to discuss and understand the social realities of African people. These are realities that emphasize intuition, emotion and spirituality. Afrocentricity is self reliant and refuses to be incorporated as a mere facet or add-on to Eurocentric knowledge that poses a threat to the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge. However, as a cursory reading of Asante’s text would reveal, Afrocentricity is non-hegemonic and welcomes the existence of a multiplicity of cultural centres and is precisely that position that allowed Afrocentricity to challenge Eurocentricism in the first place.

Afrocentricim is criticized as being “separatist” and the emergence of the “cult of ethnicity,” “disunity,” and “separatism” in a world of multiculturalism (Dickerson, 1995 p. 208). By excluding non-Black people as valid participants in the discourse, Afrocentric scholars produce “separatism” that valorizes the position of Black people. Some scholars like hooks (1994), argue that Afrocentric educators are engaged in the

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same hegemonic discourse of White scholars. She further argues that they have failed to represent a progressive vision that acknowledges cultural diversity. On a superficial level, this may seem to be the case but on a deeper level, it points to the inability of the diverse viewpoints of non-Black groups to fully reflect the particular histories and traditions of African people.

Some scholars like Gilroy (1992) also criticize Afrocentricity for its failure to acknowledge diversity among Black peoples. He, among others, argues that Afrocentric emphasis on race and racism ignores how differences in gender, class, and sexuality produce diverse experiences among Africans (Gilroy, 1992). Afrocentric scholars respond by saying that while it is feasible and necessary to articulate an Afrocentric economic theory, Afrocentricity maintains that race or culture remains the most socially relevant category in American society (Asante, 2003; 1991; Conyers, 2003; Dei, 1994; Karenga, 1993).

Some Black female scholars argue that the Afrocentric discourse is patriarchal and negates Black women’s contributions, which in turn reproduces negative Eurocentric myths about Black women (Welsh, 1988; Williams, 1995). Black women scholars argue that Afrocentric scholars have failed to examine the positive and negative realities of their lives. By so doing, Afrocentric scholars ignore, exclude and ultimately oppress Black women (Williams, 1995). These scholars argue that by rejecting alternative perspectives from Whites and Black women in the Afrocentric discourse, Afrocentric scholars reinforce racial and gender hierarchies that are oppressive and underestimate the significant role that these perspectives can play in strengthening the Afrocentric argument.
Afrocentric scholars like Asante (1992) and Dei (1998) have defended their positions on the Afrocentric discourse. Dei (1998) argues that the opposition to Eurocentricity should be viewed as only one aspect of the Afrocentric discourse. As Afrocentric educators, they acknowledge the significance of diverse viewpoints within the Afrocentric discourse; they also recognize the limitations and partiality of these knowledges. Dei (1998) argues that those who reject the Afrocentric idea lack a full appreciation for the ways in which Eurocentric knowledge has marginalized and negated alternative forms of knowledge. According to Dei (1998), “the hierarchical ordering of knowledge in Eurocentric discourses that privileges positivist thoughts and traditions of “rationality,” “objectification,” “reason,” “progress”, “the certainty of knowledge” and rejects traditions of non-Whites that emphasize the human element and dimensions of emotionality and intuition” are all examples of marginalization and negation of alternative forms of knowledge by Eurocentricity (p. 202).

Afrocentric scholars disagree with assertions that Afrocentricity degrades diverse forms of knowledge. What Afrocentricity does is to challenge Eurocentricity as the only legitimate knowledge for non-White people and acknowledges how the multiple centers of the various forms of knowledge may play an important role in diffusing the power of any one hegemonic ideology (Dei, 1998; Asante, 1991; Akbar, 1998; Conyers, 2003). Asante (1991) points out that “centricity is the location of students within the contexts of their own cultural reference so that they can relate socially and psychologically to other cultural perspectives and view all group contributions as significant and useful.” (p. 171). Afrocentricity offers all people a framework to acknowledge and validate their own individual forms of knowledge.
The criticisms on Afrocentricity show the need to integrate issues of gender, class and other social oppressions into the Afrocentric discourse. As Waldron (2002) points out, there should always be a space for articulating how our individual selves are products of “diverse identities, subjectivities, world views and standpoints, as long as race is not dislodged as the central concept” (p. 127). The reliance on the saliency of race by Afrocentric scholars to articulate Black consciousness has to do with the powerful currency that race continues to hold for racialized or Black people in particular in White dominated societies despite differences in gender and class. It also has to do with the Afrocentric scholar’s awareness that race offers an intellectual, ideological, and political oppositional response to the hegemonic nature of Eurocentric knowledge. Much work needs to be done in this area and the awareness now is useful, in that it will aid Afrocentric scholars to integrate issues of gender, class and other oppressions in the Afrocentric discourse. Despite the criticisms, Afrocentricity continues to exercise a significant influence in the United States and continues to receive increased attention in Europe and Africa.

3.9 Integrating the Discursive Frameworks

The discursive frameworks namely cultural and economic reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bowles and Gintis, 1988), resistance (Giroux, 1983a; 1983b) Anti-racist (Dei, 2000; 1996; Lee, 1985) and African-centered (Asante, 1991; Dei, 1995) discursive frameworks used for this research are important because they give a clear understanding of the role schools play in society, such as socializing children for the
society they live in. These frameworks are, relevant to this study, because they expose how schools serve the interests of the dominant group and subsequently perpetuate unequal social and economic conditions. Resistance theories, on the other hand, portray schools as the loci of counter hegemonic struggles. The anti-racist (Dei, 2000; 1996; Lee, 1985) and African-centered (Asante, 1991; Dei, 1995) discursive frameworks offer a better understanding of the cultural and other social issues affecting the schooling of Black youth in Canada. The use of these discursive frameworks, facilitate a critical analysis of the institutional structures that deliver education in the Canadian context. These include the structures for teaching, learning and the administration of education. The discursive frameworks are also ideal for addressing issues of representation in schooling, especially as expressed in the need to accommodate multiple voices, diversity and difference as they pertain to race, gender, class, sexuality, language, culture and religion, in administering and delivering education. The following chapter is a detail of the methodology used to collect, analyze and interpret the data used for this thesis.
Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology and techniques used in this research. To seek answers to questions posed by the research, stated in the first chapter, I used qualitative research methods based on interviews to shed light on African-Canadian parents’ perspectives and understanding of the African-centered school concept as an alternative educational site for Black youth in Toronto. To this research, I bring the anti-racist and Afrocentric principles, with attention to power imbalance within society and the research environment. This is why accounts of the phenomenon investigated in the voices and words of participants are used as primary data. Even so, the objectives of the research go beyond just making meaning of the participants’ perceptions and interpretations of the phenomenon. Indeed, the study rests on the assumption that the accounts of participants are valid social data that can inform social transformation.\(^5\)

I begin by defining qualitative and quantitative research, comparing the strengths and weaknesses of each and explain my rationale for choosing the qualitative research method. I then examine the potential benefits of qualitative research methods of data collection and analysis, and some of the dilemmas researchers face. I discuss how qualitative research methods have been used to collect, interpret and analyze research data that deals with the multiple and complex, socially constructed realities of African-Canadian parents and Black youth. This is followed by a discussion of ethical issues and moral dilemmas I had to consider during the data collection process. These are concerns,
particularly in relation to research, which deals with human subjects, which I had to revisit throughout the research process. I then outline the specific ethnographic methods of interviewing, observation and survey employed in the general research process. Subsequently, I explain in detail the process of gaining access to the parents and data collection, including an account of the interviewing process and of observing participants. An integral element of the research process is to access my role as a researcher, which I discuss throughout this chapter. Naturally, this demands accounting for the issues that had to be considered in doing research in the African-Canadian community and finally discuss the limitations of this study.

4.2 Qualitative versus Quantitative Research

Qualitative research is an all encompassing terminology that includes various forms of social inquiry based on a phenomenological approach. Phenomenologists believe that knowledge and understanding are embedded in our everyday world. They do not believe knowledge can be quantified or reduced to numbers or statistics. Phenomonologists believe that truth and understanding of life can emerge from people's life experiences and have developed more than one approach to gain understanding of human knowledge (Byrne, 2001). This includes critical ethnography, participant observation, discourse analysis and participatory research. Researchers who use qualitative research methods are interested in the ways different people make sense of their lives (Berg, 2001; Bogdan and Biklen 1992). Qualitative research focuses on words or actions. It uses open-ended questions and responses which permit a researcher to understand an issue in the world as

5 See Patton, 2002; Berg, 2001; Bogdan and Biklen, 1992.
seen by respondents. The purpose of gathering responses to open-ended questions is to enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view through prior selection of questionnaire categories (Patton, 2002). In qualitative inquiry or research, direct quotations are a basic source of raw data in revealing the respondents’ depth of emotion, the way they have organized their world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions. The task for the qualitative researcher is to provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their points of view about the world or that part of the world about which they are talking—for example, their experience about a particular program being evaluated. The major way in which qualitative researchers seek to understand the perceptions, feelings and knowledge of people is through in-depth, intensive interviewing.

Quantitative research, on the other hand, involves counting and measuring of events and performing the statistical analysis of a body of numerical data (Smith, 1988). Traditional researchers use positivist approaches where experiments, surveys and statistics favour objective realities. This approach is viewed as having quantitative ability since it measures things about people precisely and is able to test people by analyzing numbers carefully (Neuman, 1994; p. 58). The assumption behind the positivist paradigm is that unlike qualitative research, traditional or quantitative research is able to answer questions with little error and is reliable, in that a measure of a concept will deliver the exact same results no matter how many times it is applied to random members of the same target group.
Silverman (2000) writes that quantitative researchers argue that their method of research is superior because hypotheses are value free and; the researchers’ own values, biases, and subjective preferences have no place in the quantitative approach. This implies that it simply and objectively reports reality whereas qualitative research is influenced by the researcher’s political values. Quantitative researchers view the communication process as concrete and tangible and can analyze it without contacting actual people involved in communication (Silverman, 2000). Conversely, critics argue that such value freedom in social science is both undesirable and impossible.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) argue that qualitative research is unscientific and exploratory, entirely personal and full of bias. Critics frown on the use of qualitative research and dismiss it as unreliable because it often uses relatively small groups of interviewed individuals which cannot be taken as representative. Qualitative research also relies on trust and relationships with participants to facilitate full and honest self-representation. Critics of qualitative research argue that it takes time to build trust which could lead to loss of time because short term observational studies, for example, will be at a particular disadvantage where trust building is concerned. Silverman, (2000) argues that qualitative research is flexible since it encourages researchers to be innovative but for others, it means a lack of structure. Conversely, being fixed will give structure to the research but without flexibility.
4.3 Why Qualitative Research

This study used the qualitative research method to collect and analyze data because it is an appropriate approach for obtaining sensitive and emotional information in an introspective and interpretive way. Researchers use this method because they are interested in the ways different people make sense of their lives (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Research shows that qualitative research is a sound and effective way of taking up issues of culture, race and education, as it allows the researcher to capture the stories of relevant stakeholders. The words of participants are a path to understanding their experiences and are valid social scientific data that can generate considerations for social change (Berg, 2001). One of the primary objectives of this research was to bring the voices of African-Canadian parents to the center; hence it is the subjects and not the method that should be the primary focus of the research. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) argue that methodology should do more than produce a statistical account of participants and their perceptions.

The qualitative research approach allows the researcher to explore complex issues from various perspectives. It takes into account the intersectionality of representation and identity, which is difficult and sometimes impossible to express in numerical terms (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado and Crenshaw, 1993). The theoretical base of this research demands that intersections of race, class, gender and other means of oppression not be reduced to a tally of competing claims. Instead of placing statistics at the center of the research and working to contextualize the data with narratives and conclusions, I listened to the stories of African-Canadian parents and related these stories to the larger issues (on parents’ views) on the establishment of alternative schooling for
the educational advancement of their children. As Dei et al. (1997) point out, such
ethnographic research gives a stronger voice to the collective struggles of participants
and brings up the intersections of many complex issues. I believe this research should go
further than to produce a statistical account of the African-centered schooling concept.
African-Canadian parents are seen as stakeholders of their children’s schooling so their
thoughts, feelings and ideas were seen as crucial in developing a research method that is
compatible with my theoretical background. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) also argue that
“the advantage of using the qualitative research methods of data collection is the
‘openness’ of this type of inquiry, and allows the researcher to approach the inherent
complexity of social interaction to do justice to that complexity and to respect it in its
own right” (p. 7). Qualitative research methods recognize that reality is a social construct
in which complexity and the context of the emerging data must be considered.

Qualitative research also allows the researcher to demonstrate that the problem of
Black youth disengagement and the need for African-centered schools should be
analyzed in their relationship to the historical and present socio-economic structures of
White domination in society and how this affects the education of Black youth.
Qualitative research does not simply allow the researcher to examine how the power of
the dominant group affects the schooling of Black youth. Beyond this, it allows the
researcher to examine survival strategies employed by African-Canadian parents, their
children and the community in their interactions and relationship with the dominant
power structures (Dei, et al. 1997). Utilizing this research method made room for
African-Canadian parents to share their thoughts and perceptions from their own vantage
positions. The narratives were then connected to one other and to wider social issues
such as race, class, sexism and other forms of oppression in the society in order to cast the complex nature of the experiences of African-Canadian parents and their children.

The qualitative research approach, beyond giving the parents a voice, also significantly informs the data interpretation and helps with the theoretical development of the research. The narratives of participants guide the analytical process, being central to it, and thus, directing the development of the theoretical understanding that the parents themselves must play an integral role in the creation of the knowledge that this study reports and validates. Naturally, this methodology makes it possible to portray the experiences of African-Canadian parents in a manner, which respects their views about their children’s situations. Finally, the use of qualitative research methods helps to preserve individual stories and highlights some of the threads common in a shared set of experiences. As Dei et al (1997) point out, “the stories that participants share are not just stories but political statements and indictments of an existing structure, representing the views and experiences of a critical and articulate minority. The lives and experiences that become our data must be read as interpretations from the standpoints of the informants” (ibid. p. 7).

The evidence from this research does not claim to be representative of all African-Canadian parents’ views and experiences; it simply seeks to present the views of a significant variety of African-Canadian parents. It has been established that documenting the number of research participants as well as the variety of their responses credits the study’s capacity to represent the social worlds of participants, including an in-built awareness of its limitations in the attempt to capture every nuance of those worlds (Berg, 2001; Dei et al. 1997). I relied on qualitative data for this study. I clothed it with
the capacity to create a holistic experiential reality by using an emancipatory research approach to foster an empowering environment for the participants.

4.4 Emancipatory Research Paradigm

An emerging new paradigm for undertaking research is the emancipatory research paradigm (see Oliver, 1992; Barnes, 1996; Hammersley, 1995). The development of this paradigm stems from the gradual rejection of the positivist view of social research as the pursuit of absolute knowledge through the scientific method and the gradual disillusionment with the interpretive view of such research as the generation of socially useful knowledge within particular historical and social contexts. The emancipatory paradigm, as the name implies, is about the facilitating of a politics of the possible by confronting social oppression at whatever levels it occurs (Oliver, 1992, p. 110).

I chose to use an emancipatory research paradigm because research indicates that it is an ideal way to study the marginalized in society (Crawford, 2000; Oliver, 1992; Harding, 1987). Alternative paradigms to traditional research methodologies began to emerge in educational research, in response to the challenge of conducting research on complex multilayered issues. A paradigm refers to the perspective or lens through which people view their world. Therefore, such a paradigm through which we operate has the potential to inform our values and to affect the ways we think, act, work and approach problems (Crawford, 2000). Researchers note that paradigms have the potential to change the way in which researchers approach questions and go about investigating problems, collecting data, and reporting findings (Cochrane-Smith and Lytle, 1999; Guba, 1990; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).
An emancipatory paradigm is appropriate for this research because my aim was to give voice to African-Canadian parents who are a minority, and are in marginalized positions because of their race, and sometimes, class or gender. I made every effort to create an equitable and empowering research environment to enable them to feel they had some control over the process. The pace and open-ended nature of the interviews encouraged them to engage, reflect on, define and articulate the circumstances affecting the lives of their children, and thereby, validate their knowledge, experiences and perspectives on the issues under investigation.

The use of anti-racist and Afrocentric principles is integral to the emancipatory approach used in this research. Anti-racist and Afrocentric educators suggest six main principles that researchers must incorporate into their work. These are community; responsibility; personal and political engagement of the researcher; transformation; focus on domination studies and interface of body, mind and soul (Reviere, 2001; Dei, 1996; 1995). These principles were incorporated by acknowledging their saliency in the research questions, research investigation, analyses and interpretation of data.

The principles of community, responsibility and interface of body, mind and soul are obvious components of validity for this research because they derive directly from an African conceptual system. As mentioned earlier in the preceding chapter of this thesis, an Afrocentric conceptual system is concerned with a sense of community, that is, the composite harmonious relationship that is predicated on interdependence, cooperation, and a sense of connectedness between individuals, animals, nature and the spirit. Tied to this notion of community is the principle of responsibility in Afrocentric and anti-racist research. With this comes a sense of responsibility that Africans traditionally have for the
political, economic, social and spiritual empowerment of Black people as a collective and also includes the concern for the impact that individual actions may have on that collective (Dei, 2008, Schiele, 1994).

A related and important Afrocentric and anti-racist principle is the interface of body, mind and soul. In a Eurocentric worldview, body, soul and mind are perceived as distinct and disconnected entities. The Afrocentric and anti-racist worldview are predicated on the notion that these entities are interrelated, interconnected, and interdependent and therefore constitute one harmonious whole (Dei, 1996; Schiele, 1994).

The fourth principle incorporated in this research is the personal and political engagement of the researcher. I share some experiences with most of my informants on account of my race and culture. My being an African-Canadian parent enhanced my engagement with the research at both a personal and political level. At a personal level, it allowed me to use the experiences and insights that I shared with my informants to inquire into issues of race, gender and oppression, and ultimately, to enhance my informants’ engagement with the research. On a political level, the nature of my inquiry lends itself to my being a researcher whose concern and objective is the physical, mental and spiritual emancipation of African-Canadian Black youth in their schooling, and in the empowerment of African-Canadian parents to dismantle hegemonic ideologies and structures that obstruct the hope for positive in schooling experiences for their children.

The fifth principle is transformation. In Afrocentric and anti-racist thought, transformative research must consider how the subjects under study exercise agency for the purpose of subverting, challenging and dismantling hegemonic structures and
processes, and how their counter-hegemonic actions may lead to progressive social change and the amelioration of the status of oppressed groups. The sixth principle, demands that an emancipatory research approach must focus on domination studies. Any research that is concerned with the liberation and empowerment of oppressed people must inquire into how domination operates to marginalize, ignore, silence and devalue the knowledge and traditions of minorities (Waldron, 2003).

As an Afrocentric and anti-racist qualitative researcher, I was concerned with the fundamental aspects of the research process, namely the relationship between my research participants and myself. I needed to dismantle any hierarchy of researcher versus participant in our relationship so that participants can give meaning to their experiences and knowledge (Smith, 1990; Bishop, 1998). Thus, I asked myself repeatedly whether I had the right to know why African-Canadian parents would advocate or reject the establishment of African-centered schools as an alternative to the mainstream public school for their children. The implicit issue in this balancing act takes on its own ‘political’ overtones in a research of this nature. The nature of this challenge and how I handled it is explored in the next section.

4.5 Ethics and the Politics of Research

Ethical considerations are a crucial issue in many fields of study. There are moral concerns and dilemmas that a researcher must address in any research that involves human participants (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Berg, 2001). My research had to pay attention to concerns of ethics, including issues of consent and confidentiality, the
vulnerability of subjects, questions of exploitation and my responsibility as a researcher to share information or findings from the work.

Researchers argue that the research environment involves a power relationship between the dominant (in this case, the researcher), and the subordinate (the researched), regardless of the type of research being conducted. Afrocentric and anti-racist research, like any other research, brings with it numerous ethical dilemmas. An Afrocentric and anti-racist researcher must consider how race, class, gender and cultural differences between her and informants may skew perspectives and the integrity of the data and its interpretation.

Matthews (2003), citing Noffke (1990), affirms the relevance of this concern for any anti-racist and Afrocentric researcher. In view of this challenge, it was important for me to collaborate with my participants, working with them across differences of class, age and ability. Working collaboratively with parents meant creating space to share support between them, the participants and myself, the researcher (Cross, 1990). There was no need for me to assume ultimate authority simply because I was the researcher. The participants retained control, including the right to refuse to participate in the research (Marx, 2001; Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

To understand the power of our positions, I had to look at our social differences such as class, age and ability, which are constraints of power, and to recognize that though we shared the same racial, and in some instances gender and class identity, as a researcher, I cannot assume neutrality. It was important not to present myself as value-free or detached from the emotional subject I was looking at. To distance myself as a researcher would only undermine the quality of the relationships that had to be created.
(Ballard, 1998). The implications of my position as an Afrocentric and anti-racist researcher required that I negotiate a role that is consistent with participants’ experiences and understanding (Marx, 2001). I encouraged participants to disclose only what they wanted, and I made every effort not to use academic jargon in our dialogues. When I noticed that questions or statements were difficult for them to comprehend, I rephrased them to make them clearer and more to the point.

Access to participants was gained ethically. Confidentiality, anonymity and protection from harm were assured. I had to answer questions to satisfy the Ethics Review Board (of the University of Toronto) that parents would not be pressured to participate in the study. I kept to the requirement that if a parent was part of the study, his or her identity would be safeguarded. I ensured that the proper ethical procedures were followed in gaining access to the African-Canadian parents interviewed. Information about the study (and later consent forms) was sent to African-Canadian parents who wanted to participate in the study, and they had to complete the consent forms. Although they were adults, I had to be aware of their vulnerabilities. Overall, all participants were candid and revealing in their discussions with me, probably because they needed to speak on these issues, or because I was able to probe them with searching questions, or both.

Regarding the interviews, confidentiality required considerable attention. I obtained the informed consent of participants and assured them that whatever they said would be kept confidential, anonymous, and integral in itself as to its necessary release. I took every measure to ensure that this promise was kept. In this study, participants are referred to by pseudonyms and any revealing characteristics of their identities have been altered or omitted. The participants trusted me to handle their information respectfully.
and offered as accurate information as they could, leaving me with the imperative to be extra careful and to report their views with the same degree of accuracy.

Notwithstanding their anonymity, one primary concern of the parents was that I report their views in a reflective and appropriate manner. They wanted to know the impact the research would have on the school system, and especially their children’s school experiences. I assured them that the findings would be reported, and that hopefully, the study’s conclusions would reach a wide audience and lead to further discussion, and possibly result in, the implementation of the findings and recommendations.

In most instances, parents opened up either because they wanted to be heard on this topic, or because they shared certain identifiers with me, the researcher. Some parents shared views they probably would not have if the researcher was not of the same gender or race. Ridell (1989), citing Finch (1986), argues that when people of the same class, sex or race interview each other there is a high level of rapport generated on the commonalities, possibly leading the participant to share more information than they normally would, and sometimes, leaving themselves open to exploitation. On the other hand, one can also argue that being an insider, participants would be hesitant to open up knowing that whatever information is provided may leak into the community.
4.6 Data Gathering Methods

The field work for this study was conducted in the Greater Toronto area from August 2006 to December 2007. The data was collected mainly from African-Canadian parents who lived in the Greater Toronto area and had children in the public education system in Toronto. The research relied on a combination of methods: formal and informal interviews with African-Canadian parents. I also administered brief written surveys of the African-Canadian parents interviewed, with specific questions regarding personal and socio-economic background, as well as their opinions on school issues. The debates on establishing an African-centered school in Toronto generated so much interest that there were many hours of non-structured, informal conversations and discussions before and after the structured interviews. Some of the informal conversations and discussions contained important information that was not recorded on a tape recorder but written in a notebook for use later when needed. However, the formal individual interviews and discussions with African-Canadian parents and members of the African-Canadian community are the main sources of data for this thesis.

By the end of April 2007, I had reached a sample of twenty African-Canadian parents who had children in the mainstream public school and were willing to participate in the research. I realized there was no need to continue interviewing any more people since further interviews were not adding any new information already provided by the previous participants. The parents were of different ages, socio-economic and professional backgrounds. The study sample reflected gender and family differences (i.e. single parent and two parent families) within the informant group. The parents
interviewed gave me a valuable insight, into their own and children’s experiences from interacting with the public school system.

4.6.1 Interview Questions

The findings of this study are based on themes generated during the interviews and from analysis of data. After a few interviews, a theme related to the importance of education to African-Canadian parents and parental involvement in their children’s school emerged. As this theme was probed further, it revealed more information about the participants’ attitude to their children’s education and how much they were involved in their children’s education. Without asking direct questions, the information revealed difficulties encountered with the schools or teachers. Other themes, like parental involvement, structural constraints, and the economics of schooling emerged from the actual analysis of data after the interviews had been completed.

A selected set of questions guided the interviews (see Appendix D). I had several questions in mind knowing that as the project evolved, more questions would emerge and some questions might change. The interview guide served as a discursive compass that helped steer the interviews back on track whenever there appeared to be a significant digression during the discussions. The questions were based on related literature which suggests that parents play a very important role in the success of their children’s schooling. Current educational theories see parents as active participants in the shaping of educational policy and on-site involvement in the daily activities of the schools. It is assumed that parental involvement has a positive impact on students’ behaviour and performance (Zeigler, 1987; Epstein 1987; 1990). Some questions were also based on
literature that suggests that children learn effectively when they are culturally grounded and that educating them is made easier when they are able to link issues of individual and group identity with what goes on at school (Asante, 2003; 1994; 1993; Kunjufu, 2000; Akbar, 1998; Dei, 2005; 1997; 1995; Murrell, 2002; Tedla; 1995; Madhubuti, and Madhubuti 1994; Lee, 1994; Hilliard, 2003; 2002; Henry 1994; 1992; Ratterray, 1990). Afrocentric theory argues that centering Black youth as subjects (rather than people on the periphery), and providing an atmosphere which is culturally congruent and free from negative racial and cultural biases promotes student engagement (Asante, 1991; Dei, 2005).

Another set of questions was designed to explore participants’ perceptions on the importance of education. This category examined the importance of education to participants. Research shows that many minority parents attach significant importance to education because they see it as the best way for their children’s success and their development of self esteem and self direction (Lee 1994; Ogbu 1992; 1991; 1987; Ghee, 1990; Kunjufu, 2000). Regardless of their class background, African-Canadian parents have high educational and career aspirations for their children. For most of them, education is the only way possible for their children to get ahead in society (Calliste, 1982; 1994; D’Oyley and Silverman, 1976; Larter et al, 1982), and also a way to overcome racism and discrimination in White dominated societies (James, 1990; James and Brathwaite, 1996).

The next category of questions was to find out participants’ involvement or participation, and the difficulties they may have encountered with their children’s schooling. As mentioned earlier, Slaughter (1986) makes a distinction between the terms
“parental involvement” and “parental participation.” Participation is the direct engagement in school activities and involvement is support for the child’s schooling. Most schools value both activities but focus more on the participation dimension. Many participants are directly engaged (participate) in their children’s school activities, and also support their education. A few participants, especially the fathers, acknowledged that the nature of their professions prevented them from “full participation”, such as being in the school. All the same, they still support their children the best way possible.

The next sets of questions were related to African-Canadian parents’ perception on Canadian education and school dropout. This category examined African-Canadian parents’ perceptions of the Canadian educational system, and why many Black youth drop out of school. The educational system in Ontario has been subjected to a lot of criticism by educators and African-Canadian parents (Dei, 1997; James and Brathwaite, 1996; Black Educators Working Group (BEWG), 1993). This category of questions was designed to explicitly find out from participants what their critiques and expectations of the Ontario educational system are and what suggestions they may have on what schools should do to help Black youth succeed.

Some questions looked at the successes that parents could acknowledge in their children’s schooling. Other questions were meant to find out participants’ understanding of the concept of the Black focused or African-centered school and its potential to ensure success for African-Canadian youth. This category of questions examined what and how much participants knew about the concept, what significance it held for them, and what their views were on the establishment of an alternative form of schooling alongside the mainstream school in Toronto. Another set of questions was to find out if participants
would send their children to an African-centered school if one was established. For parents to advocate for African-centered schooling, depends on the connection they see between the concept and the academic success of Black youth (Shujaa, 1994). Literature on African-centered schooling suggests that there is a link between African-centered schooling and the academic successes of Black youth (Dei, 2005; Adjei, 2005; Lawson, 2005; Wane, 2002; Pollard and Ajirotutu, 2000; Majors, 2001; Dei, 1995; Madhubuti and Madhubuti, 1994).

An important issue raised during the 2005 debates on the establishment of African-centered schools was segregation. The final category of questions were designed to find out if parents believed that setting up such a school would be a way of segregating Black youth. African-centered schools are regarded by the mainstream as not inclusive, but a form of segregating of Black youth from the mainstream school (2005 Media Debates on African-centered schools; Awgu, 2005). As a result, some of the questions were aimed at discovering whether participants saw the establishment of Black focused schools as a form of segregation.

4.6.2 Gaining Access

The field work began immediately the Ethics Review Committee approved my proposal to do this research in July 2006. The recruitment process was carried out by putting up posters in areas with a majority of African-Canadian populations. Posters were also put up in the offices of agencies working with African-Canadians, and on the walls of university cafeterias and adult educational institutions requesting African-Canadian parents willing to participate in the research to call a number provided on the poster.
Some parents were contacted and asked to pass on the word to other parents with whom they were in contact and who may be interested in participating in the research. The rationale for using the snowball method is that active members of the communities are likely to be accessible to other members. Names suggested were followed up with phone calls, e-mails, and personal visits. Several African-Canadian parents were also approached personally in the greater Toronto area to inquire whether they would be interested in participating in the research. Letters requesting interviews (see Appendix A) were initially sent to parents who responded to the request or called to express interest in participating in the research. The letter introduced the researcher and explained the purpose of the study. Potential participants were asked to contact the researcher if they needed more information or had further questions. Those who called back to express continued interest in the study were selected to be part of a larger sample from which the final sample would be drawn.

4.6.3 Research Sample and Selection Procedure

The respondents were recruited using a purposive sampling technique defined as a procedure by which researchers select a subject or subjects based on predetermined criteria about the extent to which the selected subjects could contribute to the research study (Vaughn, Schumm and Singagub, 1996). I used purposive sampling because surveying an entire population would take much longer than a sample study especially where time is of the essence. It is less time consuming and less expensive. Purposive sampling permits the confident generalization from the research sample to the larger population (Bailey, 1987). According to Bailey (1987) purposive sampling is a sampling
strategy “where the researcher uses his or her own judgment about which respondents to choose and picks only those who best meet the purpose of the study” (p. 94). It is a sampling method used when you want to interview a particular group of people. So the intention of the study was to provide a space for African-Canadian parents to discuss their children’s experiences in the mainstream public school and how they understood the African-centered school concept as an alternative educational site. The study was limited to African-Canadian parents because of their children’s marginalization in the mainstream public school. It is worth noting that other ethnic minorities are also marginalized in schools and it would be worth investigating their experiences, but that was not the purpose for this study.

As mentioned earlier, the sample for this research was to be made up of African-Canadian parents who had children in the mainstream public school system. During the design stage of the research, I decided that twenty respondents would be adequate to provide the type of information the research was hoping to elicit. About thirty respondents, African-Canadian parents (male and female) with children in the mainstream public school expressed interest in participating in the research. Their socio-economic status ranged from working class to middle class met the criteria agreed upon to participate in the research. The challenge became how to ensure a relatively fair representation in age, class and gender. Using factors like availability, extent of interest and knowledge about African-centered schooling, a sample of twenty participants (twelve women and eight men) was selected.

Crouch and McKenzie, (2006) argue that research based on interviews often seeks to penetrate social life beyond appearance and manifest meanings. This requires the
researcher to be immersed in the research field, to establish continuing, fruitful relationships with respondents, and through theoretical contemplation, to address the research problem in depth. The choice of twenty respondents facilitated my close association with the respondents, and enhanced the validity of participants’ responses.

I assured parents that they had nothing to fear because it was an academic project for a PhD thesis. I explained the research and its implications to parents who agreed to do the interviews. The parents were helpful and co-operative.

The sample chosen also ensured “representativeness” of important dimensions of the diversity within the African-Canadian community because it reflected differences in gender, family, and socio-economic backgrounds within the informant group. The age of participants ranged from 35 to 50 years. Consent forms were then provided to them. These forms assured them of anonymity and confidentiality (Appendix A) in the handling of any data or information they might provide or divulge in the course of the interview.

The respondents were neither culturally nor socially homogeneous. Even among those who shared cultural similarities, there were some differential cultural orientations based on regional differences in their countries of origin. All the African-Canadian parents interviewed had positive attitudes about the value of education and gave valuable insights into their experiences with the mainstream public school system, how they understood the African-centered school concept, and whether they wanted it established as an alternative to the mainstream public school. The participants had a variety of experiences from other countries and from their children’s schooling experiences. All the
parents selected were educated and had at least graduated from high school. Most (sixteen) of the parents interviewed were married.

4.6.4 The Interview Protocol

The nature of the study demands a data collection method that would allow the researcher to probe into participants’ perceptions and understanding of the African-centered school concept. Some researchers suggest that the interview method is the most appropriate for any research that needs to gather detailed information from participants (Berg, 2001; Anderson, 1990). Using interviews was therefore, the most appropriate method for gathering the type of information this study needed from participants. The use of interviews enhances interaction between the interviewer and the interviewed. It permits clarification of questions asked and answers given in situations where there might be language barriers between the researcher and the informant (Merrian, 1998, Anderson, 1990).

The anticipated individual differences among those interviewed and the wide range of answers they give, also make the interview approach an attractive option for data gathering study. From experience, many people are more likely to engage in interviews as opposed to questionnaires. Secondly, some participants may not put much thought to some of the answers they give in response to questionnaires. For this reason, interviews seemed to be the best option since it gives the researcher considerable control over the data gathering process. Finally, the use of interviews enables the researcher to pick up on useful non-verbal cues, which is not possible with the use of questionnaires (Anderson 1990).
Despite the above advantages, there are limitations to using interviews. Some researchers (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Anderson, 1990; Merriam, 1988) argue that difficulties may arise from the questioning techniques of the researcher, and that the context of the interview may also affect the responses offered by participants. They further argue that it is also possible that the interviewer may interpret a response in a different way from what the respondent intended, and this may lead to a misinterpretation of the intended response (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992; Anderson, 1990; Merriam, 1988).

My interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured to allow some flexibility. The interview protocol was designed to gather information on five primary categories (see Appendix C). Each category had a set of guiding questions which were considered appropriate by the researcher. During the interviews, the use of specific questions was guided by the direction of the interview. In some instances, it was necessary to ask additional questions in response to issues that came up in the responses. With some of the questions, participants were made to explain what or how they understood certain terms used. This was to ensure that the meaning of terms and participant understanding were the same as the researcher’s. For example, all parents interviewed were asked to explain how they understood Black focused, or African-centered schooling, to ensure we were clear on the meaning, in order that we could both put their perceptions in the appropriate context. Several questions were posed on the same themes in order to develop participants’ responses and to ensure that I was getting a full account of their views. The questions were designed in a manner and with the hope that it would reduce any chance of participants giving anticipated responses. An effective
way of conducting the interviews was to center a few questions on all the major issues this study was designed to explore.

4.6.5 Individual Interviews

The first phases of the interviews were informal telephone conversations to make appointments for the formal interviews. This was an opportunity for me to have an idea of participants’ knowledge about African-centered schooling. Participants were also informed of the intention to tape record the interviews. No participant had objections; all consented to having their interviews recorded.

The formal interviews were conducted over a period of approximately nine months; August 2006 to April 2007. Most of the formal interviews lasted between one to two hours and were either conducted on the university campus, in their homes or work places of participants. Two interviews were conducted in my house. All interviews were arranged at different times and places convenient to participants. I arrived for the formal interviews a few minutes before the scheduled times. This was to give me enough time to observe and have a relaxed discussion with participants. During the interviews, I tried to observe all possible ethical codes required for doing this type of research. Participants were required to sign the informed letter of consent (Appendix A) in which was outlined, an assurance of complete anonymity; that all information provided would be used for analytical purposes only; and the intent of the study was not to determine superior or inferior answers but rather to solicit opinions, views and ideas.

The interviews were done with an interview guide whereby the use of specific questions was guided by the direction each interview took. In some instances, it became
necessary to devise some questions on the spot to probe an issue further. In other instances, questions were reworded to give a better understanding to the participant of what was being elicited. At the end of each interview, the tape was played back to the interviewee to find out whether she wanted to make additional statements and to determine if the parent had answered questions the way she had intended.

Occasionally after the interviews, I interacted with some of the parents. These interactions were usually through chance meeting on the university campus or in the mall. The meetings served as forums for continuing our dialogue. Participants did not add any new information or modify assumptions they had made earlier.

4.7 Theoretical Sampling and Methodology

Theoretical sampling is a process of data collection where the researcher collects, codes and analyzes data and decides what data to collect and where to find them in order to develop the emerging theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; p. 45). Theoretical sampling is done to discover categories and their properties and to suggest interrelationships into a theory (Castetter and Heisler, 1984). It was used to systematically develop a few major categories based on the themes offered by my research questions. It was necessary to use a constant comparison method to systematically and closely analyze the data (sentence by sentence). Codes were then constructed that related to the research categories earlier constructed (see Appendix E). Data that were not relevant or did not fit the research objective were discarded. Data that were conceptualized and integrated into categories were used to illustrate the findings. I developed a framework of analysis to explain my findings and to articulate the main themes and issues upon which this research was
focused. I now examine processes of data reduction, data coding, data display, drawing of conclusions, and verification.

4.7.1 Data Reduction (Analyzing the Data)

Data reduction is a process whereby data was reduced in an anticipatory way as the researcher chooses a conceptual framework, research questions and instruments of analysis. Punch (1998) notes that data reduction is not an independent or separate exercise but one that “occurs continually throughout the analysis.” In the early stages, data reduction was done alongside data editing, segmenting and summarizing. At the second stage of analysis, data reduction occurred through coding and associated activities, such as finding themes, clusters and patterns. In the latter stages, data reduction “happens through conceptualizing and explaining, since developing abstract concepts is also a way of reducing the data” (Punch, 1998; p. 203). My choice of this particular research topic and the search for the specific data that would fit the topic inevitably excluded a significant portion of data existing in the field but which was not relevant to the issue of focus. Ultimately, this reduced the data used in the research.

There was further reduction when I selected and condensed the data that was obtained from interviews and documents. More reduction came about when I began to summarize code and categorize the data and construct themes. The objective of data reduction is to pare down the data without significant loss of information. The data obtained from interviews and documents were organized, grouped and summarized into categories.

Inductive analysis is a process of research where the patterns, themes and categories of analysis emerge out of the data, rather than being imposed on them prior to
their collection and analysis (Mason, 2002, Punch, 1998). Inductive analysis was used to assess the extent to which the various categories described patterns and phenomena that participants had conceptualized and defined. I developed a system to organize the data to facilitate its analysis and interpretation. The first step was to come up with a classification system to categorize patterns or phenomena, based on verbal categories utilized by participants and information found in documents. I then looked for patterns, categories and themes that highlighted variations and contrasts in the participants’ conceptualizations and behaviour. These patterns were sorted into categories as recurring regularities in the data continued to emerge. The process was complete when all sources of information had been exhausted and sets of categories had been saturated (Tesch, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Data were extracted from all sources in terms of how well they related to individual themes and issues. A theme is defined as a statement of meaning that runs through all or most of the pertinent data, or which in the majority carries heavy emotional or factual impact (Punch, 1998; Silverman, 2000; Mason, 2002). Links were established between and among the elements that were identified from all sources within the data in order to start building theory. By doing so, Punch (1998) notes that the researcher seeks explanations by finding out what or why certain issues have come up. Axial or theoretical coding was done when the particular categories were defined. Axial or theoretical coding occurs at the second stage of analysis. It is where the main categories which emerged from open coding of the data are interconnected with each other. It is a process of intense analysis that is applied to each of the categories (Srauss and Corbin, 1990; (Punch, 1998).
4.7.2 Data Coding

Data coding includes procedures of constant comparison, theoretical questioning and sampling, concept development, and relationships among them. This synthetic process enabled me to question the conceptualizations of my research participants and to discard those that were not relevant to my study. A code is a tag, name or label. Coding is the process of putting tags, names or symbols (letters or numbers) against pieces of data. The pieces may be individual words or small or large chunks of data. The point of assigning labels is to attach meaning to the pieces of data, and these labels serve a number of functions when applied to a group of words to classify or categorize them and to identify a concept or a central idea that they point to (Silverman, 2000; Punch, 1998). At the beginning of data collection, I looked for codes from the raw data by way of comparative analysis. The initial emergent theory pointed to the next steps that I could proceed with, but concrete awareness of what they were yielded by the guidance afforded by emerging gaps in my theory and by research questions suggested by earlier answers to my questions. My objective was to ensure that the data represented all the diverse perspectives that I hoped to display in my final dataset, its interpretations, and the resulting finding I come up with. As indicated earlier, several themes coalesced after reading through the data several times and were categorized. A provisional code name was given to each category. The frequency of a given code determined how important that piece of information was. This helped to simplify organization, analysis and interpretation of the data. The first letter of the data categories were used as codes (see Appendix E). Coding of the data helps the researcher to develop more specific focused analysis which helps to generate more relevant questions. It is the concrete activity which
gets data analysis underway and continues throughout the analysis (Punch, 1998). By displaying the coded categories on a matrix, I was able to facilitate further analysis, as will be discussed in the next section.

**4.7.3 Data Display**

Data display is defined as an organized and compressed assembly of information that allows the researcher to draw conclusions or take action (Punch, 1998). Data display is essential because it helps the researcher to see the display or to “know what you display” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 11). The coded information from interviews was displayed on a data analysis matrix (see Appendix F). Matrices are multi-dimensional because data categorisation is such that the row and columns represent different dimensions of information and meaning. Data displayed on a matrix is an effective tool because it summarizes the information collected and exposes the gap or areas where more data is needed. It also enables the researcher to organize the information from all data sources, to draw conclusions and to take further action (Punch, 1998). Seeing the codes on the matrix makes it easier to make sense of all the information, and it assists the researcher not only in data collection and analysis but also in developing or refining the statement of the problem with which he or she set out. At this stage in this research, there was substantial data reduction as the matrix disclosed, since only a small portion of the available data was displayed. The main reason for reducing and displaying the data was to assist in drawing conclusions. The next section discusses how conclusions were drawn from the findings and interpretation of the data.
Discussion

Conclusion drawing involves the researcher stepping back to consider what the analyzed data mean and to assess their implications for the questions at hand. Verification is linked to conclusion drawing. This entails revisiting the data as many times that the researcher feels necessary to crosscheck or verify the emergent conclusions. Miles and Huberman (1994), assert that “verification may be as brief as a fleeting second thought passing through the analysts thought during writing with a short excursion back to the field notes or it may be thorough and elaborate with lengthy argumentation and review among colleagues to develop intersubjective consensus or with extensive efforts to replicate a finding in another data set. The meanings emerging from the data have to be tested for their plausibility sturdiness and conformability—that is their validity. Otherwise, we are left with interesting stories about what happened of unknown truth and utility” (p. 11). I used various strategies to generate a meaningful and coherent picture from the data. These strategies ranged from typical and wide use of comparison or contrast, noting patterns and themes, clustering and the use of metaphors to enhance the soundness of the data. As a researcher, it was necessary for me to determine the plausibility of my interpretations by assessing the extent to which the data made initial and intuitive sense to me in light of the issues the research is expected to illuminate.

Interpretation was facilitated by conceptual and figurative grouping or clustering of the data. This enabled me to make contrasts and comparisons to help sharpen understanding of the information collected. I also assessed the importance and appropriateness of the data by partitioning variables that had been prematurely grouped, or did not fit my constructed categories at particular points in time. It was also necessary
to include particular concepts and themes into a more general concept or theme that corresponds more closely to my specific categories (Punch, 1998). The findings from the analysis are reported in Chapter Six.

4.8 Data Analysis

The data analysis was done in two phases. The first analysis was carried out while in the field doing interviews. It became apparent while doing the interviews that some themes were beginning to emerge and I had to take note of these by recording them in my field notes. A few adjustments were made to the questions as the interviews went on, even though all the guiding questions remained relevant. As Bogden and Biklen (1992) suggest, it is necessary for the researcher to make appropriate adjustments during interviews because it enables the researcher to refocus and pursue more salient themes. It is, however, important that adequate care is taken not to compromise the original intent of the study.

4.8.1 Analysis in the Field

Once I began the interviews, I had to evaluate the direction of the research on an ongoing basis to determine where changes were required as the related literature suggests (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). There was also a need to make sure that the interviews were not shifting substantially from my purpose for undertaking the study-to determine whether African-Canadian parents were in favour, or not, of the concept of African-centered schools. I noticed after a few interviews that taking notes while conducting them was distracting the whole process. So I stopped taking notes during interviews and
instead, made notes of my observations and impressions after each interview. This made it possible to listen more attentively to my participants and to capture more wholly, the emotions and experiences of African-Canadian parents with their children’s education and the education system. I believe that through this process I have represented the experiences and views of my participants in a respectful, compelling and powerful way.

The second major analysis was done after data collection had been completed and recorded interviews had been transcribed. Computer files were created for each participant. The hard copies of transcripts were read several times over in search of relevant and salient themes. Several salient categories were identified and each was filed as a separate entity or theme. The next phase involved the transfer of themes from participant files to an appropriate category. This required working simultaneously with two files. In some instances, it was necessary to reduce the quantity of the text to what was most relevant to the study.

4.8.2 In-Depth Data Analysis

I went into the field with guiding questions but had no idea of what to expect. As LeCompte, Preissle and Tesch (1993) suggest, before beginning an in-depth data analysis, it is best to relocate the original research question. Therefore, based on the personal accounts of participants of the study, I asked myself “in what ways do African-Canadian parents see the establishment of Black focused schools enhancing or not enhancing Black youth education?” Thus the data analysis was based on the personal accounts of African-Canadian parents, their understanding of the Black focused school
concept, if they agreed or disagreed with the concept and how they see it enhancing their children’s education.

First, I scanned the raw data from a hard copy in order to refamiliarize myself with the contents and to initiate the generation of themes. During this process, and indeed, for the entire analysis, I had to ask myself questions like: What is this piece of information telling me? Who is saying it? How many people are saying the same things? These questions guided me through the data analysis. Several themes that came up were gradually reduced to main and sub-categories. Files were then created for each category. The data in the category was analyzed for commonalities, contradictions and uniqueness of content (Tesch 1990; Seidman, 1991). There was cross referencing of themes with question frames which was useful in providing a context for understanding the relationship between two or more issues. In the next section I focus on the participants whose accounts provide the data for this study.

4.8.3 Corroboration of Data (Triangulation)

Triangulation is the use of multiple and different data sources (interviews from diverse population samples, different documents), investigators, methods (non-standardized interviews, content analysis) for the overall research design and for the strength of the argument a researcher wants to construct (Denzin, 1989; Mason, 2002). By the use of triangulation, I was able to strengthen and enhance the data. This gave me a better estimate of its reliability and a deeper understanding of the issues I was researching.
As mentioned earlier, this research utilized in-depth interviews as the major source of data. This data was obtained from a diverse group of African-Canadian parents who originally came either from the Caribbean, continental Africa or the Diaspora and are engaged in different professions. The individual interviews were supplemented and corroborated by secondary data to give a holistic picture of African-Canadian parents and their children’s school experiences. The perspectives, opinions and the data obtained from informants were influenced by participant different experiences and understanding of their worlds. Brought together, this gave me a very rich and interesting data set. Lincoln and Guba, (1985) and Anderson, (1990) note that prior to going into the field, it is necessary for the researcher to take steps to verify the trustworthiness of the information provided by informants. As a researcher, I took the necessary steps to ensure the accuracy of the information from participants since it may not be possible to interview a participant a second time. So, I deliberately asked some important questions during the informal discussions to see if a participant would later change an original response and position on certain issues. At the end of each formal interview, I played back the tape to the participant to find out if they wanted to change or add some information. It was sometimes necessary to follow up on some of the interviews with telephone conversations in order to clarify some points. In those conversations, several issues discussed during interviews were brought up by the researcher and responses by participants were noted. During the analysis of data, all field notes were compared with interview transcripts to determine if there were any inconsistencies. In all cases, the field notes confirmed information given during the formal interview.
A number of features protected the validity of this study. The combination of sources and methods provided triangulation of data. Purposeful sampling allowed for a sharp focus on the central goals of this research study. Finally, allowing participants to listen to the interviews, to read transcripts and make changes where necessary, ensured that interpretations were reasonable and valid.

4.9 Profile of Research Participants

The participants for this thesis shared certain characteristics in common. They are all of African descent, and are parents or guardians with children in the Toronto District public school system. Notwithstanding the commonalities, there is also considerable diversity among them in terms of ethnicity, social class and gender (male and female). I demonstrate how each participant connects to the study in terms of his or her role as a parent, occupation, what they value about education and how they see education enhancing their children’s chances to succeed in life. The following brief description of each participant shows his or her ethnic and social diversity and how they fit into the research criteria. For the purpose of confidentiality, I use a pseudonym for each participant and provide a broad description of their places of origin to protect their identity. The participants are not discussed in any special order. I deal with the females first, and then move on to the male participants.
VIVIAN

Vivian migrated to Canada ten years ago from a West Africa country. She attended a university in Canada and is a teacher in the Toronto District Catholic School Board. She is a single parent and has two children who attend one of the public high schools in Toronto. She mentioned that because she is a teacher, when her children face any difficulties in school, it is much easier to get them help. She is very involved with programs and activities at her children’s school. During the interview she recounts some difficulties her children had to go through at school when they first arrived in Canada. She believes that student success begins at home and without strong family support, students struggle in school. She is very much in favor of African-centered schooling, and believes it will enhance Black youth achievement. She thinks that one of the things Black children miss in the public school mainstream is role models that they see in administration or among teachers or workers, but that in an African-centered school they would see lots of role models and thereby feel represented in the authority structure of their education. Vivian also believes that in an African-centered school, Black children will be valued and respected and be made to feel at home. She does not see any harm in the establishment of such a school. She also believes that segregation already exists in the mainstream schools and, therefore, does not see the establishment of a Black focused school as segregating Black youth from the rest of the social groups. She thinks if the government is really concerned about problems that Black youth face in school and wants them to succeed, it should experiment with African-centered schools to see if they will work and, if they don’t work, at least they know they tried and it did not work.
NANA

Nana is a single parent who has two children in the public school. Originally from the Caribbean, she migrated to Toronto, Canada, four years ago. Nana is a graduate student and works part time to support her children. She does not believe establishing African-centered schools will help Black students achieve success nor help stop the dropout problem. She thinks that just as the public school system has a role to play, African-Canadian parents also have a responsibility to do their part to help Black youth succeed in school. Her view is that there are socio-economic and academic issues that have to be examined in the effort to deal with this problem. While not favoring African-centered schools, she would prefer that the school board introduces more subjects that relate to Black youth. She would rather have her children go through the mainstream and to experience cultural diversity and learn from it. She also believes that when the children finish school and have to work, they will have to compete with their White peers, and that the earlier they got used to working together, the better for the children.

PAMELA

Pamela is an African-Canadian parent who migrated to Canada five years ago from a country in West Africa. She is married, has two children who were in the public school system and are currently in college. She studied veterinary medicine in her home country and worked for a few years before migrating to Canada. She recalls how difficult it had been to find employment because she is African/Black. She has moved from one job to another, is currently working but still looking for a permanent job that meets her qualification. She mentions that she has been very involved with activities and programs at her
children’s school. Before they went to college, she made it a point to attend all parent teacher interviews and almost all school functions. Though they are now in college, she still makes sure they take their assignments and other requirements very seriously. Pamela’s view about the mainstream schools is that they do not always do enough considering that some of the children go through a period of adjustment in a new Canadian environment. She argues that there are so many reasons Black youth drop out of school but in her view, the chief of these is that teachers are not sensitive to their needs. She thinks that instead of establishing “other schools that will be special for Black children,” it would be more useful to use the money to develop the skills of the teachers to get them to deal with new immigrant children, particularly training teachers to better understand and work with these children. She thinks that the additional teachers that may be employed in a separate school should rather be employed in the mainstream schools so that the large class numbers of students can be reduced. This would mean that the teacher to student ratio will be smaller, and that the teacher can pay more attention to the students. She does not see the African-centered school as a better alternative at all. Indeed, Pamela was also concerned about the academic credentials of students who will graduate from that school. Her question was: “How will mainstream society treat students who graduate from an African-centered school?” Pamela thinks that what should be done is “to put all those resources in the mainstream because if they do that, they will be more or less killing two birds with one stone. At the same time that you are attending to the needs of these children, their counterparts who are not Black also have the opportunity to learn through the same process. It will create an atmosphere that will encourage the students to understand each other and get along better than they do now.”
TERRY

Terry migrated to Canada from the Caribbean and has lived in Toronto for twenty years. She is a single parent and has three children but only one is in the public school. Terry is a teacher in one of the Peel Dufferin district Public Schools. Initially, we agreed to have the interview in her home but she suggested we do it in my house because she has a baby and did not want her to interrupt the interview. She recalls many social obstacles she had to overcome to get to where she is. Terry’s son had difficulties in the school and that got her more involved than usual. She had to do a lot of work to help him do well at grade level. As such, she was always involved in reading, and also volunteered in his school to assist him and others in his classroom. She emphasized that she supports her son as much as she can at home as well. She understands as a parent, that teachers have a big task but also finds a lot of things are said in theory but are actually not carried out in practice. She finds this to be a big problem and thinks teachers need support.

She also mentioned that the schools are not doing enough, but she explains there are many reasons why the schools cannot carry out all their responsibilities. She mentions that one of those reasons is that the schools are underfunded which makes it difficult for them to carry out some of the good plans. She argues that the schools have a responsibility and an obligation to make students understand the importance of education. Thus, she points out that usually each student gets passing grades, but in her view, if a student needs to repeat a grade level, it is not helpful to just give them a grade and push them through. This is because when they get to high school and teachers find out that the student is not competent for his or her level, by then, it would be too late to help them. In her words: “I am very scared of the future right now and for the children
who the schools are going to be pushing out. The model is not very good. I am very scared for the kids right now that we will be pushing out.” She supports African-centered schooling and hopes it is established soon to foster Black youth success in education.

MARY

Mary is a forty year old and married with two children who are ten and seventeen, and in the Peel District Public School system. She is originally from the Caribbean and migrated to Canada as a young girl. She also went through the mainstream public school in Toronto and finished college. She works as a healthcare aid and volunteers at her children’s school twice a week. She is very involved in her children’s schooling and attends most activities or programs organized by the school. I had one formal and another informal interview with Mary. Although she had a very busy schedule, she offered to do the interviews. Asked if she would send her children to an African-centered school if it was implemented, her response was that she was not very sure and could not give a definitive answer now. It would all depend on when it is established. She believes that what Black youth need are good mentors and not just teachers because, most of the time, a child’s academic performance depends on the teacher. She, like most parents, was concerned about how the Black focused school may be funded. On the other hand, if it is established and is working well, she did not see a problem sending her children to an African-centered school. She does not see any problem with establishing a Black focused school. In fact, she sees it as a choice that parents can make and to her, this is what makes the difference. She adds that she is “glad that this is happening so that those who are having challenges with their children’s education can have a chance to speak out so
that it can bring about change for those who need the change. I am hoping that this will be a success for those who need the change”.

**SARAH**

Sarah is a parent originally from a country in Southern Africa but is a Canadian citizen now. She is a single parent and has one child in public school in Toronto. She is a cultural consultant, educator, facilitator and trainer; a multidisciplinary cultural producer, and a performer. She also consults in organizational management, curriculum development and capacity building among African youth in a variety of areas. She also specializes in building success-oriented leadership in a number of areas using African knowledge systems. What makes Sarah’s approach to education unique is that she actively applies African values and life philosophies such as MAAT, KWANZAA & UBUNTU, using dynamic and creative popular education methods in the classroom, office or under the baobab tree. She says that these techniques are revolutionary because they were given to us by the ancestors and is rooted in how Africans were taught and learned from each other. Their appeal is that they take us away from the Eurocentric “lecture” type model where we sit, listen and have very limited input and participation in our own learning. In the Eurocentric model, African values and practices are suppressed. She believes that Africans are dynamic, animated and alive by nature. “This was how we taught the world. We are natural performers and oral communicators. Our children often get punished for this, which is misread as hyperactivity, disruption, even aggression.” Sarah believes the baton has not been passed to the youth by our leaders, yet everyone blames them for all of society’s ills. African youth are our future and we must ensure
they are prepared to play effective leadership roles in their homes, communities and the broader society in ways that are meaningful and transformative. Sarah is very supportive of the establishment of Black focused schools in Toronto because she believes that as a community, we must help the youth build dynamic social movements to challenge the world’s failing leadership and capitalist-driven oppression. And that more than anything, our youth need to feel valued and loved, instead of being stereotyped, profiled, ignored, feared, abused and underdeveloped.

**DORA**

Dora was born in the Caribbean and migrated to Canada with her parents when she was a little girl. She has lived in Canada for most of her life and attended the mainstream public school. She works with a computer firm as a systems analyst. She is a single parent and has three children in the mainstream school. She expressed a lot of disappointment with the educational system in Toronto. She narrated some of the problems she faced as a student and what her children are also going through. She was very much in favor of the establishment of African-centered schools.

**CAROL**

Carol immigrated to Canada with her husband from one of the African countries. She is educated and has a first degree. She worked for a few years and decided to become a homemaker in order to attend to her children. She is very involved with her children’s schooling and volunteers at her children’s school occasionally. During the interview, she recounted some discriminatory treatment her daughter faced in school and how they
managed to resolve it. She thinks it is important that parents participate in all aspects of their children’s education to help them succeed in their schooling. Carol expressed dismay at the flaws inherent in the mainstream public school, but is opposed to the African-centered school concept because she argues that the children must become comfortable in socializing with people from different cultures, and that even if the curriculum is going to be the same, the children need the interaction with people from other cultures, especially the dominant White society, in order to build self confidence. Carol is not in favor of Black focused schooling for Black youth.

**MARTHA**

Martha came to Canada many years ago from West Africa after completing her first degree. She furthered her studies to the doctorate level and is now teaching in a Canadian university. Prior to her appointment in the higher institution, she was employed in a high school in Ontario. She recounts the discrimination she experienced as a minority teacher on account of her race and gender even though she is very well educated. Martha is married and has two children who were previously enrolled in the mainstream public school. She took them out and enrolled them in a private school because she felt they needed more challenge. Initially she was opposed to the African-centered school concept because of how the media portrayed it. However, after doing some research on it, she has now come to understand the concept. She would rather the government spent more money on such schools than build more prisons in the community.
MAYA

Maya was born in the Caribbean. She came to Canada with her parents when she was seven years old. She had most of her education in Canada, and as she observes, it was through the educational system that she learnt that she was different because of her color. She finished high school and started university. She did two years of the first degree but had to take some time off to work because of her children. She is a single parent with two “amazing boys” who attended the mainstream public school. She believes that parents should not expect teachers to teach their children because they are only there to re-enforce what the children already know. Maya is in favour of the establishment of a Black focused school for Black youth. She believes it is the best way to help them succeed in school.

LEILA

Leila is a single mother with one child in the public school system. She was born in Canada to African-Canadian parents. Her parents originally came from the Caribbean Islands. She completed high school and went to university for her first degree. She is a school guidance counselor and is currently pursuing a post graduate degree on part time. She recounts the difficulties she encountered as a Black child in the mainstream public school in Toronto. She is the only one among her African-Canadian school mates who made it to university, and attributes her success to the support she received from her parents.

She is a single parent with one child in the mainstream public school. Despite her busy schedule, Leila participates in her child’s school activities and programs, but she
recalls there was not much parental involvement in her background when she was growing. There wasn’t much parental involvement as would be expected today. Her parents trusted that the school would do what they were supposed to do, and she decided not to complicate issues by demanding any more than they did. Thus most of the time, her parents would come to her school when she graduated, or was performing, or for some such event.

Leila believes there are so many reasons why Black youth drop out of school. She argues that “I have met very few students who are so far back that they may not want to be there.” But she knows a lot of kids who she can say were “pushed out.” So it wasn’t their own decision to drop out but the way the school treated them. The children just felt uncomfortable being in the school. She does not see the need for the establishment of Black focused schools and fears that if established, they would become dumping grounds for Black students. She points out that she does not see why some teachers should sit back and let others do the job. Establishing the Black focused school would be a way for some teachers to sit back and let somebody else do the job. She believes there is work to do and the teachers should do their job.

She believes it is the responsibility of teachers to teach children irrespective of their backgrounds, and teachers should be trained to teach in a way that could include the experiences of the African children. She argues that if the family and kids elect to go to an African-centered school that is their choice. But she concedes that it is very difficult to ignore the demand because she sees it happen all the time where schools and administrations have a way of coercing people or pushing people to make uninformed decisions so that they don’t have to deal with the problem before them.
NINA

Nina is a married mother with three children. She was born in the Caribbean but came to Canada at a very young age. She also went through the Toronto District public school system. She finished high school and currently works as a manager in a manufacturing company in Toronto. She considers herself successful, but recalls the many economic and social obstacles she had to overcome to get to where she is today. All her children attended the Peel District public schools in Brampton. At the moment, she has only one child in the public school. The older child finished high school and is now in college, but her second child dropped out of school and eventually left home. Nina mentioned that she makes it a point to attend all parent/teacher interviews. She admits that she has not been active in the school enough and, like most parents believes that involvement means being in the school “all the time and that sort of thing.” However, she makes sure that her children are in school every day and helps them with homework. She also makes sure to provide their needs so that her children would focus on their education. She did not understand the Black focused school concept very well because all she knew was what she heard from the news or read in the newspaper. Through the interview, she came to understand the concept and strongly supports an alternative school for Black youth side by side the mainstream school system. She does not see Black focused schools as a form of segregation at all, because parents and students would have the option to send their children to that school and if they did not want it too they did not have to. She believes that even though we all come from different parts, as a Black community we all have the same values. So if she teaches her child something at home and the child goes to school, it is the same thing that would be
reinforced at a Black focused school. In this case, it becomes difficult for the child to stray from the lesson. Even though she welcomes the idea of the Black focused school, she is concerned about the credentials that students who attend that school would have, and the problems they might face after graduation when they are looking for jobs.

**KOFI**

Kofi came to Canada about twenty years ago from the Caribbean. He is married with two children who attend schools in the Peel District public school system. He immigrated to Toronto thirty years ago. He is a medical technologist. He is not very pleased with life in Canada and wished he did not migrate. He is aware of the discrimination that many Black children encounter at school and so does not hesitate to contact his children’s teachers or go to the school whenever there is something he does not understand or is not happy about. He thinks the curriculum is Eurocentric and not representative of the backgrounds and experiences of the diverse students who attend the mainstream public school. He thinks many Black youth drop out of school because they do not fit into the system. And as the saying goes, “birds of the same feathers flock together. But it looks like they are sometimes left alone.” He points out that many Black youth are isolated and the teachers don’t know how to counsel them or incorporate them in the whole system. He mentions that he has also observed that Black youth seem to be different from the other children in the school.

He supports African-centered schooling and hopes that it is established soon because he believes it will be the best way to educate Black youth. He believes it is going to help his children and especially those likely to drop out or have difficulties in the
system. He thinks the African-centered school would boost the morale and the children would know that they are from a country, which produces most of the diamond and gold in the world. This will make them proud of whom they are, not just people from the Dark Continent as others have made them believe, or as they see portrayed on television or in the media. In his view, if the school boards would not supply funding, the African-Canadian community should be able to do it ourselves.

NATHAN

Nathan came to Canada fifteen years ago from West Africa but is now a Canadian citizen. He is a married and has three children who have all gone through the mainstream public school system. He finished college or polytechnic in his home country and trained as a petro-chemical engineer. At the time of the interview, he was working with a petroleum company. He recalls many social obstacles he had to overcome before he got to where he is now. Nathan is very much involved and participates in activities in his children’s school. He believes that despite its responsibility, the school alone cannot do all the training and education of our children. He thinks Black youth will succeed in school if parents make sure they study because parents cannot rely on the teachers alone to ensure a good outcome for the children. He believes both sides must work together. During the interview, he had not heard about the term “Black focused schooling”, but after explaining what the concept is he was very much in support of the establishment of such a school. He believes a Black focused school would help Black youth achieve their goals, and that it would open many doors of opportunity for them. He also believes that a Black focused school would not only be good for the Black child, but also the White
child. It would encourage the children to learn more about themselves and thus develop healthy self esteem that would help them to study better in school. He also saw it as a good opportunity for parents to have a choice to choose what they think is best for their children.

**JONES**

Jones is from a country in East Africa who immigrated to Canada with his family twenty-five years ago. He is married with four children who attend the mainstream public school. He was a teacher in his country before coming to Canada but had to enroll again in a teacher’s college in Ontario in order to teach in a school. He was a teacher in one of the high schools in Toronto for a while, but is now on retirement because of his health. Jones is very much involved in his children’s education and goes with them on trips, and attends all school conferences with the teachers even before the parent-teacher interviews at the end of each term. Sometimes he just goes to his children’s school to find out how his children are doing. Jones is dismayed at the racism and some of the flaws in the mainstream public school. He argues that Black youth are not treated fairly in the public school, that they are not welcome and made to feel at home in the public school. He welcomes the idea of African-centered schooling, and believes that if society is really worried about Black youth dropout, it would consider establishing an alternative school for them. He believes that if the School Board is sincere about tackling Black youth dropout, the alternative school is something that may have to be experimented with. Everyone would all see how it works. If it fails; the TDSB would know it gave the
African-Canadian community an opportunity to redress the challenges Black youth face in school.

He also mentioned that if African-centered schools are established, he will be one of the first parents to register his kid because he believes the mainstream school is no place for his children. He further argues that the mainstream schools do not have the interest of his children, especially Black youth at heart. All it does is to perpetuate the status quo. In other words, Black kids or minority kids are “the hewers of stone and the carriers of water”. That is the mentality of the mainstream school, he asserts. He believes those schools limit [the] Black youth and they give the impression that Black can’t do anything. He sees the African-centered school as an attempt to redress the status quo and to give Black youth “a space and let the sky be the limit”. (Monday, March 5\textsuperscript{th} 2007).

**EDGAR**

Edgar came to Canada many years ago from a country in West Africa. He is married with two children in the mainstream public school. As a parent, he is very involved in activities and programs in his children’s school. He attended a university in Canada and, eventually, went to teachers’ college and now teaches in one of the high schools in Ontario. He is very upset about the racial discrimination that Black youth face in school. However, he is opposed to the idea of the establishing an African-centered school in Ontario. He agrees that it is a very good idea or concept, but would rather have the mainstream public schools teach children about their culture and heritage and from their own experiences. Since Canada is a multicultural society, he would rather want to
see the schools employ more diverse staff as teachers, administrators, and school officials.

As a parent, he sees education as a very precarious venture. He believes it can make or break a child. Especially in Canada, education may be one of the most important assets to have, and so denying anybody education is a very serious problem. The issue for him is how we can ensure that everybody gets the same education. He mentioned that he is constantly trying to find out what to do for his children to succeed in school. He makes sure to attend all school activities and, once he is notified of a school activity or program, he always makes time to attend. He adds that when he was going to school, his parents did not even know what class he was in or what subjects he was taking; they just expected him to go forward every year. For him, while growing up, there was a clear understanding of what you were to achieve and you went ahead and achieved it. His parents did not have to know the details. He compares the nature of parental involvement in Canadian schools to that of many Africa countries, observes that conditions in here are quite different from his country of origin. He argues that the educational system is very complex and wonders how parents who don’t have a high level of education manage it. One has to be educated to gain an understanding of the educational system. He further argues that many Black youth drop out of school because the schools are not doing enough to help them make it through successfully.
KWAME

Kwame came to Canada twenty five years ago from a country in West Africa. He recalls many social obstacles he initially faced when he arrived in Canada. He is in his late forties and works with an electrical manufacturing company. He is married, and has three children. Two of his children are in the public school and one is in college. Despite his busy schedule, he makes sure to involve himself with the activities and programs at his children’s school. He believes the mainstream public schools could do better than they are doing now by reducing the number of students in each class in order to give teachers more time to pay attention to each student. He believes Black youth drop out of school because some of them come from homes where there isn’t enough support. It is important that teachers help these students. In his view, if there is no one at home to help with homework and the children come to school (and there is no help as well) then the kids give up and don’t see the point of going to school. He was initially opposed to the idea of African-centered schooling because he did not have a clear understanding of what it meant. He gained a better understanding of the concept toward the end of the interview. He does not see it as a form of segregation and believes many African-Canadian parents would send their children to such a school if the resources were provided and are well informed about what it could offer. He believes a parent’s decision will also depend on how the idea and opportunity is presented to them. After weighing the benefits that the community and Black youth may gain from the establishment of an African-centered school, he changed his view and acknowledged that “it may take a while to get it off the ground” though he would want to see it implemented sooner.

(Saturday, July 7th, 2007)
CHRISTIAN

Christian was born in Canada. He is married and has three children in the mainstream public school. His parents originally came from the Caribbean in the 1950s. Christian himself went through the mainstream public school system. He recalls the many social and economic obstacles he had to overcome to get to where he is today. He is a self-employed and runs a successful barber shop and makes a comfortable annual income. He mentioned that he would love to spend more time with his children and to help with their school work, but the nature of his business does not permit him. Though he still involves himself when he is home, his wife attends school activities and interviews much more than he does. He supports the establishment of African-centered schools because he believes it will be a good opportunity for Black youth to learn about their heritage and would build up their self-esteem and confidence.

PETER

Peter came to Canada with his parents from the Caribbean when he was a young boy. He went to a college after high school and works in a financial institution. He is married and has two children who attended the mainstream public school but are in college now. During the interview, he recalled some of the problems he faced as a young Black male in the public school. He participates in most of his children’s school activities and attends the parent-teacher interviews because he believes that children will only perform well at school when parents work together with the schools. Peter believes that it is important that both school and parents do their parts to help children become successful and responsible adults. He supports the establishment of an African-centered
school in Toronto, and would send his children to this school because it would give them the opportunity to see more role models like themselves, and it would encourage them to learn harder to achieve success.

KINGSLEY

Kingsley is forty-five years old. He was born in West Africa and migrated with his family to Canada in 1994. He identifies himself as African-Canadian. He is married with three children, all of whom attend the mainstream public school. We had the interview in his house; this took approximately one hour. One of his children finished high school and is currently in university. Kingsley sees parental involvement as very important, though when he was growing up, his parents never came to his school, but the teachers were very committed and helpful. He argues that “teachers here are not helpful. Here it is different because if nobody stands up for you in this country or if you do not stand up for your kid, the system is going to push the kid down, especially the educational system.” Kingsley wants the best education for his children, so he is very involved with his children’s education and makes an attempt to participate in most activities, and to attend all parent/teacher interviews at their school. He supports the establishment of African-centered schools and does not see it as segregation. He sees it as giving parents a right and the chance to decide what is best for their children. He also believes that all children learn differently and if he sees his child will perform well in an African-centered school that is where he would send his child.

The accounts of participants in this study are as real as the social structures that affect them. It was to contextualize their accounts concretely that has made it necessary
to offer the rather brief glimpses into their lives and thoughts. Some participants are homemakers, employed in various professions or also part-time students.

4.10 Limitations of Study

It is important to discuss the limitations of this study because, like any research, it contends with challenges and limitations. Some research is meant to illuminate complexities or the purpose of which may simply be to provoke thought. This study is qualitative and has culminated in the presentation of findings to help enhance African-Canadian parents’ views or perceptions and understanding of the Black focused school or African-centered schools as an alternative to mainstream schooling for African-Canadian children.

One of the major difficulties of qualitative research is documenting what becomes “known” and what is omitted. For any researcher, it is sometimes difficult to know what to document and what to omit. The question then is, whether in omitting what was voiced, a loss is occasioned in terms of the authenticity of the stories finally presented. As a qualitative researcher, my goal was to pick themes that would organize the research. These themes were not necessarily those that I initially formulated. They were ideas, questions and concerns that developed out of the stories of participants elicited in collecting the data. The idea behind any research effort is that its final product would become a knowledge base for a community. My intention is to use this research as an educational tool, but like any work, once it leaves the world of the researcher, how it is taken up is left to the readers’ interpretation (Dei, 1995; 2005; Matthews, 2003).
The sample for this research was limited to African-Canadian parents in Toronto, Canada. It was not a province-wide project. In its purposive context and content, this study represents the personal views and perceptions of only a few members of the participating group of African-Canadian parents. It may not represent the views of all respective communities, although its findings may serve as a basis for future research. Some of the participants had good knowledge or practical experiences about “African-centered” schooling. However, those who did not have a good knowledge of African-centered schools needed additional clarifications from the researcher to be able to make their responses. Sometimes it was necessary to rephrase interview questions to facilitate comprehension. This could result in misinterpretation of some questions though it is assumed that all questions were adequately understood and honestly responded to. Where the language employed to answer a question could not be presented verbatim it became necessary to correct some excerpts from the interview.

Another challenge of this research was interviewing parents from different socio-economic backgrounds. Participants ranged from working class to middle class parents. The question then was whether the research was speaking to a particular social and economic group. It is important to point out that other forms of oppression construct African-Canadian people’s experiences. This research, however, focuses on the saliency of race and socio-economic factors on schooling. It does not interrogate how other forms of oppression impact the lives of African-Canadian parents and youth. The focus of this research was to elevate race as the central phenomenon that conditions the experiences of African-Canadian parents and their children within the public school system.
Some critics may argue that a larger sample of participants would provide more credibility for the findings of this research. Neuman (1994) argues that a large sample does not necessarily guarantee its representativeness. Nor is a large sample that is not randomized or a poor sampling frame more representative than a smaller sample with an excellent random sampling frame.

Another possible limitation is that my position as the researcher may be considered as that of an “insider”, to the extent that I am a member of the community I am researching. My cultural and kinship affiliation to the participants may be an advantage but also raises questions of possible bias in terms of perceived difficulties related to my ability to maintain detached objectivity toward the research object. Hughes (1990), and Popkewitz (1984) argue that the notion of absolute objectivity on the part of researchers needs to be questioned because our paradigms or world views ultimately infuse themselves into our research and the choices we make in the process of research. Many researchers find ways and means to minimize the influence of the subject biases on their research. Though I am a member of the community and an insider, I had no prior acquaintance with most of the participants. I would rather want the data elicited to speak for or against the concept of Black focused schools and their establishment.

Any research approach that seeks to give voice to the experiences of participants, rather than generalize or universalize the voice of participants, would generally have limitations. This research does not dismiss the fact that its inherent limitations may not represent the experiences of all the participants. Even so, its focus has been to provide participants space to tell their stories.
The limitations of this study can be summed up as Brunner (1994) argues: complex problems do not have simple solutions, and that all research is not necessarily meant to provide ultimate answers. However, I hope that there are lessons to be learned from the outcome of this study. This research is not an indictment of teachers or the school system. It is only an attempt to investigate a phenomenon. It is a means by which to address the educational needs of Black youth and to give African-Canadian parents a voice in making decisions about matters that are fundamental to the outcomes of their children’s schooling and education.
Chapter 5: Findings: Parental Perceptions of Black focused Schools: Possibilities and Constraints

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is devoted to what the study found in the words of the participants themselves. In most of the categories, there was considerable consensus among the views of participants. There were a variety of opinions in other categories, which made it possible to distinguish between two distinct groups on certain issues. The opinions of participants were broken up according to the perceived need and the potential effectiveness of African-centered schools. Some parents felt the African-centered school concept was worthwhile; while others felt the idea was not what they wanted for their children. All the African-Canadian parents acknowledge there are problems within the mainstream public school system, but did not hold a uniform view on the establishment of African-centered schools even though the majority supports the concept and the prospects it holds for Black students. It must be noted that the African-Canadian parent population is not a homogeneous group. The parents’ concerns varied to some extent, depending on ethnicity or countries of origin. In spite of this, all the parents point out that they are aware of the discrimination and prejudice that their children experience at school. However, some common themes and concerns emerge from the analysis of their narratives. These analyses of parents’ are demarcated by status, class, ethnicity and gender. Their perceptions, and their understanding of the African-centered school concept, proceeds on the footing that its findings would contribute to our understanding
of how African-Canadian parents interpret their children’s educational needs in a White dominated society.

5.2 African-Canadian Parents’ Understanding of African-Centered Schooling

The majority of African-Canadian parents (fourteen of them) demonstrated considerable knowledge and understanding of the African-centered school concept, with a few exceptions. Although many participants were unable to give an actual definition, they were able to capture the essence of the concept. Maya has two children in the mainstream public school. When asked about her understanding of the Black focused school concept, she responded:

A school that has many Black administrators and teachers so that our children can see teachers in position[s] of power, representing them and seeing themselves within the curriculum. I think of Black focused schools as an opportunity for our children to learn our history, because we need to know where we are coming from before we know where we are going and we cannot allow the vision that our forefathers had and made the way for us to go by the wayside. We still have a responsibility to resurrect that and that can only be done in a Black focused school. (Tuesday, December 19th 2007).

Maya sees Black focused schools as an opportunity for Black youth to learn more about their culture and history, and to have the experiences of the Black community included in mainstream curriculum. She sees a Black focused school as one that will empower Black youth since they will see themselves represented in the curriculum. It would also create a strong sense of identity for the African-Canadian youth to know who they are, and help them integrate better in society. As already noted, Black students in mainstream public school have constantly been exposed to just one ethno-centric version of knowledge production to the exclusion of all others. This has become a barrier for others and impedes their progress in the education system in Toronto. A Black focused
school will make Black youth feel better about themselves and not feel marginalized. Vivian was born in Nigeria and came to Canada as an adult. She has two children who attended the mainstream school but are now in college. She also shared her view about how she understood the Black focused school:

My understanding of Black focused schooling is not just having a school for Black kids. That will be selfish. It will be dancing to the same music that the Canadian mainstream is playing as far as the curriculum is concerned. To my understanding, a Black focused school is a school that is inclusive. It is not just a school for people of the African community. It is a school that is opened to others who want to learn from an Afrocentric perspective. It is not just going to be a school that teaches just about Africa, but the curriculum will be more inclusive, as compared to the mainstream curriculum. (Friday, August 11th 2006).

Many parents (fourteen) like Vivian understand that a Black focused school is not just a school for Black children. They understand that African-centered schools would ensure the inclusion of all experiences; anyone can attend such a school. Another African-Canadian parent, Sarah, was born in South Africa, but has lived in Canada for most of her life. She went through the Canadian elementary and post-secondary school system herself, and has one child in the public school. She works as a social activist. When asked about her understanding of African-centered schools she observed that

African-centered or Black focused schooling is really about centering the African child and using African knowledge to educate and develop that child. So you are developing the whole learner, not just a piece of this child’s education…but you are acknowledging the communities they come from, the family structures they come from, the cultural identities they come from and recognizing those as strengths and using them in the classroom so that you empower the whole African community and [build] future leaders of tomorrow. (Friday 16th, August 2006).

Sarah believes a Black focused school curriculum will prepare the youth holistically for life in the broader society. Another parent, Jones, who was a teacher in
one of the high schools in Toronto, expressed his understanding of Black focused schools as follows:

My idea of a Black focused school is [a school that is] operated from the point of view of a Black person so the Black person is in the center, as opposed to the current school system where the Black student is in the periphery. A Black focused school is not a school meant for only Black kids though. What is taught there, the prism from which the curriculum is taught, is from a Black prism; a Black person’s prism. The teachers there understand the Black kids and the purpose of it is to make the Black kid successful. So whatever is done in the school is for the Black kid. Black focused schools are rooted in African ways of knowing, values and interactions. (Monday, March 5th 2007).

African-Canadian parents who have knowledge of the Black focused school concept understand a Black focused school as an alternative educational site that would validate their children’s history, experiences and identity. The parents believe that the school curriculum should connect to the lived realities of Black youth. Vivian, a teacher in one of the mainstream public schools in Toronto shared her view of what a Black focused school is. Vivian gives a clear understanding of what a Black focused school would do for Black youth in school:

I see the Black focused school as a good alternative to mainstream schooling... I think Black children who will go to an institution which teaches from an Afrocentric perspective, will identify and feel very comfortable. The school will be sensitive to their needs and address certain issues that many African parents will want to see addressed. Most of the things they will be taught in the school will incorporate their spirituality. The learning will be holistic and the spiritual aspect is not removed. Every child has something to say and they are listened to because it is not just adults who have something to say. The children will also contribute to the learning. They will feel more comfortable seeing Black teachers that they can reckon with. One of the things that these children are missing in the mainstream is that there are no role models that they see in the administration, or teachers, or workers, but in the Black focused school, they are going to see lots of role models and the children will feel represented. They will be valued, respected and this will make them feel at home. (Friday, August 11th 2006).
In sum, African-Canadian parents expressed their understanding of Black focused or African-centered school concept as a school that values the success of all their students. To them such schools will embrace collective community values and center the learner in his or her cultural milieu. Many of them also understand that a Black focused school will not be a panacea to the low achievement of some Black students. From our discussions, some parents who were sceptical at the beginning of the interviews had a change of mind by the end of the interview because they had come to understand the concept. A few parents (three of them) still held on to their views of not seeing the need of having a Black focused school established. These parents believe that parents had to be more responsible and “involved” in their children’s education. Some other reasons were that our society is multicultural and there was the needs to have children socialize with other ethnic groups. Another fear of these parents was the issue of the perceptions of academic credentials of the Afrocentric School which may not be highly recognized as that from the mainstream schools. These parents argue that the Black history or culture could be taught in the mainstream and instead funding used to establish a separate school should be used in improving equity issues in the mainstream schools. Even so, they consider it as a valuable and viable option for addressing Black or African youth disengagement and school dropout. Altogether, they believe this alternative will offer broader perspectives on success to foster hope and nurture the resilience and community-building spirit central to the lives of African peoples.
5.3 African-Canadian Parents’ Attitude to Black focused Schools

Some African-Canadian parents (fourteen) see the Black focused school concept as positive and necessary. When participants were asked if they see it as something to nurture their children’s self-awareness and culture, many of them responded in the affirmative. One parent, Maya, observes that it is important that our children know who they are. She says:

I am all for Black focused schools. You know what? I think it would be the best thing that ever happened in this country, and the reason why I say that is this, especially from the elementary level; I believe that a Black focused school at the elementary level to ground children in who they are as persons and what you want to do is build a positive attitude within their spirit instead of negativity. And so when the child is grounded from, let’s say J.K to grade eight, nobody can come and destroy that because they know who they are and know where they are going. They know the possibility of what they can do because they have the background information of their history. They will have textbooks that are written by Black people and so forth and so on. What could be so wrong with having that? I think what a lot of individuals have a problem with is the word “Black” because it is very negative. But we are Black people; we are people of colour and truly our ancestors are Black and so, if anything, we need to celebrate and embrace that in all totality, because we cannot allow the government or the system to dictate to us and get away from the issue at hand, because we really will want to make a statement with a Black focused school. We are here to educate. We are here to teach and we have to get back to that. We have to! (Tuesday, December 19th 2006).

While there was considerable support for the Black focused school concept, three participants were not in favor even though they understand the concept. They were just against the idea of Black focused schools. These participants did not see the need for the schools, but would rather want to see change in the mainstream schools. One parent was ambivalent and cynical. Edgar, a parent from a West African country, does not see how the school could connect to all the different experiences it would have to accommodate:

Advocates say that the Black focused schools would center the learner in his or her own culture, history, personal location and spiritual identity. How exactly can any single school cater for the hundreds of cultures, histories, personal locations and
spiritual identities of the dozens of Canadians? How can they throw all the different cultures under the same umbrella of ‘Black’? (Monday, March 12th 2007)

Edgar’s words reiterate one of the most formidable challenges faced by proponents of Black focused schools, namely the kind or nature of the culture to emphasize in an African-centered school. Will there be enough room in the curriculum to accommodate all cultures? Which cultures will be prioritized? As an alternative, will the schools teach salient elements of the dominant culture and cultures around the world including and especially those from Africa? These interconnected considerations raise the issue of how far the African-centered schools could engage the student’s interest in school and boost his or her performance. Afrocentric discourse “offers alternative ‘ways of knowing,’ which is informed by the histories and cultural experiences of people of African descent (Dei, 1996, p. 197).” It is a pedagogical and communicative tool, which “grounds analysis and investigations of African and Black issues in this perspective” (Dei, 1996, p. 179). Asante (1991) notes the purpose of Afrocentricity is to take action or bring all peoples of African descent from the margins to the center of post modern history. The challenge for the educator is to allow the African child to see and interpret the world through their own eyes rather than from a Eurocentric point of view. The educator also needs to be aware that schooling has to be adapted to fit the differences which minority or youth of African descent bring to the school environment. African-centered education is a “critique of a “liberal” ideology that fails to effect social change”. What it does is to disrupt “current power relations in the school setting”. It seeks to empower students and educators to question the dominance of the Eurocentric paradigm (Dei, 1996; p. 180).
Another parent, Nana, who works part-time, is convinced that making Black youth go through the mainstream, like she did as a Black parent, makes them tough and helps them overcome some of the hurdles created by racism, stereotyping and discrimination in society. She asserts:

If I had to make a choice of sending my child to the mainstream school or the Black focused school, I will send my child to the regular school because they may experience racism but they will learn from it and it will help make them tough. What the school board should do is bring in subjects that relate to the Black youth. (Tuesday, August 22nd 2006).

Nana may well have developed some coping strategies to enable her to survive racism in her environment. Her remarks are interesting but somewhat contradictory because she assumes that even though racism disempowers, it can also strengthen. It is unfair to expect another Black child to have the same experience of racism as a parent and hope it will strengthen him or her. This is because the experience could damage the child’s potential for academic success and scar him or her for the rest of the child’s life. A better alternative may be to teach children about racism and provide them with tools to resist rather than expose them to experience racism and hope they will be strengthened by it. While many participants had no difficulty expressing their feelings about the establishment of a Black focused school, they had problems describing what they feel mainstream schools should do to help Black youth succeed. Those who favor Black focused schooling consider it a priority in the education of their children. Sarah, whose views on Black focused schools are extremely positive, and can’t wait to enroll her child in such a school, thinks its implementation is long overdue:

Yes. They are twenty years long overdue. My child should be in one now. I think about it every day. Even my son and I were talking about it this morning, this
morning that we had to find a radical alternative for him. (Tuesday, August 16th 2006).

The parents who have a negative perception of such a school, think it will need a lot of commitment on the part of Black parents, the community, and support from the government. They perceive a lack of commitment on the part of policy makers and the Black community on the establishment of such a school. Other parents see the Black focused school as likely to have very little success in its attempt to combat the problems that Black youth face in the mainstream schools, such as low teacher expectations, inadequate or non-comprehensive curriculum, and a lack of role models or minority teachers and workers in the mainstream school system. Edgar feels that White teachers will dominate the schools. Therefore it is necessary that:

The mission and vision statement of the mainstream school should focus on bringing out what is best in those students. I believe that we would have achieved a Black focused school without necessarily turning the school into one. My fear of the Black focused school is the fact that it becomes an elitist enterprise or a segregated enterprise. You and I understand it as it is because we are informed … but the rest of the population would see it as a special Black school. It is what the majority think that matters, not what you and I think. The universities and colleges will start looking at it differently, and employers will start looking at it differently as a hot bed of militancy for Blacks. I think the Black focused school is not just what we want in Toronto. It is just not a Toronto thing. I think that what they have to do is that those schools in those majority Black areas are carefully selected when they are putting in teachers and principals. They should put in people who can demonstrate through their mission statements and proposals what they will achieve (Monday, March 12th, 2006).

This parent’s fear is that the Black focused school would be a form of separating Black youth from the mainstream. Opponents of Black focused schools are skeptical about the purported benefits of such institutions, and they reject any system, however well-intentioned, that “violates” the judicial ban on segregation. A Black focused school is a school that will serve the particular interests and concerns of African-Canadians youth.
and counter racism. The school will educate children to be focused, motivated and studious. The school is to create a strong sense of identity for children to know who they are and help them integrate better in society. It can make Black youth feel better about themselves and not feel marginalized. If mainstream schools would meet the needs of Black youth there would be no debate on an alternative school for Black youth. African-Canadian parents who want Black focused schools established do not want their children segregated; what they want is an equal chance for their children to succeed. Edgar also believes that it is what the majority of people in our society think that matters and not what a few minorities believe to be the best for their children. Unfortunately, he downplays his own agency that as minorities in society, we should have the right to subvert the dominant thinking especially when it works to the disadvantage of the minority. From the debates to the theories, the achievement factor has been treated as the linchpin of the justification for the need to establish African-centered schools. We next look at the participants’ views on this pivotal factor.

5.4 Black focused Schools and the Academic Success of Black Youth

The responses of parents in relation to establishing Black focused schools in Toronto are overwhelmingly positive. The parents who advocate for the concept (seventeen) believe that African-centered schools will not only be a positive educational alternative to the mainstream schools but will also increase the chances of academic success for their children. The general perspective of these parents is that schools that are culturally responsive to Black youth may at the minimum raise their consciousness for social struggle and liberation from their underprivileged status and a redefinition of
success in broad terms. However, the positive view as to it enabling academic success is based on the expectation that such schools would give Black youth self esteem and make them gain more interest in learning. One parent sums it up as follows:

The pieces around issues of healing, the pieces around spirit injury, the notions of acknowledging how slavery and other huge historical holocausts have impacted not just our children today, but how they even affect the parents who are raising them and the kind of societies in which we live, so I think African-centered learning should be teaching our children about Pan-Africanism. It should be teaching our children to recognize and celebrate the day of the African child, like last week on June 16th, for example, or African or Black history month. All these things should be part of the curriculum for African-centered schooling. Also, I think acknowledging their unique experiences and recognizing that as theory, viable theory that is actively tested and challenged ... that isn’t some intellectual game that you play to be famous, to gain status and power but something that is really dynamic and has the power, to transform lives. (Thursday, October 19th, 2006).

In contrast, three participants who oppose the establishment of African-centered schools argue that they do not see how establishing such schools will increase the chances of academic success of Black youth. Pamela, has two children who have passed through the public school and are now in college and point out that:

The solution to the school dropout may not necessarily be putting the child in a school where they are taught their cultural values to understand their culture. In the first place, that might not be the reason why the child dropped out of school. The reason may be the fact that the teachers in the school that the child may be going to are not sensitive to their needs, but not necessarily their cultural needs, or understanding their origin or Black history, or whatever. It might be the teachers are not being able to communicate with these children to be able to understand what their weaknesses are, or [they do not] have the patience to move slowly with a particular child who is trying to settle in the school society. So if they have the African-centered schools and they have new comers who are coming into the schools because remember when they come they do not start from the beginning. Some students start from whatever level they are at. Let us say a student goes to grade twelve and grade twelve is the standard where he is supposed to be and there are people already in that system who may be ahead of them in the class. If the teachers who have the same kind of approach that they have in the mainstream you will see the same problem coming up irrespective of all the efforts they are making. (Friday, September 15th 2006).
As will be more fully discussed in the findings it is obvious that Pamela does not see how establishing a Black focused school will solve the underachievement of Black youth in school. She believes that the dropout problem is due to teacher insensitivity to children’s needs, and that the same problem could occur in the Black focused schools. Her view displays a misunderstanding of the Black focused concept and, like some parents, probably believes the negative remarks she hears from the media about Black focused schooling. Considering that the antiracism and Afrocentric frames of reference will be the guiding principles of this school, educators and parents hope that teachers in a Black focused school will be well trained in the principles of African-centred education. The teachers in the school will be aware of the realities that confront their students on a daily basis and will be sensitive to the needs of their students. As mentioned elsewhere in this study parents who oppose the establishment of the African-centred school do not consider the possibilities that Black focused schools have the potential to facilitate academic success. These parents were convinced that instead of establishing an alternate Black focused school to the mainstream, it would be better to use the resources in the mainstream to improve education for all children in the schools. They fail to appreciate that it is a school that sees all students as different but equal, and provides an equal opportunity for all of them. Another angle to the objection to the establishment of Black focused schools is offered by Edgar:

I believe culture is passed on and the reason is … because culture is passed on there are about fifty countries in Africa and which one are you going to teach and [in any case] is it just history that they are going to learn in school. It is important to put [this] in perspective. We need a school that is rich in presentations, and focused on other parts of the world, and encouraging students. The best thing is to give them the tools to be able to go and find out about themselves. I believe you can do that in any school. If you are able to teach critical thinking and establish that all people are important, if you are able to talk about not just Iraq and Afghanistan in the morning
announcement but also talk about the Sudan, talk about Liberia, then you will be incorporating everything, if the history books are not just talking about V.E. day and those things. I have asked about this so many times and they say there is not enough time to talk about everything. Of course, there isn’t (Monday, March 12th, 2007)! 

A few parents (three of them) like Edgar, argue against the establishment of the African-centered school and believe that when critical thinking skills are taught in schools, it will take care of what Black students are missing in the mainstream. He admits that the Eurocentric curriculum in schools lay emphasis on just a few societies and neglects others and it is important for them to incorporate other perspectives. Ironically, his argument is borders on what a Black focused school would do for Black students. The African-centered school “will not simply teach about Africa and African peoples or the Black experience. It will center the students in their learning by starting from where they are and who they are, affirming the students’ complex and multiple identities and subject locations as entry points to engage broader issues of learning. Edgar believes that students should also learn about how their experiences connect to other global or transnational experiences and events rather than just Eurocentric education. He mentioned that he has asked the school on several occasions to incorporate other perspectives into the curriculum but the excuse has been that there is not much time to incorporate everything. This is a typical case of the mainstream’s inability to meet the needs of African-Canadian youth. But mainstream education should be able to cut across and cover all disciplines and be able to educate the learner in a broad and myriad of subjects. The curriculum delivery must be center each student in the learner’s experience and community knowledge.
5.5 Educating African-Canadian Parents on Black focused Schooling

Some African-Canadian parents (nine of them) were not as able to give an accurate definition of Black focused or African-centered schools as others. Among the nine parents, some only had vague ideas about it, while others defined it as “a Black school” or “a school for only Blacks.” Their own words reveal their understanding of it, as seen in the following:

Pamela: Yes, I have heard the term. I have not followed the debates but I understand it as a school for mainly Black children and we have to be careful how it is implemented (Friday, 15th September, 2006).

Nina: Yes I have heard the term. It was on the news the other day. It means having a separate school for Blacks. I don’t know if it is the right thing but I don’t understand it very well. I don’t know if it would work. I think they want to establish a school where there will be more Black teachers and teach the children about Black culture and heritage. That is how I understand the term (Tuesday, 24th January, 2007).

Three of the parents believe that the concept of a Black focused school would bring about a form of isolation of Black youth, but not necessarily segregation. These parents, like Nina, did not think the school would be of much help to Black youth. She opines:

I see it as running away from the issue. Why don’t you confront the issue and say that we are not satisfied with your system of education and we want to change it? I think the problem is that we have to hit at the parents. I say that a lot of it has to do with the parents. I am sorry to say this but the parents don’t want to take responsibility (Tuesday, 24th January, 2007).

Eight of the parents interviewed learnt or heard of Black focused schooling from the media or newspapers. The media presentation made it seem as if it was a school for Black children or that it was another form of segregating Black children from the mainstream public school. Sarah stressed the need for educators who see the benefits of
Black focused schooling to educate and keep parents and community informed about how to educate Black youth, and about the need for Black focused schooling. She urges:

We have to continue to inform parents, students, communities in the local newspapers as newspapers as well. Despite the negative media, I believe that it is important that we continue to make clear what Black focused means because we cannot depend on the media to misinform and fracture communities (Thursday, October 19th, 2006).

Seventeen of the parents view an African-centered education as relevant for Black youth in Toronto because it does not teach from a Eurocentric base and challenges oppression and encourages critical thinking. A Black focused or African-centered school proposes that Black youth do not have to occupy the margins, but rather that they have to be placed at the center of any study.

5.6 Parental Involvement and Structural Constraints

African-Canadian parents spoke of the importance of education in their children’s lives. They all agreed that for their children to be successful in any society, they need education. All the African-Canadian parents interviewed see education as the only route by which to gain upward economic and social mobility. For this reason, they believe that a high school education is not enough to succeed in the Canadian society and that it is important for their children to go to college or university. All parents related the enormous investment they were making into educating their children.

In general, parents always play an important role in the success of schools, whatever the racial or social background of students. Many African-Canadian parents do not see the schools as the only source of concern regarding Black youth drop out. They understand the importance of the family and parental guidance in as part of, and in
support of the schooling of their children. Many parents interviewed see the need for parental involvement in the education of children and also in other areas of educational administration. Carol, who has two children in the mainstream public school, sees the need for parental involvement in the following terms:

Once they entered the school system I have been a very active volunteer in the school because, knowing that I did not grow up in this society and not knowing much about the educational system, I felt that, you know, to be able to help them succeed in the school; being in the school (I mean it is not enough to read or hear about it) but to be there and see hands on; firsthand what is going on is very helpful. Again, knowing that the teachers are also short, they can always need a helping hand. I have done everything from in class activities and helping at the office and beyond, that keeping in touch with the teachers constantly seeing how my children are doing. I try to give them all the background support that I can give them at home. Be it homework help, library activities, be it extracurricular activities. I have done all that to help them succeed. (Friday, November 24th, 2006).

Carol and her husband see the importance of being there for their children and helping teachers out when they need it. The general notion of parental involvement in schools is for parents to show up in school council meetings, or become part of the fundraising committee, or volunteer their time at the school. Such a definition fails to capture the lived experiences of many working class and immigrant parents. For some parents, their low income jobs require that they work for more than twelve hours a day to be able to raise enough income to cater for their family needs. This means lack of time or energy to extend to helping in the school. For some parents, embarrassment or shyness about their educational level or linguistic abilities, lack of understanding, or lack of information about the structure of the school and accepted communication channels, prevent from participating effectively their children’s education.

Sarah mentions that if given the opportunity, she would be at her child’s school more often despite her busy schedule. She laments:
Interesting enough, this year, because of some frightening incidents that happened to my son at school, I ended up very quietly being pushed out of the parent council. So I have been very marginally engaged in my son’s school activities this year, which has been very disturbing. Particularly because of the things he has experienced, and I believe he needs my presence to be there more. I think that generally, schools that do not have any sensitivity around cultural issues and cultural competence, who really do not engage racism, much less anti-racism, have generally very dysfunctional relationships with parents who come from communities of color. So when incidents arise, it is further frustrating. Unfortunately, I have not been involved this year as I would want to be the whole of this year, and I have found that to be very problematic. (Thursday, October 19th 2006).

So even with parental involvement, some African-Canadian parents in general feel “pushed out”, making it very difficult for those who want to involve themselves with the schools to do so. For those parents that are “involved” in their children’s education, some point out that they had very minimal input in educational policy and curriculum decisions. This is mainly because their time schedules did not permit them to attend meetings when they were scheduled, though they consider themselves very responsible and caring parents at home. The few parents who were able to make it to school council meetings also observed that school council meetings were dominated by White middle class parents.

Indeed parents’ recognition of the importance of involving themselves in their children’s education comes against many structural constraints. Sarah and three other African-Canadian parents discussed some of these constraints. A prominent one is that, just as much as the schools want to have parents participate, they seem to be uncomfortable when parents are getting “too involved” and find ways to “push them out.”
Recollecting, she mentions that the thing she observed when she first attended the school council meeting was that minority parents were not represented even though the majority of students in the school were minority. In her own words:

When I first started to attend the parent council meetings, I actually just went to one or two meetings … They were very excited because it was a middle school and they complained that the parents don’t seem to be very involved at that level so I was shocked - I am sure they had about five hundred students and yet not more than four or five parents ended up at this meeting. I was the only Black woman or “person of colour”, until sometime later in the meeting, another Black parent came in….I was very involved, had a lot of ideas, shared some of my experiences. (Thursday, October 19th 2006).

Edgar, a teacher, also discussed the structural constraints that he and many African-Canadian parents face in trying to connect with his children’s school.

It s a very complex system or situation, and there is a lot of things you have to go through as a multicultural society. It is a complex system. I sit down most of the time thinking how do other parents who don’t have any education or who don’t have the level of education I have, do it? I am not surprised that there is so much failure in the system because it is a daunting process. You always have to be educated to get an understanding of the education system as it is (Monday, March 12th, 2007).

Working class and minority parents often feel intimidated and powerless when they deal with the school. So although educated and from the middle-class, this parent finds it challenging in dealing with the school and wonders how ethnic minority parents with little education deal with the school. Even though Edgar assumes that being educated gives one a better understanding of the schooling process, the school environment can be alienating and bureaucratic for some Black parents, and it is up to schools to overcome this problem by using approaches that are known to be effective (e.g. having support systems in schools for parental involvement in school). As mentioned earlier, conventional definitions about parental involvement have been narrow.
and do not pay attention to the structural constraints that some African-Canadian parents face in trying to connect to their children’s school. All twenty parents interviewed said they made it a point to involve themselves and to participate in most of their children’s school activities. But it is worth noting that the few African-Canadian parents who were not able to visit the school frequently were still involved with their children’s education. They still make sure that children go to school, do their homework, and help them with any difficulties their children may have when they come home.

All the parents interviewed know and realize that they cannot leave the education of their children to the schools. When asked if they thought the school did enough for Black youth, Kojo responded:

What I am saying is we cannot rely on the teachers alone. The school cannot do all. The parents also have to help. It is a partnership. So both parents and the teacher come together to make sure the students are learning what they have been taught at school. We do not have to rely on the teachers alone. When we do that the children will not learn. So when they come home the parents have a responsibility to make sure the students are learning and the school also has a responsibility. (Thursday, February 15th 2007).

Kojo’s response is an emphasis for Black parents to take responsibility for educating their children. Although some parents may feel excluded from participation in schools because they do not possess certain kinds of cultural capital, African-Canadian parents do not hold the school solely responsible for the disengagement of their children from school. They also do not see the school as the only site for political action and social response. They understand the importance of the family particularly parental guidance in their children’s schooling, and appreciate their need to partner with the schools to work together in dealing with the problem. All twenty parents interviewed see their support as an integral part of their children’s educational success. They see the need
to show this support by demonstrating interest in their children’s education, through encouraging the children. Jones, like many others, said that whenever he was called to the school, he made it a priority. Like other parents, he was often at the school. He asserts:

If you are looking at someone who is involved in their children’s school, then I am the one to look for. I am always there. As soon as they call me, in five or ten minutes, I am there. Even when I am teaching, I find time to come, so every step of the way I am there. I have listened to the teachers. I have shared ideas with them. I have done what a reasonable parent will do. So I am very much involved in my children’s education. I also go with them on trips and I have conferences with the teachers even before the parent teacher interviews. Sometimes I go there just to find out how my children are doing. So in terms of involvement, I have involved myself with the schools. (Monday, March 5th 2007).

Jones says he made it a point to be at his children’s school as often as he could because he knows parental involvement is important for his children’s education. Parents like Jones are fortunate to be able to participate in their children’s school activities because many parents would love to involve themselves in their children’s schools but for some the nature of their jobs and other commitments prevent them. Dora discussed why she thinks sometimes parents may not be involved in their children’s schooling or be able to attend teacher interviews. The times and schedules of the school may not be favorable with low income employment schedules, and employers don’t offer the flexibility of taking time off frequently.

You have to be on top of things. You have to know what is going on. You have to be in their faces and I have lost my job because I wanted to spend time with my kids. It is a problem for me now because you have to put in that much time into showing people how to do their work and you spend all that time investing in your kids and you get penalized at your job. So it’s a vicious cycle. You need to take time off for this meeting. You need time off for that meeting to see the teacher because you can only do that between 9-4 p.m. because that is the only time the teachers work and that is the time you need to work if you are working at your regular day job. They turn around and think that you don’t have it all together. You
can’t be here on time. My holidays are spent talking to teachers; going to meetings. It is gruelling. You need to be very strong because of the talk down. You feel you are at a losing battle, unless you have one person in that circle and that group who hears you, sees you, feels you and knows you and is there vouching for you. That is the only way that I find they start making a difference (Monday, November 13th 2006).

All the parents also made it clear that a parent may not be at the school often but that does not mean they are not interested in their children’s schooling. It is also plain from the narrative that Black parents are excluded from effective and change-inducing participation in teacher-parent decision making on account of their class, race and gender. One parent mentioned that she has made it a point to really know how to deal with the system in order to advocate on her children’s behalf, and touts this disposition as indispensable to being able to successfully negotiate within the system. There was a general agreement among parents interviewed regarding the importance of their involvement to the success of their children because they are primary stakeholders in their educational future, for which reason they must develop functional relationship between the schools and families to enhance Black students’ sense of support and encouragement to do well.

5.7 Issues Surrounding School Curriculum

Although over the years, schools in Toronto have become more racially diverse due to immigrant settlement, the school curriculum is still “White”. In spite of the numerous calls by parents, educators, and researchers for changes in curriculum and pedagogy to accommodate the new reality in Toronto (Daenzer 1983; Solomon 1997; Dei 1996b; Fine 1991; Wane 2004; James and Brathwaite 1996), the school system has
been reluctant to embark on any exercise to overhaul the set-up and to give it the necessary transformation until very recently.

The need for this reform was one area of concern to African-Canadian parents. They argue that the school curriculum embodies society’s sense of itself, and it is the source from which young people find what they need to, or must know, in order to grow up appropriately as acculturated citizens. The gaping absence of Blacks in the curriculum means Black youth do not and cannot see it as catering to their cultural upbringing in their multi-ethnic society. Specifically, African-Canadian parents argue that the schools fail to teach about Black history and languages or about African contributions to society. This creates a sense of marginalization in their young people. The anti-racist approach to education has drawn attention to messages given to pupils by the various hierarchies of authority in schools, the way streaming and selection operate, how incidents and manifestations of racism are dealt with, and the need to have formalized policies, guidelines and achievement targets in working for change and fairness on these issues (Dei, 1996). Research shows that the hidden curriculum carries as many racist messages as the formal or taught curriculum. In order to have an inclusive curriculum, biases and stereotypes in school textbooks and curriculum materials must be removed in all aspects of the educational experience. Parental views resoundingly affirm the need for such changes. Sarah points out that the mainstream school curriculum is lacking in so many

6 The formal curriculum refers to the stipulated attitudes, practices and procedures governing the delivery of education. The hidden or unwritten curriculum refers to tacit teaching of social and economic norms and expectations to students. These are usually things that are learned but not taught in school. They are unplanned events and lessons that all students encounter in school —both positive and negative — which make a lasting impression on learners (Henry and Tator, 2006; Blumberg and Blumberg, 1994, p. 5; Dei, 1993, p.47).
ways, and to her, this is one major factor for the high Black youth dropout rate in schools:

…I think the curriculum is lacking in so many ways. It doesn’t engage the children emotionally, culturally, spiritually and intellectually. The children are not really challenged to become critical thinkers. They are just supposed to be these machines who only regurgitate what the teacher wants you to know. They are not supposed to have opinions on their own. They don’t seem to be able to relate what happens in the classroom to what happens in their lives or in the broader society. I think the schools really seem to be extremely disconnected from what children should be learning and for what children should be preparing themselves for, in terms of the kind of world we live in. The world has changed so much since I was in public school. I think especially for racialized children (Thursday, October 19th 2006).

The negative portrayal of Blacks and their absence in the school curriculum has a material effect in the schooling of minority youth. Sarah argues that the school curriculum is not only inadequate. It does not prepare students for the world in which we live and fails to connect with the lived realities of Black youth. African-Canadian parents strongly call for open promotion of knowledge about race and social difference through a variety of educational practices. They argue that a school’s curriculum should be culturally relevant and should reflect the needs and desires of the community.

All twenty parents interviewed believe that literacy is about personal empowerment not just reading or writing skills as one parent remarks:

African-centered schooling is really about centring the African child and using African knowledges to educate and develop that child. So you are developing the whole learner not just a piece of this child’s education but you are acknowledging the communities they come from, the family structures they come from, the cultural identities they come from and recognizing those as strengths and using them in the classroom so that you empower the whole African community and building future leaders of tomorrow (Tuesday, October 10, 2006).

They also argue that learning is inefficient until these issues such as negative self esteem, lack of history or language instruction, and honoring of identity, is addressed. Sarah argues that teaching and learning processes that incorporate anti-racism and
culturally relevant approaches may take longer to develop but will have better results through the richer and varied activities and the improved cross-cultural understanding they will inculcate in the students.

Terry, a mother of two children in public school, also points out that she thinks many Black youth drop out of school because the school environment is not inclusive such as to recognize diversity, thus perpetuating a specter of persistent invincibility of Black history and general Black studies in the curriculum. She sees some solution to this if bias and stereotypes would be removed from school textbooks and curriculum materials:

There are so many factors involved. Many students drop out of school because they do not see a connection of what they are learning to their life, to their reality and to whom they are. It has to be relevant. They have to be able to see themselves in the picture. Reading a few books by Black authors; I think the people who are trying to do it have a misconception of how to do it. They don’t see any relevancy in it.

Q: When you talk about relevancy what do you mean? Is it in terms of curriculum?

A: By relevancy, I mean, for example the people our children see in positions of power. They don’t see themselves so they ask “what is the use of doing what I am doing? What is it going to get me? Am I going to be able to get there?” I think we have to have different types of models of learning to include everybody because, maybe the pencil and paper model may not be a comfort to everybody. There should be different ways of learning, right from story-telling, etc., to include everybody. (Wednesday, September 27th, 2006).

As ethnic diversity continues to increase in Western countries, one would expect schools to acknowledge the experiences of the diverse society and to be more inclusive, but in many Canadian schools, the knowledge, language and community affairs and experiences of minorities are excluded from the curriculum. Exclusive practices show up in the classroom in many ways. Some African-Canadian parents argue that their children are marginalized by both the formal curriculum and the unwritten code of acceptable
behavior and practices in the mainstream public school system. There is a belief in the mainstream public school that some minority groups are prone to do very well academically. But unfounded beliefs about groups of people, whether positive or negative, make it difficult for those groups to feel included in the learning process in meaningful ways. Many African-Canadian parents argue that the schools make it seem as if Black youth have the same educational privileges as their White counterparts. This is only in principle since many Black youth are excluded from many privileges in their schooling experience.

The exclusion of Black students’ experiences from the curriculum, results in their subordination, marginalization and alienation in the classroom. Making a curriculum culturally relevant helps to bring knowledge to bear on the problems and events the student encounters outside the classroom. It is important to note that using a child’s cultural perspectives to serve as the base for the curriculum does not preclude the use of other perspectives. It forms a base from which the learner develops views and embraces other perspectives. These issues, among many, are why many African-Canadian parents call for African-centered schooling so that their children will feel represented in that process. The parents point out that the issues of representation are crucial for delivering education to a socially and culturally diverse population. Curriculum should be understood as the whole environment and culture within which schooling takes place. Representation in education is, then achieved through creating a sense of presence for all students in a school. The need for Black representation in mainstream schools leads to the discussion on how the socio-economic background of youth affect their schooling, and why some African-Canadian parents want African-centered schools to be established
for Black youth in Toronto. This factor also draws on some poignant comments from the parents interviewed.

**5.8 Labeling and Streaming Black Youth**

Another issue of concern to all respondents was the streaming of Black students in the mainstream public schools and its implications for students dropping out. Jones, a father of four, points out that streaming students into “Academic” and “Applied” streams is another factor that leads to student disengagement. His exasperation is obvious:

Meanwhile they are all supposed to be at the same level! One has this text book and the other has this text book. This is pure streaming. In Toronto, we have gone through the different phases. Now they call it academic and applied. It is all streaming; pouring new wine into old wine-skins. If the ministry can spend money doing that why can’t they spend money setting up a school that is trying to help Black youth succeed? We say we can do it. If the government is sincere, why don’t we experiment it? Why don’t we give it a try? The Jane and Finch corridor that you think is the worse place, in this place, just use that. Just find somebody who knows what he is doing. Give the person the free hand and let’s see what happens. There are White kids in the neighbourhood, let them go to the school and see the difference (Monday, March 5th, 2007).

Many (fourteen) African-Canadian parents and the community are advocating for a school they believe will help their children succeed in school. These parents want to take the responsibility upon them. They also believe that trying to do something about their children’s education is better than not doing anything at all. And, if it does not work, at least, they know they gave it a try. In addition to the efforts of African-Canadian

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7 “Streaming” describes the process by which the Ontario Public school system places students entering grade nine onto three different course levels based on ability: The basic or vocational level, the general four-year level, and the advanced level which includes courses leading to university entrance. In 1993, the provincial government destreamed Grade 9 classes as part of the reform measures intended to address the school dropout rate. In 1994 the process of placing students was changed to academic and applied levels also based on ability. It is argued that is also a form of streaming (Dei, 1994).
parents, government support for the establishment of Black focused schools concept is critical. Instead of opposing the idea, governments at all levels (Federal, Provincial and Municipal) should be actively engaged in the debate and see how best they can help promote and back it with resources since it holds potential as a possible solution to the academic underachievement of Black students.

Jones argues that he does not see why the Ministry of Education will stream and label students and not allow the African-Canadian community to establish African-centered schools to meet the needs of Black youth. He criticizes the Ministry that, if it was sincere, it would rather use the finances to set up a school that will help Black youth succeed, instead of streaming them. Jones maintains that Black parents are responsible, and if given the chance, they will help their children succeed in school.

Seventeen participants are not in favor of school testing procedures because the tests do not acknowledge the difference in histories, skills and privileges that students bring to school. Some of the school testing procedures only help to label and force students into categories and this makes them feel alienated, even though it is unintentional. But eventually, it leads to some students dropping out. Parents expressed concern about the socio-cultural and structural barriers that operate in the schools. They argue that it has negative implications for Black youth and negatively affects their academic performance. From the parents’ perspective, students go to school to learn, irrespective of their abilities or socio-cultural conditions, and they should be allowed to learn and be the most they can be.
5.9 Low Teacher Expectations

The core of teacher expectations is that students have a tendency to perform according to expectations that people have of them. This is not to say a student automatically works well or less well in accordance with messages about their ability or general worth. Some students will consciously defy such messages. However, as Gaine and George (1999) note, teacher expectation is a very powerful force and hard to ignore and it is inevitable that teachers work to some extent, with the notion of an idealized student which is likely to be drawn from their own experience and lifestyle (Hargreaves, Hestor and Mellor *et al.*, 1975 cited in Gaine and George, 1999; p. 96). This is not to present a simplistic and negative picture of teachers, but as Gaine and George (1999) argue, with the pressures of teaching, teachers develop coping strategies to identify bright, conforming, and troublemaking students, and these are inevitably permeated by assumptions about class, race and gender. Every teacher recognizes the near impossibility of having no expectations of groups of students, as well as the ease with which a cycle of mutually confirming expectations can develop. This is not to condemn teachers but to indicate the difficult nature of the job. However, teachers bear some responsibility if unquestioning stereotypes are employed and the resulting expectations become fulfilled.

Social class and race have been fertile grounds for low expectations. Certain signals, like clothing, speech and style, as well as teachers’ knowledge of research that working class and minority students on average underperform, affect teachers’ expectations of them (Gaine and George, 1999). There has also been an abundance of
stereotypes on which to make opinions about cultural difference and inadequate parenting. One parent had this to say:

It is always the Black parent’s fault. Black parents don’t come to meetings and on and on. Even when they come to meetings you do not grant them audience in the first place. It is not that they don’t care. If they did not care they won’t put their children in the school in the first place. This child could be your child or this child can save your life one day. It is always a Black problem…what they don’t realize is that whether it is Black or Asian or what, it is our problem; because it is our society. (Friday, August 11th, 2006).

As this parent argues, some parents are not able to attend parent teacher meetings or be involved in the schools activities as teachers expect of them due to their work schedules. For many Black parents in general, the teachers or schools have not been a welcoming place, so they refrain from going to the school but as this parent explains, it does not mean they do not care about their children. Black parents are usually blamed for their apparent lack of knowledge about how to help their children achieve in school. For example, during the debates in the weeks after the proposal for Black focused schools, opponents argued strongly that “we do not need Black focused schools, we need Black focused children” implying Black parents should attend more to their children’s education (Toronto Star, 2005). This negative portrayal feeds into the low expectations that teacher have for some Black parents and their children. There are abundant stereotypes on which teachers draw about cultural deprivation and inadequate parenting (Gaine and George, 1999).

Edgar, a teacher, discusses his own experiences as a parent. He grew up and was schooled in West Africa, and believes that teachers are responsible for teaching and helping children to succeed. They are also expected to be devoted and to do their part as teachers, just as parents do their part. He recalls:
When I was going to school my parents did not know what class I was in, what subjects I was taking. They just expected me to go forward every year. There was a clear understanding of what you were to achieve and you went ahead and achieved it. No questions asked. They did not have to know the details. It is not like that here. It is a very complex system or situation and there [is] a lot of things you have to go through as a multicultural society. It is a complex system. I sit down most of the time thinking how do other parents who don’t have any education or who don’t have the level of education I have, do it? I am not surprised that there is so much failure in the system because it is a daunting process. You always have to be educated to get an understanding of the education system as it is (Monday, March 12th, 2007).

Edgar, like all the African-Canadian parents interviewed, expressed concern over the high dropout rate among Black youth. Though they know that many factors contribute to Black youth dropout, they argue that school teachers have a big role to play. The parent narratives reveal that some teachers have low expectations of Black students’ capabilities. Nine parents cited particular incidents where teachers showed disrespect towards their children. Such low expectations from teachers make students bitter because the experiences, histories, knowledge and contributions that they bring to school are devalued and negated. Jones, a retired teacher, argues that he knows the system very well and discussed some of the problems that children from different cultural backgrounds face in school. He recalls a very unpleasant experience between his daughter and her school teacher. He says:

When she was in Grade Four she was doing very well. Any work the teacher gave her she would do it very well. I think the teacher was surprised at the way she was doing well. I don’t know if the teacher was being candid or stupid. The teacher told me that she thinks somebody was doing the work for her. You know what? My daughter was the only Black kid in the class so who was doing the work for her? If it were home work, you can say the parents were doing the work for her but in class, who would be doing the work for her? So then it implies that my daughter was cheating or copying another White kid. What this means is that when my daughter left that teacher, my son went to the same teacher two years after. …So when the kids are doing well some of the teachers are bitter. The saying is that for every hundred White teachers you take ninety-nine percent of them have PhDs,
what we call “pull him or her down”. They will pull him or her down and that is why the kids are not doing well. They have different ways. The kids in the school have their own peers to contend with, and then the teachers. When it comes to peer versus peer the teacher is lurking somewhere, seen or unseen. When it comes to the teacher and the two groups of kids, the Black kid is always at fault. (Monday, March 12th, 2007).

Jones emphasized that many Black students drop out of school because of the attitudes of teachers, and the negative messages they receive from teachers and counselors in school. He discusses how his child was accused of copying someone’s work when everyone else in the class got the math problem wrong, except his daughter. Instead of the teacher trying to prove in a better way if the child really understands the problem and to encourage her, she was made to feel bad, and was penalized for excelling in the class. He adds that even though the children also contend with peers, the teachers are always in support of White kids and the Black children are always at fault. Many Black students are subject to unfair treatment in schools. Teachers use different rules for assessing behavior of different groups of students and these are rooted in teachers’ racial perception of students. With this kind of treatment, one can safely infer that Black students in many schools are likely to be subject to less praise and more reprimands than children from other ethnic groups. This can eventually lead to the alienation of many Black students and their eventual dropout from school.

Terry also argued that every human being loves to go to places where he or she is validated. No one wants to go to a place where he or she is put down all the time. Terry was born in the Caribbean but did all her schooling in Canada. She discusses some of the experiences she had, as well as those of her children in mainstream schools, experiences which continue to affect her today:
When someone looks at you that way, it takes a hold of you and you internalize it and it takes hold of you and you start rising to their expectations. You start reacting the way they want you to, and they say you are ignorant; you are this or that and if you keep thinking like that, where are you going to be in school or even in the workplace because it is easy to bring you down and they think something is wrong with you. I always tell my children they are bright children. I have to make a conscious effort everyday not to internalize it. It is hard not to (Wednesday, September 27th, 2006).

Carol, a “stay at home” mother, also shares some of her children’s experiences with some teachers:

Definitely, discrimination exists and you see it in all facets and all walks of life, and teachers are not immune to that. I think that when children come into the school system and they come across teachers, principals, whoever has very low expectations of them, that teacher or principal will not articulate it but it affects every aspect of that teacher’s behavior towards the child. If the child makes a “C” well, that is to be expected, so the teacher will not bother to find out what can be done for the child. Children pick up on these cues easily. Because, if you set high expectations for the children, they will rise up to it. If you set it low too, they will rise to meet that. If a child makes a low grade, say a “B” or “C”, and you know that with a bit of effort, this child will do better, just a statement to the child saying if you do this and that you have every opportunity to make it, can lead a child to excel. But if it happens constantly and that child does not have that encouragement they just settle to where they are because that is what you set for them, so they end up believing that (Friday, November 24th, 2006).

All participants share the same view that discrimination, stereotyping and low teacher expectations is what causes “disengagement” from school for many Black youth. All parents interviewed acknowledged that parents have a responsibility for the education of children, but they also point out that the children spend most of the time with teachers in the school for most of the year, and that “teachers’ influence on students is very powerful. They can make you or break you” (a parent).

In sum, all the parents are aware that their children face serious disadvantages in the public school system. They point out factors like low teacher expectations and the absence of Black teachers as role models for Black youth as some of the factors that
contribute to Black student dropout of school. They also point out that very few teachers are committed, who make learning and school attendance worthwhile for Black youth. In discussing some of their children’s school experiences, some parents showed a lot of emotion and anger as they relived how unpleasant these experiences were for their children. The nine parents gave an instance or several instances of insensitivity displayed by various teachers who had taught their children.

5.10 Lack of Role Models / the Absence of Black Teachers

In Ontario, there is no reliable estimate of teachers of color in mainstream schools. However, many educators and African-Canadian parents observe that they are grossly underrepresented. Many Black youth and other racial minority students lose out culturally and cognitively from underrepresentation in terms of minority teacher role models (Solomon, 1997, 1996; Solomon and Levine-Rasky, 1996). In other words, they do not benefit from the experiences and resources that the role modeling and the mentoring of “teachers of color” could contribute to their schooling experiences through the teaching and learning process. All the respondents acknowledge that it is not easy for those who teach culturally diverse classes. But they also argue that it is important for the schools to pay attention to the needs of the Black child. The narratives of African-Canadian parents further reveal that the absence of Black teachers deepens the marginalization of Black youth in the mainstream school system. Again, that their children do not see authority figures that represent them in positions of power, or in other roles or jobs in the schools. This makes it difficult for Black youth to identify with their schools. Edgar believes that one way Black youth can achieve academic success is for
schools to have more minority representation (Black teachers and other Black employees) on their staff, and in this way, both schools and teachers could acknowledge the reality of social diversity and the challenges for achieving social and educational equity that come with it.

He adds:

In Canada … it is unfortunate that there are very few Black teachers in the school system. It is an abomination not to have any Black teachers in the system that Black youth can relate to. Even if it is not at the teaching level, at least at a psychological level. You can open an all Black school and I can tell you that it will be filled with White teachers again. So what do you do with the mainstream system? I think the mainstream system should do more than they are doing. Let’s see more Black teachers. Let’s see more Black administrators. Let’s see more custodians. Let’s bring in more Black speakers to speak and encourage the children. Bring faces that are represented in the schools. (Monday, March 12th, 2007).

Edgar, like some parents, believes that our society is very Eurocentric and, even if a Black focused school is established, it will be dominated by White teachers. Edgar is used to seeing few minority teachers in the classroom. It is no wonder he thinks the Black focused schools will be dominated by White teachers. With the increase in the number of minorities, the teacher colleges in Ontario will have to redouble efforts at increasing minority enrolment, especially Black teachers, and train teachers to supply ample encouragement and provide extra support which Black students need to address the challenges they face in school.

Edgar’s statement raises another interesting point–will a mediocre Black teacher be better for the Black child compared to a competent teacher of another race? While one may be tempted to choose a competent teacher regardless of his or her race, it is noteworthy that Black teachers come to the classroom with additional assets. A Black teacher does not only have the advantage of the culture, he or she also understands the
nuances of the culture and can communicate more effectively with Black students. As well, a committed Black teacher teaching Black students is more likely to go the extra mile to improve his skills and ensure that he or she becomes equally good, as teachers of other races.

Educators point out the importance of having a diverse representation of staff. This rests on the theoretical idea that knowledge production is linked with questions of identity and history. Our individual histories, personal identities and identifications, influence how we read the world and how we construct social meanings. Dei et al., (2000) argue that questions of representation are read as dealing with power and structural equities in the school system. The presence of diverse bodies in that system should be seen as an effective means of dealing with structural hegemony and as an attempt at rupturing Euro-centered dominance and what is assumed to be normal (Dei et al., 2000). Another African-Canadian parent, Dora comments:

I think the mainstream system should do more than they are doing. ...Bring faces that are represented in the schools. Black students need them most than even the other cultures, Chinese or Japanese, Indian, etc, because historically, the constant racist attitudes towards them have damaged the sense of who they are. So they constantly need reinforcement. I think if those reinforcements are constant, it will help build their self esteem. (Monday, November 13th, 2006).

She believes more role models are needed in the school system to help Black students build their self esteem and help them succeed in school. Carol also emphasized the need for Black representation in schools:

I also think another problem for young people is lack of role models in the school system, right from teachers. Looking around and not seeing yourself reflected or represented in the teacher community sends. ...it may look on the surface that it does not matter but with any of us, can you imagine looking around and not seeing anybody like yourself do anything, not even a secretary, janitorial, nothing? You don’t see anything and unfortunately, the way you see other people or anytime you
see people like you reflected are always in the lower …it does not give you the opportunity to rise. So I think the lack of representation in the teacher community and in the society at large is a big problem for our youth (Friday, November 24th, 2006).

The shortage of Black teachers is in contrast to the growing number of minority students in Ontario schools since most immigrants tend to settle in the Greater Toronto Area. The presence of a Black teacher does not only serve to motivate Black students but is important to White students and White teachers as well. Black teachers can help their White colleagues in interpreting Black culture and also help dispel stereotypical attitudes and prejudices by presenting White students with models that are characteristic of a diversified society. Black teachers who may already know (or have come to know) the families of other Black students in a school may even be more effective as they can mentor them and encourage them to persevere in overcoming the negative and hindering forces in the school system. The presence of Black teachers can in effect, inspire other Black students to aim higher and potentially help those at risk of dropping out of the school system (Jordan, 2001).

5.11 Economic Background and Schooling

In many communities, educational experiences are related to a person’s economic position. Children of financially secure parents tend to do well in school, compared to those from low socio-economic backgrounds. All twenty respondents acknowledge the impact that economic hardship has on schooling. Parents who are teachers by profession admit that the school environment favors rich students. Usually, White and wealthy parents have a very powerful influence in the schools. Carol discusses the effects of economic background on student motivation and school achievement:
Poverty is not just a lack of what you do not have …it can sometimes bring a poverty of spirit and mind. Let’s say a child who grows up with a single welfare mom. Sometimes it becomes so difficult for that child to break that mindset that there is something more for the child than that. It is similar to a child who grows up in a family where all the females in the family do not complete high school and have children. Sometimes it becomes very difficult to break that. So unless these ills that are attached to our socio-economic status are broken and addressed, no matter what the school system does, if that child herself or himself is not coming into the school with that expectation or is not supported in the community and in the family, there is not much that anybody can do. So youth drop out of school is a complex web of problems. It will have to be tackled from various angles (Friday, November 24th, 2006).

Carol’s thoughts are not surprising since higher income and educated parents tend to have the means to see that their children perform better, either by tutoring their kids or paying others to do so, regardless of how well their classroom instruction may be. Carol emphasizes that the youth dropout bespeaks a complex situation that the mainstream public school cannot handle all the problems, and so it is necessary to use alternative means to generate solutions.

Edgar, a teacher, discusses some of the negative experiences some students face because their parents cannot afford to meet all their needs.

I have seen it diminish a lot. A lot of the students in the high school say “I used to be able to play the piano and then we could not afford it anymore so I stopped. I used to do this and the computer broke so I could not do it anymore. So I can’t type and I can’t type that report that you want me to do.” There are a lot of things that break down in the elementary system and then they come to high school and everyone expects them to graduate. It doesn’t have to happen that way and unfortunately those who suffer most are minority students because they always have the least resources financially and otherwise. A rich elementary experience will definitely make for a better performance in high school (Monday, March 12th, 2007).
Vivian stresses that the way children dress to school, another socio-economic status indicator, also affects their engagement with, or alienation from school. She affirms:

Another factor is the way they dress. Some of these Black youth have parents who are struggling, so they cannot dress the way some other children dress. Some of them may also not have the flashy snacks or foods that others bring to school but that is not an excuse for anyone to laugh at these children. Teachers are quick to point to a child and say “your parents don’t care about you because they are never there to help you.” This may not even be the case because the parents have jobs to do and we have to consider that. We are lucky as educators to have good jobs and can be home on time to be with our children. This child may not be as lucky as we are. A child should not be marked down or failed because the mother or father did not have time with a child. Play your part as a teacher. Many teachers blame these children based on the fact that their parents are poor. Why should a child suffer because her parents are poor? As educators it is their responsibility to educate the child that has been placed in their care. What has the mother’s poverty got to do with this kid (Friday, August 11th, 2006)?

Five African-Canadian parents discussed some of the difficulties that children from disadvantaged and low socio-economic backgrounds have to face in school, and its consequences for their academic achievement. Kingsley, a medical practitioner with two children in the public school, also expressed his disgust at some of the conditions that Black youth have to face in their schooling as follows:

The schools don’t have enough school supplies and most of the time, the parents have to supply most of the things a child needs at school. Parents have to buy school supplies and pay for trips, etc. So if for some reason the parents cannot afford it, then it means the kid is going to suffer and this should not happen in Canada at all. [that] resources for a school child becomes an impediment, to a child’s progress at school. It is an unfortunate situation (Thursday, April 12th, 2007).

It is disconcerting to note that each child is required to provide “back to school” materials, most of which are used as classroom supplies during the year. Many low
income parents cannot afford to provide the supplies, unlike parents from wealthier families. As a result, their children arrive at school less equipped with basic needs. As well, these parents do not have funds to pay for school trips that expand the horizon and knowledge of students. Parents emphasized the need to have adequate funding for Black focused schools so that, if established, students may have the chance of the kind of high quality education that will enable them to succeed in society. Other socio-economic challenges arise in relation to the neighborhoods African-Canadian families live in. This is because their home location also influences or determines the schools they attend. In turn, this determines much of their children’s future life course. Inner city schools tend to be at a disadvantage socio-economically. Given the lack of resources and other difficulties that many urban schools face, students who live in these areas typically experience a poorer quality of education than those in more affluent areas. The schools are also plagued with their inability to attract committed educators, and are normally unable to raise extra funds to supplement the school’s resources. Jones, who was a teacher in one of the inner city high schools in Toronto, discusses some of the difficulties the students face in that school. Some students are not able to complete assignments because there are not enough computers for the class and some cannot afford to have it in their homes. He describes the situation:

This is the place where there is the most illiteracy in Toronto. This is around the Black Creek area. I taught computers. I had about 27 computers and out of that only about 24 were working. Meanwhile I had thirty students. So I had more students than I had computers. What happened in the class is that students had to share computers. …I have taught in Ajax, Unionville, and other places where computers abound. No class had more students than computers. What do you say about this? Do you care about what happens here? And the argument the Board makes is that the parents chip in. So what? We are all paying tax. … The principle regarding the
system is the same and …but I do not care who gave it to them (Monday, March 5th, 2007).

It is for reasons of the convergence of these factors that many African-Canadian parents argued that students from low socio-economic backgrounds are essentially excluded from opportunities to participate in certain school and community activities. This problem is further aggravated by the impact of the three ‘color bar’ factors discussed next.

5.12 Racism, Discrimination and Stereotyping

All African-Canadian parents interviewed are concerned about racism, discrimination and stereotyping in mainstream public schools. Many blame the educational system for reinforcing racial and prejudicial attitudes portrayed by some of those in authority and some students as well. They argue that the educational system does not promote equity of opportunity but victimizes minority children by limiting what they are taught in school. Some of the parents interviewed were careful not to blame everything on race, conceding that some attitudes may be personal rather than racial. Pamela’s son was experiencing some problems at school, but she is careful about attributing it to race, even though she questions some of the attitudes and behavior of school authorities. She remarks:

It is difficult to say that my child experienced any racist moments because it is hard to prove. You might be suspicious that it is happening but you cannot say because it is a very sensitive thing. The only way for you to prove it is for you to confront the person who was involved. For such sensitive issues, when you try to prove it, you might end up being the victim. So, for a lot of instances, you let it go but you always have your suspicions. Why is it happening to this child and not this other one? The children will give you examples where they do similar things with their
peers and they get different marks; so things like that make you question some of the things that happen in the school (Friday, September 15th, 2006).

Most parents (seventeen) acknowledged that some effort is being made by the schools to address systemic racism and discrimination, but they think the school system is not doing enough and could do more to prevent certain racial incidents from happening. Nine parents cited instances where teachers discriminated against them or their children. Consequently, their children lost interest in going to school. Jones observes that as a result of some problems his son had to face in school, his son became different:

This is how I am seeing the school system here. Here is the path. This is where you have to go to be successful, but if the Black kid is going there, find a way to push the kid off [the] course. How do you do that socially, academically, and use everything and means available? It looks like people are taught how to do it. .....It looks like somebody in an institution tells them what to look for because everybody is doing it. I don’t think anyone teaches them how to do this. It is there and this is what I mean [that] racism and stuff are ideas fossilized in people’s minds. Somebody has to disabuse….. It is ignorance. Instead of people trying to understand they behave like the unknown is too dangerous to handle, so I better leave it in my ignorance. Leave it as it is, and I will be ok (Monday, March 5th, 2007).

Nina argues that there are exceptions, and would not want to generalize, but believes her son dropped out of school because of the racism and discrimination in mainstream schools:

There are exceptions though. I don’t want to generalize and I know there is a lot of racism going on in the schools and there is no question about that. But there is usually a difference in the way White children are treated from the Black children …The kids start thinking that, well, this is what is going to happen anyway, so it doesn’t matter how much I try, it won’t make any difference. I mean, over the years in high school for my son, this has happened over and over to my son over the years. Unfortunately, right now, I don’t know where he is and I am not saying I didn’t play a part in this. I am not totally blaming the school but I tried to work with the school from day one. Whenever they called me to come in, I always went. I
never missed an opportunity to go to the school, whether it was the “meet the teacher’s night” or whether it is whatever, anything. I never missed an opportunity of going to talk to them. So I do think that the school contributed to my son’s dropping out. One day I go to the school to talk to the principal and one of the of the kids saw me and asked me if am I going to talk to this teacher and I said yes and this is what he said to me: “say a prayer before you go in’. I go there often or they also come to the house so they know me. I went there and it was lunch time and this is what the kid said to me.” (Emphasis mine, Tuesday, January 24th, 2007).

Even though the general impression created by many school personnel is that Black parents are not involved in their children’s education, here is an example of a parent who does not fit that stereotype. All Black parents interviewed talked about the experiences of their children’s schooling and how this affected their ability to support their children. This parent’s experience demonstrates the feeling of helplessness some parents face in trying to help their children at school. Many of these parents, especially ethnic minorities, feel they have limited rights in dealing with the school system and do not know how to help their kids deal with the racist attitudes of school authorities.

Sometimes all a parent wants to do is play a supportive role in such difficult situations. Teachers want parents to support the schools when it suits them and support has to be on terms dictated by the school. Parental participation should not be limited to “Meet the Teacher” nights or when it comes to discussing the child’s academic performance but should also include instances when a child is experiencing problems at school. Schools give the impression that they are willing, ready and flexible but the boy’s remark to the parent (say a prayer before you go) is indicative of the fact that schools take a different stance when dealing with Black students and parents by allowing racism and stereotyping to inform their dealing with Black students and parents. To the extent that the students are aware of what is happening in the schools, shows that instances of
prejudice and discrimination in the schools based on race do not only alienate students, but parents as well, from the school system. They also bring tensions between parents and children, which create emotional and psychological stress for parents and their children. These issues are hardly discussed in the discourse about race and class discrimination.

Leila sees it as very important for parents to take action when such incidents occur, rather than leave matters to the school. She remarks:

I am appealing to parents; especially Black parents [to] take active part in their children’s studies. They should follow matters. Don’t sleep over anything. Stereotype to me is, or I should say, we see it as sleep country mattress; we spread it and say “they already say we are bad” and we leave it there. No, fold that stereotype; take your child to the office and “rake”. If you are a parent, you are very important and you have a voice; use it. (January 13\textsuperscript{th}, 2007).

Many Black parents in general believe that issues that involve their children are routinely dismissed or ignored because of misconceptions on the part of teachers and school administrators. Nine parents cited instances where their children were blamed when there were fights between their children and White peers. Despite repeated complaints and requests for intervention from these parents, teachers were oblivious to the problems their children were facing. Nina describes an incident that happened to her son at school:

With my son, there was one time when there was a fight and my son’s name came up. So I was called to the school and my son denied it. He told me that the story they are telling me is not the story. While he was speaking, the teacher would not even let him speak. So my child did not get the chance to defend himself, and because I was not there, I could not stick out and say, yeah! This is the truth. So I said to the teacher, “you know I was not here so I can’t say anything. But if he has evidence that he did not do it, then I think he should be given the chance to prove himself whether he was right or wrong.” His friends were admitting to me that it was not my son. The teacher would just not listen.
Q: So what happened to him?
A: He was suspended for a day.

Q: So what action did you take? You just allowed it to happen?
A: It was in junior high and I guess that was my fault too ... I did not know what steps to take, so I kind of took it lying down. When he got to high school, then I started getting more information and knowing a little bit more of what to do when such situations happen. By then I was in a better position to deal with it differently because I was more equipped when he got to high school. (Tuesday, January 24th, 2007).

The primary concern of all parents interviewed with regard to discipline in school is that minority students are more likely to be disciplined than White students. For example, there is overwhelming evidence that students of colour, especially African-Canadian males, are much more likely to be suspended from school than their mainstream counterparts (Lawson, 2003; Solomon and Palmer, 2006; Irvine, 1991). Available research also suggests that disciplinary problems, such as suspensions, contribute to the high incidence of early school leaving among minority students (Dei et al., 1997).

Kwame describes a similar problem his son faced in school:

The child sees the teacher as someone who is out to get him or her. Say something happens in the playground, the teachers will listen to the White kid, but as soon as the Black kid starts to explain his or her side of the case, he is asked to go to the office. Judgment is passed then. The teacher then goes to the office and writes down what she thinks happened. The kids are not made to feel at home. Teachers have pets in the classroom. These are kids who look like them and go scot-free when they misbehave. These Black kids also misbehave and they are in trouble. I have another example. The teacher said to my son, or the class, not to use certain words in the class. I do not know if he had used it himself and gotten himself into trouble. One day in class, a girl used the word, the word the teacher had specifically asked them not to use. This happened to be the teacher’s “pet”, and my son said: “teacher did you hear what so and so said”? She ignored my son. So my son asked her, “Are you going to do something about it?” The third time my son drew her attention to that she got angry with my son, so my son became a problem for her. From that day, my son saw that his teacher was not fair. Again when you are in a school and getting yourself into trouble for trivial things, you don’t want to go to such a place. You are human and even animals won’t do that (Saturday, March 17th, 2007).
The perception of these parents is that the unfair disciplinary measures, coupled with the prejudicial attitude of White teachers and students, is reinforced by how such situations are handled by school personnel. Parents would prefer that the situations are judged on their own merits by school authorities. Other instances where Black students experience blatant forms of racism in schools include name calling, jokes, graffiti, pictures that put people down because of their skin colour, race, ancestry, place of origin and ethnicity. When Black students normally complain about these abhorrent racist experiences to school authorities, students and parents are often met with such excuses as: “It’s all in their imagination” or as having “chips on their shoulders” (Mentor, 2000). Many parents cited instances where their children were victims of preconceived notions about belonging to a minority group who are deemed to be trouble makers, or who deserved to be treated in a manner considered “befitting them”. This last point plays into the issue of cultural identity which is also fundamental to the way African-Canadian parents see the problems their children face in the mainstream schools. We now turn next to this.

5.13 Cultural Identity

The findings disclose that four Black parents have the desire to show their multiple connections while the rest are somewhat uncertain of or ambivalent about their Canadian identity. Though the majority of African-Canadian parents are either citizens or landed immigrants who have lived here for a length of time, they still remain psychologically connected to their homelands. This affects their attitudes and perceptions.
about some social issues. When asked about her identity, Maya, a mother of two boys says:

I am a Canadian citizen now, but I am still Jamaican. I love my country and I will never give it up. I still cling to my Jamaican heritage. I am Jamaican and very proud of being a Jamaican. Our culture is very rich and very strong, that is where I get my strength from. So I cannot deny who I am, at every opportunity that I get…I claim my Jamaican heritage (Tuesday, December 19th, 2006).

This parent gives priority to her Jamaican identity. She does this without renouncing her affinity to Canadian identity, thus adding to the latter, another layer to the matrix of her personal identity. In the course of the interviews, some parents kept comparing the education in Canada to those in their homelands. Although parents want their children to consider Canada as their home, they do not want them to forget where their forefathers came from. Unfortunately, this has the potential of feeding into the identity crisis of many Black youth. Maya adds:

I think of Black focused schooling as an opportunity for our children to learn our history, because we need to know where we are coming from before we know where we are going…We cannot allow the vision that our forefathers had, and made the way for us, to go by the wayside. We still have a responsibility to resurrect that, and that can only be done in our Black focused schools. (Tuesday, December 19th, 2006).

Maya’s son’s experience (below) is similar to what many Black students experience in the mainstream public school in relation to their identity. Since the majority of the teachers are White, more attention and preferential treatment is usually given to the White students. Maya says of her son:

When he was in junior kindergarten, he came to me and said to me “Mom, being Black is a disappointment. I am sure if I were White it would be easier.” My heart was broken and I knew at that point something was happening. He was only five years old. For him, to summarize the struggle of being a Black person or Black male in this society. My heart was broken. So I said to him, “Son, you are absolutely right, but when you have it “upstairs”, when you have it in your brain,
nobody can take that away from you. They will hold you back. They will fight against you. They will label you. They will characterize you because of the colour of your skin, but when you are that smart, you’ve got to be smarter than them and play them. You have to learn their game and master their game and beat them at their own game.” That is the only way we are going to survive. For those reasons I have always sent my children to affluent White neighborhood schools. But again there is a downside to it because they lose who they are in terms of identity. Right? Even though you take all these precautions and you educate them as whom they are as a Black child living within the society... it is a very fine line (Tuesday, December 19th, 2006).

This highlights the Black youth and all the parents’ awareness of the normative value of Whiteness, and the power it holds within the mainstream public school. This child knows that if he were White, it would be much easier in the school. This parent is concerned and aware of how differential distribution of rewards in society occurs along racial lines and underscores the importance of teaching Black children in a way that will enhance their self-esteem. Asante (1991) argues that Black students need a curriculum that is culturally self-affirming and believes that establishing a framework for using African-centered curriculum will enhance the self-esteem of Black students and motivate them to learn. Other scholars suggest that the academic success of many White students can be traced to the fact that their culture is at the center of the school curriculum (Asante, 1991; Hale, 1994; Delpit, 1995). According to Hale (1994), the education of White children seems to proceed more smoothly compared to that of Black children because their learning experience complements their culture. To achieve parity in educational outcomes for Black children, the design of the educational system must complement rather than oppose Black culture (p. 4). This reiterates the call for Black students to have the kind of education that will help them take pride in themselves and help strengthen their self esteem and confidence.
Seventeen of the parents interviewed related similar disparities in their children’s schooling experiences as part of the systemic oppression and expressed the desire to have schools that reflect the communities in which they live. The parents expressed their frustration with the school system and the constant struggle of their children to maintain their individual selves and group identities. One parent in discussing some of the problems his children have had to go through says:

What I am saying is that give us our place. If you will not give us our place let bodies that represent the kids be there in terms of teachers, in terms of administrators. I am not talking about just office or cleaning staff. I am talking about people who have responsibilities-the principal, the school board, supervisors. This is a multicultural society. Take schools in Brampton, York region or you take ten schools and see how many of the principals are other than White. A school in Jane and Finch has a White principal and ninety percent of the teachers are Caucasian. So what message are you giving us? When we ask, give us our space, or … give us bodies that look like us, are we asking too much? Are we asking too much? Why can’t we have our schools? The Jews have their schools. They are talking about segregation; go to Barrie or New Market and you will see what segregation is about. Everybody is moving away because we are coming close to them but the teachers are still here. The teachers come from Barrie, New Market, to Jane and Finch to teach and go. You said we want community schools where kids attend schools which are in their neighborhood, that is a good idea. Then community schools must have community teachers who live in the community [who], the kids can identify with and [know] what is going on in the community. (Thursday, October 19th, 2006) (emphasis mine).

While many factors like poverty, racial isolation, family values and family pathology contribute to Black students’ poor school performance, cultural identity (and related factors) is a critical, but often overlooked factor. This is because while the other factors are often visible, cultural identity is often invisible and hence difficult to identify. A significant number of the parents interviewed (seventeen) noted that the cultural mismatch between Black culture and mainstream Canadian culture can play a significant role in determining a Black student’s success or failure in school. While Black culture is
distinct from the mainstream culture, many schools fail to recognize this and continue to hold firmly to the view that Black culture is deficient and thus inferior. When White teachers carry such attitudes to the classrooms, they devalue the unique ways Black students speak and behave and rather consider them disruptive instead of recognizing it as an expression of their own cultural styles.

The constant struggle of some Black children to maintain their individual selves and group cultural identities sometimes brings them into conflict, not only with school authorities, but with their peers and even sometimes with their parents as well. These are some of the pressures that Black youth face at school, which could eventually lead them to drop out. For this reason, seventeen of the parents interviewed agree that a Black focused school would be a better alternative to the mainstream public school for their children, because it would offer their children an opportunity to reaffirm their worldview which has been defamed by a Eurocentric worldview. It would also help equalize how African-Canadian and European-Canadian children view themselves and each other, and how they relate to the contributions that have emanated from their respective beliefs about the world and the universe (Schiele (1994). Vivian elaborates the need for their children to know their identity in the following words:

I see a Black focused school facilitating my child’s history, experiences and identity, but I will take it one by one. When there is a role model, who supposedly understands this culture and helps the Black kid develop his personality and understanding; that, to me, is identity. The schools will also be concerned about the teacher of the kids. The teachers are going to make sure that the kids succeed academically. Every kid is capable of doing anything under the right circumstances, so it will create the situation where kids can decide where they want to be. They will not decide for them or push the kids into something that they do not want to do, but just give them direction or paint the picture for them. …The Black focused school will address the problems that many Black kids face because many of the kids do not know who they are. The people who will work in the Black focused schools will be people who know who they are and will try to bring up kids too who
know who they are. The kids are at a loss. Multiculturalism is only lip service. It is only drumming, dancing and dining—bring your food and let me taste it; wear your clothes and come and dance for me to see; entertain me…that is all multiculturalism is about but I think there is more to multiculturalism than we are made to believe. (Friday, August 11th, 2006).

African-Canadian parents attribute the difficulties their children have in negotiating their individual self and group cultural identities to the very narrow school curriculum, as discussed earlier. Parents argue that the public school does not link questions of identity with schooling. They also point to the importance of history in the formation of social identities, as well as the relevance of identity to knowledge production. The parents appreciate the fact that the month of February is set aside to mark the achievements of Black or African people in history. The parents argue that their children appreciate the chance to show and tell about their cultures and to express their identities as people of African descent, but they believe it is not enough because, most of the time, their children’s existence are marginalized. It is only by creating culturally responsive and affirming school experiences for Black students that schools will be in a better position to engage Black students in a schooling process that leads to academic success rather than academic failure.

Aside from a few negative voices (three parents), the majority of many African-Canadian parents interviewed saw the idea of the Black focused school as a concept that can help promote a sense of identity and pride in Black students. The school will center the child in his or her own experiences and will eliminate their sense of inferiority based on race, class or gender and allow Black youth to view themselves as capable human beings. The challenge of parental and community contribution to building that sense of
pride in the children is closely tied to the issue of nurturing identity in this. This is taken up now.

5.14 Responsibilities of Parents, Community and Schools

All the African-Canadian parents interviewed and the community in general, acknowledges the need to work together with the schools. One way of parents getting involved with their children’s education is having school administrators listen to their concerns and making available to them the choices they want for their children’s education. There have been many critiques on the commitment of Black parents to their children’s education, but as one parent discusses, if they were not serious about giving their children an education, they would not put them in school in the first place. One parent remarks:

We are lucky as educators to have good jobs and can be home on time to be with our children. This child may not be as lucky as we are. A child should not be marked down or failed because the mother or father did not have time with a child…. It is always the Black parent’s fault. Black parents don’t come to meetings and on and on. Even when they come to meetings you do not grant them audience in the first place. It is not that they don’t care. If they did not care they won’t put their children in the school in the first place (Wednesday, September 27th, 2006).

Terry adds that instead of authorities blaming Black parents for their children’s poor educational performance or simply their poor education, teachers and school administrators should listen to parents who are now speaking out on the need to reform the current educational system and to establish an alternative form of schooling to help their children in their academic pursuits.

Every parent, guardian, caregiver interviewed for this thesis believes he or she has something to contribute to the school system. This means the roles and
responsibilities of all stakeholders should be clearly defined, valued and respected. All the parents expressed a desire to work with the schools; they see this as their responsibility to discharge in aid of the education of their children. Terry, a single parent with two children, suggested that it is necessary for parents or members of the community to support the schools in every way.

I think it needs so many different members of the community to support it. It is ok for teachers not to know everything. We will need members of the community to approach and support the school in all it needs to do. They may have to ask community members and parents to help and support (Wednesday, September 27th, 2006).

In response, it is important for the schools to be prepared to tap the wealth of knowledge and expertise available in the African-Canadian communities in their efforts to address Black youth disengagement from school. This knowledge and expertise which, on the one hand, speaks to the concerns of the Black youth and their parents, also finds outlet in the demand to have schools that address them. Parents’ views on this avenue of solution are central to the discussion that follows.

5.15 Summary of Major Findings

From the foregoing analysis of the data, according to the criteria set out for the exercise, the main findings established may be reiterated. First, we find that the African-Canadian parents interviewed for this thesis have positive opinions on the establishment of an alternative form of schooling for young Black people. Even though a majority of them want Black focused schools to be established, some seem to be initially confused about it as well as what position they could take if established.
Secondly, the findings also show that African-Canadian parents are not a homogeneous group when it comes to their understanding and perceptions on the Black focused school concept. While some African-Canadian parents do not see the need to include their children’s experiences in the schooling process, other parents and community groups call for the establishment of such schools as an alternative to the mainstream school. They think it will keep Black youth motivated enough to stay in school.

Thirdly, the data also indicate that a majority of African-Canadian parents (seventeen of them) believe that Black focused schools will avoid the oppression that Black youth face in mainstream public schools, and that will also enhance their children’s academic achievement and chances of success in life more broadly. African-Canadian parents who reject the concept outright, are mainly concerned about how these schools would be funded; they did not see how the government would fund them when there are problems with funding the mainstream public schools.

Finally, a major concern was whether academic credentials obtained from Black or African-centered schools would be as appreciated by mainstream society as those obtained from the mainstream schools. These and related findings are discussed in depth in the next chapter.
Chapter 6: Discussion

In addition to the myths of meritocracy that abound, I find it interesting that the issue of Black focused schools or any other kind of cultural or religiously based schooling is immediately labeled as "controversial". I would like to ask, why it is not "controversial" that we have a Eurocentric school system in a country in the most multicultural cosmopolitan city in the world?! Why is the silence and denial of racism not seen as "controversial"? It is time to openly challenge and disrupt this complacency (Zine, 2005).

6.1 Introduction

The passage above is Zine’s reflection of the discomfort expressed by segments of the society towards the establishment of an African-centered school in Toronto, which is a diverse society with ethnic minority students forming a large part of the school population. She contends that it is time to challenge the racism and discrimination in the school system.

My research findings detailed in the preceding chapter are based on the perceptions of participants and how they understand the African-centered school concept. This research echoes the findings of other studies on the issue of African-Canadian parents’ concerns about Black youth schooling and the discriminatory practices in the mainstream schools. The parents I interviewed affirm the inadequacy of the mainstream school curriculum to meet their children’s needs. They emphasize that the pedagogic practices in the schools do not reflect the diversity of experiences, ideas and events that have shaped and continue to shape human growth and development. Some parents are also concerned that Black students do not see themselves reflected as there are only a few Black and ethnic minority teachers in the public school system. A closer scrutiny of
African-Canadian parents’ narratives in this study also clearly point to the need to address the structural problems in the Canadian public school system. Parents discussed their understanding of the Black focused school concept and its impact on educating Black youth. They also discussed what it will take to develop an alternative model of education for Black youth. The findings discuss the importance of parents’ voice and their experiential knowledge on their children’s education. This chapter discusses my findings in the previous chapter and other issues that came up in light of the views and analysis found in academic literature and research.

6.2 Black focused or African-centered Schools Revisited

All the African-Canadian parents interviewed would prefer their children to attend schools that every student can identify with and should be a place where they can feel comfortable, be accepted and be made to feel “at home”. This means that Canadian schools must become more inclusive and be governed by principles that stress more equitable power sharing among all stake-holders in the educational system. Many African-Canadian educators and members of the community see it as their collective responsibility to help their children succeed in school and some see the idea of an alternative African-centered school for their children as a valid option to this end. According to Dei (1996), the establishment of an African-centered school should not be seen as a contradiction. Rather, we should interpret the existence and success of African-centered schools as a challenge to mainstream schools to live up to the ideals of genuine inclusion. While steps are taken to make our public schools inclusive, Black focused or African-centered schools can be instituted for those parents who wish to send their
children to the school. Parents foresee that the success of African-centered schools will bring an added pressure on the current school system to respond to the needs and concerns of a diverse student body. Parents and members of the African-Canadian community who advocate for African-centered schools see it as an avenue to address some of the problems that Black youth face in school and in particular to pursue strategies that make it possible for Black youth to achieve success in school.

Not all African-Canadian parents interviewed share the idea of a Black focused school; some (3 parents) even oppose it for some valid reasons. What seems clear in the findings is that all African-Canadian parents are concerned that their history is not included in public curricula. They are also concerned about the racism and prejudice in the schools. More significantly, even African-Canadian parents opposed to African-centered schools do not see African-centered schooling as a form of segregation as portrayed by critics and the media. For those parents who oppose the idea, racism is a major concern, and they question how the African-centered school will be funded, and whether academic credentials from such schools will be appreciated by mainstream society. These African-Canadian parents are also concerned about the socializing of students who may attend African-centered institutions since Canada is a multicultural society.
6.3 Equity in Schools

The role played by schools cannot be separated from what happens in the larger society. If any advancement is to be made in a society, both school and society must work hand in hand. In Canadian schools, students study a common curriculum in non-selective and heterogeneous classes. This is necessary to promote the ideal of equality, build a sense of community, and ensure input into school life from students of different backgrounds. It is feasible because in a school which emphasizes personal and social issues, students of different backgrounds can all contribute and benefit from the effort to generate solutions (Beck, 1990). However, in North America, schools impart values and belief systems which are characteristic of the world views of the dominant group. Regardless of its effects, the dominant culture is imposed on minority students who are taught to internalize a feeling of inferiority (Asante, 1991). Parents argue that the imposition of the dominant culture on their children trivializes and disrespects the minority cultures and ultimately leads to alienation, anomie and ambivalence in those children about their own cultures and identities. In the view of some parents (seventeen parents) interviewed, the failure of mainstream public schools to address social injustice justifies the need for alternative ways of schooling. This buttresses the belief of some in the African-Canadian community that problems faced by African-Canadian youth in school cannot be addressed by the mainstream public schools alone.

The parent narratives illustrate that the idea of a Black focused school is a contested terrain with many questions that need to be answered about the prospect of its feasibility and raise questions for educators and administrators who make the effort to ensure that the prospect of educational excellence is not only accessible but equitable to
all social groups. Some of the questions which arise are: can Black youth educational
careers be addressed through modification of the current school system? Should society
search beyond the current system for an alternative? Would the establishment of a Black
focused school dilute the legitimate pressures for change emanating from concerned
educators, students, community and diverse ethnic groups? Would such pressures
challenge mainstream schools to abandon a historically Eurocentric focus?

Parents who oppose establishment of Black focused schools raised further
questions like: How would such a school cater to the needs of the diverse groups of
Black people in Toronto? Would the school not be a return to segregation? How will
students benefit from a protected school environment when they eventually have to move
into the larger society where they will not be “protected”? Will students attending and
graduating from African-centered schools not be stigmatized? What if other communities
start demanding their own schools? How will the school be funded and will it teach the
Ontario curriculum? These are genuine concerns which should not be dismissed. But as
African-centred educators point out, it is useful to problematize voices that oppose the
establishment of Black focused schooling in terms of assessing their concerns through
the eyes of mainstream society.

Parent advocates of Black focused schools recognize Black youth disengagement
and “drop out” as a long-standing problem which African-Canadian parents and
community workers have been fighting for many years. As parents argue, the only option
for Black students who “drop out” would be an alternative school with solutions to help
them develop their sense of identity and group unity. The alternative school offers
possibilities for enhancing Black youth academic and social achievement once educators begin by centering students and their African-Canadian experience.

6.4 Families, Parents, Community and Schools

Every community in general has responsibilities and identifiable roles to play in the delivery of education. African-Canadian educators, parents and community are calling for alternative educational practices that may contribute to positive educational experiences for Black youth. Following the debates in 2005, critics of the concept argued that educators who call for African-centered schools stay in their ivory towers and try to impose their ideas on the community. It is important to realize, however, that educators are not different from community members. The objective of this research was to discover the position of community members by speaking to African-Canadian parents on how they understand the concept underlying the demand for the establishment of African-centered schools. Though the focus of the research was on parents who had children in the mainstream public school, the voices that emerged were voices of parents, some of whom are also educators and whose voices should be taken seriously on issues concerning the community. In this broad sense of community, we see that some educators and teachers in the mainstream public school are saying that the system is failing African-Canadian students. An African proverb says “when the alligator comes out of the river to say the crocodile is dead, we may doubt the authenticity of the information but we cannot dismiss it.” In other words, we must consider the call for the establishment of schools, especially in terms of the prospect that it may help African-Canadian youth succeed in their schooling. This hope is clearly expressed in most of the
narratives of the African-Canadian parents interviewed. Indeed, it is generally asserted that the mainstream public schools do not develop the Black child’s talent. For the most part, they discourage and demoralize Black youth. One parent argued that in Toronto, there are schools or classrooms for gifted students. “These are children who are exceptional, outside the norm of the bell curve”. If they deserve special attention, and the Toronto District School Board sees it necessary to establish schools in Toronto and surrounding areas for gifted students, “how much more students who lag behind their peers and deserve special remedial attention”? This requires thinking about the necessity to seriously consider the concerns of those groups with a demonstrated educational disadvantage.

Farrell (1994) points out that in debates about African-centered schools, the concepts of “alternative” and “choice” are very significant. Just as students should be exposed to alternative learning environments, parents should have the right to choose schools they want their children to attend. The Black focused or African-centered school would serve those who want to go to such a school.

6.5 The Question of Segregation

Three African-Canadian parents, who were interviewed, did not want Black focused schools established but did not see it as going back to the days of segregation. Critics of Black focused schools assert that it is a step backwards and that a segregated school would not create a positive learning environment for Black students. Researchers and educators on African-centered schooling argue that this critique must be challenged because segregation refers more to physical space and location. The act of segregating a
group always takes place in an economic and political context. The main aim of segregation, in the first half of the past century, was to prevent Blacks from full participation in socio-economic sectors of national life. But parents (17 of them) I interviewed do not believe that establishing a Black focused school, in this case will deprive Black kids of an inclusive education. On the contrary, the aim is to help them perform better academically in school. The act of segregation back then was different, and its aims must be distinguished from the need of parents who wish to send their children to a school that is free from discrimination and bias. When participants were asked whether they consider a Black focused school as a segregated school, the majority of parents (seventeen) answered that they do not see a Black focused school as a segregated school. They see a marked distinction between “forced segregation” and “separation by choice”. They argue that African-centered schools aim to address an educational crisis and to help minority youth succeed in their education. And that the learner must be affirmed in all of his or her identities if schools are to provide a holistic education. While racial solidarity alone cannot guarantee academic success for Black youth, being exposed to the realities of society in a supportive environment empowers the learner to deal with pressures of society. This would mean teaching about race and racism, gender and other oppressions. The parents argue that African-centered school is about equity, and should not segregate students along racial, ethnic, religious, gender or socio-economic or class lines. As stated earlier, African-centered schools will aim at enrolling African-Canadian youth and the less fortunate, but will not exclude others. When asked in the interview if he thought establishing African-centered schools was a form of segregation, many parents, like Kingsley, answered:
Not necessarily. This will be established under a different premise, whereas in those days it was based on the colour of your skin. They are two different things. “Because of the colour of your skin we will not let you come in to this school or do this or that”. So you had no choice, but this time you are going to be given a choice, which is different from before, and everyone wants to be given choices …given that choice we may even have some White, Asian, Chinese, Indian parents who will want to send their children to Black focused or African-centered schools if the school is good and students are doing well. I believe it is a win-win situation for the government, the parents and the community (Thursday, April 12th, 2007).

Parents like Kingsley disagree with critics who argue that establishing Black focused schools will be a form of segregating Black youth. He points out that stigmatized segregation was an official policy practised in the United States, which was to forcibly separate Blacks from Whites over the objections of Blacks and to provide them with inferior public services. These parents point out clearly that we cannot compare the request for a "Black focused" school from African-Canadian parents and community who are concerned about high dropout rates among Black students, as segregation. In fact, the Toronto School Board already operates schools for aboriginal, gay and lesbian students, and it will be hard-pressed to reject a Black focused school. The question is, how can a school be segregated when it is open to all students?

The parents who support African-centered schooling emphasized that African-centered schooling is about inclusion, the valuing of diversity, the concept being grounded in the belief that different cultures can and should thrive together. The program is meant to make all students comfortable, to embrace who they are, embrace others as they are, and to be open to all cultures. Altogether, they argue that African-centered education will be enriching for any student. If well implemented, many lessons could be learned which could be transferred to the main stream system and enhance learning for all children.
African-Canadian parents (in the survey) (seventeen) who advocate for African-centred schooling find it hard to understand how people can equate an African-centred school with a segregated school, when the actual segregation existing in the Greater Toronto area is open for all to see. One parent remarks

They are talking about segregation; go to Barrie or New Market and you will see what segregation is about. Everybody is moving away because we [Blacks] are coming close to them, but the teachers are still here. The teachers come from Barrie and New Market to Jane and Finch to teach and go. You said we want community schools where kids attend schools which are in their neighbourhood; that is a good idea. Then community schools must have community teachers who live in the community and know what is going on in the community… I have taught in a class, in high school and a kid tells me “you are the first Black teacher I have encountered” This was in Scarborough [a place dominantly occupied by racialized bodies]. ... An Afrocentric school is not a school meant for only Black kids. What is taught there, the prism from which curriculum is taught is from a Black prism; a Black person’s prism. The teachers there understand the Black kids and the purpose of it is to make the Black kid successful (Monday, March 5th, 2007).

This parent, Jones explains that an African-centered school is defined by what is taught and practiced, rather than who attends or does not. While an African-centered school may have Black students in mind, the school will be open to everybody irrespective of race, gender, ethnicity, class, and religion. Currently, there are three African-centered schools in Toronto which are private and there are several focused schools in Toronto which are gender-based schools, faith-based schools, and in some cases, schools for gifted children located in White neighborhoods which have more than 98% of White students. This parent does not understand the fuss about the establishment of African-centered schools in Toronto. One really wonders the rationale behind the objections and discomfort over the establishment of a school, majority of whose population is likely to be Black. The question one is forced to suspect is racial undertones
underlying the objections to the proposal. Would the objections be the same, if the proposal for another alternative school was for majority White students?

Akbar (1998) in his book “Know Thy Self”, discusses the need for Africans to educate themselves, asserting that until the educational system has been restructured in a truly pluralistic way to respect and integrate the identity of all potential learners, a “preliminary segregated” education may be the necessary solution. The form of “enlightened segregation” that he proposes requires the “best thinkers” in the African community to structure a system of learning intended to educate rather than miseducate our children. To Akbar, African-centered schools are no different from how the wisest Rabbis developed Hebrew schools for Jewish children, or how the Mormon Church structured Mormon education for Mormon children, or again how the wisest Catholic priests structured Catholic education for European Catholic children. In citing these examples from other ethnic communities, Akbar seeks to show that self-affirmation does not presuppose the negation of other groups. There has not been any strong accusation against the Jewish, Catholic or Mormon education as being “separatist” or “segregationist”; terms which have been slung at supporters of African-centered schooling. My question then, as a researcher, is why it becomes a problem when some Black parents are pushing for the establishment of alternative schooling. Could this be a case of the majority wanting to stifle efforts by minorities seeking ways to help their children succeed at school? What people seem to forget is the implementation of an African-centered school will not result in the withdrawal of Black students from the mainstream system. It is basically parents’ understanding the impact that schooling processes have on Black children and just a request for an alternative for parents to
willingly enroll their children in such schools if they so wish. After all, parents have the right to decide which schools are best for their children.

6.6 The Issue of Academic Credentials

Another concern for some African-Canadian parents who were interviewed is that academic credentials from African-centered schools may not be appreciated and recognized by mainstream society. This follows from the twisted logic that because it is an African-centered school, the curriculum will be watered down. To a large extent, some of these views are fostered by misinformation from the media and critics of African-centered schooling. I had to emphasize and have parents come to an understanding that the curriculum would not change because it is an African–centered school. The school to be established would strive for academic excellence. Students would not just learn about African culture and history. They would use the same curriculum as that used in the mainstream school, but taught from an African-centered perspective. African-centered schools will be subject to the same provincial testing and evaluation standards as other schools in Ontario. Even if the worst fears of parents (regarding academic recognition) are realized, this problem is not likely to persist for long especially if the schools are well organized. If quality is not compromised, students from African-centered schools should be able to compete effectively with those from the mainstream schools.
6.7 Teachers as Role Models

Most African-Canadian parents see Black teachers or staff representation as very important to the validation of their lived experiences, culture, and heritage in the school curriculum. Some also pointed out that having Black teachers would not necessarily make a big difference especially if they do not support African-centered schooling. These parents emphasized that just because a teacher is Black does not mean he or she will connect better with Black students. Good teachers are good teachers, irrespective of their race. But in the case of the Black focused school, it is important that they have teachers of colour to reflect the diversity of the classroom and to act as role models. The school will employ educators who are qualified to teach the Ontario curriculum, and are well-versed in the principles of Afrocentric education. There are a number of teachers in Ontario who already meet these qualifications. However, if the School Board is serious about Afrocentric education, it would provide professional development to increase the capacity of the system.

6.8 Funding

Another question raised by parents was how the African-centered school would be funded. If we accept that education is not only for self improvement but a common good for all, then parents have a right to determine where and how their tax dollars are spent. Some parents pointed out that parents who decide to send their children to African-centered schools are also tax payers. If religious and gifted schools receive public funding in Ontario, then it is fair that the African-centered schools be also funded.
For some parents, another major concern was to secure commitment from school administrators and public officials to finance the cost of educational reforms which address the educational inequities known to exist in the educational system. This is what one parent had to say about the need for secure funding for the Black focused school:

It is a school just like any other school. The government should try to fund the school. Even if at the back of their minds they think that it will not succeed, they should not “pronounce the death before the person dies”. They should let us try. We all raise funds in the schools, so maybe with time, the parents will come up with a strategy to raise funds, but the initial money has to come from the government. It has to support the school if it has the interest of the children at heart. We have tried as a community and we know the problems our children are having, and that is why we are suggesting that we try this method. They have to fund it because it is a school just like any other school. They should let us try. The government will have to support us if they want to see the Black youth succeed. (Friday, August 11th, 2006).

Parents argue that it is the Ontario government’s responsibility to fund African-centered schools like they would any other mainstream public school in Toronto. With the decision to establish African-centered schools in Toronto, the provincial government must assure members of the African-Canadian community that funding will be secure. African-Canadian parents, on their part, need to be vigilant to ensure that successive governments continue to fund African-centered schools.

6.9 Catering to the Needs of Diverse Black Groups

An important question some parents (three parents) and opponents wanted answered was: how would such a school cater to the needs of all the diverse groups of Blacks? African-centered education sounds good for the African-Canadian youth, but with all the different African ethnicities, how would the African-centered school cater to the needs of all those
ethnicities or group of Blacks or non-African children who may want to attend the African-centered school? Whose culture, history and spiritual identity will be advanced? The Afrocentric school will have to address the complexities of “Blackness and Africaness” in their teaching and education and help their students to understand that Africa is not just one but a complex whole. Students will have to be taught that being Black or African is not just about skin colour. It is a very personal and subjective narrative and should not be merely restricted to skin colour. Dickerson (2004) notes that the concept of ‘Blackness’, as it has come to be understood, is rapidly losing its ability to describe, let alone predict or manipulate, the political and social behaviour of Black people living in North America. “African-ness”, on the other hand, is the state of being African. It is the way in which Africans define themselves and are defined by others and has political, psychological and cultural dimensions. It is a site of struggle that reflects and shapes relations of power between individuals, communities and countries (Adibe, 2009). People who identify as Black have their own diverse forms of identification and come from different places in the world.

The schools, once established, can begin by focusing on commonalities like the achievements of Blacks in global history and development. At the same time, children who will attend the African-centered school should be taught with sensitivity and respect to cultures, spiritual identities and represented by incorporating them into their collective school experience. Each child should be taught from the position of being in the center of their cultural and human experiences.

Inclusivity requires pedagogies that respond to the social construction of difference in the school system and the larger society in terms of race, class, gender,
sexual orientation, age and ability. An inclusive education requires spaces for alternative and sometimes oppositional paradigms to flourish in the schools (Dei, 2008, 1996). An African-centered education respects and includes students’ backgrounds in the content of their education. True equity and integration does not mean a “one size fits all” approach. It is always best to provide a variety of rich options from which students can choose to serve their diverse needs and interests. The principle of centering the student in her/his heritage will not only benefit Black youth but students from all backgrounds, to help them develop their ability to function optimally in a racially diverse society.

6.10 The Media and Black focused Schools

Comments from recent media coverage on African-centered schooling in Ontario reveal the fundamental challenges that the African-centered school concept poses to Canadian society (Toronto Star, 2005; Globe and Mail, 2007, 2005). The coverage conveyed that the media and the public have a vested interest in defending the illusion of an idealized democratic, multicultural and tolerant society where racism does not exist. The “Toronto Star”, in particular, has constantly ignored the “focused” in African-centered schools, and referred to the concept as “Black schools” and “Black only schools”. The omission of the term “focused” misdirects the discussion and casts it in a negative light.

The media investigation into the Black focused school debate fails to capture the real everyday politics and socioeconomic realities, as well as the institutional practices that work within Canadian society and education to protect White privilege. As Lawson (2005) suggests, the media like education, participates in selective forgetting and
remembering to protect and promote White privilege⁸. The media only reproduced the existing research paradigm that centres White hegemonic order as historical, relational and a heterogeneous construct that represents the experiences of all humanity (Dyer, 2000). By this action, the media fails to take into account the history of oppression, systemic negligence and failure of institutional accountability. If the media had factored in the historical experience, the philosophical grounding of African-centred education and the rationale for its establishment, it would have seen the issue in a whole new light. The call by the African-Canadian community for an alternative form of education should be seen as a legitimate right to question the educational system based on their history and experiences of oppression.

As a researcher, I find the media’s response to the Black focused school debate is disconnected from the theory and practices of the issues being investigated. They don’t seem to have fully grasped the challenges facing Black and other minority students in the mainstream school system. The position taken by the media seems to ignore research showing the failure of the current school curriculum to reflect diversity concerns, lack of sufficient Black teachers in Ontario schools, and the mistrust between White teachers and Black students. In the weeks after the proposal of the establishment of African-centered schools, the media (especially the Toronto Star and CTV) unduly highlighted voices in the community that opposed, over those that supported the African-centred school concept. This is not to imply that the media should not cover critics. But the attitude of

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⁸ In this paper, the term “whiteness” is used to refer to the concept of white racial dominance in a society. It is to be distinguished from the concept of “White identity/ies” which refers to the multiple and varied ways white individuals (choose to) inhabit their bodies in the world. The two concepts, however, overlap.
the media can potentially paralyze the efforts of members of the African-Canadian community working hard to find a solution to the problems their children face in the educational system.

6.11 Towards the Establishment of Black focused Schools

Many schools claim to be multicultural, but only a few actually are. This is because the curriculum is European in nature, and everything else that is taught to the children is, at best, supplemental. Many teachers in the mainstream schools have no option but to teach from the European tradition of educational theory. Other teachers who can teach from a different educational theory are discouraged from doing so. Children are taught from textbooks that make the European the subject of all human experience, while non-Europeans are made the objects of that human experience. Multiculturalism then becomes a platitude, and this is why African-Canadian children need a radical shift from this public education experience. They need to attend a school that will make them feel capable of achieving success, and that will help them contribute to the development of society. The basic principle of a Black focused school is to attend to the emotional and spiritual needs of its students.

Parents who understand and support the concept believe that African-centered schools will counter the neglect and negation of African experiences, history and culture. There are benefits to be found in the implementation of African-centered schools as alternative forms of schooling because a child who feels validated and respected is more likely to participate actively in school and to feel that he or she has an investment in the outcomes. The schools are likely to produce positive results and attitudes in Black youth,
rather than a misunderstanding of who they are, the invisibility, and the low self-esteem some seem to currently suffer from. A significant investment in training teachers will be needed and the incorporation of African-centered issues into the present system of policy and practice is non-negotiable. This translates into substantial financial investments, the benefits of which could be significant in the long term.

The evidence points to the prospect of better life chances for Black youth when schooling is holistic and the system of practices pursued in that activity is built on a foundation of cultural relevancy in which teachers play a pivotal role in communicating thoughts, values and actions meant to maximize the chances of ensuring positive academic outcomes for each student. As well, the evidence points to the prospect of the need to address the inequities in the mainstream public school system that undermines the hope of success for Black students. Although the views canvassed from African-Canadian parents are not homogenous with regards to the establishment of an alternative school for Black youth education, there are many parents and members of the community who want the establishment of African-centered schools to enhance learning for Black youth. The findings of this study also reiterate the call for government and policy makers to work with the African-Canadian community to map out their expectations of the educational system with regards to what they want for their children. Though it is the responsibility of the government to make policies and pass legislation, a successful implementation of policies, in this case, also depends on the supportive role of educators, parents and the community.
6.12 Educational Transformation

As discussed earlier in this study, the education of Black students takes place within a school system that is White, middle-class and Eurocentric, and run by White middle-class teachers and administrators who are probably unaware of how school policies and practices alienate and silence Black youth. Unless recognized and interrogated, this will continue to contribute to low academic achievement of some Black youth who do not feel welcome in the system. Hence, many African-Canadian parents interviewed for this research support an alternative form of schooling where Black students can establish their sense of individuality and identity and enhance their status in society. The participants who support the establishment of the alternative school argue that if African-Canadian parents and community do not take action by finding solutions to their children’s problem of underachievement, who is going to do it? They also point out that the Black community should not allow our White-dominated or Eurocentric society to continue using the current school system as a coping mechanism to deal with Black students whom they do not understand, or do not wish to understand. The issues discussed earlier in this chapter leave no doubts regarding the answer to this question. Some parents argue that the problem of having many Black students drop out of school has little to do with their abilities. It has more to do with the educational structures within which they study and not that African-Canadian parents have not involved themselves in their children’s education as much as White middle class parents are acclaimed to be. Parents suggest that the educational system is the problem partly due to its curriculum content (especially the hidden curriculum), lack of role models or the presence of very few Black teachers, and the instructional pedagogy. These are issues that African-
Canadian parents and the community want to see addressed. For Black students caught in an education system that does not value their interest, it is just right for their parents and the community to make decisions that would benefit and help them succeed in their schooling. As stakeholders, African-Canadian parents must have the right to decide how they want their children to be educated, and which schools their children should to attend. They are aware of the possible challenges of establishing an alternative school but also believe the right step has to be taken to help Black youth succeed in school. As a society, we should promote schools with strong ties to the community where students get the feeling of belonging to a group and should not feel isolated. The knowledge and skills imparted should be meaningful and functional in the lives of students. The community on its part will have to see itself as one body, to the extent that if one part hurts, the whole body should be seen to be hurting. In this regard, Black students should not be seen as “other people’s children” but as part of the community who need to be supported in the successful pursuit of their educational endeavours (Delpit, 1995, p.195).

Equity in education must be prioritized and must be among the main forces driving change in the educational system. Parental responsibility has too often been used as a counter-argument when objections are raised against the institutional barriers and shortfalls within the school system. While no one doubts parental responsibility plays a key role in educating children, this should not be used as an excuse to blame both children and parents for the problems some Black children face in school.

Currently, the theoretical and practical case for excellence in schools is separated from the struggle for equity. Equity and excellence should be linked. One should not come at the expense of the other. For educators, the challenge is not simply to ensure that
excellence is accessible, but that excellence is equitable, as well. What this means is that all students should be able to attain excellence regardless of race, class, gender ability and sexuality. Equity considerations must therefore be situated in the broader definition of education. In order to bring equity to the forefront of current discussions about educational change, educators have to move beyond mere rhetoric into concrete action. Educational theory should not be separated from teaching practice. Theories and policies should not just remain on paper but be put into practice for the benefit of all students. By so doing, educators and parents will have to start thinking beyond the traditional ways of problem solving (i.e. thinking outside the box) and consider alternative programs that develop and integrate high-quality learning opportunities in all areas of students’ lives – at school, at home and in the community.

Representation is central to structural transformation in schools. Some cardinal issues as: who is teaching the youth, how, why and what is taught have to be addressed since physical bodies in positions of influence represent power and knowledge. These are important and have implications for knowledge production and identity formation of students.

Transformation is only possible if it proceeds from the development of the inner self and human spiritual values. In rethinking schooling and establishing alternative outlets, the complex link between the natural, spiritual, social, cultural, political and economic dimensions of life and society offer important social knowledge for teaching and learning. In order to counter, rapture, and transform hegemonic and material practices in schools the knowledge and experiences of students of colour must be central to the learning experience (Bernal, 2002 cited in Dei, 2008). Specific educational
initiatives would mean asking learners to situate learning in their understanding of self and personhood and in the interactions of nature, society and culture.

In transforming the educational system in Toronto, educators will have to redefine success broadly to include both the academic and the social. This means understanding the self and one’s connection to a group and what this means for communal responsibility and civil duty. There is a broad range of interests in our diverse communities and it is important for educators, to use the strengths embedded in our differences to our advantage rather than engage in practices that only serve to accentuate current obsessions with individual capabilities and rights. To establish, strengthen and support local communities, we must all recognize our responsibilities to a larger collective.

Education is also about teaching the importance of matching individual rights with social responsibilities. Consequently, transforming education will mean that all stakeholders of education (students, teachers, parents, community workers etc) must define their responsibilities as offering support, advice, encouragement and must engage in concrete action to effect change. We should all work collectively to set the agenda, priorities and goals for the future of our communities. The majority of African-Canadian parents (seventeen) interviewed for this thesis argue that an alternative educational outlet will provide Black youth with the means and resources required to meet their responsibilities to themselves, each other and their communities. It is important for all stakeholders of education to see the issues that affect the delivery of education in a broader perspective, and to work with allies by making linkages and connections. Most indigenous cultural knowledge systems speak to the importance of mutual
interdependence which extends beyond the local community. All progressive workers must strike meaningful and purposeful working relationships and link the issues in a spirit of genuine partnership. A partnership in which questions of power are not evaded, but confronted, discussed and dealt with in a manner that is beneficial to all parties.

6.13 Role and Relevance of Alternative Educational Outlets

The community mobilization for a Black focused school should be seen as part of parental responsibility for education. Parents interviewed who advocate for a Black focused or African-centred school do not see it as a panacea for all of the problems facing minority youth but as one of the things that should be done to enhance learning for Black youth. It should also be seen as part of parental advocacy for Black youth education. This way, parents get their voices heard and also push the educational system to come out with alternatives for Black youth education. We can only bridge theory and practice of schooling if we begin to critically explore the possibilities and challenges of alternative schooling for diverse youth. African-centered schooling is not just a political term that seeks to address issues of African youth disengagement and “push out” from the mainstream public school. The notion of African-centered education works with some fundamental principles for rethinking schooling and education in Euro-Canadian contexts. Educators stress that education among other things, empowers learners to resist the political and intellectual dominance of Eurocentric forms of knowing, assumed to be universal knowledge. In challenging the dominant claims to knowing, ideas and practices associated with African-centered education should be presented as legitimate ways of knowing. The ideas enshrined in this form of education will have relevance for multiple
learners, and not just Black/African people (Shockley, 2008; Galabuzi, 2008; Dei, 2008, Asante, 2003).

An alternative educational site serves as a model for transformation and social action. Erickson (1987) points out that cultural difference between students and teachers affects students’ educational achievement and also notes that culturally responsive pedagogy is one means of engaging in transformative teaching and learning that will equip students with the educational capital to deal with the contradictions between the norms and values privileged in the school on one hand, and the harsh realities of students’ home or out of school experiences on the other (p. 342).

Parents who advocate for Black focused schools point out that an alternative educational outlet will have a clear focus on academic learning that combines a more effective method of teaching diverse youth and create spaces where the needs of the most disadvantaged are seriously and concretely addressed and not glossed over. The majority of the parents argue that an alternative school will build a positive self-concept, provoke engagement and excitement about learning and enthusiasm for collective action. They believe it will also assist their children in developing the necessary intellectual, moral and emotional skills for accomplishing a productive and affirming life in society.

An important way by which institutions of learning can reach out to local communities is by responding to the relevance of academic research and scholarship for African-Canadian or Black communities. Dei (2008) defines such relevance as “helping communities come to understand and respond to pressing social and educational issues that confront them” (p. 134). African-Canadian educators and parents cannot expect educators who have been working in the mainstream schools to challenge the system
without facing some personal consequences. The process of re-visioning schooling in a more critical way is best to start by a cultural shift within a faculty of education by cultivating progressive approaches therein. If we should engage the idea of the Black focused school within the parameters of the current schooling, educators expect to encounter some professional resentment and resistance from some educators with many years of service in the school system who may not be willing to accept that the school system is failing some students. Hence the call by some parents and educators for a departure from the current structure of public schooling and to look elsewhere for support from centers of learning that are connected and yet have an arm’s length from the current school boards. Parents who advocate for African-centered schooling understand that the school will be a new entity and not one imposed on educators and administrators. The educational system will have to work with those committed to exploring new visions and alternatives of Black and minority education.

6.14 Challenges, Resistance and Possibilities

In establishing an alternative Black focused school, there are going to be enormous challenges ahead of us as educators, parents and a community but as we engage in sharing ideas and experiences, as well as engaging in the political practise for change, we must maintain the faith that the future contours of our communities lie across geographical spaces and contexts. Since the project may shift attention from the existing fight for equity and justice within the structure of the Toronto District School Board, this could be a problem as some Black students will definitely remain in the mainstream school system. The advocacy for inclusive curricular and pedagogical practices within
the TDSB should not stop after the establishment of a Black focused school. Successful stories from the alternative Black focused school should be transferred into the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) system.

Many teachers who have received their academic training elsewhere and in Canada have no problem identifying and relating to concerns expressed by racial minority groups about the Eurocentric nature of Western education. The challenge for educators is an educational paradigm built on Afrocentricity may place a huge responsibility on teachers who are products of a Eurocentric education system. This will mean that teacher training programs must now incorporate an Afrocentric frame of reference in order to equip teachers with the necessary skills to work effectively within a Black focused school structure and in line with its instructional philosophy.

Given the controversy surrounding the establishment of Black focused schools and the reluctance expressed by the current Premier of Ontario (Dalton McGuinty) towards the its establishment in Toronto, one challenge such a school might face is surviving any steep budget cuts that may occur in Ontario and Toronto in particular. This calls for vigilance on the part of educators, Black parents and the community in general to ensure that once established, Black focused schools will have adequate resources to enable them to run smoothly.

A potential challenge for the Black focused schools is the lack of teachers with the expertise in the relevant areas of the pedagogy that need to be emphasized. More importantly, getting teachers to buy into the idea of educating Black kids with the ultimate objective of “centring” them in their culture may even be a bigger challenge. Even though I argue for preference to be given to Black teachers, their mere presence in
classrooms may defeat the purpose for these schools if they do not buy into the idea and commit themselves to seeing their students succeed. It is therefore imperative that teachers “buy in” else they may even adopt a “wait and see” attitude, neither embracing nor resisting the change. The challenge here is to inspire them to embrace the change, support it and become champions for it.

Due to the misunderstanding of the African-centered school concept by some parents and the negative media coverage, there is a possibility that some Black parents may hesitate sending their children to the school even though their children would benefit by attending African-centered schools. The location of the schools could be a challenge for families who do not live within the proximity of the school. This is likely to pose a problem for Black parents who may want to send their children to the schools but yet live further away from the school.

Allowing African-Canadian youth to see, understand and interpret the world from their own eyes rather than from a Eurocentric point of view could pose a challenge for educators. This would mean that teachers will have to criticize the ideas and practices within the wider community that establish, promote and perpetuate White hegemony over African and non-White people. The challenge will be how the school will reform the curriculum to address the needs of an increasingly diverse people or community of African descent.

The challenges of educating youth for the future in a multicultural society are likely to overwhelm not just the mainstream school but an African-centered school as well. Dei, (2003) notes that educators and parents must respond to the challenges not by simply preparing students to take advantage of available opportunities but must be able
to articulate a new vision of education in Ontario. The question is: will the African-centered school be able to direct and/or mediate these challenges or will these challenges continue to shape the form of education and schooling?

African-centered educators believe it is important to have teachers who have the interests of Black students at heart and who would encourage them to do well at school. Although many see the Black/African teacher as an important role model, it is important to have a teacher who has a social perspective that students can identify with and can easily relate to. The idea of having Black teachers as role models is very important but the challenge will be whether they can promote African studies and send a message that stresses inclusivity in the school, recognition of the intellectual ability of all peoples and an opportunity to learn about our varied social realities (Dei, 1995). Another challenge for teachers in the school will be to present the histories and cultures of African people in a positive light while not idealizing or romanticizing the past. The challenge is to present the truth about the past contributions of African societies to the world and in doing so not to gloss over some unpleasant aspects of Africa’s cultural histories and experiences in terms of political repression, slavery, gender exploitation and ethnic conflicts.

Indeed, one of the biggest challenges that teachers in African-centered schools may face, particularly in low income neighbourhoods, is the general lack of correspondence between the culture of the home or neighbourhood and that of the school. In other words, cultural coherence may only exist within the walls of the school and not beyond. Consequently, teachers and staff may struggle to maintain a notion of Black identity and culture that may not correspond well with the notions of identity and culture that children and their parents confront on a daily basis in their homes.
African-Canadian parents believe that establishing an African-centered school should resist the deficit and pathologizing discourses and redefine parental involvement in a new way. Any difficulties encountered should not be ignored but attended to through the coordinated efforts of educators, administrators, parents, families and local communities. It is essential that educators work with communities in educating Black children if they want to succeed in mobilizing them as partners. Forging and sustaining such partnerships with community groups will present some challenges since educators already have their hands full trying to motivate and teach children and collaborating with the African-Canadian community may not be part of their job descriptions, let alone curriculum development at schools for educating their children.

In the establishment of an African-centered school, class size will play an important role. Manageable class sizes which encourage student participation can increase their interest in school in general and their academic achievement in particular. It will also allow educators to pay particular attention to the needs of all students. The alternative school should provide positive learning environments in which the abilities of students are recognized and academic potential nurtured and supported. The organizing principle behind alternate or focused schools and programs is that students will be successful, have a feeling of belonging and motivated to study and succeed.

As indicated elsewhere in this study, the introduction of Africana-centered schools per se may not be a perfect solution to the problems facing Black students in the Ontario school system. But from the view of many African-Canadian parents interviewed for this research, it can be seen as a response to the needs and challenges that some Black students encounter in schooling. This presents parents, educators and school
administrators with a responsibility to offer creative solutions that meet the needs of some Blacks students in the mainstream public system. The findings of this research carry a number of scholarly and practical implications some of which I now discuss.

6.15 Implications for Research and Practice

While the life stories of twenty African-Canadian parents cannot adequately speak for all African-Canadians, this research nonetheless, makes it clear that they have had an opportunity to have a say in choosing their children’s schooling. The implication is that the views of these African-Canadian parents offer new insights into how they understand the African-centered school concept. The research thus offers an avenue for the demonstration of parent power, and highlights the importance for African-Canadian parents to work together as a community to find solutions to the ongoing problem of underachievement among Black students.

This research shows that many of the African-Canadian parents (seventeen) interviewed favor the establishment of African-centered schools. A few (three) who do not support it doubt whether such a school per se, would help Black youth achieve success in school. They also do not see how emphasis on culture or history in a school curriculum would help a child improve academically. Scholars who study the African-centered education issue argue that it is not a question of whether the African-centered school would guarantee achievement for Black youth; but the hoped-for merit is that bringing African ideals of community and social responsibility into the schooling process makes a lot of difference in educating Black youth (Dei, 1995; 2005; Adjei, 2005; Akbar, 1998; 1984; Kunjufu, 2000). The challenge is to pinpoint whether African-centered
schools can help prevent the dropout and, whether they would help to enhance academic performance of Black youth remains.

Research on African-centered schools established in the United States show they are meeting the needs of Black students and the community (Murrell, 2000; 2002; Shockley, 2008). Of course, not all of them have had good success rates but as Dei (2005) suggests, what has to be done is look for the success rate in these schools. If it is working well in the United States, what prevents the Canadian educational system from establishing them in Canada as well (Dei, 2005)? He goes on to point out that the call for African-centered schools is not an “either/or” scenario, but an “and/with” approach implying that establishing African-centered schools is not a substitute for the mainstream schooling. The two can co-exist, so Black youth or parents can decide what is best for them. African-Canadian youth, in Canadian society, have not had the opportunity to look at the other side of learning. The right for parents to choose an education that speaks to the physical, emotional, spiritual needs of Black youth should be seen as a form of their involvement in ensuring that the outcome of the schooling process and experience facilitates good outcomes for their children.

We would never know how effective Black focused schools may be until they are established. African-Canadian parents interviewed, who argue for the establishment of African-centered schools, stress that the schools would develop a more positive self-image among Black youth. Given the growing number of African-Canadian parents, educators and researchers who support Black focused schooling suggest that, education and teaching in Canada should focus, proactively rather than reactively, on liberating

The call for the establishment of African-centered schools recognizes the importance of providing education that speaks to the lived realities of people of African descent. The goal of an African-centered approach to education entails the resuscitation of culture and to prepare the African student to accept the baton of cultural leadership handed to it by the generation that preceded it, to build on that inheritance, and pass it on to the generation that follows (Wane, 2002; Shujaa, 1994; Hill, 1992; 1999). In this context, the administrative and personnel of the African-centered school must have their efforts complemented by the major stakeholders, African-Canadian parents and the community to ensure that this becomes a truly collective effort to enhance academic performance of Black youth and help them become responsible adults.

The call for alternative schools is also an outward manifestation of the larger problems facing the mainstream Canadian public schools. The concept of a Black focused or African-centered school “questions the fundamental objectives” of what and how public schools teach, and “whose interests are reflected in both the official and “hidden” curriculum (Dei, 2008; p. 297)? This means that in Canadian urban centers where communities are culturally diverse, African-centered schools, functioning through with African-centered instruction and pedagogy would hold promise to ensure Black student success. The presence of the African-centered schools would challenge mainstream schools that have a sizable identified group of “at-risk” students to examine their curricula and pedagogical practices. If the failure rates of Black students are high due to the Eurocentric way of teaching, it may be necessary for them to examine and
implement the alternative measures and actions that will consider the social, cultural, and economic realities of the student body.

Available research shows a paucity of culturally relevant pedagogy in teacher preparation in Canadian pre-service programs (Dei, 1996; Solomon, 1992; Wane, 2002). As Wane (2002) notes, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto, for instance, is situated at the core of a vibrant multicultural urban center and given its location, it is expected that the teacher education program would reflect the community it serves. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Even though the program provides courses on gender, race and diversity, equity and multiculturalism, it mainly perpetuates the interest of the majority. For the program to be equitable and to reflect the community it is meant or supposed to serve, teachers should be given concrete strategies, models, and lesson plans on how to teach in diverse communities. This should include how to infuse history and culture throughout the curricula. A significant amount of training and retraining of educators, teachers and school personnel will be required to incorporate the cultural traditions of any group into the present system of policies and practice. This translates into both emotional and financial investments the benefits of which could be significant in the long term.

This research suggests that some African-Canadian parents find the current educational system deeply disadvantages their children and the community needs to be informed and educated about the principles and real meaning of the African-centered school concept beyond what the media and critics tell them. Even if African-centered schools are not established on a large scale, understanding an education regime that speaks to and meets the cultural and emotional needs of students is very important. With
the emphasis on diversity in teaching and learning in our society today, culturally responsive teaching, such as promised by the African-centered schools is needed more than ever (Dei, 2008; Shockley, 2008; Delpit, 1995, Hernandez Sheets and Hollins, 1999). The content of curricula in African-centered schools would include cultural identity components that view cultural differences between African-Canadian and European-Canadians as positive, not stereotypical. Teachers would have to recognize African-Canadian cultural identity differences as positive, and integrate them into teaching African-Canadian students, as well as allowing non-African-Canadian students to become aware of the positive and unique nature of cultural diversity. This implies that African-centered schools, at whatever level, must offer and reinforce courses, experiences, and interactions that foster Afrocentric ideas and beliefs through studies in cultural heritage. Research, on Black focused or African-centered schools, show that cultural affirmation is central to the theme, philosophy and ethos of African-centered schools and its goal is that the African-centered school approach must lead to the attainment of the positive cultural identity that may be lacking in some African-Canadians (Dove, 1994; Dei, 2005; Murrell, 2002; Henry, 1994).

Some critics argue that the establishment of African-centered schools would do little to improve the relations between teachers, students and parents, or assist in making schools beneficial or equitable for all students. Rather, they consider that it is imperative that teachers, students and African-Canadian parents continue working to make public school inclusive, to ensure that all students, regardless of background, are treated equally and fairly, and that they have an equal chance to succeed in their studies. But it is also rightly argued by some African-Canadian parents that just as some educators and parent
organizations are trying to build effective ways to fight racism and youth dropout from school, it would make sense to try out something, specifically, such as establish African-centered schools, make mistakes in doing so, and learn from the mistakes rather than not make any attempt, for fear of failing.

The school administration and teachers are keys to establishing a sound educational atmosphere for children. If they do not meet this responsibility, parents cannot afford to wait for the schools and political authorities to lead in changing that atmosphere. To the extent that the struggle for educational equality in Toronto will not be over until every Black child is able to maximize his or her potential, it must be expected that agitation for culturally-sensitive and inclusive education would continue till necessary changes occur for the benefit of all social groups.

African-Canadian parents, scholars and social activists see the establishment of African-centered schools as a way to create collective consciousness which will lead to empowerment and respect for our communities (Hilliard, 2002; Asante, 2003; 1991 Brown, 2005; Kenyatta, 1998; Akbar, 1998). Critics who oppose African-centered schools see it as an attempt to fragment the Canadian “mosaic” into its “real colors.” Whether the mosaic is a reality or an illusion is something that people of color, especially African-Canadian parents, will have to decide. In the meantime, educators, researchers, African-Canadian parents and the community cannot just remain unconcerned as Black youth are left out from the demonstrated benefits promised by the schooling process.

Hilliard (2002) pinpoints that the outcome of an African-centered education is the development of a mission, the development of a purpose, the development of competence for vital knowledge and essential skills that inculcate a sense of belonging and facilitate
character development and the ability to critique structures of domination purveyed by Europeans, Africans or others. The arguments raised by African-Canadian parents in support of having African-centered schools established in Toronto requires educators, administrators, other African-Canadian parents and the community to seriously rethink the need to find alternative solutions to the problem of Black youth disengagement and dropout from school.

For our world to be a better place for all, schools need to instill in students values and attitudes needed to enhance their individual and community status. Introducing an alternative form of schooling will help address some of the gaps that are in the mainstream public schools. The current debates on Black youth schooling in Toronto, Ontario reveal some of the disadvantages in schooling that Black students must overcome that hold them back from succeeding in the public school system. A Black focused or African-centered education can offer that change on account of its collective cognitive commitment to the spiritual and intellectual growth that would enhance the prospect of success for the Black student. It must be kept in mind that the benefits of the success of the African-Canadian students accrue to other students. I acknowledge however that there are no quick, short cut or straightforward solutions, and no single program, nor a defined method to teach Black youth. The foundation for Black youth educational success and the prerequisite for its eventuality appear to be committed, caring, dedicated, well-trained teachers who are not afraid, resentful or hostile, and who genuinely want to teach Black youth and help them succeed. A supportive relationship between teacher, parents and student is also a fundamental necessity for this to work well and to generate solutions to related problems in the Black community.
6.16 Directions for Future Research

Action is needed to help educate other Canadians to understand and acknowledge the failure of the current educational system for Black students. Additional research is also needed to help African-Canadian parents and the community to understand the Black focused or African-centered school concept and its benefits for educating Black youth. In other words, policy makers must evaluate the success of the few African-centered schools in Canada, and those to be experimented, to determine whether more should be established or not. I share the view of educators and African-Canadian parents who argue that the establishment of African-centered schools is an asset that can address current youth disengagement from schooling in the mainstream public system (Dei, 2005; Adjei, 2005; Henry 1994; Brown, 2005; James 2005).

For future research on alternative schooling, it may be useful to use a larger sample that will include other ethnic minorities. My research highlighted the possibilities and challenges of establishing alternative schooling for Black youth in Canada. What is significant are the important lessons that can be learnt from the agency that African-Canadian parents and community have of a collective commitment to change. It is important that future research focus on how African-Canadian parents and other minorities resist the cultural and institutional structures that undermine their children’s educational achievement. I believe that this research has opened up possibilities for researchers to conduct more research using diverse methodologies and discursive frameworks on how the community understands the alternative schooling concept and its role and relevance in educating ethnic minorities in Canada. Establishing alternative schooling may involve a lot more than just raising standards. As Sadowski (2001)
suggests, more research is needed on student attitudes, teacher satisfaction, class size, tracking and myriad of other factors for educators and administrators to understand what needs to be changed about students and learning.
6.17 Conclusion

My research on African-Canadian/Black Canadian parents illustrates Eurocentric bias in the Canadian educational system which eventually results in their disengagement and dropping out of school. The variables that affect Black youth education are extensive and cannot be covered by one study. However, one important variable is the parental right to choose an education which will meet the needs of their children. The paucity of relevant research literature on African-centered schooling in Canada is a clear indication that this important aspect of educating African-Canadian children, and the presence of parents’ voices in the process of doing so, has been neglected to a great degree by scholars and policy makers. After listening and following the heated debates in 2005 on whether African-centered schools should be established in Toronto, I found it necessary to investigate how African-Canadian parents and the community understand such an important educational and social policy evolution. My findings indicate an overwhelming consensus on the problem of the prejudice and discrimination within the Canadian mainstream educational system and the inability of the mainstream public school to address the cultural and educational needs of Black youth. As a result a majority of African-Canadian parents (seventeen out of twenty) interviewed support the establishment of an alternative Black focused school which will help their children succeed in school. Indeed it is plausible to argue that the marginalization and disempowerment of ethnic minorities especially Black youth begins with children in school. I share the view of scholars (Mukherjee, 1993; Dei et al., 2000; Lund, 2006; Ryan, 2006) who argue that despite the introduction of the Canadian Charter on fundamental human rights, multicultural education and anti-racist education, the school
system continues to urgently require restructuring and reorientation so that it would be more inclusive and represent all student groups and their world views. Establishing an alternative school will not only benefit African-Canadian students but all students. The time for this “change” to happen is now if we are to unlock the potential of African-Canadian students and reverse the cycle of underachievement.
**Post Script**

In January 2008, the Board of Trustees of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) voted by a majority decision, to set up a Black focused school in Toronto in September 2009. This decision again resulted in a heated public debate for months. While advocates see it as a positive step to improve Black student achievement and stop the prevailing trend of Black student disengagement in school, opponents argue that it is misguided and that setting up Black focused schools would be segregating students and undermining the ideal of multicultural education. African-Canadian community and parents who support the idea are thrilled with the TDSB decision and see it as a big step which will enable educators and parents to create choices for Black youth and help them succeed in their academic pursuits. The hope of the Black community is that the Board will work with it to ensure success for all students in the Toronto district, and beyond. It will be necessary for the School Board officials to follow up and work with African-Canadian parents and the community about the “next steps” that will be required to assist Black youth succeed in school.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Letter Of Informed Consent

Dear Participant,

My name is Rosina Agyepong and I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. I am conducting a research study as part of my doctoral thesis to examine or understand African-Canadian parents’ perception on the concept of African-centered or Black focused schooling in Toronto. I am looking for African-Canadian parents to participate in a forty-five minutes to one-hour interview to discuss their views on the issue of the concept of Black focused schools as an alternative to mainstream schooling. The only requirements to your participation in this research would be that you are an African-Canadian parent or caregiver and your children must have or be attending a mainstream school in Toronto.

I would like to request your assistance in being a participant in this proposed study. I am interested in knowing your views on Black focused or African-centered schools as an alternative for your child’s education. In this study, it is my hope to interview approximately twenty female and male parents who are Black or of African ancestry. My intent is to facilitate one-hour interview sessions where you will be invited to talk about your child’s experiences in the mainstream school and your understandings of the Black focused or African-centered school concept. I want to assure you that as a researcher, I have no relationship with the schools and the information provided will not be shared
with them. I also want to assure you that you will never have to talk about anything that you do not want to discuss. Please keep in mind that your participation in this research is completely voluntary and that you have the right to withdraw from the research at any point when you wish to discontinue without any consequences for you or your children. You also reserve the right to demand that any part of your interview should not be included in the final research. You also reserve the right not to answer any question that you feel uncomfortable answering. After the transcribing of the research, the interview will be sent to you for your review and comments. During the review of the transcribed data, you reserve the right to demand any portion of the interview to be removed from the final research.

It is my hope that the data from the interviews will help to bring about change of the traditional mainstream curriculum so that experiences of Black or African-Canadian youth will be acknowledged. The information gathered from this research may contribute to schools, teachers and professionals who work with Black youth to make schooling experiences better for African-Canadian youth to help them achieve success in school.

The interviews will be arranged at a time and place convenient for you. The interviews will begin in July, 2006 and end in September, 2006. The researcher will make every effort to ensure that complete anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained before, during and after the interviews. All interviews will be confidential and only pseudonyms
will be used. The study will be supervised by a professor at O.I.S.E. University of Toronto.

I will transcribe all recorded interviews. I will also provide you with a copy of your transcript so that you can check that I have not missed anything or you can add anything you would like to add or change. All the documents I will be working with will be stored in securely in a locked file cabinet for seven years of which I will be the only one to have access.

Participants who express interest in this research will be asked to sign a letter of informed consent to indicate his or her agreement with the details of the study. All participants will have a copy of their signed informed consent letter.

If you are interested in participating or would like more information, I would be happy to provide further information about this study. Please contact Rosina Agyepong at (905) 458-0732 or by e-mail at ragnepo@oise.utoronto.ca.

If you agree to participate in this study, please read and sign the attached form. Thank you in advance for considering taking part in this study. I look forward to working with you.

Yours sincerely,

Rosina Agyepong.
Appendix B: Research Consent

Rosina Agyepong
Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
OISE, University of Toronto
252 Bloor Street West
Toronto, Ontario
M5S 1V6.

Dear Rosina,

RE: BLACK FOCUSED SCHOOLS IN TORONTO: WHAT DO AFRICAN-CANADIAN PARENTS SAY?

I, ___________________________, (Please print name) agree to participate in the study being conducted by Rosina Agyepong, as part of the requirement for her Doctoral degree. I understand that the Study will explore African-Canadian parents’ perceptions and understanding of the Black focused school concept.

I understand that the interview, which will be arranged at mutually convenient location and time during the week. I also understand that the interviews will be tape-recorded with my consent. I understand that the transcripts of the interview and the tapes will be seen or heard only by Rosina Agyepong, the Thesis Supervisor and will be used for analytical purposes only and never used for anything else. I also understand that I will have the opportunity, at my request to review and comment upon the transcripts of my interview. I understand that the transcripts, tapes or notes relating to the interview will be kept in a secure filing cabinet and will be destroyed when no longer needed. I have been assured complete anonymity and confidentiality and have been informed that I reserve the right to terminate the interview at any given moment.
Signed:

------------------------------------------------
Participant
Date: ----------------------------------------
Telephone Number: ________________________

Signature of Researcher
Rosina Agyepong
-----------------------------------------------
Date: ----------------------------------------
Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

BLACK FOCUSED SCHOOLS IN TORONTO: WHAT DO AFRICAN-CANADIAN PARENTS SAY?

Are you an African-Canadian parent/guardian with children in the mainstream public school?

I am a doctoral student at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. I am conducting a research study as part of my thesis to understand how African-Canadian parents understand the Black focused school concept as an alternative form of schooling for Black youth in Toronto.

If you are an African-Canadian parent/guardian and answered YES to the questions above I would be interested in interviewing you about some of the challenges your children encounter in their schooling and whether the establishment of a Black focused school in Toronto will be a better alternative. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes, arranged at a time and place convenient for you.

If you are interested in participating and would like more information please contact me

Rosina Agyepong
By phone at 905 458 0732

Or by e-mail at ragyepong@oise.utoronto.ca

I look forward to hearing from you

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Name: ______________________
Gender: ______________________
What is your age? ______________________
What is your race/ethnicity? ______________________
Where were you born? ________________
If not in Canada, how long have you lived in Canada? ________________
What languages do you speak? ______________________
What is the highest level of education you have received? ________________
What is your occupation/Profession? ______________________
What is your marital status? ______________________
How many children do you have? ______________________
Do you live with all your children? ______________________
How many children do you have in public school? ________________
Have any of your children dropped out of school? ______________________

**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT WITH SCHOOLS

1. When you hear the term parental involvement or participation what does the term mean to you?
2. How have you, if any, participated or involved yourself with activities and programs at your children’s school?

3. What school activities are you involved or participate in and what do you do precisely?

LEVEL OF SATISFACTION WITH MAINSTREAM PUBLIC SCHOOLS

3. Do you think the school does enough to make attending school worthwhile for your children? If yes/no explain.

4. Do you think your children are treated fairly in the school they attend? What is your reason for your answer?

5. Can you describe some of the challenges (if any) that you or your children have encountered as a parent trying to connect with your children’s schooling?

6. Did you or your child experience any racist moments in the school?

7. Do you feel comfortable sharing your experience? How do you see that experience impacting you as a parent or your children?

SUCCESES

8. What are some of the successful things you have made as a visible minority parent in your child’s school?

9. What stands out most in your thoughts as the best moment you ever had in connecting with the school?

10. What do you think mainstream public schools should do for Black youth to help them achieve success?

STUDENT DROPOUT OF SCHOOL

11. What does the phrase school dropout mean to you?

12. Why do you think Black youth dropout of school?

13. Have any of your children dropped-out of school?

KNOWLEDGE OR UNDERSTANDING OF BLACK FOCUSED SCHOOL CONCEPT

14. Have you heard about the term “Black focused” schools? How do you understand the concept Black focused school?
15. Do you think Black focused schools should be established as an alternative to the mainstream public school in Toronto.

PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF BLACK FOCUSED OR AFRICAN-CENTERED EDUCATION

16. How do you see Black focused or African-centered schools as an alternative form of education for Black youth?

17. Do you see Black focused schools facilitating your child’s history, experiences and identity?

18. If Black focused schools are implemented, will you send your children to this school and why?

19. Do you think many African-Canadian parents will be willing to send their children to “Black focused” or African-centred schools and why?

20. One argument is that by implementing Black focused schools we would be going back to the old days of segregation. What is your opinion on that?

Please note: These questions are by no means fixed; the interviews may assume forms, which are more inductive and organic so that relevant themes (such as race, sexism, class, age, and accent discrimination etc. etc.) emerge naturally.
### Appendix E: Categorization and Coding System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Category Codes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are some of the Institutional and systemic structures that prevent children of African-Canadian parents’ from succeeding in the mainstream public school?</td>
<td>Impact of Institutional and systemic structures (racism, sexism and discrimination).</td>
<td>S (Institutional and Systemic Structures)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are conceptualizations of Black focused schools by African-Canadian parents informed by their individual locations in terms of their race, class culture, gender, sexuality, and other social oppressions?</td>
<td>Beliefs and attitudes about Black focused or African-centred schooling.</td>
<td>C (Conceptualization)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does the mainstream discourse inform ideologies about African-Canadian parents and their children?</td>
<td>Ideological representations; myths and stereotypes about African-Canadian parents and Black youth.</td>
<td>R (Representation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are conceptualizations of Black youth schooling held by African-Canadian parents incorporated into the knowledge production within mainstream public schooling?</td>
<td>Mainstream Schooling and Black youth discourse; Black focused or African-centred knowledge.</td>
<td>P (Knowledge Production)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do African-Canadian parents and community participate to subjugate, challenge, transform and dismantle the systemic structures within the Canadian mainstream educational institutions and society?</td>
<td>Resistance; self-definitions challenging and transforming etc.</td>
<td>A (Agency)</td>
</tr>
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Appendix F: Data Analysis Matrix

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<tr>
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<th>Interviews</th>
<th>Documents</th>
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