The Analysis of Early High School Dropout and East-African Youth in At-Risk Communities

By

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Abstract

The issue of dropout rates within minority groups has become an increasingly important problem, as black male youths tend to be one of the minority groups that have the highest high school dropout rates within Toronto. This is especially true for those who live in recognized at-risk communities. There is little present literature that speaks to the specific factors that affect East-African youth and their reasoning behind dropping out of school. There are inherent differences between Caribbean, Afri-Canadian and East-African youths that would make their experiences within the educational system quite different from one another. This study attempts to analyze those differences through using interviews from knowledgeable educators and available literature/studies to present the main factors contributing to this issue and what solutions can be developed to solve it.

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Education is often purported to be the key to a successful future, and without it, attaining this success decreases dramatically. The issue of dropout rates within minority groups has become an increasingly important problem, as black male youths tend to be one of the minority groups that have the highest high school dropout rates within Toronto. This is especially true for those who live in recognized at-risk communities.

I want to study the relationship between high school dropout rates and at-risk young males, but I want to focus on those youths who come from an East-African background, which would be those countries located mainly in the Horn of Africa. There is a lot of information regarding high school dropout rates and black youth, but this data often clumps members of the Caribbean, Afri-Canadian and East-African communities together. Unfortunately, there is no present literature that speaks directly to the issue of dropout rates and East-African youth. There are articles that speak to issues of transition and immigration regarding these youth and how this affects their livelihood in Western society. These issues are not directly related to education, but they are contributing factors to the problem posed in this paper and therefore help give this issue context.

There are inherent differences between Caribbean, Afri-Canadian and East-African youths, in particular cultural and traditional values that would make their experiences within the educational system quite different from one another. By failing to recognize each sub-group’s intrinsic differences, the present research fails to provide a thorough explanation for what the root causes are pertaining to this issue.
Purpose of the Study

This research is important and beneficial to educational administrators because it will help them have a clearer picture of this problem. More importantly, it can provide them with a basis from which they can create better programming and provide better resources for students who may be affected by this problem in the future. This research is also helpful to East-African youth and their families, where this will help increase their awareness about this issue and possibly influence positive changes to deter students from dropping out.

Research Questions

The central question that this paper will be focusing on is what are main factors that are causing black males with an East-African background in at-risk communities to drop out of high school?

Sub-Questions

1. How does the shift in cultural settings from their native lands in comparison to that of Canada influence the decisions East-African youth make?
2. In what ways do the socioeconomic factors of this group affect their academic success?
3. How has the settlement experience within Canada for East-African families impacted East-African youth?
4. Is the Ontario education system lacking the fundamental elements to adequately prepare these youth for success?
Background of the Researcher

Growing up education was always instilled in my home as an expectation. I grew up in a social housing community that is considered at-risk, but regardless of this fact my parents were very stringent in regards to their wishes for their children to pursue higher education. This was mainly because they were not afforded the opportunity to receive one because they came to Canada as refugees from a war-torn country called Eritrea. Coming from an East-African family I understand the value that education has within the home so it was surprising to see so many of the people I grew up who came from similar circumstances not attain educational success. For one reason or the next many East-African youth were dropping out of school and this was the case especially for males. I was curious as to why this was happening considering the strong support education received within these families so I decided to look deeper into this issue and that’s when I realized there was no information about this growing trend. Most of the information I did come across spoke to black male youth in general, but there was not anything specific about this particular group. This is when I decided to embark on a journey of research and attempt to find some answers to this daunting question that many people, including myself, have.

Overview

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as why I became interested in the relationship between high school dropouts and at-risk East-African youth. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature which categorized into seven sections: education, student engagement, socioeconomic factors, family relations, settlement experience, Africentric schooling and cultural
differences. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure used in this study
including information about the participants, data collection instruments, and limitations
of the study. Chapter 4 organizes the data collected from the research participants into
five themes: systemic educational issues, social inequalities and environment, cultural
identity and familial ties, teaching practices and Africentric schooling and cross-analyzes
it with the literature. Chapter 5 includes what was learned, insights, recommendations for
practice, further study and might also review the limitations of the study. References and
a list of appendices follow at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The issue of high school dropout rates in relation to East African youth in the Toronto area has little research available that speaks directly to the issue. It is important to understand this, as the literature in this review that speaks specifically to the East-African experience in Toronto is quite limited. When speaking of East-Africa, this paper will be discussing countries located in the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia). It should be mentioned that some studies group Eritreans with Ethiopians because of the small representation that Eritreans first represented when they first came to Toronto. With that being said, this chapter will be divided into seven sections and they are:

1. Education
2. Student Engagement
3. Socioeconomic Factors
4. Family Relations
5. Settlement Experience
6. Africentric Schooling
7. Cultural Differences

This literature review will attempt to frame this growing problem through discussing prominent factors that previous research has considered to be major contributing factors of dropping out. It will also discuss specific issues that pertain to the East-African experience and help to give an overall greater understanding as to why this problem exists.
**Education**

Black students make up 12% of the Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) population, which is the equivalent of 31,800 students, with 25% of this number being student from East-African origin (Census Portraits, 2011, p.3). Although black students do not make up a large majority of the population in the TDSB, they accounted for 31% of all suspensions in the 2007-2008 school year (Rankin, Rushowy & Brown, 2013, p.1). Many have argued that this disproportionate rate is a result of the much criticized and now eradicated zero-tolerance policies that were passed in the early 2000s as a response to curtail violence and bad student behaviours in schools (Rankin, Rushowy & Brown, 2013). There is an abundance of information that suggests that these policies have targeted youth from minority groups and have in effect have had a detrimental impact on their academic success. Dei supports these findings, where he argues that many black students fell through the cracks of this one-size-fits-all approach (Dei, 2008, p.5).

**Student Engagement**

Student engagement is based on a student’s feelings, interests, perceptions and their overall attitude toward school (Archambault et al., 2009, p.654). If a student has negative feelings about school than this will negatively affect their engagement levels. The greater the disengagement the higher chance there is for students to drop out of school (Archambault et al., 2009, p.654). Student engagement can be split into two components and that is social and academic. Social engagement (behavioural) is based on
behaviours such as, participation in school-related activities, rule compliance and attending class. Academic engagement (psychological) is based on performance levels and general attitudes towards school (Archambault et al., 2009, p.653). School disengagement first starts off psychologically, where academic and performance levels will begin to suffer and students will show a general disinterest in what they are learning. This disinterest eventually starts to shift to behavioural aspects, where attendance levels and misbehaviours begin to occur, which ultimately results in students dropping out (Archambault et al., 2009, p.655).

It’s not surprising when separated into categories and compared, poor social disengagement – mainly poor attendance and compliance – was a better predictor of dropout rates than academic engagement (Archambault et al., 2009, p.666). In other words, students who consistently missed classes and misbehaved had a much higher chance of dropping out than students’ willingness and effort to learn in the class. This is not to say that low school performance does not affect dropout rates because it does, as low school performance can lead to grade retention. Grade retention and low academic performance can cause students to face a number of stressors, such as rejection from peers, a loss of friends and overall low self-esteem issues (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.37). These factors eventually build up and set the stage from which students decide to dropout (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.37).

This makes sense as students disengage from school first psychologically and then behaviourally (Archambault et al., 2009, p.655). This is also supported by other studies, as researchers have found that engagement behaviours, even from primary grades, trumped academic scores in predicting future dropout rates (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007, p.326). These findings are incredibly important because it demonstrates
that student disengagement does not happen overnight, rather it is a process that develops and grows over a long period of time and ultimately culminates in dropping out of school (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007, p.326).

One of the ways student disengagement can be fixed is through positive student-teacher relationships. Christle, Jolivette & Nelson support this argument by saying “students who are attached to supportive schools in which personnel recognize their individuality and care about and promote their successes are prone to complete high school and make successful transitions to adult life” (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007, p.334). Teachers can unknowingly find themselves in precarious situations with students when it comes to determining their educational futures. Students on the precipice of deciding whether to dropout or not often find that a positive relationship with a teacher can ultimately prolong their stay in school (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.37). Just as a positive student-teacher relationship yields positive outcomes, a negative relationship will have negative consequences, where consistent conflicts and a lack of support will cause students who are “teetering” to drop out of school (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.37).

**Socioeconomic Factors**

Many research studies support the notion that low socioeconomic status is a strong contributing factor to dropout rates, where students who come from low-income families are more than twice as likely to drop out of school in comparison to middle-class families (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007, p.326). In Toronto, the East-African community is extremely poor, where the majority of them live in social housing communities. Approximately 23 percent of people in Toronto are considered poor, with
black groups having the highest representation in this area. Ethiopian and Somali groups are among the poorest of the poor, where about 70 percent of Ethiopians and 63 percent of Somalis are poor (Scott, 2001, p.22). It should also be mentioned that both groups have the highest rates of child poverty in the city (Scott, 2001, p.22). Also they are significantly disadvantaged in the area of employment, where their unemployment rate is two and a half times that of all Canadians, and their median income is a third less than other Canadians (Scott, 2001, p.22).

**Family Relations**

Positive family relations is imperative for a student’s success in school, where research has shown that consistent family stressors can contribute to a higher probability of dropping out of school (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007, p.326). This is supported by A. Lessard et al., where they argue that young boys and girls who experience “little cohesion, conflicts and a lack of organization within the family show a higher dropout risk than other students” (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.26). Students who feel as though they lack support at home and don’t have a real commitment from their parents to their school activities are at greater risk to dropout than students who feel that they do have this support (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.26). Experiencing family problems at home can lead to internalized problems, such as depression and anxiety, which is a factor that has been documented as a contributing factor to dropout rates (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.38). It is

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1 In this study, Eritreans were often grouped under the category of Ethiopians when doing statistical comparisons.
evident that negative familial relations carry a huge burden on a student’s educational future.

Settlement Experience

The East-African community within Toronto is definitely considered a disadvantaged group, where the majority of them have come to Canada as refugees or through a government resettlement program in collaboration with the United Nations (Scott, 2001, p.20). The way these groups arrived in Canada and the status they were given when they landed has had a negative impact on their livelihood. Most Eritreans who came to Canada in the 1980s came through the resettlement program mentioned earlier, while some others came as refugees. There was also a large amount of Eritreans who did not come directly to Canada first, where they came from other countries such as Sudan, Kenya, Italy and Germany.

On the other hand, the majority of Somalis who migrated to Canada and then later on to Toronto came through refugee status. Somalis had a more difficulty with their settlement experience because of their status. Refugees are required to have documentation that confirms their identity, such as birth certificates and passports, but due to the political strife and civil war that was occurring in Somalia, many immigrants from this region lacked this documentation (Scott, 2001, p.21). As a result of this, they were labelled as Undocumented Convention Refugees. Living under this category has many restrictions attached to it and it takes a minimum of three years to clear. Such restrictions include the inability to reunite with other family members because you are unable to sponsor anyone, as well as you generally cannot leave the country. People in
this category are unable to get access to educational loans from the Ontario Students Assistance Program (OSAP), which restricts those youth who do not have the financial means to pay for a post-secondary schooling (Scott, 2001, p.21). Also, another crippling barrier this category carries is that immigrants are only eligible for temporary work permits, which can restrict them from many potential employment opportunities. These types of restrictions have had an enormous effect on the Somali community, where the parents are being limited in their abilities to provide for their families. Somali youth are also affected by this as they are unable to get access to funding that will aid them in pursuing higher education (Scott, 2001, p.21). With the realization that they are ineligible for such funding it does not seem surprising that many Somali youth would find little interest in finishing high school, let alone pursuing post-secondary schooling.

Africentric Education

Recently members of Black communities in several Canadian cities have been attempting to create a curriculum that is centred on an Africentric perspective, which in other words is education that celebrates the history of black people. These schools can offer students the chance to engage in an inclusive and ethno-culturally-centred learning environment. The push for Africentric public schools in Toronto, Halifax and Montreal are considered controversial and have ignited heated conversations, both on a public platform and within Black communities themselves (Hampton, 2010, p.1). Those who support this type of curriculum argue that Africentric schooling will help those at-risk students who may feel as though the current education system is oppressive and unrepresentative of their own experiences. In particular, proponents of this argument
view the current educational system as one that is mainly based from a Eurocentric perspective, which ultimately fails to engage black learners (Hampton, 2010, p.1). Dei agrees with this view where he argues that one of the main reasons black youth fail to achieve academic success is because the education system subliminally delivers negative differential treatment by race and does not adequately recognize students’ racial identities (Dei, 2008, p.5). In their book, *New Perspectives on African-Centred Education in Canada* Dei and Kempf state why there is a need for the Africentric approach:

“The African-centred argument stresses that there are social values and ideas in African systems of thought that are relevant to the education of youth. Hence, today’s youth must be encouraged to resist an amputation of the past and the self and instead to recognize and affirm the positive contributions of African peoples to world history and civilization” (Dei & Kempf, 2013, p. 86).

The idea is that students need to be introduced to all histories and not just taught a partial part of it. The teaching of African history is imperative for students of this descent because it allows them to connect to what is being taught to them. The material is culturally relevant and therefore has a greater potential to students engaged.

Just as there is many supporters for the Afrocentric approach there are many who find that this approach would do more harm than good. Those who argue against Afrocentric schooling say that this type of education system supports segregation and fear that it would cause black students to become further stigmatized and marginalized, as they would be at greater risk in regards to integrating into the greater society (Hampton 2010, p.1). This argument holds no merit because this is not the first time that such schools have been created, where they have existed in Nova Scotia, Alberta, British
Columbia and all over the United States (Dei & Kempf 2013, p.84). There are even several different private institutions within the Greater Toronto Area that support an African-centred curriculum (Dei & Kempf 2013, p. 61). There are several different private educational institutions that support different religions and the issue of segregation is not mentioned. This seems to only be an issue because it is being introduced into the public education system and even then this is problematic, as Catholic schools are publicly funded. Critiques of this system claim that creating schools like this is a move backwards, but that would imply that society has been moving forward (Dei & Kempf 2013, p.76). In many fields society has been moving forward, but when it comes to issues of racial equality in our education systems, it becomes obvious that this advancement is barely visible. So the real issue seems not to lie within the issue of segregation, but within the actual content being taught in an Africentric school.

Cultural Differences

The cultural values of East-African families differ than those values that are predominant in multicultural societies such as those found in cities like Toronto. These values are a part of the identities of East-African youth, but these values can also come into conflict with other values and identities that youth their age come accustom too. This is especially the case for youth who have immigrated to Canada from other countries. Immigrant youth experience a two-level transition as they are attempting to build their adult identity in the new society while at the same time trying to maintain values and norms from their homelands (Mondain & Lardoux, 2005, p.2).
Generally when people migrate they do so in hopes of finding a better life for themselves and especially for their children. Results have shown that immigrant parents often have to make compromises between their own values and beliefs and the customs and norms of the country they decide to migrate to (Mondain & Lardoux, 2005, p.9). Scott further expands this line of thinking, where she argues that due to the cultural shift in Canada, immigrant parents often feel that children’s rights undermine their authority and responsibility as parents (Scott, 2001, p.23). These choices can often cause distress within these families, especially on the relationship between the child and the parent. As the children more readily learn and adapt to the values of their Canadian peers, they stray further away from the values that have been instilled in them by their parents and this can usually lead to increased conflict between them and their parents (Scott, 2001, p.24).

So this data is then suggesting that families are aware that there is a sort of conflict occurring for youth between choosing and accepting differing social identities. When you combine this with the pursuit of education, youth can often find this overwhelming and sometimes too difficult to handle, which may cause them to abandon the whole notion of pursuing an education to begin with. Also, the social identity that these youth choose may not correspond with pursuing an education so they may not feel that going to school fits their lifestyle.

Conclusion

As demonstrated through this small sample of research, the issue of dropout rates within the East-African community is a multi-faceted issue that is compounded by many different variables. The data compiled in this literature review is just a sample of what
this paper will be comprised of, but the topics of interest mentioned here will serve as the foundation from which this paper will be grounded from. Issues relating to socio-economic factors, settlement patterns, the Ontario education system and culture are the main focus that this paper will utilize to analyze this problem and through which can hopefully provide a better understanding as to why this problem exists.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Procedure

This research will study the relationship between high school dropout rates and at-risk young males, but I want to focus on those youths who come from an East-African background, which would be those countries located mainly in the Horn of Africa. There is a lot of information regarding high school dropout rates and black youth, but this data often clumps members of the Caribbean, Afri-Canadian and East-African communities together. This research is important because it will help differentiate the issues that make these two groups different, which ultimately will give a better understanding to this salient problem. This qualitative research will include a review of the literature that relates to my topic and face-to-face interviews with a principal, a teacher from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and a student/parent support worker (SPSW) from the Pathways to Education program, which is a program that deals directly with this targeted population.

Instruments of Data Collection:

The interviews will be informal and semi-structured based. The entire interview questions can be found in Appendix A. The following are some sample questions that will be used in the interviews:

1. What do you think are the reasons behind students dropping out of high school?
2. Do you think their social environment has anything to do with it?
3. How important do you think familial influence is to students these days?
4. Do you think a student’s particular culture has any influence on how they perform in the classroom? Why or why not?
5. Which racial group do you think experiences the most trouble in the classroom?

Interviews are a powerful tool that provides researchers with an in-depth view into topics that literature sometimes is unable too. Establishing a good relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is essential in producing authentic interviewee responses. Creswell emphasizes this by suggesting “more collaborative interviewing, where the researcher and the participant approach equality in questioning, interpreting and reporting” (Creswell, 2013, p.173). There are important challenges that become present during the interviewing process and being aware of them are key to ensuring a successful interview.

Participants

The participants that will be used in this study will be a mix of educators and practitioners who are currently employed in their respective fields. In total there will be three participants. I was able to locate these participants through personal networking and recommendations. I wanted to interview educators who have either worked in the specified area that I’m studying or who have experience working in a similar area, as they would be able to provide important insight into this problem. The following is a description of the participants and their qualifications:

**Brian** is a SPSW for the Pathways to Education program. This program was developed over six years ago and its purpose is to help marginalized youth overcome the barriers that restrict progress in their education. This role embraces the idea of working with other networks to ensure that students in our program have access to a wide spectrum of
supports and resources. At the time of the interview he had been working in his current position for the past two years. Brian is also a certified teacher in Ontario. Brian self-identified as a first-generation minority.

Matthew has over twenty years of experience working with the TDSB. He has worked in several schools both at the primary and intermediate stages, where he has worked his way up from the classroom to administration. He has extensive experience working with at-risk youth and children with Caribbean, East-African and Afri-Canadian roots. He also has a vast amount of knowledge relating to the Africentric curriculum, where he served as a vice-principal at an Africentric school. Matthew has been involved in various TDSB initiatives and holds a Masters of Education. He is currently a principal of an elementary school in the Toronto area.

John has over seven years of experience working as a teacher in the TDSB. He has worked at three different schools working mainly as classroom teacher for the primary grades. He has extensive experience working with the Africentric curriculum as he taught at an Africentric school for several years. John also has years of experience working with at-risk youth and students from different minority groups. He currently works as a grade 2 teacher in a primary school. John self-identified as Afro-Caribbean.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews will generally be comprised of open-ended questions that will explore the personal experiences of these highly skilled individuals and ultimately present this issue’s more personalized side. These questions are extremely important in
that they will provide insight into the East-African perspective, which as I have already mentioned in chapter two, data is limited. The discussion from my interviews focused mainly on the East-African voice and how these interviewees, from their experiences, understand these youth to be affected by factors such as, social environment, family, culture etc. The information I gained from the interviews was invaluable and it helped substantiate areas of my research that required more strength.

In regards to the coding and organizing of the interviews, I did several things that helped with the coding process. I found that finding repetitive words and phrases was important, so I would read the interviews a several times. As I was reading the interviews I would write words that stuck out to me beside a particular sentence. I did this a few times and as I would read the interviews over again I noticed that I kept finding more ideas to write down. Not only that, but I noticed that the words I was writing down were being repeated. This repetition helped highlight the patterns and inconsistencies in the data.

The next step was to create categories that could represent groups of these words and the general ideas from the data that I had. I came up with ten main categories, in which I could group the data into. I created a chart that listed the code, the requirement to be associated with that code and examples from the data that I had that matched that code. Once the categories and chart were created, I then colour coded them to make the data easy to read and reference later on in the future. Following this, I consolidated the information into five themes, which I was easily able to group my data into.
Ethical Review Procedures

In regards to the ethical review protocols I ensured that I obtained an up-to-date version of the consent letter template and then I adjusted it so that it would reflect my research interests. This letter expresses to the participants that their consent is required to participant in the interview and this consent can be withdrawn at any point within the interview. This letter also states the interview will take place at a time that is convenient for them outside of school hours and most importantly this letter highlights that their confidentiality will be respected at all times. A copy of the full consent letter can be found in Appendix B.

Limitations

The biggest and only limitation of this study was that I could not speak to the students that I am researching about. Being able to directly interview the youth that my research is about would have given my research a much deeper look into the issue of high school dropout rates within the East-African community. I wanted to get their own personal perspectives on why they feel that they this problem is happening, but because of the restrictions of my research I now have to solely rely on the educator’s perspective.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

I conducted three interviews with three individuals who have a combined experience of over 25 years in the field of education. Each of these interviewees are in different points of their career, with some at the beginning and others at a much more developed stage, which ultimately helps to create a holistic perspective on this topic. The information that I obtained from these interviews has been invaluable in providing further insight into the issue of high school dropout rates within the East African community.

When analyzing the data, five main overarching themes stood out and these themes were used to then organize this chapter. The following are the five themes:

1. Systemic Educational Issues
2. Social Inequalities and Environment
3. Cultural Identity and Familial Ties
4. Teaching Practices
5. Africentric Schooling

The findings from these interviews are certainly interesting, but not completely surprising. With the exception of a few topics, there was a general consensus amongst the interviewees when it came to certain foundational issues. These issues include, but not limited to, the influence of familial ties; social environment; educational systemic issues; and the importance of community. The most important issue that all three interviewees agreed upon was the major factor behind high school dropout rates. This is incredibly important as these individuals are all educators so the fact that they all see the same
problematic pattern helps to pinpoint a place to start creating a solution. When it came to discussing possible solutions regarding the issue of high school dropout rates with this particular group of youths the interviewees had different opinions as to what exactly could be done, but they all agreed that Afrocentric schooling—with some modifications—could be one of the tools used to help. More importantly, they all agreed that the histories of East-African youth differs from that of Caribbean and Afri-Canadian youth and such a difference plays a factor in how successful Afrocentric schooling would be. With that being said, let’s look into what the interviewees had said at a much closer scope, starting with the topic of systemic educational issues.

**Systemic Educational Issues**

One main issue that all three interviewees identified as a major factor leading to youth dropping out of high school is student disengagement. There are many reasons why students become disengaged in school but a consistent pattern that reoccurs is the relationship between the curriculum, the way the curriculum is being delivered and the effect this has on student performance. The Ontario curriculum provides expectations that teachers use to help guide and focus their teaching, but how this material is taught is up to individual interpretation. In other words, teaching styles vary, which means the quality of education a student receives varies as well. John echoes this sentiment by saying, “I think there are assortments of factors behind students dropping out of high school…students’ loss/lack of interest in either the material that is taught and/or the way the material is delivered. Students at times feel disconnected from their education, as the material is not relevant or reflective to their lived realities”. Matthew also agreed with the fact that
student engagement is a problem. One of his reasons as to why students are dropping out of high school is because “schools are not meeting [students’] real world needs (educators are teaching children with a model that is about 20 years old)”. This point is further reinforced by Brian who says that “the biggest issue regarding high school dropout rates is the lack of an integrated curriculum and this has impacted the decreasing interest levels for students in academic settings (disengagement)”. According to this, there seems to be a clear connection between the material teachers are teaching in classrooms and students levels of engagement, where the rise of high school dropout rates seems to be related with teachers’ inability to effectively engage their students.

Additionally, the curriculum itself seems to be an issue in regards to low student engagement levels. The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is comprised of students from all over the world, but yet the curriculum fails to recognize the diversity of its students, in particular those students from an East-African and Caribbean background. Many argue that history is taught from a Eurocentric perspective, which doesn’t allow students with East-African and Caribbean roots to be able to connect to what is being taught, therefore leading to student disengagement (Dei & Kempf, 2013). This argument is supported by Hampton, who also argues that students are disengaged because the current educational system is based on one specific narrative (Hampton, 2010, p.1). Brian agrees with this when he says, “The curriculum is dominated by a Eurocentric voice. Changing the faces of teachers is one thing, but this does a disservice to students when the curriculum does not coincide with the diverse background of the students”. Kempf shares this belief and says “when students see neither themselves nor their histories reflected in their education, disengagement understandably follows” (Dei & Kempf, 2006, p.132). This begs the question however, that if the curriculum does not
adequately address the needs of these particular students, how can teachers then effectively teach these students and keep them engaged? John believes that this is a problem that has existed for quite some time now as the increasing limitations put on financial resources by administration and the lack of training that teachers have in this area (as well as the lack of willingness to seek this training) has only exasperated this issue even further. John continues by saying, “many teachers and the system on a whole do not take the time or resources to adequately serve students of African descent. Many are unwilling or just do not know how to move out of the familiar comfort zone”.

Accepting and learning different practices can be challenging and requires additional effort. Brian finds that this may be difficult to do because many teachers already feel overburden with their current work load, so the desire and willingness to seek and understand these new practices that can help serve these students and their needs is not there.

There is also the issue that this subject matter can be very uncomfortable for many teachers to deal with because of the level of sensitivity it requires. John expands on this by saying:

“Anytime something or someone is unfamiliar to you it usually brings an uncomfortable feeling upon you. As educators and the education system on a whole, learning how to adequately educate a segment of society that has historically been disservice is not only uncomfortable, but also challenging. There are many societal stereotypes and biases that need to be unlearned regarding people of African descent. As individuals we all have biases and it is for us the [teachers] to challenge the biases we have; the education system
as a whole needs to do that as well, but there are many forms of resistance fighting against doing so”.

Recognizing and discussing racial and social inequalities can often create emotionally charged dialogue that some may find uncomfortable, especially if this conversation is being led by a teacher whose race is representative of historical privilege. Brian agrees with this sentiment, where he believes that East-African and Caribbean students may find it easier to resonate with a teacher who comes from a similar background and teachers from these backgrounds may find these issues easier to talk about because of their own personal experiences. This is not to say that teachers who are not from an East-African or Caribbean background are not capable of teaching this material because they obviously can. When approaching these topics teachers need to recognize their status of privilege and how historically it has affected the society that these students live in today. More importantly, teachers need to recognize how privileged races have shaped the narratives that are being taught in the classrooms and what kind of effect it may have on a student’s individualized perception of themselves and others. Kempf agrees with this when he argues that those who teach history do not only pass on knowledge, but actually “construct it through conscious and unconscious inclusion and exclusion of historical perspectives, contributions and events” (Dei & Kempf, 2006, p.131) He believes that this “selective process” of sharing history further alienates students from themselves and their historical stories. Kempf argues that, “instead of contributing to the wholeness of the learner, or the wholeness of history, colonial/dominant education is a marginalizing force, which divides the learner from herself and her history” (Dei & Kempf, 2006, p.136).

John agrees with Kempf and expands on this by saying:
“If the dominant narrative is only partial stories or complete false stories then society as a whole, over time will believe what they see and hear most. Some people of African descent internalize many of these negative biases and stereotypes and it also plays a role in forming their view of their reality and potential societal mobility. Educators need to be committed to be changing and challenging societal prejudice”.

John highlights some important points, where he speaks to the continuous negative cycle that is occurring within our education system. Students are being taught a specific type of history that not only fails to recognize the minority voice, but also has created stereotypical behaviours and images of these various groups. A prime example of this can be found in various literature and children’s books, such as Tarzan that often depict Africa as a country with a jungle type of landscape, dismissing the various different countries and cultures that exist in this continent (Newsinger, 1986). When this demeaning illustration of Africa and her people is being perpetuated on a large scale within our educational institutions, it becomes hard as a student from this background to not internalize at least some of what is being consistently reinforced (Newsinger, 1986).

Both Brian and John feel that through recognizing and addressing the differences between the dominant and minority narratives teachers have the opportunity to create a platform of trust with students, where students can then feel comfortable in opening up about their own experiences. This then helps to foster an environment of inclusiveness which allows teachers and engaged students to work together to help deconstruct negative biases and stereotypes that students face in school and greater society.
Student disengagement is also influenced by student performance, where there is a relationship between low performance levels and low engagement levels. All the interviewees agreed that a lack of skill is a precursor to student engagement levels and eventually high school dropout levels as well. A. Lessard et al. agrees with this, as they believe that poor academic performance and grade retention can cause a number of stressors to develop that eventually lead students to drop out of school (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.37). With Matthew’s experience in both teaching and administration he argues that from his experience he believes “low literacy skills (mainly reading) and a lack of mastery of primary skills lead to frustration later on (so the lack of knowledge or the inability to master the social skills that is required of dominant institutions)” are major factors behind students dropping out of school. What is being said here is that a student’s inability to perform in the classroom at an early stage can cause increasing frustrations over the years that eventually reaches a point where a student no longer wants to partake in additional schooling – resulting in dropping out. The research supports this as Christle, Jolivette & Nelson argue that student disengagement does not occur suddenly, but rather it is a slow process that begins as early as the primary grades (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007, p.326). Archambault et al. agree with this, but extend this argument by saying student disengagement occurs in two phases, psychological and behavioural. The first phase (psychological) is categorized by poor academic performance, which leads to the second phase (behavioural), which is defined by heavy absenteeism and misbehaviours in class and this leads to the final result of dropping out (Archambault et al., 2009, p.655).

Brian and John also share this belief that the root of a student’s inability to perform, in most cases, is ultimately a result of teachers not meeting the needs of their
students. John solidifies his argument through giving an example of this by highlighting those “students [who are] being transferred along without meaningful learning for years and when they get to high school they realize how far behind they are and give up”. In other words, it is that it is the responsibility of the teacher to recognize areas of trouble early on so that they can adequately be addressed before it is too late. This is not a new concept and this way of thinking is applied in all aspects of our lives, as it is common sense to want to fix a problem before it grows into an even bigger problem. In my own personal experiences I have seen students who are struggling and in clear need of Individual Education Plans (IEP) pass from grade to grade with teachers failing to intervene to ask questions and probe into the background of the student. Creating IEPs, probing and asking questions are tasks that are specific and individualized, so that means additional work for teachers who already have to teach several other children. This is a daunting task, but it is included in the teacher job description and students should expect this from their teachers. With that being said, teachers are not only solely responsible for this issue, as they are a part of an overall system which is underfunded, overworked and ultimately outdated. John supports this argument as he thinks that “some students are forced out of high school due to the system failing to adequately service its students”.

Brian goes a step further and speaks to the poor historical educational policies that targeted students mainly from poor socio-economic backgrounds:

“There are students who come from poor socio-economic backgrounds, students who are visible minorities and students with behavioral issues. I grew up in a system that did not take these factors into account, but rather supported a zero-tolerance platform. What did this mean? This meant that
extenuating circumstances and factors were not considered when students misbehaved, instead these students were punished – in my opinion too severely – and then this started what became a vicious cycle of detentions, suspensions and failure that many students got caught in. Unfortunately, many students fell through the cracks because of these poor policy choices. Thankfully today we have generally moved away from this sort of punish first, ask questions later mentality, but this doesn’t mean that there aren’t still issues that need to be addressed that relate to equality and diversity amongst students”.

Although Brian’s experiences speak to the educational policies from the past, the effects of them can still be felt today. Brian still feels that there are many teachers who still believe in creating a zero-tolerance environment within their own classrooms because it is easier to punish students then taking the time to understand what is going on. I am not surprised by this, as I too have seen this behaviour in my past practicums. Teachers need to understand that increasing punitive measures does not deter misbehaviours, nor does it increase compliance. On the contrary, it often increases student aggression, decreases student engagement levels and contributes to an overall negative classroom environment. Christle, Jolivette & Nelson support this argument and argue that positive student-teacher relationships are necessary in order to keep student engaged and in school (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007, p.334). They believe that “students who are attached to supportive schools in which personnel recognize their individuality and care about and promote their successes are prone to complete high school and make successful
transitions to adult life” (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007, p.334). A. Lessard et al. agree and argue that just as a positive student-teacher relationship yields positive outcomes, a negative relationship will have negative consequences, where consistent conflicts and a lack of support will cause students who are “teetering” to drop out of school (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.37). Creating apprehensive classroom environments do not help strengthen student-teacher relationships, but rather they weaken them and increase chances of students dropping out (A. Lessard et al., 2007).

As Brian said earlier, steps are being taken in the right direction and this is evident by the change in policies that govern the current educational system. Hopefully these educational policies can continue in this positive direction, where the focus is on rehabilitation instead of punishment. In the next section the influence that social inequalities and the environment have on high school dropout rates will be discussed.

**Social Inequalities and Environment**

Students of East-African origin are considered a minority and minorities in general face higher levels of social inequalities and this is largely due to their low socio-economic status (Scott, 2001). A large majority of East-African youth in Toronto live in social housing communities and this makes sense considering the fact that this group makes up over two-thirds of Toronto’s impoverished community (Scott, 2001, p.22). Unfortunately the atmosphere within most social housing communities is often not supportive of educational endeavours, as social
conditions encourages behaviours that do not conform to societal standards (Balfanz, Herzog & Mac Iver, 2007). In other words, youth living in these social communities are often blinded by their poor social conditions that they are unable to see the long-term value in pursuing academic related activities. So those youth who are in school and who are living in these environments can often get influenced by this mentality and based on this can make decisions that often lead them away from staying in school (Balfanz, Herzog & Mac Iver, 2007, pg.225).

The interviewees agree with this sentiment, where they see one’s social environment as a strong determinant on future decisions and goals. Matthew believes that “[your] social environment means everything because one’s immediate environment is their primary experience; it is where they learn to see, interact and reflect ‘the world as they know it’”. John expands on this and talks about the influence a negative social environment can have on a child’s perception. He says, “if students’ see their social environment based on their own negative perception of their reality, it will either propel the child to want to raise above the negative for good or it will lead to them believing they can’t do better then what’s around them so there is no point in even trying”. A student’s social environment helps shape one’s outlook on life and it can be difficult to want to rise above the negative things and people that surround you. This is especially true for youth who are going through important transitions in their lives (ie. puberty), which causes them to be much more impressionable. Brian speaks further to this issue, as he talks about the imminent dilemma of peer pressure and teenagers:

“I feel your social environment definitely helps shape your views on education. If you are friends with people or have people around you who are
skipping classes, not doing their assignments, disrespecting teachers and have an overall negative attitude towards education then more than likely you will either share those feelings or begin to have them. That’s how peer pressure works…it slowly infiltrates your mind and decisions; and we all know how prevalent that issue is with teenagers”.

A. Lessard et al. support Brian’s opinion in regards to the negative effects peer pressure can have, as they believe having the company of deviant peers contributes to increased cases of delinquency in school (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.38). They conclude this argument by saying “peer relationships [appear] to play a significant role in shaping the educational journey of dropouts” (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.38).

The fact that all three interviewees believe that social environment has such a profound impact on a student’s educational choices is not surprising, as your environment helps shape the person you are. So when students are consistently being exposed to negative social influences and environments which don’t support educational ideals, it only makes sense that they don’t continue in school and dropout. Of course, that is not to say that all students being exposed to these environments will make such damning decisions. In fact, I grew up in similar conditions and did not choose that path – so there are ways to avoid this, but the key is access to opportunities. John explains this perfectly:

“What we see and believe has an impact on our possible outcomes, but it does not mean that we will be good or bad regardless of our social environment. A huge factor in social environment is access to opportunity. The more viable
and positive opportunities are available to individuals the more likely individuals will make positive choices”.

Access to opportunity is fundamental in helping these students that are growing up in these negative social environments. Without these opportunities students are much more likely to get caught up in the “now”, which will cause them to lose focus of the bigger picture – and that is their future. Christle, Jolivette and Nelson agree with this and believe schools are a part of a community in which a lack of opportunities in the community is a strong predictor of whether students complete school or not (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007, p.333).

Gaining access to opportunity can be more difficult for some East-African students and this is because of their settlement experiences. Like myself, many East-African youth living in Toronto are first-generation, but there is also a large majority of these youth who were not born here and either came here through settlement programs that gave them permanent resident status or status as refugees (Scott, 2001, p.20). As stated in chapter two, those who came through the latter option often experienced difficulties due to their undocumented statuses and this made it hard for these families to obtain work and for youth to obtain loans to pursue post-secondary schooling (Scott, 2001, p.21). The limited access these families were given makes it much harder for students in these families to succeed. Not only do the students need to have access to opportunities, but parents living in these social environments do too because the positive effects of being able to access positive opportunities will trickle down. Like myself, both John and Brian grew up in social housing communities and they were able to achieve success in school and
obtain jobs within the education sector. They may have been a product of their social environment, as their perception of the world has definitely been shaped by their experiences living there, but they did not let that define the people they are today. They were given access to opportunities that allowed them to make positive choices, which resulted in the successful positions they hold today.

What this means for teachers is that they need to recognize and understand the environments their students are living in and what kind of influence it can have on them. For those students living in poor social environments teachers should make an extra effort to give them access to opportunities that will help keep them on track to success. In the next section the impact of cultural identity and familial ties on high school dropout rates will be discussed.

**Cultural Identity and Familial Ties**

When it came to issues relating to the role cultural identity and familial influence played in academic success the interviewees held differing opinions. John believes culture should not influence how students perform in the classroom and that the onus is on the teacher and her or his own practices to ensure student success. He goes on to say, “as educators we need to take time to learn and understand the students we teach, regardless of their culture we need to figure out their strengths and weaknesses and plan accordingly”. John sees culture as an outside problem that should not affect the student’s ability to succeed. Brian and Matthew disagree, saying that culture and family definitely plays a part in
determining student success. Brian feels the influence family has on students can be quite strong and it is extremely important. He goes to say:

“[Family is] extremely important because a strong family influence helps you become guided and provides you with a proper sense of direction. The social distractions and influences that society presents can be altered when one has strong morals and principles that stem from family influence. In terms of education, having strong familial ties could definitely help potential troubled students stay on track because they have something to look forward too at the end of the day. Basically their family functions as a role model and they don’t want to disappoint them”.

In this sense then, having a positive family influence on a student may essentially trump other factors that could hinder educational success, such as a student’s social environment. This is supported by the literature, as Christle, Jolivette & Nelson argue that family turmoil can often contribute to creating a stage for school dropout (Christle, Jolivette & Nelson, 2007, p.326). A. Lessard et al. support this argument, where they feel that students who have a strong support system at home and parents who are committed to their child’s academic endeavours have a greater chance at staying in school than those students who lack this integral familial foundation (A. Lessard et al., 2007, p.26). Matthew agrees with Brian, but believes the notion of family is extended beyond the traditional definition of what family means. Matthew believes that, “family influence is important as the notion of family is becoming smaller (1 or 2 generations) and as such institutions, such as schools are counted on more to do what families did in the past (teach character, morals, values, build communities through events/programs)”.

So in this
sense teachers and the students in their classrooms function as a secondary type of family
to students and could arguably hold a similar familial influence over student success. This
makes sense considering the amount of time students spend in school on a yearly basis.
Teachers and school administrators then have the responsibility to ensure that their
classrooms and the overall environment of the school are reflective of values and ideas
that would be considered acceptable on a grander societal level.

Matthew brings up an interesting point, saying that although the school functions
as a type of family many families within the East-African community are not necessarily
happy with the influence that teachers and the school environment have on their children,
as this sometimes could cause conflict with their cultural beliefs. Matthew says:

“I think that East African Families are in somewhat a state of shock because of this and are having conflict with the way that the system operates.
Caribbean families are as well, but because they have been in Toronto longer they are “more used to it – less shock.” With having said that, family is the base for all and how we all develop our moral standards, practices, barometer and imperatives. Presently our system and institutions are at odds with families and the notion of it.”

This is interesting in that Matthew highlights the importance of family and the role it plays, but he also point out the struggle there is with this idea of family and what that really means. What is more interesting is that he speaks to the specific struggles of East-African families and their ability to adapt to “the system” in Toronto. Moundain & Lardoux agree with this, where they argue that immigrant
parents often have a difficult time adapting to the countries they migrate to because of the compromises they have to make – which usually conflicts with their cultural beliefs and values (Mondain & Lardoux, 2005, p.9). Matthew shares this belief by saying, “When our culture is different than the culture of the dominant institutions there is conflict (particularly class/socio-economic based behavior)”. This conflict then translates to distress within these families, especially between the child and parent (Scott, 2001, p.23). Matthew extends this translation to school performance, where he believes that “[this] conflict ultimately presents itself as suspensions, low achievement and dropouts”.

In Matthew’s earlier quote about East-African families and their struggle to adapt to the current educational systems, he creates a dichotomy between the way East-African and Caribbean families operate due to the length of time each of these groups have been here. Many Caribbean families have generational roots within Toronto, where they have been here for quite some time, unlike their East-African counterparts. As Matthew points out, this immigration experience has had an effect on their culture, where Caribbean families have had time to adjust to the way things work in Toronto, unlike East-African families. This puts an astronomical amount of stress on students, as high school in itself is already difficult considering the amount of change a teenager’s body goes through, both mentally and physically. This is then compounded with the fact that many East-African students are already dealing with changes and confusion regarding their own cultural identity.

Moundain and Lardoux agree with this and believe youth from immigrant families often have difficulties attempting to build their own identity in their current society, while still trying to maintain cultural values and beliefs that their families hold
sacred (Mondain & Lardoux, 2005, p.2). Brian agrees with this, but believes there is a way to balance both identities and still be successful. He believes that it is students with a strong cultural identity that are usually more successful because of the reverence they have towards their families. Brian goes on to say:

“[Culture] creates a sense of discipline and structure that guides a student to perform in a certain manner. Every culture is different, where you have many students from first generation families who place a much higher value on education than compared to students from Canadian born parents – at least this is what I’ve seen from my experiences. Coming from a first generation family myself, my parents were very strict on me when it came to education and that was because they never had the same opportunities that I had received. By not taking advantage of the education here it would’ve been an insult to my parents because they sacrificed so much for me”.

Brian’s family strongly believed in the pursuit of education and this became ingrained in their cultural beliefs. Brian’s respect for his parents’ beliefs caused him to adopt these similar values, which gave him the motivation and tools to succeed in school. The research supports this, as 92% of East-African students have parents who expect them to attend university once finishing high school (Census Portraits, 2011, p.4). So there is clearly a strong push from families of East-African youth to pursue post-secondary endeavours.

Although John does not believe that culture should affect student performance, but like Brian he does believe having a strong family foundation
definitely contributes to achieving overall success. John cites his own personal experience through the education system as an example of this, where he says that “[his] parents migrated here from Jamaica in hopes to raise a family and give their children the best life they could… [Becoming a teacher] would allow me to give back to my parents as well as create a family for myself”. In both instances we see the positive effect that having a strong family has had on achieving educational success.

Many East-African students have similar stories to Brian’s, where due to the value education was given in their cultural upbringing in Toronto they adopted similar values and placed a high value on education themselves. This research suggests that some East-African families have a stronger cultural identity than some Caribbean families and this is largely due to the fact that they immigrated here only a few decades ago and have few generational roots here as of yet. There may then be a difference in the way East-African students perform in comparison to Caribbean students in some cases. As time progresses though the strength of this identity will come into question as these youth come to adopt or incorporate values that are found within the social environments in which they live. John disagrees with this and believes that student performance is largely based on their engagement level. He feels as though if students are given meaningful and relevant materials they will succeed. Matthew and Brian do not necessarily disagree with John on this point. As stated earlier they strongly believe that student engagement is a precursor to success, but they feel you cannot ignore the role culture plays in student performance. They see a difference in the way that East-African and Caribbean students perform. The Census Portraits, which is a research study
conducted by the TDSB and compared the differences between East-African, Caribbean and West-African students, supports this idea (Census Portraits, 2011, p.6). According to this data East-African students are performing ten points higher than Caribbean students in reading and math and five points higher in writing (Census Portraits, 2011, p.6). Additionally, “fewer students of Caribbean background earn the expected number of credits (at least 15) by the end of Gr.10 putting them at greater risk of not graduating on time” (Census Portraits, 2011, p.6).

Brian’s views support this data and he elaborates on this by saying:

“There is a strong correlation between both groups’ struggles in the classroom, as their circumstances have allowed them to create a culture of disengagement that needs to be changed. Maybe 30+ years ago when East-Africans first started migrating to Canada performances would have been different, but I feel as though these different black communities have somewhat collided with one another and in many ways we have started to share common problems, with one of them being success in the classroom”.

Matthew agrees with Brian, but sheds some light as to why the performance levels between these two groups are slowly becoming levelled. He says:

“[There is a difference in student performance] but the gap is closing. East African students perform a bit better than Caribbean students – but as they construct their Black identities in Toronto their performance in school becomes closer to that of Caribbean Students. The main difference – I think, is historical experience (African vs African Diaspora), cultures and ethnic identities. These I think drive the difference of how they experience school,
Matthew attributes this closing gap to culture and historical experience, but in particular he highlights something very important and that is the fact that East-African youth are not only constructing their cultural identities, but also their black identities as well. When the term “black” is used to describe race it is encompassing of people who have roots in both East-Africa and the Caribbean. Their historical plights may be different, but when they come into a multicultural and diverse society like Toronto they often get clumped together and essentially are treated the same by greater society. This would then make sense as to why there is a conflict amongst East-African youth in constructing their cultural identities because their experiences and perspectives at home differ to how society and others treat and view them. The conflict that these students’ are experiencing with their cultural identity and the expectation to adopt their family’s cultural values – which includes the high value placed on education – this may be a factor explaining why the academic performance levels of some East-African youth is dropping, thus leading them to drop out. In order to ensure student success, educators need to be aware of these cultural differences and conflicts that affect their students and their ability to perform in the classroom. Teaching practices play a fundamental role in this and this will be the next topic of discussion in the following section.
Teaching Practices

The interviewees all came from similar backgrounds of either living in social housing communities or working within them for a long period of time. Brian and John had negative experiences within the educational systems and they wanted to use that as a catalyst to help shape and change future generations, especially students who grew up in circumstances similar to their own. Matthew had worked for several years with at-risk youth and he too joined the education field to make a difference in the lives of the youth that he worked with. Each of these interviewees have a passion for working with “at-risk” youth and a dedication to the communities they work in. This background is necessary to know because it informs their teaching practices. They don’t just teach because it is a task to complete, rather they have a vested interest in the each of the students they work with. As demonstrated throughout this entire chapter, all three interviewees believe that teaching practices are at the core of why these students are dropping out of high school. Teachers need to ensure that their classroom environments are welcoming of discussions that challenge student thinking and truly analyze the complexities of contemporary society. Matthew agrees with this and thinks teaching should be “complicated by looking at the intersectionalties of race, class, ethnicity and gender and how we define it to evolve it in Canada – from a Canadian perspective”. In particular, teaching needs to be relevant to the cultural and social needs of students today. Unfortunately, the curriculum fails to be culturally relevant to the East-African experience and therefore it leaves students feeling disconnected
to what they are learning. There has been a move to change this with the introduction of Africentric schooling and this will be discussed in the last section.

**Africentric Schooling**

The interviewees all agree that creating Africentric schools is a move towards the right direction, in regards to the TDSB attempting to create a curriculum that is culturally relevant to a population of students who are statistically performing at much lower levels than other students. John is a strong proponent of the Africentric schooling model, where he believes that it has the ability to affect real positive change in society. John believes that our current curriculum is unable to address the needs of students with African roots because of the problematic ways they are portrayed in greater society and the media. He argues the way to change this perception is by creating full stories that can be taught to students. He says:

“...The goal is to teach students full stories, [which is] more than just parts of the societal narrative. The Africentric School aims to show the full narrative that includes the realities of everyone in our society. It allows students to believe in themselves while being confident and comfortable in whom they truly are. It allows students to see role models who are similar to them, which then allows them to physically see the good they can become in our society. It affords students the opportunity to hear and see real lived examples of people like themselves who overcame the same obstacles they may be facing; there...
then is a lived roadmap to success that they can too travel along. It also allows students to have meaningful curriculum relevant to their lived experiences in creative ways”.

John believes that the Africentric school system provides a holistic learning environment that gives students a chance to see history through a lens that has otherwise not been provided. More importantly, it gives students real life examples of people who are successful and who have made important contributions who have come from similar roots and circumstances as they have. This idea is supported by many other educators and researchers, such as Dei who argues that it is important for today’s youth to resist attempts to forget about the past, but instead reclaim and affirm the positive contributions that African people have made to civilization (Dei & Kempf 2013, p.86).

Brian agrees with John in that Africentric schooling provides students with a framework that is reflective of their experiences, in which they can find good historical role models from which they can learn from. He expands on this by saying:

“There is a clear need to help black students in general because in comparison to students from other races, especially white students, their performance levels are quite low. Afrocentric schooling is basically a way to address this problem, where students are being taught a curriculum that is reflective of their personal and historical experiences. These students are not only being taught about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr., but rather other important black role models – that are not only American too. Not to say that
those two political figures are not important, but being taught about them
each year becomes redundant for students. They also begin to feel like there
aren’t many important black historical figures that they can look up to”.

Being able to relate to what is being taught, as well as having historical
figures that are relatable to students seems to be an important theme here. The
research supports this, as 78% of black students in the TDSB say that learning more
about their own culture and histories would make their learning experiences more
interesting (Census Portraits, 2011, p.5). Dei shares this belief as well, as he
attributes the inability of black youth to achieve academic success to the negative
differential treatment that the current education system reinforces (Dei, 2008).

Although Brian does believe that Africentric schooling is a good tool to use
to teach these youth, he stresses the need for it to be relevant. He argues that it
should be “culturally and politically relevant as opposed to just culturally relevant.
The entire curriculum needs to coincide with the cultural make-up of the schools
population”. This is a great point because as mentioned earlier, East-African
students often get clumped up with other students of African descent, even though
their historical experiences are completely different. The idea of teaching a
curriculum based on African history is good, but it needs to not make the same
mistakes of early attempts to teach about African history and recognize the intrinsic
differences there are within this continent.

Matthew agrees with this sentiment and his views on Africentric schooling
are more critical. He believes that on the one hand the Africentric school model is
still in its early stages and because of that it is too early to say wholeheartedly that
this approach would work. On the other hand he is hopeful about this approach and
argues this pedagogical framework could work, but that it needs to be “reconceptualized, redefined, described and critiqued to be highly effective”. As with Brian, he believes that in failing to do so, the curriculum runs the risk of ignoring the important differences there are between the different histories of black people. He eloquently puts this by saying:

“The greatest challenge I believe in not doing this would be that we would define East Africans through a West African, Caribbean, Afro-American, and Christian lens…The East African experience/s (gender, race, ethnicity, and class/royalty) and all of the intersectionalties are too often overlooked and or overshadowed. This must be taken into account and delivered through the pedagogical framework or we will be giving up essential parts of the African /Black/Afri-Canadian Story. As well the East African learners will not be given the opportunity to properly make and bring meaning to their “Canadian-ness”. So yes I believe that East African youth would benefit from this [learning experience], but it would be more beneficial if the pedagogical framework is culturally relevant and responsive to their African Canadian experience”

Matthew brings attention to key issues that need to be incorporated into the current Africentric schooling model. All three interviewees believe that the Africentric schooling approach can work, but Brian and Matthew point to the importance of ensuring that this framework is inclusive of all respective histories. Africentric schools are a good way to start by ensuring that students, in particular East-African students are being taught by a curriculum that is relevant to them. The fundamental point here is that this curriculum needs to be culturally relevant to the students its
being taught too. Hopefully once these histories are completely incorporated into the Africentric framework; it will be used as a tool to reduce high school dropout rates amongst East-African youth.

**Conclusion**

The information this study had gathered has been incredibly informative in illustrating the complexities there are within the issue of high school dropout rates within the East-African community. As this study has demonstrated, there are several factors that contribute to East-African students’ failure to stay in school. These factors have been grouped into five main themes, which are systemic educational issues, social inequalities and environment, cultural identity and familial ties, teaching practices and Africentric schooling.

When discussing systemic educational issues the prominent issue was student engagement and this was negatively affected by poor academic performance and an outdated curriculum. The research and interviewees alike agree that there is a positive correlation between student disengagement levels, academic performance and the student’s inability to relate to the current curriculum.

There was a general consensus that a student’s social environment and the social inequalities that a student faces have a strong influence on educational success. Negative peer pressure and a poor perception of reality are consequences that students experience when being exposed to these environments. Having access to meaningful opportunities were cited as plausible solution to this problem.
Not all interviewees agreed on the influence that culture has on a student’s education, but the research supported those who did agree with its influence. The research and the interviews both highlighted the conflict that many families experience when immigrating to a different country and the negative effect this may have on students who are struggling to construct their own identities. There was an overall agreement on the role family plays in academic success, where a strong familial system helps to strengthen a student’s educational journey.

In regards to teaching practices, the interviewees came from similar upbringings and this has helped to shape their perspectives on education. They all share a passion to help at-risk students succeed and this helps us to understand why they strongly believe in the power of strong teaching practices.

There was mixed opinions when it came to the effectiveness of Africentric schooling, where the issue that some interviewees had was the cultural relevance of this framework. The research supports the idea of Africentric schooling and so do the interviewees, as long as it tells the whole story of the Afri-Canadian/Caribbean experience.

These factors present a starting point from which educators and parents can start from to solve this issue. It is through a holistic collaboration that involves educators, administration and parents that future East-African students can begin to overcome these factors and deter away from dropping out of school.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

**Introduction**

This research has sought to determine why East-African youth are dropping out of high school. The process has been both extensive and informative. Trying to understand this issue was a difficult process as there is not that much literature that speaks to this specific topic. The data obtained through this research has definitely shed light on this salient issue, but more importantly it has created a platform from which educators can begin to eventually resolve this problem. This chapter uses the findings from the research to discuss further implications and recommendations emerging from this work.

**Implications for Teachers**

The data from this study is incredibly important in that it highlighted student disengagement as a major factor of why students are dropping out of school. Initially when I started this study I thought that most of the reasoning behind this issue would be found in areas relating to socio-economic problems and cultural influences. When the issue of student disengagement kept coming up, I was surprised that that issue had not previously crossed my mind. I was looking for “deep” answers, but one of the main contributing factors to this problem was the most obvious one. Students need to be excited or at least somewhat intrigued by what they are learning because that is what gives them the motivation to want to move forward. It’s common knowledge that school is important, but at an age when life struggles are not really tangible it becomes easy to underestimate the value that obtaining an education can have. The responsibility of
keeping students interested is then placed on teachers. Teachers need to ensure that the material they are teaching is not only relevant, but also interesting.

As a future teacher, this will definitely change the way I teach because I find that new teachers are often so focused on teaching the content that they forget about their pedagogical delivery. I feel like I have almost undermined the importance of student engagement and this might be because I have not yet seen the connection between engagement levels and poor attendance and the long-term consequences this relationship might yield. With that being said, I have seen the effects of student disengagement on report cards and on the overall classroom environment, which are definitely precursors for poor attendance as students get older. During my practicum I taught a kindergarten class about measurement and the lesson itself was fun, but the students were mentally not there because they did not get to go outside for the entire day due to the weather. I could tell that their attention was elsewhere as none of them were facing me. Instead of continuing with the lesson I stopped and did a physical activity with them for the remaining lesson time and finished the lesson the next day. Being able to adapt and change what you are teaching on the spot is incredibly important because sometimes—for whatever reason—it’s just not working. There is no point in continuing on if your students are disengaged. The information I gathered from this study helped reinforce this point for me.

Another important implication of this study is that it demonstrated the need to incorporate different histories and narratives when teaching students. The Ontario curriculum essentially ignores the different histories and cultures of the students it teaches and this is hugely problematic because, often only one narrative is being told. Teachers need to make an effort to go beyond the classroom boundaries and incorporate
these different teachings into their lessons. Until this study, I did not realize how limited the curriculum was in regards to cultural diversity and how this may affect student engagement levels. Not many teachers share this commitment to incorporating these voices into their teaching practices and this is unfortunate, but this makes me realize how important it is for my own teaching to ensure that I have these perspectives included.

Implications/Recommendations for the Educational Community

There are many things that the educational community can learn from this study. First and foremost, teachers need to understand that student disengagement has a direct effect on long-term educational success. Teachers need to ensure that their lessons are engaging and also that their students are truly understanding what they are learning. Students can often become disinterested in what they are learning if they don’t understand it. This reminds me of the old English proverb that states “you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink”. Teachers have a difficult job, where they have to teach the same content to students who have differentiated needs. This means creating lessons that are not only knowledge-based, but interactive and fun too. Too often we associate teaching with seriousness, which creates a classroom foundation based on obedience and strict attentiveness. Instead of trying to force each student to model an unrealistic standard of what the ideal student should be like teachers should embrace these differences and use them to their advantage. In order to keep students engaged and ultimately in school, teachers need to create lessons that reflect the growing needs of their students and learn to embrace change – it is through change that students and teachers alike grow. It is up to teachers at the primary level to ensure no student becomes invisible
or just passes along. Early recognition of skill areas that require additional help is essential for a student’s long term success.

Secondly, teachers and the administration need to make more of an effort to recognize the cultural diversity of their student population. What students learn should be culturally relevant to some degree because this allows them to connect to what they are learning. Administrators should attempt to have more workshops and training done for teachers, as their cultural sensitivity skills can always be improved. Teachers need to recognize the cultural diversity that exists in their classroom and make attempts to understand it because these factors may be affecting the way a student is performing. Ultimately, students should feel as though their histories are celebrated and not repressed. Teachers shouldn’t be afraid to take risks and explore terrain that has not been explored before, specifically with this community. By doing this, students can engage in meaningful discussions and improve their overall learning experience.

Thirdly, teachers should try and make opportunities available to their students as much as possible, especially with those students who come from poor socio-economic backgrounds. These opportunities could range from suggesting extra-curricular activities to just a simple check-in each day, the point is that these positive gestures could be all that it takes to help these students rise above their negative circumstances and ultimately stay in school. By teachers going the extra mile to help students it strengthens their student-teacher relationship. As demonstrated in chapter four, strong student-teacher relationships have the potential of deterring students from dropping out.

Lastly, teachers need to be understanding of the different plights of the parents with whom they deal. Often students whose parents migrated here have completely different customs in their native lands and this can sometimes cause parents to experience
a ‘cultural shock’ when coming here. Teachers need to be aware of this and understand that this cultural shock can affect student performance and behaviours in the classroom. Teachers should be prepared to make the necessary modifications and accommodations to ensure that these students can succeed in the classroom.

**Further Study**

This study attempts to shed light on an issue that was previously barely discussed. As with any study, I was able to answer many of my previous questions, but also I found myself asking new questions as I continued to gather my data including:

1. As time progresses, will achievement levels of East-African youth continue to decrease?
2. Once East-African families have established generational roots in Canada, will their achievement levels be worse or better?
3. Do students with families who have generational roots in Canada share the same familial admiration as those students whose families immigrated here? What role does culture play in this?

These questions could possibly lead me to conduct other studies, such as:

1. Comparing the student performance levels over a ten year period between Africentric schools and regular schools
2. Studying the effect that settlement experiences of East-African families has had on students
3. Doing a cross-analysis between families who have generational roots vs. those who do not and seeing the differences there is regarding their values, cultural customs etc. I would then use this information to see what effect this has on their education.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Consent Letter

Date: _______________________

Dear _______________________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching student. I am studying the issue of high school dropout rates of males within the East-African community for the purposes of a master’s research paper and my research advisor is ___________________. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide tremendous insights into this topic.

The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 30 minute interview that will be audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you, outside of school time.

The contents of this interview will be used for my final research project, which will include a, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline
to answer any specific question. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher Name: ______________________

Phone Number, Email: __________________

Instructor’s Name: ______________________

Phone Number: ________________________

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by _____________ and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: __________________________________________

Name: (printed) ____________________________________

Date: ______________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

6. What is your position?
7. How many years of experience do you have in the field of education?
8. Why did you become a teacher?
9. What are the main racial background(s) of the students that you deal with?
10. Do you see a difference in the way Afro-Caribbean and East-African students perform in the classroom?
11. What do you think are the reasons behind students dropping out of high school?
12. Do you think their social environment has anything to do with it?
13. How important do you think familial influence is to students these days?
14. Do you think a student’s particular culture has any influence on how they perform in the classroom? Why or why not?
15. Which racial group do you think experiences the most trouble in the classroom?
16. What do you think are the reasons behind this?
17. How do you think we can address this problem?
18. Do you think Afrocentric schooling can help address this problem?