Toward a Multi-Centric Approach to Education in Toronto

By

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Abstract

Toronto is one of the most diversely populated cities in Canada. The Ontario Ministry of Education and the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) have been working to respond to community demands for schools to meet their needs with various iterations of equity frameworks for over thirty years. Current TDSB statistics reporting the relative academic success and student experience of school broken down by ethno-racial identity indicate that there is much work to be done to ‘level the playing field’.

This research study focused on learning from multicultural, anti-racist, Afrocentric (also referred to as Africentric and African-centred), and culturally relevant pedagogies as well as the insights of current educators toward theorizing multi-centric approaches to education in Toronto. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with three elementary school teachers currently working in TDSB schools. Findings suggest that teachers’ work to centre students’ identities in their teaching yields positive academic and social benefits and is best supported through a school-wide, integrated approach. The implications of these findings suggest that more needs to be done to support prospective and current teachers in adopting centricity-based approaches into their teaching philosophy and practice and that more effective school-wide approaches must be found and supported by the Ministry of Education and School Board.

Key Words: Centricity, Multicultural Education, Anti-Racist Education, Afrocentric Education, Africentric Education, African-Centred Education, Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Multi-centric Education
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“It is in and through education that a culture and polity not only tries to perpetuate but enacts the kinds of thinking it welcomes, [and] discards and/or discredits the kind it fears.”

(Minnick, 1990, p.11-12 in Battiste, 1998)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Canadian schools, and particularly those in metropolitan areas such as Toronto, must find meaningful ways to respond to the cultural diversity of their student populations. In the 2011-2012 TDSB Student and Parent Census (Yau et. al, 2011), it was reported that 71% of TDSB students identify with ethno-racial backgrounds that are non-White. The reality is that Toronto, and Canada more generally, are societies that are becoming increasingly diverse. Since the 1971 adoption of a policy of multiculturalism, Canada has continuously moved in the direction of a legal framework that calls on us to address the reality of our multicultural society with the spirit of accepting and encouraging diversity rather than assimilation. Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau put it well when he stated, “National unity, if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one’s own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions” (Trudeau, 1971).

Despite the seemingly pro-diversity spirit of our legal framework, arguably the conditions on the ground reflect that there is serious work yet to be done in cultivating a society that truly values the flourishing of diverse cultural identities (James, 1995; Dei and Kempf, 2013).

Moreover, it must be understood that to have a truly equitable society, with respect to diversity
and otherwise, historical and current systems of oppression and privilege must be challenged and accounted for. As one of the largest and most influential public institutions, the public school system must be a leader in this regard. At present, the data shows that this is not happening.

According to the TDSB census profiles (based on data from 2006), in almost every area measured (school climate, relationship with school adults, class participation and relationship with other students, self-perceived abilities, and academic achievement) students who identified with ethno-racial groups other than White reported a less positive experience than the TDSB average and/or are in fact less successful. The 2010 report “Decolonizing Our Schools: Aboriginal Education in the TDSB,” by York University professor Susan Dion, Krista Johnson, and Carla Rice, for example, underscores the immense failings of the public education system to meet the needs of its Aboriginal students. The data shows clear links between cultural identity and a feeling of disconnection from school curriculum content, educational methods, and social climate (Dion et. al, 2010). The report also elucidated the extent that racialized students, in particular Black students, have higher drop-out rates than their White peers. Such findings suggest that the school system is structured to disproportionately meet the needs of White students compared with any other cultural group. More grimly, though equally accurate, it is clear that the school system is failing to meet the needs of its racialized students so that they too can achieve success.

Finding ways to strengthen and privilege the relationship between cultural identity and students’ experience of schooling is essential for numerous reasons. Firstly, it is important to recognize that students spend the bulk of their time in school and that what happens there significantly impacts the development of their own self-concepts (Asante, 1991). Students’
developments of their senses of self-worth, identity, and visions for their futures are constantly being shaped by their experiences at school, their interactions with peers, teachers, and administration, as well as the “truths” they encounter in the curriculum material (Asante, 1991; Battiste, 1998; Dei and Kempf, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b).

Secondly, the ability to see oneself reflected in the curriculum is important for promoting engagement and preventing disengagement (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). When students feel that the material is relevant to them, it becomes worth knowing and more compelling to explore (Freire, 1993).

A publicly funded school system is one of the main tools of the state for creating social cohesion (Asante, 1991; Fullan, 2003). It is therefore imperative that schools have a clear mandate with respect to the goals they are striving to achieve regarding social dynamics. Schools, like greater society, face the challenge of balancing the cultivation of social cohesion with allowing space for social difference or even conflict (Rodriguez-Garcia, 2010). Following the logic of Trudeau’s vision, schools ought to be a place where individuals can cultivate their ability to participate in a multicultural society by having their own strong cultural identity. Schools ought to be places where students enact the Canadian vision of a multicultural society, not where they wait to be released into it regardless of their preparation, or lack thereof.

Despite a policy framework that emphasizes equity and diversity in Ontario education, and the important work being done to move in a more positive and inclusive direction, we aren’t there yet (James, 1995). The current landscape of traditional public schools is one in which diverse student bodies continue to be responded to either without nearly enough intentionality or in well-meaning but ultimately harmful ways (James, 1995). Often when culture is intentionally
focused on, it is often done in shallow or tokenizing ways which can result in the reinforcement of stereotypes, rather than more accurate and therefore complex inter-cultural interactions (James, 1995; Lund, 2012).

The dominant Canadian culture, that which relates to White European narratives, is privileged in schools, as it is in society at large, by being given a status of neutrality (Dei, 1996; Dei and Kempf, 2013; Solomon, 1996). When schools have celebrations of culture, it is never in reference to White European culture because that is happening every day, all the time. When schools celebrate culture, they celebrate other cultures, but often the “other” is actually conceptualized as the “Other” (i.e. foreign, exotic, strange) and the “Other” is frequently presented with a single story (James, 1995). Borrowing from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, we can understand that the danger of the single story is that it creates stereotypes and, “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete” (Adichie, 2009). The ways in which culture, cultural identity and difference are negotiated in schools impact students of all cultural groups, regardless of whether their identities are being discussed positively or negatively, because is through this negotiation that they are taught about others and how to think about others (Asante, 1991; Giroux, 1997).

In Toronto and elsewhere, there are alternative approaches being taken in both public and private schools to respond to the negotiation of cultural identity in schools. There are some schools that are intentionally placing cultural identity at the heart of their school philosophy; choosing to centre students’ identities in the overall culture and curriculum delivery of the school. Although public centric schools in Toronto, namely the Toronto Africentric School and the First Nations School of Toronto, are technically open to students of any background,
ultimately it is students who identify with the identity being ‘centered’ that attend these schools. Centric-school models and, more generally, the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy to any degree in any setting strives to bridge the gap between students’ personal identities (including cultural, racial, ethnic, class, religious, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions) and experiences outside of school with their experiences at school. Students who, for whatever reason, do not have a relevant centric-school model available to them are left to fend for themselves in, ultimately, Eurocentric schools implementing equity frameworks to various degrees.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

Through my research, I sought to learn from the philosophical and theoretical frameworks of multicultural-, anti-racist-, Afrocentric- (also referred to as Africentric- and African-centred-), and culturally relevant pedagogy and put them into conversation with the experiences of Toronto public school teachers who are committed to centering identity in their teaching philosophy and practices. It is my hope that through this research, more can be learned about how to best meet the needs of our diverse student population, and, in particular, how we may be able to expand the role of centricity in Toronto schools.
1.2 Research Questions

The central question guiding this research was:

What do a small sample of elementary public school teachers perceive to be the benefits, challenges, and limitations of centering cultural identity in their teaching philosophy and instructional practice?

Subsidiary questions included:

- How do the teachers view the role of cultural identity in education?
- What do the teachers know about, and how do they perceive, centric-school models?
- How can the perspectives of the teachers be used to inform a continued conceptualization of a multi-centric approach to education in Toronto?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

My interest in this research area comes out of several personal assumptions that are important to clarify. Firstly, I believe that a multicultural society in which distinct cultures have the opportunity to be strong, vibrant, and continuously developing is positive. I view interactions between cultures, both on the level of the individual and collective, as vehicles of potential opportunity more so than potential threat. I do not believe that vibrant multiculturalism is the undoing of social cohesion. I believe that access to one’s culture and the opportunity to enrich and express it is fundamental to the human experience and I therefore oppose policies of assimilation. I similarly oppose policies which promote systematic segregation in all spheres of
I believe that Canada has much work to be done to achieve a truly equitable and inclusive multicultural society.

I also bring with me into this study the assumption that there are connections between a strong cultural identity and academic success, self-esteem, and a sense of place in the world. I see all of these factors as integral to students’ general success and resiliency. I therefore believe that schools have a duty to ensure that their plans for engendering these qualities in their students take into account cultural identity.

Finally, my interest in this research is intimately tied to a vision I have for a public school system which provides students with greater access to alternatives which centre their identities. In particular, I am interested in a multi-centric school model in which students would aim to balance the benefits of –centric schooling and “heterogeneous” schooling models. Students would spend time in both “heterogeneous” and “homogenous” cultural groups, giving them the opportunity to both enrich their own cultural identity with others like them, and to enact inter-cultural sharing within the school. (It should be noted that every cultural group, regardless of how it is defined, will still be in many ways heterogeneous. The use of the terms “heterogeneous” and “homogeneous” here my best attempt to distinguish between schools which actively centre one identity versus numerous identities.) I see this research as an opportunity for me to learn more about the philosophical underpinnings of various models for placing cultural identity at the centre of school settings. Furthermore, I see it as an opportunity to learn about the best practices of teachers working within these frameworks in different environments as well as the opportunities, challenges and limitations that they face. Learning about this will be of great help to me as I continue to envision different models for schooling in Toronto.
I also feel that it is important to situate myself with respect to my various social and cultural identities. I am Jewish, white-skinned, from an upper-middle class family, able-bodied, cis-gendered female, feminist, heterosexual, environmentalist, and someone who generally views the world through lenses which borrow heavily from critical theory and critical pedagogy. I see myself as an educator and a life-long learner.

I have a strong background in informal education in Jewish communities with a specific focus on Jewish identity building. Through my experiences growing up participating in and then taking leadership roles in Jewish educational spaces, I have come to greatly appreciate those spaces. Through those experiences I was able to build a positive sense of self that places my cultural identity at the centre of my life and overall identity in ways that I find enriching and empowering.

My personal experiences in schools have also given me insight into the importance of cultural identity in those settings. I attended public schools from kindergarten through high school and then continued my education with an undergraduate degree in Diaspora and Transnational Studies, with minors in Philosophy and Anthropology, at the University of Toronto. Although I was generally successful academically, I did not always feel that school was “for me”. I was Jewish and education in my early years was clearly for White Christian students. I always felt safe and welcomed, I had friends, and I more or less enjoyed the content, but I knew it didn’t relate to me, wasn’t about me, and wasn’t for me. Canadian history did not reflect my family’s stories. On my mother’s side, during World War Two my family narrative was one of concentration camps, suffering, and loss. Anything before that was about living in a shtetl, eating a lot of potatoes, and a general fear of anti-Semitism. On my father’s side, the stories were of a
tight knit small Jewish community in Saint John, New Brunswick which was partially so tight
knit because of pervasive anti-Semitism from the dominant majority community. Our stories
were certainly not about pioneers, English-French relations, the railroad or settling the west. At
“holiday” assemblies, I was distinctly aware that they were actually Christmas Assemblies with a
cursory “Dreidel Dreidel” song thrown in. Throughout my school years I felt comfortably
removed from these cultural experiences. Although for me, the lack of personal connection was
not particularly harmful, my recognition of my own separation allows me to relate to the
experiences of other students who may feel even more alienated than I did.

1.4 Overview of this study

In order to answer these research questions I conducted a qualitative research study
which borrowed theoretical and methodological elements from phenomenology, grounded
theory, and case study research approaches. I interviewed three teachers who intentionally centre
their students’ identities in their teaching. Interview participants were found mainly through
personal connections of classmates and friends and were selected for based on the
recommendations of others who had a clear sense of my research interests. By integrating
research and data from the interviews, I was able to create a clearer picture of how and why
teachers are centering students’ identities within a Torontonian context and how we may be able
to further support this important work in the future in a variety of ways.

In chapter 2 I review the literature in the areas of educational approaches which centre
student identity and raise critiques of normative Eurocentric schooling models. I also present the
“official” Canadian context through a review of key government documents. In chapter 3 I
expand the discussion of the research design. In chapter 4 I report my research findings, and in chapter 5 I discuss these findings in relation to the literature and their implications for my own teaching practice and revisit my vision for multi-centric approaches to education in Toronto.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Canadian Context

In order to approach the topic of how and why some teachers and schools are choosing to put cultural identity at the heart of their philosophies, it is important to understand the Canadian context within which this is happening. This context must be understood as both a product of the reality of a diverse society and the historical development of government policies with respect to that diversity.

2.0.1 Demography

According to Statistics Canada’s latest quarterly demographics report (July-September, 2013), “net international migration accounted for more than two-thirds (69.2%) of the country’s population growth in the third quarter of 2013” (Statistics Canada, 2013). At the provincial level, in Ontario, the pattern was the same with the provincial population increase mainly a result of international migration. Of the recorded net international immigration of 95,130 people who immigrated to Canada in the third quarter of 2013, over a third of them (approximately 33,000) immigrated to Ontario (ibid).

Due to low birth rates and high immigration, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver where immigrants tend to settle, there is a rapid increase in the proportion of citizens who were born outside of Canada, whose mother tongues are neither English nor French, and who belong to visible minority groups (Statistics Canada Projections in the Diversity of the Canadian Population 2006-2031, 2010). Specifically, Statistics Canada projects that by 2031, close to half the population over the age of 15 will be foreign-born or have
at least one foreign-born parent (ibid). The reality of the population growth patterns indicates that we can expect to see an ongoing increase in the diversity of the Canadian, Ontarian, and particularly Torontonian student populations.

In its 2011-2012 student census, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) reports that, with respect to ethno-racial identity, its student population breaks down as follows:

- White – 28%
- South Asian – 22%
- East Asian – 17%
- Mixed – 7%
- Middle East – 6%
- Southeast Asian – 6%
- Latin American – 2%
- Aboriginal – 0.4%

This breakdown highlights that the proportion of TDSB students whose ethnic background is (self-) identified as White is slightly more than a quarter (and decreased from 32% in 2006), which is particularly important to keep in mind when examining the predominantly White/Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogies at play in the majority of TDSB schools. Furthermore, it should be noted that while these numbers paint the picture of a diverse student body, this breakdown is not evenly distributed across TDSB schools. Rather, communities of the same ethnic background are concentrated in different areas of the city and altogether unrepresented in others (Yau, et.al, 2011). A detailed analysis of the intersections between ethno-racial identity and economic status is beyond the scope of this research study. However, because economic status is also likely to impact school experience, it is worth noting that there is
significant overlap between the geographic distribution of minoritized communities and poverty (Yau, et. al, 2011).

2.0.2 Government Policy: Immigration and Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism as official Canadian governmental policy is an important backdrop of analysing its expression in schools and school policies. However, understanding this policy (and the lived experiences of non-white Canadians) must be contextualized in a basic understanding of Canadian immigration policy and aboriginal-settler relations as they have developed over time.

Until the 1970’s immigration to Canada was primarily from Europe, and until the 1900’s even more narrowly from Britain and France. During the earlier years of post-contact Canada, discriminatory immigration policies such as the Chinese head tax and outright ban on Chinese immigrants between 1923 and 1947 kept Canada’s non-indigenous population primarily European, Christian, and White (Peters, 2015). Only after revisions to the Immigration Act 1967 did visible minorities begin to arrive in Canada in significant numbers (Brown, 2008).

It was in this context, of recently revised but as yet mainly unrealized immigration policy that, in 1971, the Canadian federal government, led by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau announced the adoption of a policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework. Trudeau’s speech framed the adoption of the policy as deeper than a simple acknowledgement of the diverse demographics of Canadian society. Rather, it expressed a values-based position that all Canadian citizens and society as a whole would benefit from the safeguarding and flourishing of diverse cultures and the interactions between them. He addressed the relationship between
national unity and personal ethnic identity stating, “The government will support and encourage the various cultures and ethnic groups that give structure and vitality to our society. They will be encouraged to share their cultural expression and values with other Canadians and so contribute to a richer life for us all” (Trudeau, 1971).

The initial announcement was accompanied by an approach based on four key points; that the government would “support all of Canada’s cultures and will seek to assist, resources permitting, the development of those cultural groups which have demonstrated a desire and effort to continue to develop, a capacity to grow and contribute to Canada, as well as a clear need for assistance” (Trudeau, 1971); assist members of cultural groups to overcome cultural barriers to full participation in Canadian society; promote creative encounters and interchange among Canadian cultural groups in the interest of national unity; and assist immigrants to acquire at least one of the official languages in order to become full participants in Canadian society (Trudeau, 1971).

The implementation of this policy was partially framed as a response to the development of a mass society in which mass communications and technology and the globalized culture they spawn were eroding individual identity and threatening to alienate individuals from themselves and others (Trudeau, 1971). The strengthening of ethnic identity and communities was seen as a valuable tool for confronting this reality. The key points highlighted previously, can be interpreted both as valuing the maintenance of cultural identities and wanting immigrants to be empowered to successfully navigate the mainstream, or, more critically, as a nice sounding way of describing surface level commitments to diversity and undercurrents of assimilationist mentality.
In 1988, the Canadian Multiculturalism policy was put into law in the form of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act under Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. Beyond guaranteeing equal rights and protection under the law regardless of background, the Act is based on several principles regarding the rights of Canadians to the freedom to practice their cultures and the freedom from discrimination. The final “whereas” statement which explains the rationale of the Act states:

“AND WHEREAS the Government of Canada recognizes the diversity of Canadians as regards race national or ethnic origin, colour and religion as a fundamental characteristic of Canadian society and is committed to a policy of multiculturalism designed to preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians in the economic, social, cultural, and political life of Canada.”

The Act goes on to state that it is the policy of the government to “…acknowledge[s] the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance, and share their cultural heritage.” (Canadian Multiculturalism Act, 1988) As well as to “promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation.” (ibid) Thus both the Act and policy before it claim to not only guarantee minorities’ rights to keep their cultures but to continue developing them as part of the ongoing development of Canadian culture.

2.0.3 Educational Policy

As long as governmental policies regarding multiculturalism have been in place there have been statements, initiatives, and policies aimed at manifesting these policies in the realm of
education. Heritage language programs, multicultural clubs, and, later, race relations committees are all part of this legacy (James, 1995). In 1993 The Ontario Ministry of Education published a document entitled “Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation”. Four years later, the TDSB Equity Foundation Statement which acknowledges that “certain groups in our society are treated inequitably because of individual and systemic biases related to race, colour, culture, ethnicity, linguistic origin, disability, socio-economic class, age, ancestry, nationality, place of origin, religion, faith, sex, gender, sexual orientation and marital status. Similar biases have also impacted on Canada’s Aboriginal population” This statement was put into place and continues to be the guiding document for the board today (TDSB Equity Foundation Statement, 1999). The statement further acknowledges that “such biases exist within our school system” (ibid) and goes on to acknowledge that these biases can result in negative impacts on student success. The document states the Board’s commitment to “ensure that fairness, equity, and inclusion are essential principles of our school system and integrated into all our policies, programs, operations and practices” (ibid). Finally, the statement outlines eight mechanisms through and by which it will ensure equity including: curriculum; equal opportunities for success; hiring practices and equitable representation among staff at every level; valuing contributions of parents and community groups; systems for recourse when inequities arise; financial and human resources to support equity initiatives; and procedures to continuously revisit and improve practices when needed (ibid).

As illustrated by this brief look at the Multiculturalism Act and TDSB Equity Statement, on paper, Canada is well on its way to being an inclusive, vibrant, multicultural society in which
individuals and groups have opportunities for ongoing cultural practice and development, and in which barriers that exist on the basis of culture are seen as problematic and a wrong to be righted. However, as the research show us, the reality is that the lived reality of many students and Canadians more broadly, is far from this ideal (Agyepong, 2010; Battiste, 1998; Brown, 2012; Carr and Klassen, 1996; Dei and Kempf, 2013; Lund, 2010; Rice, 2014).

2.1 The Problem Defined

Despite the theoretical context of multiculturalism and inclusivity promoted in Canadian civil society and public institutions, schools continue to be overwhelmingly bastions of Eurocentric cultural norms and narratives. As such, students whose own cultures differ tend to experience greater disconnection and face greater barriers to academic and social success at school (Asante, 1991; Banks, 2008; Dei, 1996; Egbo, 2009; Rice, 2014). Dropout rates and instances of academic failure are disproportionately higher for students from minoritized groups, and specifically of Black and Aboriginal descent (Brown, 2012; Dei and Kempf, 2013; Dion et al, 2010; Thompson and Wallner, 2012). Out of recognition of, and in response to, this longstanding and inequitable status quo, a wide body of theory and policy recommendations has been and continues to be developed.

2.2 Theoretical Responses

2.2.1 Introduction

In response to the landscape of educational systems which fail to support the success of their minoritized students (See New Perspectives on African-Centered Education in Canada by Dei and Kempf (2013) for an explanation of this term and reasons for using it), a growing body
of literature and theory has evolved, primarily in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in Canada. Theorists and researchers have developed approaches including, but not limited to, multicultural education, antiracist education, culturally relevant pedagogy, Afrocentric education (also referred to as Africentric and African-Centered), and critical multicultural education. Other related theories beyond the scope of this study include anti-colonial and indigenous education, social-justice education, and more generally pedagogies of equity and anti-oppression.

Although these theoretical approaches and philosophies are all responding to the same general phenomenon, each have their own analysis of the causes (why the problems exist), what a resolution would involve and mean (what do we want instead), and consequently, what are appropriate strategies to implement toward success (how do we get there). Nevertheless, despite their differences, all of these frameworks have a commonality in that they advocate for educational approaches which (to varying degrees and in varying ways) centre students’ identities in their educational experiences (Carr and Klassen, 1996; Duarte and Smith, 2000; James, 1995; Lund, 2012; Ogbu, 1992). In other words, they all seek to bridge the gap between students’ home cultures and out of school experiences with their experiences in and of school. Within the context of this research study, this notion will be referred to as “centricity”.

Proponent of Afrocentric education Molefi Kete Asante defines centricity as “a perspective that involves locating students within the context of their own cultural references so that they can relate socially and psychologically to other cultural perspectives…a concept that can be applied to any culture” (Asante, 1991, p.171).

Ultimately differentiating between each of these theoretical approaches is often an impossible task (James, 1995; Lund, 2012). Different theoretical camps contain within them
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those with “softer” and “harder” stances. When criticisms of one theory are raised there are those who break off to create a new one, but also those who seek to improve the framework from within. Together these voices form an interconnected, responsive, and ongoing conversation that can be challenging to follow. One cause of confusion pointed out by Lund (2012) is that it is important, but often difficult, to account for the contextual differences between the United States and Canada. In Canada the context of the conversation is one of a government policy of multiculturalism – which is very different from the U.S. Moreover, many of the minoritized groups in Canada and the U.S. have different origins, reasons for having immigrated, and experiences within dominant society. Consequently, the needs of these various communities for centricity will differ and must be understood within their own community context rather than seeking to find one catch-all solution (Ogbu, 1992).

Despite the confusion, there are several key ideas overlapping between different theoretical approaches that will form the theoretical grounding of this study and they are discussed below.

2.2.2 Balancing Needs

Proponents of educational approaches rooted in centricity suggest that there is a dual need for educators to cultivate both cultural competency in students’ home cultures and in mainstream culture Delpit (1988) discusses the notion of “the culture of power”, suggesting that there are specific linguistic, communicative, and presentation codes that are part of an overall culture of power. She argues that students whose community cultures are outside the culture of power must be explicitly taught the codes of the culture of power in order to be able to be
successful within it. She argues that while validating students’ cultures and identities is critical, ultimately there are gatekeeping points (i.e. getting accepted to university, gaining employment, etc.) at which they will need cultural capital in the culture of power – if they are not prepared for these gatekeeping points, they simply will not pass through them (Delpit, 1988).

Any centricity based educational approach must affirm and validate student identities through both the taught and hidden curricula of the school (James (1995), Gay (2010), Banks (2008), Egbo (2009), Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b)). All students must be given the opportunity to see themselves as actors, not merely those acted upon in the narratives taught at school (Asante, 1991). The school environment and culture which implicitly suggest which values or standards are deemed “acceptable” must include and reflect the cultures of the students (Dei, 1996). Additionally, hiring practices should be considered because by having culturally relevant role models among teaching staff, students of minoritized groups’ ability to connect with school, and their future aspirations can be profoundly impacted (Banks, 2008; Dei, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995b).

2.2.3 Naming Oppression

A common criticism of “softer” multicultural education is that it focuses on representation and the reduction of prejudice by learning about and to appreciate cultural differences but that it fails to adequately name and challenge the status quo of structural power dynamics and oppression (Carr and Klassen, 1996; James, 1995; Ogbu, 1992; Lund, 2012). The current trends in the academic discourse suggest that explicitly naming oppression where it exists, including within the school itself, is a necessary pre-requisite to empowering students
toward challenging the status quo (Asante, 1991; Banks, 2008; Dei, 1996; Dei and Kempf, 2013; Delpit, 1988; James, 2005). Education is, in this sense, seen as having the potential to be transformative – but only if issues of power, privilege and oppression are explicitly discussed (Asante, 1991; Dei, 1996).

2.2.4 Understanding Who Benefits

The question of who would benefit from centricity in education is often asked, particularly in response to Afrocentric education. Critics assert that it is solely Black students who would benefit and consequently argue against it on the grounds that it privileges some students over others. While it may be true that students of minoritized backgrounds would see the biggest gains in terms of academic improvement at school, this must be understood in context; that currently the system, with its Eurocentric orientation, benefits one group – White students of European descent - over all others. If plurality and multiculturalism are truly understood as social goods, then it should be understood that all students will benefit by having access to a wider range of rich histories, cultures, and perspectives. Leading proponents of Afrocentricity, Asante and Dei argue that Afrocentricity should be seen as a basis for multicultural or multi-centric education (Asante, 1991; Dei, 1996). The aim of centricity as it is discussed in Afrocentric education and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is not to replace one hegemonic discourse with another but rather open up a plurality of perspectives toward a more inclusive educational environment and culture (Dei, 1996; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995).
2.2.5 Addressing Whiteness

Following from the notion that all people can benefit from a move away from Eurocentric education and the creation of space for the centricity of other identities and perspectives, it is also important to think about how to include and even centre the identities of White students of European descent within this plurality. Giroux (1997) argues that White students must be actively taught about White privilege and the oppression of others. Moreover, he contends that they must be taught to rearticulate their identities as White people, ultimately suggesting that teachers should be actively teaching White students how to be allies in the struggles of oppressed groups (Giroux, 1997).

In order to really shift the status quo, much self-reflection and acknowledging of power and privilege will need to be done by members of the culture of power; in other words, White people will need to do some thinking and changing (Solomon, 1996; Delpit, 1988). Delpit suggests that ultimately it will be those who come from the culture of power that need to learn to listen to the voices of those from outside it, and that structural level change will need to come from the top down (Delpit, 1988). If we accept that for change to occur both those with power and those without it must have the tools and desire to seek change, then, negotiating Whiteness at all levels of education is a critical aspect of altering the status quo.

2.3 Implementation: Toronto Alternative Schools

In Toronto and Ontario more generally, there are several examples of schools, beyond faith-based schools beyond the private Jewish Day School System and publically funded Catholic School system which are designed to meet the specific needs of certain cultural groups.
The TDSB is host to a number of alternative schools at both the Elementary and Secondary levels, three of which are of particular relevance to this study in that they have cultural centricity built into their foundations.

2.3.1 Africentric Alternative School

After decades of community organizing, heated public debate, and immense controversy, the Toronto Africentric Alternative Elementary School was established in 2009 (Dei and Kempf, 2013). Proponents of the school sought to create a school environment which could address the high dropout rate of Black students which, at an average of 40%, is approximately ten percent higher than the average (Thompson and Wallner, 2012). Despite opposition to the school on the grounds that it was overly reminiscent of segregation and antithetical to Canadian values of multiculturalism and inclusion, the school was finally given the go-ahead (Thompson and Wallner, 2012). The school is open to any student who wishes to attend regardless of their identity. The school aims to cultivate, academic achievement, self-pride, and motivation to succeed (TDSB website).

2.3.2 First Nations School

Schools have a long history as the sites of violence and cultural genocide for First Nations communities (Battiste, 1998). In 1977, an alternative school called the Wandering Spirit Survival School, now known as the First Nations School of Toronto was opened (TDSB website). The school aims to “empower future leaders with a strong cultural identity to be contributing members in a global society” (TDSB website).
The school is focused on culturally relevant content and ways of learning for First Nations students and appears to be successful. Lucas, a student of the First Nations School of Toronto said “This school makes me proud of who I am and is more focused on my culture. I’m more comfortable here” (Brown, 2012).

Similarly, a student at the Urban Aboriginal Alternate High School located in Ottawa commented “…since I came to this school, I finally had people to share my experiences with, and people I could talk in my own language with” (Rice, 2014). The Urban Aboriginal Alternate High School jointly funded by the Ontario Federations of Indian Friendship Centres and the Ottawa Carlton District School Board (Rice, 2014). The school was originally opened in 2004 at the Odawa Native Friendship Centre and has grown from less than ten students to approximately thirty-five per year. Two years ago the school had its largest graduating class of ten students. The school was founded to address the ongoing challenges faced by Aboriginal students in achieving success within mainstream schools.

Aboriginal communities face unique barriers to education including under resourced schools on Reserves, students needing to leave their communities to pursue higher education, and other structural barriers. Those same communities also face the reality that the school curriculum, ways of knowing and learning, and demographics of students and teachers do not reflect their own cultural identity or narratives (Battiste, 1998). A report by the non-profit organization People For Education in 2013 showed that 51 percent of elementary schools and 41 percent of secondary schools in Ontario offer no Aboriginal education opportunities (Rice, 2014). The Urban Aboriginal School is based on an educational model focused on Aboriginal culture and maintaining the flexibility to help students and meet them where they are at. The
school community is an opportunity to be around other Aboriginal youth and adults which allows students to have their own identities understood, shared, and valued rather than be met with confusion or devaluation.

### 2.3.3 Triangle Program

Toronto is also home to the Triangle Program which is a part of the Oasis Alternative Secondary School. The Triangle Program is a full time TDSB program for LGBTQ teens which offers “academic and applied curriculum that addresses the interests, concerns, literature, science and history of the lesbigay and transgender communities wherever possible” (Triangle Program website).

### 2.4 Conclusion

George Sefa Dei said “what we need is a “multi-centric” approach to curricular knowledge…a “multi-centric” education can create spaces in the classroom for all participants” (Dei, 1996, p.177). To achieve this vision of a multi-centric educational landscape in Toronto will require the hard work of many community members, educators, and policy-makers. It is hard work worth doing; the needs are high and urgent and will only become all the more so.

This chapter attempted to set the stage for meaningful interpretation of the research findings by providing key background information in the areas of Canadian national policy, local educational policies, the challenges which need to be solved, key issues found in the literature, and some current examples of how some Toronto alternative schools are already implementing concepts of centricity within their school philosophies. The process of researching these different
areas was at times challenging and disheartening. It was also encouraging to learn about the hard work already being done to respond to the needs of marginalized communities in Toronto and to see that a path forward is slowly but surely being carved out by community leaders, educators, and researchers. The task of balancing the ideas of a multicultural society that is pluralistic and values diversity with the lived experiences of oppression faced by many Canadians is not simple. Creative solutions which target the specific needs of specific communities must be found, implemented, and supported. At the same time, we must find ways to bring different communities together and actively teach our youth how to live together in more meaningful and liberating ways.

In the following chapters of this study, the insights of current TDSB teachers who are implementing a focus on cultural identity in their pedagogy and teaching practice will be shared and analysed in the hopes of contributing to the much needed project of incorporating multi-centric approaches to education in Toronto.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Nature of Research

It should first be stated openly that the nature of this study is that it falls within the realm of discovery, not justification; that is to say it aims to learn more toward the cultivation of a theory rather than to prove or disprove a specific and stated hypothesis (Ashworth, 2000). This qualitative research study does not fall neatly into one category or approach to qualitative research. Rather, it borrows elements of phenomenology, grounded theory, and case study approaches. The study is based on a literature review and face-to-face interviews with three educators. The focus of this study is to determine the perceptions of a small number of teachers with respect to the benefits, challenges, and limitations of centering students’ identities in their educational philosophies and approaches. In this regard, the focus is somewhat similar to a case study in which multiple cases are investigated and analyzed; in this study, the perceptions of the teachers are the “cases” being examined (Creswell, 2013). At the same time, this research seeks to understand the essence of cultural identity focused education from the perspective of educators working in that field and in that sense borrows from the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013). Finally, because the backdrop of this research study is the desire to further theorize in the realm of multi-centric approaches to education, this study in some ways reflects a grounded theory approach (Khan, 2014).

The unit of analysis found in this research study is the data collected from individual interviews conducted with educators in the relevant field. In this respect, the study again borrows from phenomenological, grounded theory, and case study approaches. All research participants have a shared experience insofar as they are all currently teaching in public elementary schools.
in the TDSB. With respect to modes of data collection, the interview process utilized is common to all three approaches previously mentioned.

The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using a coding process which allowed common themes to emerge. The interview transcripts were analyzed as separate units as well as in relation to one another. Findings have been reported both as an analysis of the individual cases studied as well as in relation to one another and in conversation with the existing literature; allowing some theoretical insights to be drawn.

3.1 Research Process

This research study began with an initial review of the literature, mainly focusing on multicultural education and Afrocentric education. Later, further research was done in the areas of anti-racist education and culturally relevant pedagogy. Minor research of the literature on anti-colonial and Indigenous education was done. The literature review found in Chapter 2 seeks to offer a picture in broad strokes of the Canadian context in which centricity as a premise and focus of education is, or could be, happening.

I held face-to-face semi-structured interviews with three educators. Initially the framing of these research was intended to include a comparative aspect; comparing the perspectives of educators working within centric school models such as the Toronto Africentric School and the First Nations School of Toronto with those of educators implementing culturally relevant pedagogy within “regular” schools. However, finding “regular” schools with an explicitly stated focus on cultural identity that went beyond the TDSB equity statement proved challenging. Ultimately, I re-focused my research to focus on the perspectives of educators whose personal
teaching philosophy and practice is focused around centering students’ cultural identity regardless of the type of school they are currently working in. In the end, this reframing proved to be quite significant in that it allowed me to learn more about the perceived role of school-wide support in supporting teachers’ efforts.

Each interview was set up in advance and at the convenience of the participants. All interviews were conducted at the schools at which the teacher’s work outside of school hours at the request of the participants. Each interview was held separately and lasted between thirty and ninety minutes. The interview protocol included twenty questions, which were not shared prior to the interviews in order to ensure that answers were not overly curated (See Appendix A for interview protocol). Each interview took its own path and while most questions were covered, the path of the conversation was very different with each participant. The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and notes were taken by the researcher as well. Consent letters were e-mailed in advance and explained and signed in person at the interview prior to beginning the interview.

3.2 Participant Selection

My initial goal was to have participants selected on the basis of working within, or having previous experience working within, schools which place an intentional focus on the cultural identity of their students as part of the school’s philosophy, pedagogy and/or structure. Selected participants would have a minimum of three years of experience working in such environments and self-identify (verbally or by taking on leadership roles) that they have actively chosen to work in such environments and identified with the school’s pedagogical framework so
that I would be sure to be speaking with people familiar with and actually embodying the philosophy in their practice.

What ultimately happened was that potential research participants were initially identified through colleagues at and outside of OISE who were familiar with my research interests. A description of the study and participant criteria was sent to potential participants – so in some sense the teachers who ultimately participated in the study were self-selecting (See Appendix B for the invitation letter that was sent to prospective participants). Notably, two of these teachers are not regular classroom teachers but work specifically in English Language Learning (ELL) programs.

3.2.1 Background of the participants

**Derrick** was in the middle of his first year at his current school. He had taught primary grades throughout his career, primarily Grade 1 as both a classroom teacher and as a Reading Recovery teacher. He had also taught Physical Education and Health from Kindergarten through Grade 6. Derrick had been a teacher at three different schools, including the Toronto Africentric School and had aspirations of becoming an administrator within the TDSB. Derrick self-identified as African Canadian.

**Nasreen** had been teaching at her current TDSB school for the past twelve years. Originally from Bangladesh, Nasreen immigrated to Canada twenty years ago. As an observant Muslim fluent in Bengali, Nasreen’s cultural identity was reflective of the majority of students at her current school, which is populated by a majority of recent immigrants from Pakistan and
Bangladesh who also identify as Muslim. Nasreen was teaching full time in the English Language Learning (ELL) program.

**Zahraa** had been teaching at her current TDSB school for nineteen years. At the time of the interview, she was teaching in an English Language Learning (ELL) program for newcomer students in Grade 1. The school had a majority Muslim population of newcomer students from Grade 1 to Grade 5 with a high frequency of turnover as students relocated to other areas of the city and new ones arrived to the country and neighborhood. Zahraa self-identified as a visible Muslim and spoke several languages including English, Urdu, and Arabic.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

After the interviews were completed they were transcribed by the researcher with the aid of a program called Inqscribe which allows the recordings to be played at a slower rate. The transcripts were sent to the interviewees to be checked for accuracy. Each transcript was then coded separately and a list of codes was generated. Codes were then re-grouped, combined and discarded to create a new code list. A second round of coding with the new list was then done. Next, themes were identified and then each transcript was re-analyzed for evidence to support each theme. Reorganization of the data continued throughout the writing process to arrive at what can now be found in the findings reported in Chapter 4.

### 3.4 Ethical Review Procedure

This research was conducted under the OISE MT Program Ethical Review. This protocol stipulates that only educators will be interviewed for the purpose of this research and that all participants will sign a consent form prior to participating in the study which will be securely
stored by the researcher (see Appendix B for consent form). The confidentiality of all research participants was maintained throughout the study and participants are referred to only by pseudonyms which were assigned by the researcher. All participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any point. None of the participants were remunerated for their participation, however, they did experience the benefits of a space for reflection on their own experiences and practices as educators. Transcripts were shared with participants following the interviews to be checked for accuracy and to give participants the opportunity to strike any comments from the official transcripts. All data, including audio files, was stored securely by the researcher on a password protected computer.

3.5 Limitations of the Research Design

As a result of the inherently limited scope of this research study, there are numerous limitations. With respect to the theoretical framing of this study, it is quite possible that key ideas and perspectives were not looked at with as much depth as would be ideal, and that others were completely overlooked in the literature review. In particular, this study, which seeks to push forward research in the Canadian context, fails to adequately include the specific history, context, and literature regarding First Nations and anti-colonial education. Future studies, or extensions of this one, should ensure the inclusion of these perspectives.

Methodologically, two out of three participants happened to be educators in ELL programs in schools whose populations are majority new immigrants while one participant worked with a generally more established community. These aspects of the participants’ contexts were not intentional nor were they adequately taken up within the findings or discussion as they
were not the intended focus of the study. Future studies, or extensions of this one, should seek to learn more about the different natures and needs of different minoritized communities in Toronto rather than grouping them together as this study did.

Given the nature of the ethical review procedure, only educators were able to be interviewed for this research and the nature of the research methodology itself was pre-determined to be qualitative. The research questions were therefore geared toward uncovering the educators’ perspectives on the general research topic of cultural-identity based education. The conclusions of this research and the questions it has raised could be further explored in studies which also seek to uncover the perspectives and experiences of students, parents and other community members. The findings reported in chapter 4 and recommendations for further study suggested in chapter 5 could be investigated using both qualitative and quantitative research methods in the future to reinforce the findings of this study and to continue building the body of research in this field done within a Canadian, and specifically Torontonian, context.

3.6 Strengths of the Research Design

By its very nature qualitative research allows for a deep and meaningful engagement with the stories, experiences, and perspectives of research participants (Creswell, 2013). The findings of this research reflect the perspectives of educators who are in the field today addressing the challenges that this type of educational approach brings up and who are constantly finding new strategies to meet those challenges, and gaining new perspectives on what works and what doesn’t as they observe their students. While limited to the perspective of three educators, this research allows a window into a variety of approaches to implementing centricity in education.
which can provide a springboard for further thought and research on the subject. It allows the researchers and the readers to see both similarities and differences between the three participants’ perspectives. Finally, it allows important questions to surface which can be further explored by other research initiatives in the future.

Finally, this research offered a positive experience to the participants in that it gave them an opportunity to both reflect on their own practice and experiences as well as contribute to the field of research. Giving voice within the research literature to the lived experiences of the educators who are shaping this work in practical reality is the core strength of this study.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I report the research findings derived from three interviews that I conducted with teachers currently working in Toronto District School Board (TDSB) schools. All three interviews were conducted mid-school year, two prior to the winter break and one shortly after. In using the data from the interviews to help answer my overall inquiry into how and to what ends teachers are centering their students’ cultural identities in their teaching philosophies and instructional practices, I have organized the research findings into four overarching themes (and several sub-themes); 1) Participants found “cultural identity” to be a problematic term, 2) Participants reported benefits in academic, social, individual and community growth as a result of centering students’ identities in their educational approaches, 3) The teachers emphasized the need and motivation to teach inclusion explicitly and implicitly, and 4) The teachers emphasized the importance of a school-wide and multi-faceted approach to centering students’ identities. It is worth noting that there is a high degree of overlap between the various themes and sub-themes and that ideas were often intertwined when expressed.

4.1 Participants found “cultural identity” to be a problematic term

In different ways, all three participants expressed some hesitation in using and defining the term cultural identity. Although culture and cultural identity are terms found within the literature used in this study, participants found these terms limiting both in the sense of talking about their pedagogy and instructional practice, as well as when talking about their own sense of personal identity.
When asked to describe his own cultural identity, Derrick, for example, commented: “...I more identity myself as a strong, open-minded individual that’s always evolving, always reflecting, always learning and making mistakes...but if we had to box myself into an identity so to speak, I would definitely consider myself African Canadian.” Moreover, Derrick raised a sense of tension between how one self-identifies versus externally imposed labels, commenting: “irrespective to what society norms as to what your culture is and how you identify with it, many people view themselves differently from what others may think. So it’s [cultural identity] how the individual identifies themselves and how they express their experiences.” This sense of wanting to define identity quite broadly and to ensure an emphasis is placed on self-identification was shared across all three participants. Zahraa, for example, explained that when she thinks about cultural identity she thinks about it as broadly as possible, commenting: “...it’s what makes us who we are...it could be our cultures, our names, our faiths, our home countries, our...genders, sexual orientations, social-economic [status]...”

Nasreen didn’t offer a focused response when asked directly to define cultural identity. However, throughout our conversation, as did Derrick and Zahraa, she expressed, at various points in our conversation, that factors such as religion, country of origin or descent, ethnicity, race, and language were all meaningful components of identity that she tried to address in her teaching.

4.2 Participants reported benefits in academic, social, individual and community growth as a result of centering students’ identities in their educational approaches

All three participants identified a range of academic and social benefits resulting from centering students’ identities in their educational experiences at school. These included increased
opportunities for student voice, meaningful access to curriculum and increased academic engagement and success, developing pride, self-worth and cultural competency, and broadening or altering students’ future aspirations. In order to realize these benefits, they all prioritized a student-centred approach to teaching and learning. I will begin by reporting their perspectives on this approach and why it matters.

### 4.2.1 Student-centred approach as a foundation for centricity

A major commonality between the three teachers interviewed was their student-centred approach to learning and teaching. They spoke at length about the need to base their instructional practice on the students they have in their class each year. When discussing her plans for the year, for example, Nasreen explained that each year she has students write a dual language book. While the process remains consistent, the content each year was contingent on the cultural-linguistic identities of students in her class. In her words: “Every year the kids are different, their focus is different”. Similarly, Derrick expressed that a fundamental component of his teaching practice was being responsive to the identities, interests and experiences of the students in front of him. In his words: “I assess and I reflect on who is in front of me. And I [take] the time to get to know my students. Not just their backgrounds and stuff but their passions, their likes and dislikes. And that is how I try to tailor my programming”. Zahraa continuously emphasized the need to begin instruction with the particular students’ prior knowledge, “start[ing] with the familiar and then move on”. It was evident through the interviews that for these three educators, the students themselves, who they are and their experiences, was the starting point for successful classroom learning.
4.2.2 Student Agency and Voice

A common theme across the interviews was that the promotion of student agency and voice is both a necessary basis for, and benefit of, cultural-identity based approaches to teaching. On the one hand, teachers described a desire to encourage student agency and voice and on the other, they described seeing an increase in student agency and voice as a benefit of their practice; in a sense describing a positive feedback loop between their efforts and benefits for students.

With respect to promotion of student agency and voice as a base, Derrick captured this shared perspective well when he described what grounds his educational work,

For me, what roots and grounds me is how can I, what's the best way that I can help my students that I am responsible for or that are my class...how can I help them grow? Like, academically, socially, emotionally...How can I help them to see themself and take ownership of their learning and want to be in charge of their learning?

Similar to Derrick, Nasreen talked about enabling student agency by posting her long-range plans in the classroom; the notion of transparency was essential to her approach. Nasreen, Derrick, and Zahraa all discussed implementing some kind of sharing practice, whether it was called a unity circle, community circle, or without name, whereby students could voice their perspectives, experiences, questions, and interests. Nasreen, for example, shared that “…every day we start with [talking] about their personal [experiences], if they want to share something. But I respect that if they don’t want to share or they must share with only or not with the group, that’s okay…” The teachers also stressed the significance of providing opportunities for students to share their experiences and thoughts – whether they be successes or challenges - with other students, (including in their home languages), and with them as their teacher. These types of
practices were described as serving a dual purpose of both building the classroom community and creating opportunities to include and validate students’ voices, experiences, and identities.

Increased student agency and voice as a benefit yielded by centering students’ identities in the classroom is closely related to academic engagement which is discussed in the following section.

4.2.3 Increased Engagement and Academic and Social and Success

All three participants spoke about the need for and benefits of using students’ identities and experiences as the starting point for meaningful engagement with the curriculum. Zahraa shared: “As teachers we always say start with what they know, dig what their prior knowledge is and then move over… when we bring in things that they are familiar with we are starting with their prior knowledge.” In the context of working with majority Muslim students, Zahraa shared the example of looking at Islamic art to teach patterning and tessellation. She also elucidated the barriers to academic success and engagement when one does not root instruction in students’ realm of experience in describing the scenario of having to cover a Gr.1 social studies unit about the changing seasons with students who had recently arrived in Canada. She explained: “if you’re sharing things that they can’t connect to, you know, reading stories about maybe skiing….ask[ing] them “so what kind of clothes would you wear in winter?”, “What kind of activities would you do?” they don’t know. And yes, you can use pictures and hands-on videos and whatever, but unless you’ve ever really experienced it, it’s hard to make that connection.” She reinforced that students do have meaningful experiences in their own contexts that they can
draw on and that can be used to hook them into a lesson and scaffold their learning, in this case their own experiences of seasonal changes in their home countries.

Derrick specifically reported observing positive changes and growth in the students at the Toronto Africentric School both academically and socially over the course of each year. This observation was shared by both Zahraa and Nasreen in relation to their teaching practices which also centred students’ identities in their educational experiences. Nasreen described an increase in her students’ EQAO results, specifically in reading, writing and critical thinking. Zahraa shared a more general observation: “when you bring in the things that the children are familiar with from their backgrounds then they really want to learn and they show you that they’re capable of learning.” Both Nasreen and Zahraa cited expressions of this such as greater interest in producing and sharing work in their first languages and more confidence to share ideas with peers and teachers.

The participants also spoke about the need to explicitly foster pride in one’s culture and, in the case of Nasreen and Zarhaa who both work primarily with newcomer students in ELL programs, the need to explicitly talk about the benefits of, and to promote pride in multilingualism and the retention of first languages. Nasreen commented that she has seen a shift over time both in academia and in parents’ views away from a rejection of first languages toward an understanding and an appreciation for retaining them as well as students showing greater interest in maintaining their first languages as they grew older.
4.2.4 Future Aspirations

A major reported impact on students was changes to students’ expressed future aspirations. All three teachers commented that their students often have limited and sometimes negative outlooks on what is within the realm of possible futures they might access. While many newcomer students’ parents are well educated and had highly respected and well-paying jobs in their home countries, often they struggle to find work, or skilled work in their fields, in Canada. With these careers as their only examples, many students’ future aspirations stay within the realm of cab-driver, store-clerk, etc. Derrick also noted that the racialized community he works with is subject to a host of negative stereotypes which are often internalized, and then realized, by young people in the community.

The teachers reported that by focusing on and validating students’ identities and experiences, students have started to “see themselves as authors, readers, as mathematicians, as scientists” (Derrick). Nasreen specifically shared that in her community students’ primary career aspirations were to become doctors and engineers but that through her work, now they are also interested in becoming authors.

4.3 The teachers emphasized the need and motivation to teach inclusion explicitly and implicitly

A central theme consistently emphasized by all three participants was the need to both model (and in that sense teach implicitly) and explicitly teach students to be inclusive and value diversity. They spoke passionately about the need to not only create opportunities for students to see themselves reflected in the goings-on of the classroom but to learn about others; to show “the full story...[otherwise] if we are isolating and cutting out the rest of the story we’re doing the
same thing that the European model, or whatever the other model that we’re trying to get away from, did.” (Dexter) They described explicitly talking to students about embracing differences, reminding them to “be proud of your identity at the same time you learn about new things” or talking to them about respecting others: “it doesn’t matter if you like it or don’t agree with the person, but you respect. Because in order to get respect for your identity you have to respect the other”.

All three teachers work in schools which, although the majority of students are not from the majority white culture, do have a racial, ethnic, or religious majority within the school. They spoke about the need and responsibility as teachers to “give them that exposure that they’re lacking, if they’re lacking it. Find ways to show and model different types of narratives or different perspectives and get them to challenge their perspectives that they have, critically”.

4.3.1 Support for and hesitation regarding centric-school model

The teachers’ value of inclusivity and diversity was expressed when sharing perspectives on centric-school models. The conversations mainly centered on the Toronto Africentric School which was the example all three teachers were most familiar with. There was a common understanding that centric schools have a lot to offer communities currently being underserved by the education system because they “offer an environment where they [the students] can see themselves and they can see a future for themselves…and [the school can] catch them before they’re gone…” because they allow educators to “cater to their [the students’] experience and knowledge…”.
Derrick, who has personal experience teaching at the Toronto Africentric School expressed steadfast support for the school and explicitly discussed the misconceptions of the school as only for Black kids and only teaching Black history. Zahraa and Nasreen who do not have personal experience with the school or others like it expressed simultaneous support and hesitation; sharing for example that in an ideal world [in their opinion] we wouldn’t need centric schools because all schools would be places where “everyone is celebrated and everyone is welcome”. She also commented that she believes that as a whole system there needs to be a stronger push toward an inclusive system. Similarly Nasreen shared that she feels that it might be important right now but that she worries about students, including her own, being underexposed to people with diverse backgrounds and therefore unprepared when they eventually encounter them in the workforce.

4.4 The teachers emphasized the importance of a school-wide and multi-faceted approach to centering students’ identities

All three participants indicated that they feel their work is most meaningful and successful when it is part of a school-wide approach. Participants spoke about the importance of having a supportive administration and strong leadership vision which incorporates a value for focusing on students’ identities and experiences within the school as a whole. Both Nasreen and Derrick (while at the Africentric School) felt that they were part of a whole school approach with a clear leadership vision. Conversely, Zahraa felt that at this time, likely due to the high demand placed on a small administrative staff serving a population of 1700 students with a high turnover rate, her school lacks a school-wide approach in this regard. Examples shared by Zahraa of the manifestation of a school-wide approach she would like to see included having multi-lingual signage in the school, hallway bulletin boards which focus not only on mainstream celebrations
but those of the student population as well, and having school-wide opportunities to honour the culture of the students whether over the announcements or during assemblies. Across all three interviews aspects of a school-wide and multifaceted approach that were raised included the identity of staff members and access to role models, support in the form of resources, technology and professional development, collaboration with other staff members, and connections with the parent and wider community. These sub-themes will be discussed below.

4.4.1 Hiring Practices and Access to Role Models

All three teachers interviewed identified serving as a role model as an important element of the work that they do. For Derrick, giving back to young people where he grew up and being able to play a role similar to that which the teachers that really impacted his life is the reason he got into teaching, “I knew I liked helping people and I saw them do that and it’s something that I wanted to do. It inspired me and I want to inspire other people that are in areas or communities that may be lacking positive models, role models and inspiration. So I moved here. I knew I went here too and that played a part.” Similarly, Zahraa shared: “because of my own personal history, my travel history, and then my parents and my feeling [sandwiched] negotiating those cultural and other identities do impact who I am and why I teach”.

The absence of role models was cited as a problem students of non-majority culture or non-White European descent experience to various degrees. Nasreen talked about how oftentimes after a family immigrates to Canada if the parents can’t find work, the fathers will return to the home country in order to provide for the family. She also commented that the traditional family roles are upset once the family arrives in Canada. All three participants talked
about an absence of teachers “who represent our students as far as their skin colour, language, religion” and stated that the majority of teachers are from the majority White Christian culture while the students are not. In Derrick’s case, until he and two others joined his new school’s staff this year there were no Black male teachers at the school. Zahraa commented that although there are few teachers who represent the students they do “have quite a few EA’s, we have volunteers and lunchroom supervisors who are [representative of students], but you know, the students don’t often see positions of responsibility given to staff who represent them”. Nasreen shared that other than herself and two other teachers, the rest of the staff are “from the mainstream”.

The consequences of this lack of role models in authority figures at school and, frequently at home, was described by Derrick,

There were no Black male teachers here before…Every recess that I'm on yard duty I have a trail of students that are following me. It’s so bizarre to me. They want to spend their recess with me. My students and students that are not even in my class. Boys and girls. That kind of signalled something to me. Because they gravitate to it. They’ve been missing having role models in their lives…It’s not a facade, there's a lot of students in this school that there's no male role models for them or positive male role models. So when they’re seeing it they gravitate toward it. I think being here and just being myself and being comfortable being myself, just that alone it helps others to know that you can be yourself and not have to feel like you need to be anything more than just who you are.

Zahraa also commented on the consequences of this phenomenon with respect to developing future aspirations, sharing that in her own life, when she was deciding what career to pick, she didn’t initially see herself as a potential teacher “because I had not seen a woman in a hijab in front of a classroom. I never thought that was possible.” She shared that even after 19 years in the school, because visibly Muslim women are most commonly in the role of lunchroom supervisors or parent volunteers at school she still
has students asking her if she is a lunchroom supervisor or “whose mum are you?” when she is on duty.

The teachers expressed the importance of students seeing teachers “like them” in leadership roles, for example leading whole school assemblies at the Africentric School. Both Nasreen and Zahraa expressed in depth understanding of the experiences of their newcomer students and their families because of their own experiences as immigrants. They talked about sharing their own stories with their students and their families as a way of building their confidence that they too will adjust and can be successful.

4.4.2 Support for teachers efforts; resources, technology, and professional development opportunities

When discussing supports and barriers to the participants’ work, access to resources such as time, professional development, technology, and relevant texts for students emerged as a shared theme.

Access to diverse texts which portray a diversity of people, identities, cultures, perspectives, and languages was seen as a key component of the participants’ work. Nasreen commented on the importance of resources which “reflect their culture and their experience” in order to help students connect and create meaning. These texts are also important for validating students’ identities. For example, when Nasreen does a unit about fables she can invite in parents to tell or read stories from their own cultures which reinforces for students that “they have wonderful fables in their own culture…” Both Nasreen and Zahraa commented on the challenge of texts which are outside of students’ experience, for example, “they might talk about baseball
or touchdown and things like that...those books were more like for a Canadian born”, particularly when these texts are used for assessment purposes.

At the same time, although dual language books and texts portraying others “like” the students are an important bridge to learning, all three teachers spoke about the need to show a wide diversity of people and cultures within texts so that students are exposed to as many different perspectives as possible and taught to value and respect other cultures just as much as they are taught to value and respect their own.

All three participants mentioned using technology in their classroom as something which supports their work. In Derrick’s current school he has access to a SMARTboard in his classroom and he has found that “incorporating that has changed my ability to expose them to so many things and to get them to be involved in their learning in meaningful ways”. Nasreen has also found that her students have become very engaged with her i-movie dual language movie and text projects. With her younger students she is using bitstrip.com because it is more visually oriented. She is also using Edmodo to communicate with parents and looking forward to experimenting with online polling to get parent input about what would be a meaningful community projects for her students to take on. Nasreen is currently using her own Mac computer in her classroom but the principal has committed to buying one for the school so that the students can “use it freer…create the movie and that sort of thing”.

Both Nasreen and Derrick spoke about meaningful professional development opportunities as something they feel does and would further support their work. Nasreen’s work with dual language texts and movies came out of professional development workshops she
attended and she has found this to have really positively impacted her students’ experience.

Derrick spoke about the need for “meaningful PD that helps me come away with things that I can come and do with the students that would be innovative and help them be owners of their learning and their quest on the educational journey”. At the same time, he shared that often times PD sessions he has attended have turned out to be unengaging university style lectures that he doesn’t feel model the type of engagement he needs to do with his students. All three participants spoke about the need to continue developing themselves as educators and the need to be reflective about one’s own teaching practice.

4.4.3 Collaboration with and attitudes of other staff

In addition to talking about the opportunity to be positive role models for students with shared identities, a common theme across the interviews was the idea that all teachers, not only those who represent the culture of the students, have opportunities to serve as positive role models for students with respect to validating student identity by modeling positive attitudes in that regard. Zahraa spoke about other teachers at her school who “really go out of their way to bring in representatives from the community. Who try and bring in examples into the curriculum to show that there are different role models and things can be looked at from different perspectives.” Nasreen spoke about the importance of teachers sharing their own experiences and identities because “it makes it real for the students”. She shared that their former principal, who was Jewish, would teach about Channukah to the students, parents or the ambassadors club at the school during the holiday. She also talked about an interaction with a Christian colleague who asked her what she thought about the idea of her bringing in a Christmas tree. Nasreen
encouraged the teacher to bring in the tree and talk about Christmas with the kids so they could “ask her questions and she’ll talk about it personally”.

The teachers also described a feeling of isolation, particularly Nasreen and Zahraa who work with students outside of their homeroom classes. Nasreen spoke about the desire to collaborate more with other teachers, particularly the homeroom teachers, but felt that time and busy-ness was a serious barrier to doing so. At the same time she reported a sense of being part of a team that supports students in their learning and mentioned team meetings that take place to update students IEPs as a meaningful opportunity to work with others to support her students.

As a new staff member at his current school Derrick did not feel able to comment on the degree to which his philosophy was shared across the staff or school, however, he did say that he does “not see or feel any opposition to my teaching or my philosophy. I feel comfortable, I feel welcome…I think that I am supported and that anything I would want to try and do to better the students I’ll get the support.”

With respect to his experiences at the Toronto Africentric School he shared that a lot of energy was put into building the school community and into reflecting the identities of the students in communal spaces. One prominent example was a daily (and later bi-weekly) morning assembly led by different staff members each day. The assemblies would include the singing of O Canada and the Black national anthem as well as a daily affirmation. The affirmations were “essentially a quote…from a prominent person in the African community. Could be African Canadian, African American, or anywhere” they would reflect on the affirmation and it would be the guiding affirmation for the week. He expressed a sense that this positive growth came out of
the strong communal aspect of the school and the fact that students were supported by all teachers whether or not they were directly responsible for their day to day instruction.

They saw that their teachers really cared about them. They saw that it wasn't one teacher in isolation as their teacher they saw it as a community of teachers. And they knew that you know it doesn’t matter which teacher is in the hallway or which teacher whose class I’m in, every teacher is my teacher. And the communal focus really helped to get students to see themselves as a part of a bigger society.

Overall, all three teachers expressed a sense that their work has a greater impact when their educational approach is shared by other members of the staff and when the students feel that they are part of a united community dedicated to them and their success.

4.4.4 Connection with parent community

All three participants spoke about the importance of understanding the context of the families their students come from. On the one hand, this context awareness is used to inform teaching practices and to support students who may be caught in the middle between different attitudes promoted at home and at school. On the other hand, the teachers spoke about the need for a strong and positive relationship with the parents in order to work as a team to support the students.

They spoke about the need to understand the varying attitudes that parents may have toward school and that how they see their role in regard to their child/ren’s education is culturally specific and often different from the expectations of the school. Both Zahraa and Nasreen spoke about the fact that many of their students come from countries where “school is the role of the teacher and home is the role of the family”, so when parents don’t show up to parent-teacher interviews or curriculum nights it could be because “they’re feeling intimidated,
they don’t have the language”, or because they simply don’t understand it is an expectation of them as parents in Canada yet. They also spoke about the many other barriers parents may be facing such as having been uprooted because of war at home, lack of familiarity with the new environment, massive alterations to traditional family, social, and gender roles, lack of employment, balancing multiple jobs, childcare needs, language barriers, and depression. Both Nasreen and Zahraa’s schools have settlement workers that work out of the school and Nasreen’s school in particular has very vibrant ambassadors program and a range of programs for newcomer parents to integrate them into the school community and provide much-needed support for them. Nasreen also commented that she works with the parents a lot to ensure that they understand the importance of keeping up the child’s first language and that they see themselves as capable of supporting their child’s learning by supporting them in their first language.

On the other hand, Derrick, who works with a less transient, more established community, faced a different challenge when it comes to engagement with parents. He commented that “a lot of the parents of these children, their experiences as students in the TDSB or in whatever boards, a lot of them don’t have positive experiences. So if they didn’t have positive experiences and they’re raising their children, they’re not really gonna be open right off the bat to interacting with teachers.” He spoke about the need to work hard to get the parent community involved and working as a team with the teachers because “if we’re working in isolation, we’re not gonna get the best gains”. The Toronto Africentric School, therefore had a lot of community events, often on Saturdays, where the whole school body including teachers,
parents, and students would come to school for various discussions, guest speakers, unit circles, class meetings, etc.

4.5 Conclusion

Notably, although all three participants were working in very different schools environments with respect to their communities’ predominant identities, strengths and challenges, as well as the level of support and shared vision from administration and other staff members, there were high degrees of overlap in their analyses, practices, and reflections. The findings presented here will be further discussed and their significance elucidated in the following chapter as they are put into conversation with the existing literature.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.0 Introduction

My research was designed to learn from teachers who are currently working in TDSB schools and who are intentionally centering their students’ identities and experiences in their educational philosophies and instructional practices. The findings from this study serve to reinforce the case being made by many other researchers that our school system needs to change so that all of our students can experience success within it (Asante, 1991; Carr and Klassen, 1996; Dei, 1996; Dei and Kempf, 2013; Delpit, 1988; Solomon, 1996; James, 1995; Ogbu, 1992).

In this chapter I discuss the research findings and their significance in the context of the literature I reviewed in Chapter 2. In connecting these teachers’ insights with the body of existent literature, I am able to connect theory and current practice to create a clearer image of what is happening, what needs to be happening, and how to move forward. I put my interview findings into conversation with the literature to draw out the trends and nuances regarding how teachers and researchers understand the connections between student identity and student success and consequently how these understandings inform their practice and work. Next, I articulate recommendations for policy and practice in the broader educational system. I also recommend areas for further research based on my findings as well as consider the implications of this study on my own self-understanding and reflexive positioning as a researcher and future classroom teacher. Finally, I will also re-evaluate my own visions for a multi-centric school based on the learnings gained from this study.
5.1 Discussion

In the following discussion the voices of my participants take their place within the current academic discourse. The nature of the discourse itself will be examined, as will be the notions of growth, teaching about and for diversity, and the need for community wide and multi-faceted approaches.

5.1.1 Who’s Saying What? And What Do They Mean?

A review of the literature and analysis of the data from my interviews reveal one thing with great clarity: when it comes to vocabulary, there is no clarity. There is some consensus that multicultural education is focused on creating more tolerance by sensitizing students to other cultures through the focus on similarities via positive representations of diversity (Carr and Klassen, 1996) and pride in cultural heritage which is understood to build self-image (James, 1995). Multicultural education is said to see “cross-cultural interactions and cultural sharing…as practices that will lead to integration and acculturation of immigrants and minorities, and ultimately success in society” (James, 1995, p.32). However, in other literature multicultural education is said to do what anti-racist education theorists say it fails to do, namely question and seek to challenge and transform the structures of power in society (Asante, 1991; Banks, 2008).

Terms such as structural and institutional racism are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes distinguished as distinct ideas. ‘Afrocentric’, ‘Africentric’ and ‘African-centered’ are used by different researchers at different times (Asante, 1991; Dei, 1996; Dei and Kempf, 2013). Anti-racist education theorists claim that this perspective aims to address students’ experiences
and educational outcomes on the basis of racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism although the term would seem to imply a sole focus on the axis of racism (James, 1995; Lee, 2012).

Given the diverse and inconsistent use of terminology found in the literature, it is no surprise then that the matter of terminology came as a challenge within the interviews. It was notable that all three participants were looking for a framework to our conversation in which identity could be considered as broadly as possible without imposing any particular labels on the students we were discussing. The teachers’ commitment to their students as unique and complex individuals made discussing ‘cultural identity’ challenging because the term was, although not explicitly defined by myself or the participants, as limiting in some way or carrying problematic connotations.

5.1.2 It’s All About the Growth: Academic, Social, Personal, and Community Growth

Despite different understandings of how to conceptualize the problem, solution, and pathways to the solution found throughout the literature, there is a one major commonality shared by those engaging in this broad conversation. Namely, the disparity between student success and growth in traditional public schools correlated with membership in dominant/majority communities versus oppressed/minority communities. Put simply, there is a recognition that White students generally experience success in the current school system whereas racialized students generally experience more challenges and barriers to success.

The insights shared by Derrick, Zahraa and Nasreen during their interviews support what the research tells us with respect to the positive impact of incorporating students’ identities and experiences into their school experiences. All three teachers reported observing numerous
benefits for students when opportunities to connect their home cultures and experiences outside of school with their experiences at school and within the overall culture of their schools were created. Benefits reported included academic engagement and achievement both in class and on standardized tests such as EQAO, as well as increased self-confidence, self-worth, pride and interest in one’s home culture and respect for one’s parents and community members. The fact that these benefits touched on so many different areas suggests further support for research by Asante (1991), Banks (2008), Battiste (1998), Dei (1996), Dei and Kempf (2013), Delpit (1988), James (2005), Ogbu (1992) and others in which similar wide-ranging benefits are discussed. Furthermore, these findings serve as an important reminder that academic, social, personal and community growth are intertwined and that meeting students’ needs must therefore be approached holistically.

5.1.3 Teaching About and for Diversity

The desire expressed by my research participants to ensure students not only have a strong self-respect and respect for their own culture but also the cultures of others is at the heart of the centric-enterprise. Proponents of centric education state very clearly that “a person educated in a truly centric fashion comes to view all groups’ contributions as significant and useful” (Asante, 1991, p.171). The goal of Africentric education, for example, is not to create a Black version of eurocentricity by replacing one hegemonic worldview with another (Asante, 1991; Dei, 1996).

Both Zahraa and Nasreen positioned themselves very clearly as educating toward a respect for others and for difference. Because they both teach in schools with large majority
populations they both expressed worry that their students would lack the necessary exposure to others to be prepared for experiences in more diverse settings, such as future experiences in the workforce. This concern also seemed to inform their opinions of centric school models such as the Toronto Africentric School. They both expressed support for the school and hesitation about it as the complete solution. Derrick in particular was very keen to clarify what he called a misconception of the Toronto Africentric School as trying to teach about and value African and Black culture at the exclusion of other cultures. He spoke explicitly about working to ensure students developed a healthy respect for and interest in others through his instructional practices.

5.1.4 It Takes a Community: The Importance of School-wide Approaches

There is a seeming consensus between the three research participants which supports the call for school-wide approaches found throughout the literature. Schools are fundamentally communities, a fact which doesn’t change regardless of the character of the school. You can have a supportive, inclusive, tight-knit community or a fractured, discriminatory, uncaring community at school – but it will be a community in either case. If not approached intentionally, the default culture of any school in Toronto will be that of the dominant culture; White and Euro/North American-centric. This culture will be reflected in both the hidden and explicit curriculum and will be fundamentally oppressive to anyone who doesn’t fit neatly into that category. Schools are, as every community is, a microcosm of society in that there are numerous intersecting facets of expressions of power playing out at all times (Delpit, 1988). Therefore, when trying to transform a school toward true equity and inclusivity change must occur on all levels (Banks, 2008; Dei and Kempf, 2013). In my interviews the specific areas of discussion centered on representation and role models within the staff, shared attitudes and collaboration
between staff members, support from administrators for professional development, resources, and specific projects, and finally the connection between the school and the parent and wider community. I am choosing to group these aspects together under the notion of school-wide approaches in order to emphasize that centricity goes beyond any one factor but is rather a philosophy which must be applied across all factors of school life.

Teachers can serve an important role as leaders and role models. As visible minorities Derrick, Nasreen, and Zahraa in their roles as teachers already challenge normative understandings of who can have authority and power and of possible future careers students can aspire to. As women wearing hijabs, Nasreen and Zahraa explained that they sometimes confused students who often assume that they must be other students’ mothers or ‘lunch ladies’. As a Black male teaching primary grades, Derrick challenges notions of who school and academic success is “for”. Through the fact of their presence and how they choose to teach, all three teachers disrupt traditional understandings of what knowledge is, who can have it and create it, and who can have power, what power is, how it gets mobilized, and to what ends. Not only do these three teachers fulfill the need for more role models who reflect the student population in the communities in which they teach but because of their approaches to teaching which affirm and validate students’ cultures and heritages they “are simultaneously involved in a transformative educational project that destabilizes and breaks down oppressive structures of schooling” (Dei, 1996, p.179).

However, teachers alone, especially when working with already disadvantaged groups who often need much more attention to succeed in class, cannot be responsible for the overall culture of the school. In order to create a real shift in the outcomes for minoritized groups, there
must be school-wide approaches, led by visionary principals and administrative staff who cultivate a united vision shared by all staff members which invites the voices and participation of parents, students, and community members into the conversation about how to best support the school’s students (Delpit, 1988).

With respect to fostering united school-wide approaches, a factor which must be addressed is the fact that the majority of administrators and teachers in the TDSB are White (Carr and Klassen, 1996; Ryan, Pollock and Antonelli, 2007). As Delpit notes, it is often those with power who are least able or willing to acknowledge it (Delpit, 1988). In 1997, Giroux wrote about the need to address white youth’s increasing discomfort with their whiteness by creating and implementing a pedagogical approach which would “offer students a possibility of rearticulating “Whiteness,” rather than either simply accepting its dominant normative assumptions or rejecting it as a racist form of identity” (Giroux, 1997, p.203). A year earlier, Solomon reported wide-spread resistance by White teacher candidates to anti-racist theory and pedagogy (Solomon, 1996). The evidence shows that, for members of the culture of power, interrogating race and other sites of oppression is an immense challenge (Delpit, 1988; Solomon, 1996; Giroux, 1997). Now, almost twenty years after Solomon and Giroux’s writings, the teacher candidates and students they spoke of are today’s current teachers, senior teachers, and administrators. It is therefore unsurprising that all three teachers interviewed are among a small minority of teachers in their schools who share their teaching philosophies. In this sense, there is a clear need for public schools such as the Toronto Africentric School, in which all aspects of a school are intentionally approached by principals, administrators and teaching staff alike.
There are other benefits of school-wide approaches that we can learn about from the Toronto Africentric School, as reported by Derrick. For one, although students have different teachers each year like in traditional public schools, Derrick described a sense among the students that felt that all of the teachers were their teachers, not just their classroom teacher. Thus, because of the greater emphasis placed on the community and the time and energy spent on community building as a whole school, the students felt as though they had a whole team of adults supporting them and they had access to multiple role models and trusted adults to turn to. One of the challenges that both Zahraa and Nasreen raised – barriers to collaborating with other teachers – would likely be mitigated against if a whole school approach was being implemented.

A school-wide approach would also further support the work of individual teachers by ensuring that there were relevant resources, including books reflective of students’ cultures and histories, technology which all three teachers said supported their ability to ensure exposure to a variety of perspectives, narratives, and experiences, as well as valuing professional development opportunities for teachers. A school-wide approach would also ensure that the general culture of the school, including what you can find on bulletin boards, disciplinary approaches, and which holidays get celebrated, was culturally-relevant to the population of the school. All of these factors were raised as supportive when present and barriers when absent by Derrick, Zahraa, and Nasreen.

Incorporating a close relationship with the parent community as part of a school-wide approach is supported both by the literature and the participants’ insights (Delpit, 1988; Agyepong, 2010; Dei and Kempf, 2013). A positive relationship between the school and the parent community helps to support the students’ academic and social success. But it goes further,
by developing forums for communication, and by truly valuing the insights and experiences of parents and community members a school gives itself the opportunity to be truly transformed into a space which challenges hegemonic structures of power and privilege and which can actually begin to serve the needs of its community.

5.2 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

In order to truly change the landscape of education on Toronto, changes will need to be made at the levels of teacher training, schools as institutions, and classroom teacher practices. It is important to note that in many cases supporting policies are already in place and the task at hand is to close the gap between policy and practice.

5.2.1 Faculties of Education and Pre-Service Programs

- Culturally relevant pedagogies and centricity-based approaches should be implemented in pre-service training courses
- Hiring practices of pre-service training programs should aim to ensure representation of cultural diversity among faculty at every level
- The overall culture of faculties of education, including but not limited to curriculum, instructional practices, scheduling, and assessments, should be more culturally responsive
- A course in critical pedagogies which specifically and explicitly examines the theoretical frameworks of multicultural-, critical multicultural-, antiracist-, anti-colonial-, indigenous- and Africentric- education, as well as social-justice, equity, and culturally relevant pedagogies should be a mandatory component of teacher-training programs
- Teacher candidates should be taught the current statistics which highlight the correlations between race and student experience and achievement in public schools
- Teacher candidates should be taught about and encouraged to critique structural oppression and manifestations of power and privilege as they play out in Canadian society at large and within the university in order to prepare them and model for them how this can be done with students in schools
- Teacher candidates should be expected to participate in an ongoing two-year process of self-reflection and reflexive positioning with respect to their own lived experiences of
privilege and oppression; this should be supported through one or more courses but be implemented as a coherent and focused journey

- In particular, White teachers of European descent must be supported in rearticulating their understanding of Whiteness and be taught allyship strategies

- Teacher candidates should be taught specific strategies for implementing the pedagogies listed above and have opportunities to learn from best practices in the field

- Principalship qualifications courses should include specific training in how to lead a culturally responsive school and implement centricity from a multi-faceted and school-wide approach

5.2.2 Schools

- Undertake a process of critically re-examining their own institutional cultures including, but not limited to, questioning (and then responding to):
  - How is curriculum being implemented and delivered?
  - Whose voices are privileged and whose are unheard?
  - Which cultural norms are privileged and which are de-valued either implicitly or explicitly?
  - How does power presently operate?

- Create opportunities for staff-wide professional development in the realm of culturally relevant pedagogy

- Promote collaboration between staff members and whole-school initiatives to centre students’ identities

- Provide ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers in the realm of culturally relevant pedagogy

- Hold community forums to learn about the cultures and needs of their students and their families

5.2.3 Teachers

- Critically reflect on their own identities and experiences and how these are impacting their teaching and the learning experiences of students from diverse backgrounds

- Participate in professional development opportunities that already exist to support them in implementing centricity-based approaches

- Actively learn about their students’ identities, backgrounds, cultures, and experiences and use these as the base for further teaching and learning
• Look for and create opportunities to connect to students’ community life and bring people and resources from the community into the classroom

• Actively work to dispel stereotypes and provide students with exposure to multiple narratives, perspectives, and cultures in holistic ways

• Use resources which portray people who share students’ cultures in multiple and positive ways

• Avoid shying away from hard or challenging topics such as oppression, rather, find meaningful ways to integrate discussion of these topics and empower students to both be critical and responsive

5.3 Recommendation for Further Research

There are many areas for further research that can and ought to be pursued. Much of the current available literature is from, or based on research and writing from the 1990’s and 2000’s and from an American context. Further research in the contemporary Canadian context will be essential to the development of Canadian solutions. In particular learning more about teachers’ responses to various terms used in this field toward the creation of a consistently applied vocabulary to help promote the conversations that need to be happening between school staff and between school staff and researchers.

The fact that all three educators repeatedly talked about needing to teach students both about themselves and others and to cultivate respect for difference and that Derrick specifically addressed this in the context of ‘myth-busting’ suggests that there is an ongoing “PR problem” regarding centricity in public education. Therefore further research should be conducted with a broader sample of teachers, including those from dominant/majority culture backgrounds to better understand fears and misconceptions current teachers have which may be barriers to the implementation of any or all of the pedagogies discussed in this study.
Starting in September 2015, all teacher-training programs in Ontario will be two years long. The increased time commitment as a student in a non-funded program may create additional barriers to entry for non-White, middle-upper class students. A two year program, however, also offers not only more instructional and practicum hours but a longer period in which teacher candidates will be able to engage in a process of critical self-reflection and engage anti-racism pedagogy. Further research into effective strategies for explicit instruction in allyship for White teacher candidates should be done in order to maximize the potential of this new structure for pre-service training.

5.4 Toward a Vision of a Multi-Centric School Re-Examined OR Reflexive Positioning PART 2

As I discussed in my introductory chapter, part of my motivation in choosing this focus for my Masters research is my interest in the idea of a multi-centric centric school. Throughout the two-year process of this research I have learned much more about the range of ideas, motivations toward, future visions, and critiques within the discourse of centric education and other related frameworks such as multicultural education, anti-racist education and culturally relevant pedagogy. I have had the chance to speak with three educators in three of Toronto’s schools serving often under-served minoritized communities. This process has led me to re-evaluate my initial conception of a multi-centric school in light and I conclude this research study with several questions requiring further reflection and study.

The myth of happy, well-functioning, multicultural meritocracy in Canada is prevalent, particularly among White middle class people. And, it is true, if you work hard enough you probably can achieve whatever you put your mind to – assuming you are also a White, Christian,
able-bodied, heterosexual, gender conforming male with money whose first language is ‘standard’ English. But for everyone else, to varying degrees, there are structural barriers that make success that much farther out of reach, and in some cases, beyond reach. I think it is important to find ways for schools to serve as sites for myth-busting so that change can start to happen.

Major proponents of Afrocentric education, such as Molefi Kete Asante and George Sefa Dei talk about the need for centricity and multi-centric education (Asante, 1991; Dei, 1996). Their positioning of Afrocentric education as a basis for multicultural education really speaks to me. In their conceptualizations of it, the goal of centricity is not to supplant eurocentricity with a different hegemonic discourse but, rather, to offer students the opportunity to engage with the world with their culture at the centre (Asante, 1991; Dei, 1996; Dei and Kempf, 2013). Asante talks about how society would be different if people were truly educated about the horrors of slavery. As a Jewish person who is able to identify links between my own family experiences of the holocaust and my orientation toward social justice, this logic speaks to me.

Extending beyond teaching about traditions and foods to teaching about history and oppression opens up new spaces for analyzing, critiquing and potentially transforming society. At some point, different communities who have different histories and encounter oppression and privilege in different (and even opposing) ways will need to learn to openly acknowledge these dynamics and work together to change them. The question, perhaps, is if we are there yet.

In conceptualizing a multi-centric centric school several factors were initially part of my vision. Students would spend time in both self-identified mixed age ‘cultural’ groups and
‘heterogeneous’ age groups (their grade class). Students would have access to culturally relevant role models and time would be dedicated to explicit and implicit instruction in cultural competence. Students would also have opportunities to learn with and have social relationships with students from other cultural groups. Time and energy would be dedicated toward intentionally navigating different ways to learn about each other’s cultures in a deep and nuanced way. Explicit discussion around historical and current oppression and privilege would be welcomed and facilitated. The school would serve as an experiment in living out a sort of critical multiculturalism in which student would be empowered to learn about themselves, each other, and others who may not be represented, and to make explicit and critique the structures of power presently in existence from a place of strength.

Two years later, after reading a lot, speaking with educators, and having practicum placements in four very different schools, two of which were alternative (one private and one TDSB), I am aware of many aspects of this vision which must be critically examined and problematized. I am also aware that as I learn more I will see new problems, generate new questions, and need to continually re-evaluate my ideas of why and how to approach education in particular ways.

Perhaps the major barrier to a multi-centric centric school in Toronto is the issue of accessibility. Accessibility in the sense of; who would be interested in this project and why? Where would the school be located and whose participation would that privilege or prevent? From which communities would the school leadership be? What would the overall school culture be based on? What cultural codes would be privileged? How could this be achieved within the framework of the Ontario curriculum? How could the school truly find balance between the
many needs of the communities involved? However, those are some of the questions that society as a whole needs to answer. If we accept that schools are sites for the production and often reproduction of society and culture, then perhaps we cannot wait until ‘society figures it out’ but must deal with these questions intentionally within the context of educational institutions. Such an endeavour would likely be incredibly hard, upsetting, and uncomfortable. Nevertheless, the kinds of discussion that could be generated could be potentially transformative in terms of “realizing the promise of diversity” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).

In any case, such an endeavour is a long range idea which would need to come out of a greater body of research into the needs of different communities and out of an expressed desire for and support of this type of school at the community level. As a well-meaning, progressive, white-skinned person, I must be cautious in the role that I take in further envisioning such a school and continuously re-examine how my own experiences, cultural codes, privileges, and values are informing my work. My own experiences of disconnection in school are an important grounding for me, but I must continuously remember that, ultimately, I participate and come from the culture of power. In pursuing this work I must work with others and take the lead from members of the communities most affected. I need to continue learning what it means to be an ally and to keep my own passion and vision in check in order not to represent or misrepresent the voices of others who deserve the opportunities to speak for themselves.

5.5 Implications for my future practice

As I move forward in the world of education this process and content of this research study will stay with me in several ways. For one, the value of an active and ongoing relationship
between research and my practice has been reinforced through this study. My practice will certainly be informed by my research and I hope to use my practice in the future to inform the research of others.

A particular area of interest that has emerged for me as a result of this research is how to more effectively integrate anti-racist and allyship training into pre-service teacher training programs. Another emerging area of interest which will be of particular relevance should I become a classroom teacher is how classroom teachers can effectively work to create shared staff philosophies and approaches that integrate centricity into ‘regular’ public school settings.

Finally, I will carry with me an awareness of the falsity of school as a neutral space. I will strive to continuously be self-reflective of the cultural codes being promoted, reinforced and privileged within the educational (and other) spaces I am a part of. In particular, I will strive to be the teacher who understands that ensuring my classroom is an empowering community for my students does not lessen my own power within the classroom, and acts accordingly.

**Conclusion**

This study is rooted in the notion that a multicultural society is a project worthy of pursuit. At the same time it is important to challenge the narrative of the present Canadian multicultural meritocracy as a well-functioning system. In order to have a truly *equitable* multicultural society we must acknowledge the Eurocentric character of Canadian public and civil culture and examine and challenge the structures of power which comprise our current status quo. In the same spirit of one of my research participants, Zahraa, I feel it is important to distinguish between the world we want and the world that is. As Delpit points out, if you are
trying to fight oppression, it doesn’t help to ignore the power dynamics at play and pretend like they don’t exist (Delpit, 1988).

School is a site for the production, and re-production of culture and that it is therefore crucial to be intentional in how we create and operate our schools. At the very least, the Toronto school system is, by and large, failing according to the stated goals of the equity foundation statement adopted by the TDSB in 1999. The goal of schooling is and ought to be the creation of sites for emancipatory education which will empower all youth to transform society for the better.

Understanding centricity as “a perspective that involves locating students within the context of their own cultural references so that they can relate socially an psychologically to other cultural perspectives…a concept that can be applied to any culture” (Asante, 1991, p.171), I find the idea of centricity to be a powerful, viable, and necessary aspect of addressing the failings of our educational system in its current form.

While there are many important conclusions of this study, I believe there are two key big ideas found in the literature that are supported by this research and deserve the final remarks. Namely, that we do not live in a power-neutral society and, as public civil institutions, schools too are not neutral spaces; this must be understood and intentionally accounted for in how teachers approach their work. Ultimately, teachers must work to find the balance between supporting their students to be culturally competent within their home cultures and within the dominant culture of power. They must strive to validate and centre their students’ identities
within not only their classrooms but school environments as a whole. Moreover, as communities, school must find ways to implement multi-faceted and school-wide approaches to centricity.

This task is not an easy one. Self-reflection as a researcher and teacher, continual reflexive re-positioning in relation to one’s academic and teaching endeavours must be a responsibility continuously taken up by those of us working for change in these fields.
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Appendix A: Letter of Consent

Date: ________________________________

Dear ________________________________,

My Name is Jenny Isaacs and I am a second year student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on the perspectives of a sample of teachers working in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) who teach in schools that explicitly emphasize cultural identity as a central driving force of their school philosophy and instructional practices (i.e. culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy). I am interested in interviewing teachers working in these schools who similarly underscore cultural identity in their teaching philosophy and practice, and in understanding their perspectives on the range of outcomes, benefits, challenges, and limitations of this commitment.

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in this study. Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a research conference or publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. The only people who will have access to the research data will be my research supervisor and my course instructors. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to 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 a maximum of 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 the transcript to ensure accuracy.

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

Yours sincerely,

Jenny Isaacs
416 821 5798
jenny.isaacs@mail.utoronto.ca

Research Supervisor’s Name: Dr. Angela MacDonald
Phone Number and email: 416-821-6496  angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca

**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 from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Jenny Isaacs and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: _______________________________________________________

Name: (printed) ___________________________________________________

Date: ___________________________________________________________
Appendix B: Invitation to Prospective Participants

My Name is Jenny Isaacs and I am a second year student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). My research will focus on the perspectives of a sample of teachers working in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) who teach in schools that explicitly emphasize cultural identity as a central driving force of their school philosophy and instructional practices (i.e. culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy). I am interested in interviewing teachers working in these schools who similarly underscore cultural identity in their teaching philosophy and practice, and in understanding their perspectives on the range of outcomes, benefits, challenges, and limitations of this commitment. In order to learn from their experiences, these teachers will preferably have a minimum three years of teaching experience. If you, or members of your staff, your colleagues, or professional acquaintances fulfill these criteria and are interested in participating in this research, please contact me at jennya.isaacs@oise.utoronto.ca. Should you have any questions about this research study, please do not hesitate to contact me or my research supervisor, Dr. Angela MacDonald at angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca.
Appendix C: Interview Protocol

1. One of the criteria of participation in the study is that teachers are working in schools…Can you tell me about the philosophy of the school you are teaching in and how long you have been teaching there?

2. Why did you decide to work in the school you are working in?

3. What does cultural identity mean to you?

4. How would you describe your own cultural identity?

5. What role does the cultural identity of your students have in your school’s setting?

6. How do you see this priority reflected in the school programming?

7. How does this focus manifest in your own teaching philosophy and instructional priorities?

8. Can you give me some examples of how this focus manifests in/through your teaching?
   *probe re: specific lessons and their core learning goals, instructional strategies, assessment etc.

9. Do you consider this work a component of “culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy” (CRRP)? Why / why not?

10. What do you see as the strengths of your school’s model with respect to its focus on cultural identity?
11. What outcomes or impacts have you noticed for students? Staff? Admin? Parent-school-community relations? (Probe for academic and social sides)

12. What structures exist to support this model?

13. What do you think are some limitations of this model?

14. What are some challenges and/or barriers to enacting this model of education?

15. How do you and/or your school respond to these barriers?

16. What do you believe schools and teachers need to overcome those barriers?

17. What kinds of factors do you think could support more teachers and schools to do this work?

18. How has working within this pedagogical framework impacted your teaching?

19. What other models do you know of that place an emphasis on cultural identity in education?

20. Generally, what do you perceive to be the benefits and limitations of centric-schooling models of schooling and teaching versus non-centric schooling models?