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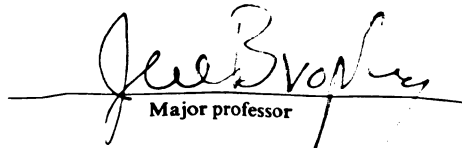
**A Journey of Transformation:  
Teacher Professional Development at an  
African-centered Public School**

presented by

**Ebony Marie Roberts**

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A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION:  
TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT  
AT AN AFRICAN-CENTERED PUBLIC SCHOOL

By

Ebony *Marie* Roberts

A DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

### A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION: TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AT AN AFRICAN-CENTERED PUBLIC SCHOOL

By

Ebony **M**arie Roberts

A product of the Black Nationalist/*P*an Africanist consciousness of the 1960's, African-centered schools represents the *collective* will of Black people in America to rediscover and reclaim their connection to *Africa*. Viewed as an alternative to traditional Eurocentric schools, which often devalue the *history, language and culture* of Black children, African-centered schools reflect the life experiences, history and traditions of people of African descent throughout the world. Often its staff has studied the work of Pan Africanist scholars such as John Henrik Clarke, Maulana Karenga, Ivan van Sertima, and Chancellor Williams to provide a historical and conceptual framework from which to teach. Increasingly, however, as African-centered education is being tested in the public arena in districts serving large Black student populations, it is important for teachers who work in these schools to study Pan African thought so that they understand the goals and philosophy of African-centered education.

In African-centered schools, teacher development is critical; teachers must know and understand African and African American history and culture and be well grounded in Pan African thought. In the public school setting, however, teacher professional development has been largely unsuccessful in preparing teachers to understand, develop and implement African-centered education. Most teachers have never taken an African Studies course and therefore have yet to be exposed to such scholarship. As a consequence, many of the

teachers who are placed in African-centered public schools do not fully understand the goals and philosophy of African-centered education or see its value and importance in the education of Black children.

In this dissertation, I created and led a study group for teachers at an African-centered public school in Detroit, MI. I provided opportunities for teachers to read and discuss classic and contemporary work on the (mis)education of Black children in America's schools. I explored the potential of study groups as a professional development tool that 1) supports construction of a critical discourse that challenges teachers to see their work more critically; and 2) provides teachers with a better understanding of African-centered education and its value and importance in the lives of Black children. I examined teachers' views on race, power and schooling, focusing on how participation in the study group challenged teachers' beliefs and assumptions about Black children and the purpose of education for Africans in America. I found that teachers had an uncritical habit of mind, rarely questioning their practice or the schooling process, and remained resistant to the concept of African-centered education. It was difficult for them to step outside what I call their "local" Discourse – the limited, familiar, accepted ways in which they are used to talking about race, culture and schooling – and into a more "global" Discourse where a critical, African-centered pedagogy is possible. This study challenges traditional approaches to teacher professional development in urban schools serving Black children and offers insight into African-centered teacher education.

to my ancestors

I am who I am because of you

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## CHAPTER 1

# EDUCATING BLACK CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR CULTURE

### Introduction and Rationale for this Study

The underachievement of Black children in America's schools is well documented (King, 1994; Irvine, 1990; Kunjufu, 1985). In fact, the majority of Black children attend the nation's poorest schools and are often tracked into remedial and special education classes (Delpit, 1995; Oakes, 1995; Kozol, 1991). Studies have also shown that the cultural and linguistic differences between home and school (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Irvine, 1990; Villegas, 1988; Heath, 1983) and differential teacher behavior (Irvine, 1986; Grant, 1984; Rist, 1970) have had a particularly negative affect on the education and schooling of Black children.

To improve the achievement of Black children in mainstream public schools, scholars have argued for some time that the schooling process should be more closely aligned with students' culture and their "indigenous ways of knowing, learning and being" (King, 1994) to counter the disabling aspects of schooling (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1992; Asante, 1991). They support the creation of a school community that reflects, affirms, values and respects African people and culture. However, few, if any, teacher education programs prepare teachers to meet the needs of African American students. Although some programs have an "urban" education component, the "uniqueness of the African American cultural experience" is rarely a feature of such programs (Ladson-Billings, 2000b). What's more, when Black children are discussed, their learning and development is viewed from a deficit perspective which devalues their language and culture (King, 1994).

For these reasons, Black parents have begun to turn to African-centered schools to educate their children. Increasingly, African-centered schools have been established in cities

with large Black populations such as Washington, D.C. and Oakland, CA, taking on the responsibility of educating Black children effectively. Educating Black children within the context of their culture, African-centered schools demonstrate the value and importance of culture-centered pedagogy and curriculum. They provide a culturally affirming school setting and a caring school staff who value the cultural resources Black children bring with them to the classroom. And as Lee (1992) argues:

Rather than simply complain and react, the independent African-centered school movement has taken a proactive stance, defining within a community context the possibilities and gifts that Black children offer the world, and creating institutions to manifest its ideals (p. 161).

The movement for African-centered education has its roots in the Black nationalist struggle for self-determination – to define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves instead of being defined, named, created for and spoken for by others. A product of the Black Nationalist/Pan Africanist consciousness of the 1960's, African-centered education is “rooted in the cultural image and interest of people of African ancestry... and represents and reflects the life experiences, history and traditions of people of African ancestry as the center of analyses” (Wade Nobles in Madhubuti & Madhubuti, 1994, p. 8).

While including African contributions to the world in the curriculum is important, this alone does not create a “critically transformative” (King, 1994) conception of education, however. Developing an African-centered curriculum, therefore, is not simply a matter of adding people or events in Black history to an existing curriculum (Lee, 1992; Lomotey, 1992; Ratteray, 1990). It requires a fundamental restructuring of the approach to history and the position of African people as subjects rather than objects in history (Asante, 1991; 1988). As King (1994) argues, Black children need an education that helps them see the collective liberation and survival of African people as a goal and to understand this as part of a larger

struggle for social change. Too often, however, African-centered education is reduced to teaching Black history facts (i.e., the Civil War, the Civil Rights Movement) absent a critical discourse where the documentation of history itself is questioned (i.e., the ways in which European historians have distorted African history and the sociopolitical implications of such distortions).

Through their study of African history and culture, a number of Black historians have provided the historical evidence to support an African-centered curriculum, and their work can be used to create texts and other materials that can be used by teachers and students.

Scholars such as W.E.B. Dubois, Cheikh Anta Diop, Chancellor Williams, Yosef A. ben Jochannan, John Henrik Clarke, Ivan van Sertima, and Maulana Karenga redefined and reclaimed the history of Africa for African people. Their collective work and consciousness contributed to the development of an African-centered movement in education (Ratteray, 1990) and informs the curriculum and pedagogy in many African-centered schools.

While African-centered schools share some elements, the concept of African-centered education is continually evolving as various schools and school districts consider the potential of this alternative educational model to improve Black student achievement (Ratteray, 1990). Milwaukee, Atlanta and Detroit Public Schools are three examples, becoming pioneers in the movement to bring African-centered curriculum to public school education.

Originally conceived as male academies, Detroit's first three African-centered schools opened in the fall of 1991 – Edo Academy, Umi Academy, and Ayo Academy<sup>1</sup>. Each of these academies were designated “empowered” schools, which meant that they functioned independently within the public school system – they were free to design their

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<sup>1</sup> All school names are pseudonyms.

own curriculum, determine their yearly calendar, select their own staff, and manage their own financial affairs (Watson & Smitherman, 1996). Leading scholars from across the country were brought in to conduct workshops and seminars to provide teachers with the intellectual and material resources to develop and implement African-centered curriculum, and the staff was involved in ongoing professional development throughout its first two years.

The African-centered educational model received so much support from Detroit parents, teachers, and community members that the district decided to expand its Afrocentric vision beyond the three academies. On February 2, 1993, the Detroit Public Schools resolved to develop and implement a comprehensive African-centered educational program in all Detroit schools. This was to include research and curriculum development, staff development, PreK-12 curriculum guides, and other resources needed for curriculum development and implementation (Kenyatta, 1998). In 1996, however, the Detroit Public Schools Office of Research, Evaluation and Testing surveyed all principals in the district to gauge the level of understanding of African-centered principles and the implementation of the curriculum, and found that principals and teachers lacked sufficient knowledge of African-centered education – its goals, philosophy, and guiding principles. This internal report concluded that “an extended plan” for professional development was needed to establish a knowledge base for teachers and administrators throughout the district.

Scholars agree that preparing teachers to educate Black children in the context of their own culture requires in-depth knowledge of African and African American history and culture (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; King, 1994; Asante, 1991) and a foundation in Afrocentric thought (Akoto, 1994; Lee, 1992). However, few teachers or teacher educators have such an in-depth understanding of African and African American history and culture or

the sociopolitical context in which **Black** children are schooled (King, 1994). Recognizing this, I wondered what kinds of experiences would lead teachers to develop a more informed understanding of the historical, social, political, economic and cultural forces that shape the Black experience in America so that they might see the value and importance of African-centered education in the lives of Black children.

### **Brief Description of this Study**

This dissertation examined the potential of a teacher study group to 1) support construction of a critical discourse that challenges teachers to see their work more critically; and 2) provide teachers with a better understanding of African-centered education and its value and importance in the lives of Black children. In this study, seven teachers at an African-centered public school participated in a six-month study group, which I created, led and documented as a participant-observer. In the study group sessions, we read and discussed work by leading Black scholars in education, sociolinguistics, and psychology. This body of work focused on the historical and contemporary school context in which Black children learn and the alternatives to traditional, Eurocentric educational models.

The study group followed a modified book club format (Reischl, 1999; Flood, Lapp & Rank-Buhr, 1996; Florio-Ruane & deTar, 1995). This format offered opportunities for teachers not only to study together but also to share pedagogical and curricular ideas; reflect on their own practice; and interrogate their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning (while supporting their colleagues in doing the same). As a researcher, I collected and analyzed audiotapes of the group's discussions, kept a reflective journal, documented teachers' beliefs and attitudes with a brief survey, studied the journals teachers kept, and interviewed each teacher twice, once in November and again in May. Together, these data

allowed me to get a sense of who *these* teachers were, what they believed and why, and whether transformative seeds could be planted by studying critical, African-centered educational philosophy. My analysis focused on teachers' developing views around issues of race, culture, and language, and their conceptions of African-centered education.

Rather than re-socialize Black children so that their attitude and behavior is more compatible with white, mainstream school culture, this research suggests that we re-socialize teachers so that they can become "cultural workers" (Freire, 1998) and by doing so empower Black children to transform themselves, their communities, the nation and the world. In this dissertation, I examined the potential for a teacher study group to do just that – re-socialize teachers. This group was designed to challenge teachers' views on race and culture and language and the assumptions they held about Black children. As such, the group provided opportunities for teachers to question themselves and each other about the purpose of education and the role that schools play in reproducing inequality. The group also provided opportunities for teachers to deepen their knowledge and understanding of African-centered education and its value and importance in the social, psychological and emotional development of Black children.

As the analysis of the study group discussions will show, teachers were largely uncritical. Despite my efforts to challenge and push them to think beyond traditional, Eurocentric educational models, it was difficult for teachers to step outside what I call their "local" Discourse – the limited, familiar, accepted ways in which they are used to talking about race and culture and schooling – and into a more "global" Discourse where a critical, African-centered pedagogy is possible. Given the current status of education for Black children in America's schools, I argue that educators must begin to rethink *how* and *what* we teach Black children and the role we play in conserving or transforming the status quo.

## Central Questions

The study group was envisioned as a space where teachers would be challenged to think beyond the boundaries of mainstream education, and interrogate their assumptions about Black children as well as their views on teaching and the purpose of education. In this group, teachers wrestled with ideas, questioned traditional and African-centered conceptions of teaching and learning, and re-examined their work as educators of African American children. As part of ongoing professional development, this group was designed to be a consciousness-raising experience for teachers. As such, the following questions guided my research:

1. What do teachers know about African-centered education? Do they understand the goals and philosophy of African-centered curriculum and pedagogy? Do they see the value and importance of African-centered education for African Americans?
2. What do teachers learn or unlearn about educating Black children from reading and discussing Black scholarship? What influence does this learning have on how they think about their students and their work in an African-centered school context?
3. Does this kind of inquiry and discussion challenge teachers' existing beliefs and assumptions about Black children, and if so, in what ways? Does this challenge bring about either transformation or resistance?

In the remaining section of this chapter, I outline the theoretical basis for this study. I draw on mainstream teacher education research and examples of teacher professional development in African-centered schools.

## Review of the Literature

### Preparing Teachers to Teach Diverse Students

In response to concerns raised by parents, educators and community members regarding the miseducation of children of color, research has begun to address the

preparation of teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations (Paine, 1989; Zeichner, 1992). In the last decade, teacher educators have explored the potential of diversity training (McDiarmid, 1992; McDiarmid & Price, 1990), diverse field experiences (Haberman & Post, 1992), and autobiography discussion groups (Florio-Ruane & deTar, 1995; Reischl, 1999) on teachers' perceptions of children of color. By and large, these approaches seek to get teachers beyond the superficial aspects of culture so that they can begin to make "deep cultural transformations" (Boykin, 2000) in their classrooms. As Lizette Roman, a bilingual teacher and student in one of Sonia Nieto's graduate courses, wrote in her journal:

To have knowledge of another culture does not mean to be able to repeat one or two words in a student's language, nor is it to celebrate an activity or sing a song related to their culture. To acknowledge and respect is to be able to understand and apply this knowledge to everyday classroom activities. It is to be able to make changes or modifications in one's curriculum or pedagogy when the needs of the students have not been served (quoted in Nieto, 2000b, p. 180).

As Lizette suggests, understanding another culture involves more than learning the superficial aspects of culture such as dance, dress and food. However, much of what is done in the name of diversity has been little more than "window dressing." In fact, most approaches to multicultural education avoid asking difficult questions related to access, equity and social justice argues Sonia Nieto (2000b). As she argues:

Social justice and diversity are not the same thing. Given the vastly unequal educational outcomes among students of different backgrounds, equalizing conditions for student learning needs to be at the core of a concern for diversity. Thus, "celebrating diversity" through special assembly programs, multicultural dinners, or ethnic celebrations, if they do not also confront the structural inequalities that exist in schools, are hollow activities (p. 183).

Nieto argues further that we must look critically at why and how our schools are unjust for some students. This means analyzing school policies and practices – the curriculum, textbooks and materials, instructional strategies, and professional development of teachers.



In most cases, however, when teachers are instructed to use liberatory practices in their work with children of color, they are provided few models for such teaching (Burbules, 1993). All too often “we send new teachers into schools full of good intentions to inquire and reflect, but with little else” (Fecho, 2000, p. 195).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000b) and others have suggested that there is no single course or set of field experiences that can prepare preservice teachers to meet the needs of America’s increasingly diverse student population. She suggests that a “more systematic, comprehensive approach” is needed (p. 209). This approach must go beyond traditional forms of professional development where teachers sit passively; teachers must be prompted to examine the ways in which their practice conserves rather than transforms the status quo (Edelsky, 1991). Indeed, in our efforts to support teachers’ professional development around issues of culture:

What is needed are not simply peers who support one another, essential as this may be, but also peers who debate, critique, and challenge one another to go beyond their current ideas and practices (Nieto 2000b, p. 185).

While this kind of debate and critique does not exist in most forms of teacher professional development, it could lead teachers to interrogate their beliefs and assumptions about teaching, learning and the purpose of education and by doing so redefine their role in the process of schooling and the education of African American children in particular.

### **Building Relationships: Professional Development Through Collaboration**

While many school budgets support teacher professional development (Lytle, 2000), the dominant form of presentation in many professional development workshops is a lecture format where teachers sit passively, seldom examining their practice (Lieberman, 2000). In many cases, teachers are rarely given the opportunity to discuss the pedagogical strategies or

ideas provided in these workshops with their colleagues, and often do not receive ongoing classroom support for their professional development (Foster & Peele, 1999).

Increasingly, however, schools have begun to encourage dialogue and collaboration across grade level and department (Lytle, 2000). Some of the approaches commonly used to encourage teacher professional development – collaborations with universities (i.e., professional development schools), inquiry or study groups, school wide improvement projects, and teacher networks – are constructed quite differently and serve very different purposes yet speak to the power of teacher collaboration as an ongoing part of professional development.

Many teachers, however, maintain that they do not have the time or have not had the opportunity to reflect on their practice. For teachers who work in urban schools, the issue of time is key, given the relatively large class sizes, lack of resources, diverse student needs, and increasing pressure to meet district and state standards (Sims, 1992). These kinds of demands on teachers' time often mean that they have not had the opportunity to look closely at their practice. Add to this, the isolation teachers often feel (Labaree, 2000). As Labaree explains:

Ever since the invention of age-graded education early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, teachers have found themselves plying their trade within the four walls of the self-contained classroom. They normally teach under conditions where they are the only professional in the room, left to their own devices to figure out a way to manage a group of 30 students and move them through the required curriculum (p. 230).

Labaree explains further that this isolation has shaped the image of the “self-made” teacher who doesn’t need support from colleagues. This image of the teacher leaves little room to create a “shared professional culture for teachers across classroom domains” (p. 230).

While teaching may be an isolating experience, it occurs within a web of social, historical, cultural and political forces. Therefore, teachers' work is necessarily social and

political (Foster & Peele, 1999; Edelsky, 1991). Likewise, teachers' collaborations with colleagues through inquiry communities, teacher networks or other forms of collaboration are necessarily political in nature. As Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1999) argue:

It involves making problematic the current arrangements of schooling; the ways knowledge is constructed, evaluated and used; and teachers' individual and collective roles in bringing about change (p. 289).

Similarly, Brian Lord (1994) argues that professional development must support a critical stance toward teaching, what he refers to as a "critical colleagueship":

This means more than simply sharing ideas or supporting one's colleagues in the change process. It means confronting traditional practice – the teacher's own and that of his or her colleagues – with an eye toward wholesale revision (p. 192).

Lord and others (Fecho, 2000) maintain that teachers must develop habits of mind that provoke critical inquiry. Such inquiry has taken a variety of forms – journals, teacher research, teacher networks. Each of these provides teachers with a source of support and means for inquiry and reflection (Berne, 2001).

Research has found that the conversations teachers have with one another around their practice can lead them to interrogate their assumptions about their students and their work as educators in a system that marginalizes some students and not others (see Florio-Ruane, 1995; Reischl, 1999). Building collaborative relationships with colleagues can also lead teachers to feel a greater sense of power to change the culture of their classroom (see for example McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). As Lieberman (2000) argues, participation in creating and sustaining a group that supports their professional identity, interests and learning, brings "great power and energy" to teachers (p. 223). While such groups often have very different purposes, they have proven to be a meaningful source of support for teachers, create a sense of community, and encourage teacher learning (Lieberman, 2000). Take for example, Michele Jean Sims (1992), an African American teacher who studied her

own practice. By collaborating with *colleagues*, Sims realized that she could meet the *needs* of her African American students better. As she writes:

Collaboration with colleagues initiates discussions around teacher practice and classroom realities that for some time were buried. By taking closer looks at our own beliefs and theories about language, literacy, teaching and learning, teachers come to know that teaching and learning are interactive and that inquiry and collaboration are inextricably related (p. 346).

Through inquiry and collaboration, she argues, teachers can “confront thoughts and emotions that oftentimes are submerged or abandoned” (p. 348).

So in the company of colleagues and in the context of inquiry and reflection, teachers might be encouraged to examine their own beliefs and assumptions about teaching and the purpose of education, and by doing so, begin to see the transformative possibilities in a critical pedagogy.

### **Teacher Professional Development at African-centered Schools**

While teachers should receive ongoing professional development in the content areas as new and innovative instructional strategies are developed and proven effective, there is a particular need for professional development in African-centered schools where the curriculum and instruction should reflect the life experiences, history and traditions of African people. But what form of professional development is needed to train and support teachers in an *African-centered* school context?

Generally, African-centered schools provide its teachers with the materials and other resources needed to develop and implement an African-centered curriculum (Ratteray, 1990). The format for these sessions generally includes lectures by renowned scholars in Pan African thought and seasoned practitioners who have taught in the African-centered

**school context.** In some cases, teachers are given incentives for participating in these **sessions** but generally participation is voluntary (Ratteray, 1990).

**As** is true in traditional public school settings, teachers in many of the African-centered public schools cropping up across the country are complaining about the additional professional development the district requires for teachers in these schools, which has led to **conflicts** between teachers and administrators. Milwaukee is one example. Recognizing that most teachers have not been exposed to Black history and culture in their preservice education, Milwaukee Public Schools required its teachers to complete a minimum of 18 college credits in African and African American history and culture within the first three years of their placement at one of the district's two public African-centered schools, one elementary and one middle school. While the district reimbursed teachers who began teaching at these schools when they first implemented the African-centered educational model, they did not agree to reimburse teachers who came to the school in subsequent years; they had to pay for these courses themselves. Nonetheless, fulfilling this requirement was not a problem for teachers at the elementary school because teachers there decided to complete the course requirements as a cohort, thus providing support to each other. In the middle school, however, a significant number of teachers was removed because they did not meet this 18-credit requirement in the three-year time limit. Failure to meet the course requirement and the subsequent turnover meant that teachers at this school did not have a shared understanding or commitment to African-centered education, making it difficult to build collaborative relationships with colleagues.

Other African-centered schools have found study groups to be important and necessary to the development of an African-centered worldview and have established ongoing study groups (Lee, 1992). In describing early challenges of the New Concept

Development Center (NCDC), an independent African-centered school in Chicago, Carol Lee (1992) explains:

Training teachers to impart the appropriate cultural knowledge and ideological perspectives into their instruction at African-centered schools has not been an easy task. Mainstream university teacher training programs, on the whole, do not prepare teachers to be responsive to diverse cultural concerns in their instruction, and they certainly do not prepare them to work in schools like NCDC (p. 164).

Recognizing this, NCDC maintains an ongoing staff development program. Teachers meet weekly by grade and monthly as an entire staff to discuss curricular and pedagogical strategies. These monthly sessions have included lessons on African American history and culture; an “intensive review” of theories of learning; and introductions to new strategies for teaching in the content areas and culturally responsive manipulatives and teaching units. NCDC also pays for its teachers to attend relevant seminars and workshops offered at local universities or community centers (Lee, 1992).

A major source of support and reinforcement for teachers in independent African-centered schools has been the National Teacher Training Institutes organized by the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI) (Lee, 1992; Ratteray, 1990). Since 1975, the Council of Independent Black Institutions, which provides resources to independent Black institutions (IBIs), has offered a two-week training seminar on how to develop and sustain an IBI. Recently, the Teacher Training Institutes have expanded to provide training for teachers and parents in African-centered public schools (Lee, 1992). However, CIBI’s primary focus is to support independent institutions therefore similar kinds of teacher training institutes are needed for public institutions if the African-centered educational model is to “work” in public schools. In large part, teacher professional development in the public school setting has lacked the depth needed for teachers to understand the philosophy of African-centered education and see the value and importance of African-centered schools

in the lives of Black children. Teachers therefore need ongoing professional development and support from the school's administration and district level leadership. Existing efforts have failed to provide the kind of collaboration and professional development needed to sustain the African-centered philosophy of education in public schools and therefore need to be revised.

### **Potential of Study Groups as a Context for Teacher Professional Development**

Book clubs and other kinds of discussion groups have become very popular. In many cases, they provide a means for intellectual and social interaction where participants can share ideas, thoughts, feelings, and reactions to a piece of literature (Flood & Lapp, 1994). A growing number of researchers have examined autobiography discussion groups with beginning and experienced teachers around culture (Florio-Ruane, 2001, 1994; Reischl, 1999). Others have explored the potential of book clubs as an instructional strategy with students (Smith, 1996; McMahon & Raphael, 1997). Yet another promising teacher education practice that embraces the complexity of preparing and developing teachers who teach in urban schools is study groups.

While book clubs are potential sites for teacher professional development, the structure of many study groups focuses the discussion more squarely on the historical, political, social and cultural aspects of American education and can provide opportunities for teachers to critically examine the process of schooling. Moreover, the interactions between the reader and the text and between the reader and other readers make study groups a powerful tool for increasing teachers' understanding, and may lead teachers to question their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and the purpose of education.

In designing this research project, I hoped to create an environment for more focused and sustained talk among teachers about the education of Black children than is often the case in conventional teacher professional development. To that end, I planned for our group to meet once a month from November 2000 to May 2001. We met on six occasions and each session lasted about an hour to an hour and a half. By designing this kind of literacy activity for teachers, I wanted to create a context for inquiry and reflection that would help teachers think critically about their work as educators of African American children. It seemed likely that teachers at a variety of points in their careers and with different backgrounds might value and learn from each other's perspectives; therefore, I recruited teachers without regard to race, gender or teaching experience.

In the next section, I argue that participation in a teacher study group can be the beginning of a journey of transformation, a movement toward a more critical, African-centered consciousness where African people and culture are valued and respected.

### **Moving Toward a Critical Consciousness: A Journey of Transformation**

Envisioned as a space where teachers might challenge their attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions about Black children and the purpose of education for Africans in America, I hoped the study group would raise teachers' *consciousness* – how they understand and interpret societal institutions, practices, and values – so that they might begin to examine their work as educators more critically. Often the ways in which teachers, even African American teachers, think about their students and their practice is filtered through a Eurocentric worldview; therefore, the purpose of the study group was to supplant traditional, hegemonic ways of thinking and being and teaching. For this reason, I chose texts that questioned and



critiqued the status quo, and those that took an alternative and sometimes radical position on the education of Black children than that commonly found in scholarly texts. I probed and pushed teachers to think beyond mainstream, Eurocentric education in hopes that this might lead them to consider the transformative possibilities of a critical, African-centered pedagogy.

When I designed this intervention, I imagined it as the beginning of a journey of transformation; a movement toward a critical consciousness that values and respects African people and culture and reflects an African worldview. In designing the study group, I hoped to get teachers to think critically about the (mis)education of Black children in America's schools, to question their beliefs and assumptions about Black children and the purpose of education. I wondered what kind of influence reading and discussing seminal work by Black educators and psychologists would have on teachers' beliefs and attitudes about the education of Black children.

In thinking about this process, I came to realize that change happens gradually and oftentimes with resistance (Howard, 1999). I also recognized that any attempt to challenge teachers' deeply ingrained cultural beliefs would "have to compete with, replace, or otherwise modify the folk theories" that guide teachers' practice (Bruner, 1996, p. 46). For these reasons, it was important that teachers studied in a "spirit of discovery," where new understanding and new knowledge could be constructed (Burbules, 1993). As Burbules (1993) argues, we cannot change other people. Rather

[t]hey change themselves: They construct their own understandings, they change their minds, they decide on alternative courses of action, they redefine their priorities, and so on. This process may be only partly conscious, and it may come as the result of so many microchanges that even the person who changes may see the culmination only after the fact (p. 10).

With this in mind, the study group sought to create opportunities where teachers could gradually construct a deeper understanding – given their current understandings and individual histories – of the historical, social, economic, political, and cultural forces that shape the lives of Black children.

While I have studied a number of theories on identity development, the work of William Cross (1971) on Black identity development has shaped my thinking on the process or stages of this transformation the most. There are five stages in Cross's model which describe the process of racial identity development for African Americans:

<i>Pre-Encounter</i>	Individual conceptualizes life from a white European frame of reference. This person may deny or devalue his or her Blackness. Individuals in this stage have little understanding of the sociopolitical implications of race in America and prefer to think in terms of a "colorless" or "colorblind" society.
<i>Encounter</i>	This stage describes the "awakening" process experienced by African Americans. This awakening is often the result of a critical incident in the individual's life that leads the individual to reconceptualize issues of race in society, and to reorganize racial feelings in one's personal life.
<i>Immersion</i>	In this stage, the individual begins to take ownership of her or his racial identity. The individual makes a conscious decision to "become Black" and embrace African values. This stage is illustrated by the individual's investment in African American culture which is often evidenced by wearing ethnic clothing and hairstyles, choosing African entertainment forms, and associating primarily with other African Americans.
<i>Internalization</i>	Individuals in this stage have a heightened awareness of the meaning of being African American. The individual has a high degree of comfort with her or himself as a racial being and insists on being acknowledged as African American while recognizing and appreciating other ethnic or racial groups.

### *Internalization-Commitment*

In this stage, there is a shift from uncontrolled rage toward white people to controlled, felt and conscious anger toward oppressive and racist institutions; from symbolic rhetoric to a dedicated, lifelong commitment to the struggle for Black liberation. The individual at this stage differs from the individual in the fourth stage in that he or she has moved beyond rhetoric and is actively trying to change his or her community.

Although this model speaks to identity development in African Americans specifically, I found it to be a useful framework for understanding the level of consciousness of the teachers in this study (who came from a variety of cultural backgrounds). As an example, Marissa, a white teacher who participated in the study group, remarked that she once thought:

I just needed to treat all kids the same and not look at what race they were. And I thought I was doing them justice and I thought that I was very open minded but then I learned in my last couple [master's] courses that I really have to appreciate their differences (Interview, November 2000).

Like many white teachers, Marissa sought to be “colorblind” (Nieto, 2000a). She assumed that *difference* meant *deficit*; therefore, she tried not to acknowledge the cultural differences between her students. According to Cross’s model, Marissa was in the *Pre-Encounter* stage. She thought in terms of a “colorless” or “colorblind” society, and therefore did not understand the sociopolitical implications of race in America. In her master’s courses, however, Marissa learned to acknowledge and value cultural differences in her classroom. This experience served as the “critical incident” that began the “awakening” process characteristic of the *Encounter* stage in Cross’s model. As this example shows, Cross’s model illustrates how one’s identity is constantly being negotiated in interaction with others and is therefore open to change (also see Kondo, 1990).

A number of other theoretical constructs describe the process through which individuals gain a more critical consciousness. Molefi Asante (1980) developed a model of

Afrocentric transformation, with four levels of transformation, leading finally to Afrocentricity, an “awareness of a collective and conscious will, and constant struggle to interpret reality from an African-centered perspective” (p. 56). In the context of this study, Asante’s model provides a lens for understanding teachers’ individual experiences with transformation as each level represents a different level of awareness. The first level in Asante’s model of Afrocentric transformation is skin recognition, “awareness of skin color and heritage as characteristics that distinguish one as a person of African descent” (56). The other three levels – environmental recognition, personality awareness, and interest-concern – speak to an individual’s growing awareness of race and racism, and a concern with issues of injustice and the oppression of people of African descent.

Paulo Freire’s (1973) description of the development of critical consciousness is also useful here. As a conceptual framework, it provides a close look at the process through which individuals move through various stages of consciousness. In Freire’s model, individuals eventually achieve a “transitive” consciousness, which has two levels. The first level, “naïve transitivity,” represents an understanding that people are subjects of history, not objects, but is characterized by oversimplification of complex societal problems and reductionism. In contrast, the second level of this “transitive” stage of consciousness is marked by a deep analysis of societal problems and complex reasoning (see Shujaa, 1992).

Gloria Ladson-Billings’s (1994) work with successful teachers of African American children is also instructive. Ladson-Billings found that the teachers who were most effective with Black children had similar beliefs and practices, what she termed a “culturally relevant pedagogy.” Compared to what she calls “assimilationist pedagogy” or mainstream, Eurocentric pedagogy, “culturally relevant pedagogy” encourages students to maintain cultural integrity while succeeding academically. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), a

“culturally relevant pedagogy” produces students: 1) who can achieve academically; 2) who can demonstrate cultural competence; and 3) who can both understand and critique the existing social order. In describing the characteristics of a “culturally relevant” teacher, she compares the beliefs and practices of an “assimilationist” teacher, one who is content with the status quo, to a “culturally relevant” one. This comparison was useful in my analysis of teachers’ views of teaching, the schooling process and their beliefs about how to educate Black children.

Together, this work provided a framework for examining teachers’ beliefs and assumptions about educating Black children, and their level of consciousness with regard to issues of race, power and schooling. While there were two white teachers in this study and the work described above (with the exception of Freire) speaks to the Black experience, there are some important parallels given the nature of this study. I was interested in teachers’ developing understandings of racism and educational inequality as it relates to educating Black children, and each of these models dealt directly with issues of race and in some cases described the process of becoming more conscious of the struggles of people of African descent.

Expanding on Asante’s Afrocentric transformation model and Cross’s stages of Black identity development, I developed a conceptual framework to help my understanding of teachers’ transformation process with regard to issues of race. Each level represents a different level of *consciousness* or awareness, with “critical, African-centered consciousness” representing the highest level of consciousness<sup>2</sup>:

- 1) *Awareness of racial differences*: Individual is conscious of differences between people based on racial, ethnic and cultural characteristics but oversimplifies complex societal problems involving issues of race.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that individuals might not be consciously engaged in this process.

- 2) *Awareness of racial discrimination*: Individual is conscious of discrimination based on a person's race or ethnicity but firmly believes acts of racial discrimination are now rare and isolated events.
- 3) *Critical consciousness*: Interest in and concern about the issues of oppressed peoples throughout the world but unspecific to people of African descent.<sup>3</sup>
- 4) *Critical, African-centered consciousness*: Individual is aware of the collective and conscious will of people of African descent, and seeks to interpret reality from an African-centered perspective that views Africans as subjects rather than objects of history.

Once teachers have reached a critical, African-centered consciousness, a critical, African-centered pedagogy is possible. Like critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1983; Freire, 1970), an African-centered pedagogy is characterized by a deep analysis of societal problems and institutions, and empowers Black children to question and challenge racism and injustice. Teachers who enact a critical, African-centered pedagogy value and respect African people and culture, and see the necessity for Black institutions which affirm and reflect the Black experience.

Developing a critical, African-centered consciousness is a process; it does not happen overnight. Instead, teachers move *gradually* toward a critical consciousness, continually questioning and revising their views of teaching and the purpose of education. Cabral (1973) has described this transformation as "a slow, broken up, and uneven process, whose development depends on each person's degree of acculturation, the materials conditions of his life, his ideological training, and his own history as a social being" (p. 43).<sup>4</sup> For this reason, it was important to know each teacher's story – where they were raised, where they were educated, what they believe, what they value, etc. In Chapter 2, I provide a snapshot of the teachers in this study as a context for understanding their beliefs and

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<sup>3</sup> While a *critical consciousness* is better than an uncritical habit of mind, in the African-centered school context, a *critical, African-centered consciousness* is more relevant and more closely aligned with the principles of African-centered pedagogy (see Lee, 1992).

assumptions about Black children, their views of teaching and the purpose of education, and their conceptions of African-centered education.

### Organization of the Dissertation

This introduction was intended to offer the reader an overview of the study and the theoretical foundations of this research. The following chapters describe the context of this study, provide an analysis of the data, and discuss the implications of this study for teacher professional development in African-centered schools. Chapter 2, *Context and methods of this study*, describes the African-centered school where this study took place, introduces the teachers who participated in the study group, and describes the research methods. Chapter 3, *Toward a critical consciousness: Challenging teachers to see the world with new eyes*, examines teachers' beliefs and attitudes; how they understand and make meaning of the larger social, cultural, and political issues ever present in American education. Chapter 4, *Seeing the value and importance of African-centered education*, describes teachers' efforts to understand African-centered education and make meaning of their work as teachers of African American students in this school context. I argue that a shift in teachers' paradigms or folk theories about teaching and the purpose of education is required in order for them to understand and embrace African-centered education and see its value in the educational lives of Black children. In Chapter 5, *Lessons learned*, I discuss what teachers learned or unlearned as a result of their participation in the study group. I consider whether and how the readings and discussions challenged teachers' beliefs and assumptions about Black children, their views on teaching, and the purpose of education for Africans in America. Chapter 6, *Preparing teachers to work in an African-centered school context*, turns to issues of professional

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in M.J. Shujaa (1992)

development for teachers in African-centered schools and examines the challenges of applying the African-centered educational model to the public school context. This chapter re-examines the need for ongoing staff development and the use of study groups as a means for supporting a critical stance toward teaching.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **CONTEXT AND METHODS OF THIS STUDY**

#### **Context of this Study and Research Problem**

In October 1999, I visited Edo Academy, one of Detroit's first three African-centered public schools. I went there to interview one of the school's first teachers for a paper I was writing on the 1991 controversy surrounding the Academy's placement in Warrendale, a predominantly white neighborhood on Detroit's west side. This teacher, affectionately known to students as Baba Jay, was one of the first staff to join the Edo Academy family when it was established in 1991 as an African-centered school and therefore knew a lot of the school's history. In describing the Academy's first years as an African-centered school, Baba Jay spoke openly about the problem of teacher turnover and how difficult it had been to bring new teachers into the fold each year.

Many of the Academy's first teachers, he explained, although college educated, had little to no teaching experience; however, they were committed to teaching an African-centered curriculum. While teacher commitment is key to the success of African-centered schools, teachers must be trained. Professional development, therefore, was a critical piece of the school's development early on. Teachers were given countless inservices and workshops – some with leading scholars in Pan African thought, including Molefi Asante and Asa Hilliard – to help them understand the philosophy of African-centered education and how to implement African-centered curriculum. Increasingly, however, many of the new teachers who joined the staff in subsequent years were somewhat indifferent to the idea of African-centered education. Their indifference might be attributed to the fact that new teachers, unlike the original cohort, were assigned to the school by the district rather than volunteered to teach there. As a consequence, they were marginally involved in, even

resistant to, any kind of professional development, especially if it required a time commitment outside of regular school hours. In addition, what the school had organized for teachers at the beginning of each school year – a two-day workshop or “baptism” into Pan African thought – was disjointed and could only touch the surface of the African-centered philosophy of education, which meant that teachers had a fragmented knowledge of the school’s underlying philosophy.

My conversation with Baba Jay about the school’s history and the challenges it faced training teachers inspired me to work with Ayo Academy, also one of Detroit Public Schools’ first three African-centered academies, and one with a high rate of teacher turnover. I was interested in ways to (re)engage the faculty in a dialogue around issues of race, power and educational inequality, not by means of inservice workshops required by the district and union, but by means of a small, voluntary study group. Informed by a growing body of research on dialogue in teaching (Burbules, 1993) and the role of dialogue in teachers’ learning and professional development (Clark, 2001; Berne, 2001), I wanted to create a context for teacher learning and research the ways a study group could engage teachers in a dialogue on the (mis)education of Black children and the philosophy of African-centered education. I assumed that even if teachers at the Academy were there by assignment rather than choice, the study group might be both informative and engaging.

In designing this study, I realized, given the Academy’s recent challenges and the standard fare offered as professional development, how difficult it would be first to get teachers to see the value in this kind of inquiry and reflection, and second, to agree to meet on their personal time. I worked from three central assumptions: 1) teachers are knowledgeable practitioners who 2) often gain very little from traditional forms of professional development and who 3) value collaboration with colleagues. Through my

research, I wanted to find out whether or not the opportunity to read and discuss the work of leading Black scholars on the education of Africans in America might lead the teachers to (re)consider the enduring power of race and racism in American education and the role that they play as educators in transforming or reproducing mainstream, Eurocentric education. I also wanted to investigate whether participation in this dialogue might lead teachers to challenge and possibly change their beliefs and assumptions about Black children and how best to educate them.

This study draws on previous research with African-centered schools (Pollard & Ajirrotutu, 2000; Murrell, 1999; Watson & Smitherman, 1996; Hoover, 1992; Lee, 1992; Lomotey, 1992). The present study, however, is unique in two significant ways. First, this is not an evaluation study. I did not set out to evaluate whether the school's African-centered curriculum led to improved student outcomes or the degree to which the African-centered educational model was being successfully implemented. Second, teachers were the primary focus. Rather than study the entire school community – teachers, administrators, parents, and students – I chose to work with teachers, to challenge their attitudes, beliefs and assumptions about Black children and the purpose of education. My study was exploratory and focused on the nature of teachers' learning – what they (un)learned about the philosophy of African-centered education and the sociopolitical context in which Black children are schooled – as they read and discussed Black scholarship from the fields of education, psychology and sociolinguistics, and linked this to problems of practice in their own school and classrooms. The following sections describe the school context, the participants and the research methods.

## **Brief Description of Ayo Academy**

Ayo Academy is an African-centered public school in Detroit, one of many urban districts in the midst of reform. As one of the Detroit Public Schools' first three African-centered academies, Ayo opened its doors in 1991 with 205 students, grades PreK-2. The Academy was located on Detroit's east side and was housed in a small building with one hallway. The building's size kept enrollment small and helped to create a close family environment. In its first three years, there were 8-10 teachers on staff and everyone – teachers, parents, and students – knew each other well and worked together in the spirit of the oft quoted African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." As one former teacher described, "it was like heaven." Importantly, the curriculum was African-centered, but the "feeling" was also there – the feeling of an African family.

In 1994, in response to increasing enrollment, Ayo moved to its current location in northwest Detroit. Once a monastery, this building is set back several yards from a busy city street and has a commanding presence on the block. Of the nearly 760 elementary and middle school students now enrolled, fewer than 1% are non-Black. Today, the average class size is about 32 students and there are more than 70 staff members, most of whom are Black (89%).

Written in its first year, the Academy's mission statement places emphasis on nurturing the whole child – emotionally, psychologically, socially, and physically – and the shared responsibility of parents, teachers and community for educating our children:

Ayo Academy is founded on the belief whereby the responsibility for educating our children in a clean, safe and healthy environment, is shared by the staff, parents and community. Our purpose is to provide academic excellence through an African-centered curriculum that is multidimensional and global in approach. We will empower students to achieve their best by instilling a strong sense of identity through positive expectations, values and self-discipline (Ayo Academy Mission Statement).

Note that while there is reference to an “African-centered curriculum” in the Academy’s mission statement, I would argue that it is rather general; that is, it is unclear what an African-centered curriculum actually involves or how it is different from the curriculum offered in traditional public schools. As an “African-centered” school, I would argue that the African-centered focus of the Academy’s curriculum and instruction should be made more explicit and a definition of African-centered education provided. However, each of Detroit’s African-centered academies has its own conception of African-centered education, so they look and feel very different from one another. This freedom to (re)interpret the African-centered educational model may have led in this case to what appear to be superficial changes in the school’s curriculum and instruction, giving “the look” of an African-centered school.

As one of the first African-centered public schools in the country, Ayo Academy was seen as a pioneer in the African-centered schools movement and received a lot of media attention. Some believe, however, that the media attention undermined the school’s success. First, the publicity distracted teachers from the everyday business of teaching and learning. As one former teacher explained, teachers often felt “on stage”; they were continually being interviewed and observed by journalists and researchers interested in studying the school. Secondly, the publicity attracted more students than the school’s small eastside building could hold. Other parents heard about the school’s success and wanted to enroll their child. The Academy eventually added grades 3-8 and moved to a bigger building. However, in a larger building with more students, the school became too big to maintain the kind of close, familial environment that had attracted so many parents and made the African-centered educational model work.

With the Academy's rapid growth and the addition every year of new teachers, who have been given little to no instruction on how to develop and implement African-centered curriculum, the school's vision has gradually changed; there is less of an African-centered emphasis in the curriculum and the culture of the classroom. Essentially, teachers "do their own thing" where African-centered curriculum is concerned. While some teachers have infused African and African American history and culture in classroom displays and rituals, others have done very little in this regard. Thus, there is a lack of consensus and continuity across classrooms. There has also been a declining teacher and student interest in the school's remaining African-centered activities. For example, Ayo established a school wide "African Dress Day," as a way to create a sense of community and celebrate African culture, where students and staff wear African dress the third Thursday of every month. However, during the 2000-2001 school year, participation dropped significantly by December, and by June, very few students or teachers were seen wearing African dress.

Without a shared vision, ongoing teacher development, and curricular support, the Academy has experienced a high rate of teacher turnover. In the last three years, Ayo has lost 10-15 teachers each year. Such high turnover, with little to no support for new teachers, has had a significant effect on the culture of the school. Teacher morale is low and student behavior has worsened. Currently, only two to three teachers from the Academy's first building remain, and there are rumors that they too will be leaving in the next year.

As this dissertation unfolds, I will return to the question of how to prepare teachers to infuse the curriculum with traditions, practices, and subject matter content that reflect African people and culture, and the ways teachers grappled with whether schools should be responsible for "teaching culture."

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## **Description of Participants**

I recruited seven teachers to participate in the study group I created and led during the 2000-2001 school year. Once a month, these teachers met after school in a cavernous room which had previously served as the monastery's library. In this setting, they discussed works written by Black scholars in the fields of education, psychology and sociolinguistics. I chose the works teachers read and discussed, and facilitated the group's discussion, acting as a participant observer. As such, I recorded the conversations that occurred during the meetings, interviewed and surveyed the teachers, and recorded field notes after each meeting. On the basis of collection and analysis of these data, I hoped to learn about the potential of study groups to impact teachers' consciousness around issues of race, power and educational inequality in the American system of education.

Five African American teachers and two white teachers participated in the study group. All women, they ranged in teaching experience from one year to more than thirty years. Collectively, they have taught in a variety of school settings, including suburban white, urban and rural Black, and urban integrated schools. Two attended historically Black colleges in the south and two others attended predominantly white state universities in Michigan; the other three teachers attended a state university located in Detroit. While the elementary teaching profession is primarily white and female, there was a significantly greater number of Black teachers in this group than in similar groups of this kind that have been studied by others (e.g., Florio-Ruane & deTar, 1995; McVee, 1999; Reischl, 1999). This fact raised the possibility that the group I created and researched might enact patterns of discourse and topics of discussion in which race and racism were more readily broached than is the case in research on white-only teacher discussion groups.



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In designing this study, I wondered whether and how differences in teachers' racial identities and cultural orientations shaped who they were and what they believed. Research on teachers rarely considers the influence of teachers' racial identity on their belief systems and teaching practices (Foster, 1990); however, teachers' political views and cultural orientation do shape how they "read the world" (Freire, 1970), and therefore how they see their students and their role as educators (see Ladson-Billings, 1994; Foster, 1990; Foster, 1993; Henry, 1994). In this study, I found teachers' *cultural frame of reference* mattered in how they responded to the texts and the issues raised in them. Their individual histories – where and how they were raised, where they went to school, where they were trained – shaped their views of teaching, learning and the purpose of education.

While teachers' backgrounds, identities and culture help shape their beliefs and assumptions about how best to educate Black children (Foster, 1990), I would argue that a teacher's *cultural frame of reference* has more to do with her life experiences (i.e., where she was raised) than her race. For example, a Black teacher who was raised and lives in an affluent white suburb and whose friends are primarily white would likely be unable to relate to the social and economic realities of the many Black children who live in our nation's economically depressed, racially isolated urban communities. In this case, although the teacher is racially Black, her *cultural frame of reference* is white. Additionally, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) found in her study of successful teachers of African American children that a teacher's race alone does not determine whether she will be successful with African American children. One of the three white teachers in her study had lived in the Black community her entire life, and as Ladson-Billings explains, had an African American cultural reference:

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Her friends and social contacts outside of school were almost exclusively African American. She was conversant in African American dialect and was sometimes mistaken over the phone for an African American.

Here, although the teacher is white, she was raised in the Black community, felt connected to her students, and demonstrated what Ladson-Billings refers to as “culturally relevant teaching.”

Yet there is much to be said about the connection that Black teachers often share with Black students. Foster (1993), who studied sixteen exemplary African American teachers, maintains that there is an important difference between Black and white teachers. She argues that Black teachers more often understand Black students (i.e., their language and behavior), value the cultural resources they bring to school, and can relate to their lives. They have experienced racism themselves and therefore can understand and explain to their students how race and racism impact Black folks’ lives socially, economically and politically (Foster, 1990). I will return to the question of whether teachers’ race matters in educating Black children in Chapter 3, but for now suffice it to say, those who teach Black children, regardless of their race, must understand, respect and value African people and culture and believe that Black children can and must succeed.

What follows is a brief description of each teacher, taking into account the influence of teachers’ *cultural frame of reference* on their views. When reading these snapshots, written from my observations, interviews and interactions with teachers as a group and individually, please make note of the following: teachers’ race, age, years of teaching experience, years at Ayo Academy and their *cultural frame of reference* (i.e., the environment in which they were raised – urban, suburban, rural – and the race of people they were raised around – primarily

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Black folks, white folks). Table 1 provides this information for quick reference. In subsequent chapters, I will refer to each teacher by first name<sup>5</sup>.

**Table 1: Study Group Participants**

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Years of Teaching Experience</i>	<i>Years at Ayo Academy</i>	<i>Cultural Frame of Reference</i>
Faith	Black	55	32	6	Urban Black
Cathy	Black	53	10	4	Urban Black
Anita	Black	30	6	2	Urban Black
Cheree	Black	28	5	2	Rural Black
Marissa	White (Italian)	27	4	2	Suburban White
Bridgette	Black	23	2	1	Urban Black
Janice	White (Polish)	25	1	1	Suburban White

### ***Faith Houston***

Faith is an African American woman in her mid fifties who lives in a suburban community that borders Detroit, and is an active member of one of Detroit's oldest Baptist churches. She is very reserved but I also found her to be warm and nurturing. She sees herself as an artist and believes her teaching ability is a gift from God. Some would say that Faith is mean but she describes herself as firm. Her second grade classroom is very structured and reflects her penchant for neatness and order.

Faith grew up in Alabama. Raised in the segregated south, her first teaching experience was in an all white classroom in Ecorse, MI. As she remembers, "That was quite an experience." She began teaching in the Detroit Public Schools in 1969, and in her 32 years of teaching, she has taught first through fifth grade. She did her student teaching in Normal, Alabama, a rural town near the historically Black university she attended, and has been teaching at Ayo Academy for six years.

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<sup>5</sup> I use pseudonyms rather than the teachers' real names.

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### ***Cathy Mason***

Cathy is an African American woman also in her mid fifties who has lived in Detroit most of her life. She is actively involved in district politics and serves as the school's union representative. Cathy teaches fourth grade at Ayo Academy, and her classroom is quite different from Faith's. Where Faith's room is neat and orderly, Cathy's may be described as "organized chaos." She is very creative, and uses art across the curriculum. Her teaching style is hands-on and her classroom is student-centered. She loves teaching and is good at it, she believes, because she has "mother wit."

Before she began teaching, Cathy worked in a number of careers, including a few years at one of the major automotive plants in Detroit. Working first as a substitute teacher in Detroit while she got her teaching certificate, Cathy has been teaching 10 years altogether, and has been at Ayo Academy for four. She did her student teaching in Detroit, and feels that this field experience taught her more than her methods courses about teaching Black children.

### ***Anita Gibson***

Anita is an African American woman in her early thirties. She has two young children who keep her busy in the evenings and on weekends. Anita's second grade classroom is also student-centered and she brings an energy to her work that keeps her students engaged. She believes that "children learn by doing," and therefore provides a regular diet of hands-on activities where children are able to move around the room and work in cooperative groups.

She was raised in Flint, MI, and has taught in Highland Park and Romulus, MI. She has been teaching for six years, two of which have been at Ayo. She did her student



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teaching in Ann Arbor, an affluent college town, which she says was very different from working in Highland Park, an economically depressed city surrounded by Detroit.

### ***Cheree Sanders***

Cheree, an African American woman in her late twenties, is relatively new to Detroit, having moved from the south soon after she finished college. She is reserved and soft spoken, and brings a very warm energy to her classroom. I would describe Cheree as “Afrocentric.” Almost everyday, she wraps her head in African fabric and adorns herself in African jewelry and clothing. She engages her third graders in a variety of hands-on and group activities, and believes that before she can start teaching the content areas, children should be taught their history.

Busy taking classes toward her certification the last four years, Cheree became certified in December 2000, during the period of this study, and has been teaching at Ayo for two years. She was born and raised in Mississippi and has a deep southern drawl.

### ***Marissa Vitale***

Marissa, an Italian American woman in her late twenties, teaches second grade at Ayo. She was raised in St. Clair Shores, a white suburb of Detroit. Marissa’s classroom is also student-centered, and I would describe her as nurturing. She seems to really care about her students and tries to understand their language and behavior despite the cultural difference. She was first exposed to diversity through her first teaching position, which was in a private, international school where she taught for two years. Together with her master’s courses, this experience changed her approach to teaching diverse students. She once believed that she needed to “treat all kids the same and not look at what race they were.”

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She has been teaching for four years; two of which have been at Ayo. She did her student teaching in Utica, MI, an eastern suburb of Detroit. Marissa speaks Italian and seems closely connected to Italian cultural traditions and customs.

### ***Bridgette Williams***

Bridgette, an African American woman in her early twenties, was raised in an upper middle class community in northwest Detroit. As a novice teacher, Bridgette's fourth grade classroom is very structured. She has high expectations for her students and often challenges her fourth graders by giving them middle school work. Compared to Cathy's fourth grade classroom, Bridgette's room is teacher-centered. Bridgette feels that she must be in complete control and believes that her classroom would be chaotic otherwise. She is articulate and outspoken, and motivates her children to succeed beyond what society expects of them.

Bridgette has been teaching for two years, and this was her first year at Ayo. She did her student teaching in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, near the historically Black university that she attended. There, she says, she had Black instructors who told her, "Black children have been taught to fail, they've been taught that they can't do anything, so you have got to go in there and boost their confidence," and therefore feels that she was better prepared to teach Black children than most beginning teachers.

### ***Janice Lipinski***

Janice, a white woman in her mid twenties who recently finished her student teaching, teaches fourth grade at Ayo. Raised in Troy, MI, an affluent suburb of Detroit, Janice has had scarce interaction with Black people and confessed that she is unfamiliar with

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Black culture. Janice is outspoken and friendly, and as a first year teacher, she seeks regular support from her more experienced colleagues. This has been a year of growth for her all around – she is learning about her students as she learns the art of teaching. In this first year, she especially had difficulty understanding her students’ language and culture, which made the year more challenging.

Janice worked in marketing before deciding to teach, and served as a substitute teacher in the Troy and Rochester, MI area while getting her certification. She was a part of a certification program at a large state university that was specifically designed for “urban education” but did not focus on educating African American children in particular. Last year she student taught for a semester at Ayo Academy in a fifth grade classroom. Janice’s cultural heritage is Polish although she did not refer to herself as Polish American or seem closely connected to any particular ethnic traditions or customs.

### **The Study Group’s Readings**

As a professional development activity, the study group offered teachers opportunities for focused reading and discussion and encouraged a spirit of inquiry and reflection. It provided 1) the content (the work of Black scholars as a focus of study); and 2) the context for discussing their own work as teachers in an African-centered public school.

As members of this group, teachers read and responded to texts that addressed the (mis)education of Black children in America’s schools and the ways in which teachers and schools can address the specific needs of Black children. Some of these texts focused on the social, psychological and emotional development of Black children and some focused on the goals and philosophy of African-centered education. I chose each text because it challenged traditional, Eurocentric ways of understanding and educating Black children. Each of these

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texts acknowledges and understands the social, historical, and political context in which Black children are schooled, underscoring race and class inequities in American education. Table 2 provides a list of the readings and the corresponding dates our group met and discussed the selected texts. Each reading selection has also been annotated (see Appendix C) for quick reference.

Teachers' lives were exceptionally busy so we often read selected chapters from the larger texts (e.g., Wilson, 1992; Smitherman, 2000). In addition, several of the teachers reported that they found the theoretical pieces difficult to read and understand; they preferred reading the more practice-oriented pieces such as Kenyatta's (1998) Guide to Implementing Afrikan-centered education (Interviews, May 2001). For example, Cheree explained that she had difficulty reading Mwalimu Shujaa's (1994) chapter, "Education and schooling: You can have one without the other":

Some things I had to really decipher, you know, stop for a moment. It was a lot of work, a lot of big words in there that I had to stop and pause and try to internalize... that would probably be the one I would say I liked the least.

Similarly, Marissa noted, "I would rather read books that are more practical and real life than theoretical." This preference is not surprising, however. As Burbules (1998) argues:

Many practicing teachers (especially in public schools) regard theoretical work, much of it generated by relatively privileged academic scholars in universities, as out of touch with and irrelevant to their concerns (p. 16).

While teachers generally prefer reading texts that have implications for their practice, the purpose of the study group was not to provide particular instructional strategies. Instead, I hoped to provide teachers, by means of reading and discussing texts that speak to the (mis)education of Black children in America's schools, an opportunity to reflect on the meaning and importance of their work in an African-centered school context as they reflected on sociopolitical context in which Black children are schooled. By examining the



work of Black scholars who interpret the schooling process from an African-centered rather than a European-centered perspective, I hoped teachers might approach their practice with a more informed understanding of the problems and possibilities in public education for African American children.

**Table 2: Study Group Readings, 2000-2001 School Year**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Reading</i>
November 28	Woodson, C.G. (1933). <u>The miseducation of the Negro</u> . Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
January 16	Shujaa, M.J. (1994). Education and schooling: You can have one without the other. In Shujaa, M.J. (Ed), <u>Too much schooling, too little education: A paradox of Black life in white societies</u> (pgs. 13-36). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
	Akoto, A. (1994). Notes on an Afrikan-centered pedagogy. In Shujaa, M.J. (Ed), <u>Too much schooling, too little education: A paradox of Black life in white societies</u> (pgs. 319-337). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
February 20	Wilson, A.N. (1992). <u>Awakening the natural genius of Black children</u> . New York: Afrikan World Infosystems.
March 13	Smitherman, G. (2000). <u>Talkin that talk: Language, culture and education in African America</u> . New York: Routledge.
April 24	Kenyatta, K. (1998). <u>Guide to implementing Afrikan-centered education</u> . Detroit, MI: Afrikan Way Investments.
May 21	Kunjufu, J. (1985). <u>Countering the conspiracy to destroy Black boys</u> . Chicago: African American Images.

### **Organization of Study Group Sessions**

The discussion sessions centered on responding to and discussing the readings. The organization of the sessions resembled the processes often used in book club discussions of both adults and children (Florio-Ruane, 2001, 1994; McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Flood, Lapp and Ranc-Buhr, 1996). Specifically, in advance of each meeting, I prepared content-

specific questions to focus the discussion and encourage further inquiry and reflection (see Appendix D for discussion questions). I led each discussion, probing teachers to think beyond the mainstream so that they might begin to rethink their assumptions about teaching and learning, and challenge existing beliefs, attitudes and expectations surrounding Black children.

Writing was also an important form of response and reflection (Flood & Lapp, 1994; Reischl, 1999). Participants were asked to keep a journal throughout the length of the study group to document their developing understandings and responses to the readings and discussions. I hoped to use these journals as an additional source of data on teachers' learning; however, in most cases, teachers did not write in their journal consistently, making this an unreliable source of data. As such, teachers' journals were used with caution when analyzing the data.

Unlike traditional staff development sessions, in which teachers often sit passively and receive information, participants in the study group actively discussed the readings throughout the hour to hour and a half sessions. Although it was the end of the day, group members were often talkative and upbeat as they entered the room where our sessions took place. I also brought food and drink to create an informal setting where teachers could relax following a busy, stressful day in the classroom. In follow up interviews (May 2001), teachers consistently noted that they enjoyed the group's discussions. Among other things, they liked that I prepared the questions for discussion beforehand and led each of the discussions. Janice's comments are a good example of the kinds of remarks teachers made about the group:

I think you did a really good job of preparing because you had those questions for us and that was a good way of getting us going or moving us along, sometimes we got side tracked. And I think that was really helpful because you picked out certain

points that maybe we overlooked or wanted to discuss but didn't know how to get there. I thought that was good.

Cheree had similar good feelings about the group:

I liked the communication. We could debate without any argument. And that's good. Most of us think that debating means that you gotta argue all the time, but it doesn't necessarily mean that. To me, I think, in the group, all of us got a chance to give our views whether we agreed with the other person and we didn't take offense to it or nothing like that. So I liked that type of energy, environment.

## **Research Methods**

### **Design and Data Collection**

The study group was designed to provide a context for ongoing reflection and discussion around issues of race, power and schooling in American education. Six study group sessions were held over a seven-month period from November through May, and lasted approximately one hour to an hour and a half each. Sessions were scheduled from 3:15pm to 5:00pm, one Tuesday of each month based on teachers' schedules.

Teachers participated in the study group voluntarily. They were not compensated for staff development time by the school but incentives were provided by the researcher. A complimentary copy of the selected texts was purchased for each teacher, and a \$25.00 gift certificate redeemable at a local Black bookstore was given upon completion of the study to encourage teachers to continue reading books similar to those read by the group. These incentives were considered appropriate given the nature and purpose of the study group.

As a means for ongoing analysis and reflection and as a participant observer, I kept my own journal of field notes (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) during the seven months of this study. To address the research questions from a variety of angles, what is called "triangulation" in interpretive research (Gordon, 1980), I collected data using a number of sources:

**Study group sessions:** Each session was audio taped for later analysis of the group's discussions. These tapes provided a record of the teachers' interactions and responses to the texts. Selected sections of these tapes were transcribed and catalogued by me.

**Teachers' journals:** Teachers recorded their beginning understandings and responses to the readings and the group's discussions in a journal provided by me. These journals were collected from teachers with their consent at the end of the research period and shortly returned. The journal was intended to be a place for teachers to reflect on what they had read and what they may have learned through the readings and group discussions; however many of the teachers did not write in their journal consistently, making this source of data less useful than I originally had hoped. While there is little data in the teachers' journals, they were used as much as feasible when comparing data to refine, revise or reject the inferences I was making about teachers' participation and learning in the study group. As this dissertation shows, however, other data sources were considerably richer and provided a greater opportunity for triangulation and analysis.

**Reflective journal:** I kept a journal of my own where I recorded my observations, thoughts, questions, and reflections on the group's discussions and responses to the readings. In particular, I noted my observations of the group's interactions, including my role in the group, and provided an ongoing analysis of teachers' developing consciousness. My journal allowed me to have a record of my thinking over time and a record of my observations of the group. It also was a source of continuous framing and testing of interpretations which influenced my subsequent participant observation and my ongoing analysis of the larger data set in an iterative process of focusing, testing, and refining research-based interpretations, which sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967) call the "constant comparative method."

**Teacher interviews:** I conducted interviews with individual teachers in November before the study group began meeting to learn about their existing beliefs and practices with regard to teaching Black children and their current understandings of African-centered education.

This first interview also gave me the opportunity to get to know teachers personally and begin to develop rapport. I interviewed teachers again in May shortly following our last session to gauge what teachers learned from the readings and discussions and whether their beliefs, attitudes and expectations had changed as a result of their participation in the group (see Appendix E for Interview Protocols).

**Attitude survey:** In addition to interviews, teachers were asked to complete an attitude survey in November as a way to assess their views of teaching and their attitudes and beliefs about educating Black children before they were introduced to the texts. The survey, which I developed, combined "culturally relevant" practices from Gloria Ladson-Billings's (1994) work with successful teachers of African American children and the work of Black psychologists Baldwin and Bell (1985), who developed the African Self-Consciousness Scale. The African Self-Consciousness scale measures 1) awareness of one's African identity and heritage (a sense of collective consciousness); 2) general priorities placed on Black survival, liberation and the necessity of institutions which affirm Black life; 3) specific priorities placed on self-knowledge and self-affirmation (i.e., Afrocentric values, customs, and practices); and 4) recognition of racial oppression (via people, concepts, institutions) to the development and survival of Black people. I also drew on Pang & Sablan's (1998) work on teacher efficacy. They developed an instrument to measure how teachers feel about their ability to teach African American students. Three dimensions were covered by this 25-item attitude survey:

<b>African Consciousness</b>	<i>Do teachers understand and value students' African heritage and believe that African history and culture should be infused throughout the curriculum?</i>
<b>Collective Consciousness</b>	<i>Do teachers feel connected to their students, the school, and the Black community?</i>
<b>Teacher Efficacy</b>	<i>Do teachers feel that they are able to teach Black children effectively and have the power to make a difference in their students' lives?</i>

Teachers were asked to respond to a series of statements regarding their views of teaching, the schooling process and the purpose of education as it relates to teaching Black children. A Likert scale was used: (5) Strongly Agree; (4) Agree; (3) Neither Agree or Disagree; (2) Disagree; and (1) Strongly Disagree. The items were clustered around one of these three dimensions (see Appendix B) and scores were averaged to get a total score for each dimension. Some items were negatively skewed (e.g., I believe failure is inevitable for some) and their values were reversed when averaging teachers' scores.

**School and district level documents, newspapers and other materials:** To help situate Ayo Academy within the context of African-centered schools nationally and the Detroit Public Schools' African-centered educational model, I collected a number of documents from the district and the school to provide a more complete picture of the school community. I also spoke with former teachers and community members who have been associated with the school in its ten-year history and therefore could provide a perspective that many of the teachers in this study could not. Lastly, I consulted area newspapers to provide additional insight into the school's history, particularly its first year.

### Methods of Analysis

Through the course of fieldwork, a number of issues became salient, leading me to refine my research questions and analysis. It became apparent that teachers knew very little

about African-centered education. The philosophy was new to them as were the key ideas and concepts central to African-centered education. As an example, teachers used the terms African-centered, Afrocentric, and African American interchangeably to describe the philosophy of the school. Teachers also spoke in response to the texts in ways suggesting that they were resistant to the concept of African-centered education and this resistance persisted over time.

The lack of prior knowledge and the resistance to the concept of African-centered education seemed related to differences in teachers' life experiences and cultural background. For this reason, the analysis of the data required attention to a number of important factors that characterized this group. Participants differed on several dimensions: 1) their level of experience as teachers; 2) their cultural backgrounds and life experiences; 3) their tenure at Ayo Academy; and 4) their knowledge of African and African American history and culture.

My analysis of the data was intended to investigate whether the study group challenged teachers' views of teaching and the purpose of education as it relates to teaching Black children specifically. For this reason, I focused on: 1) teachers' existing beliefs and assumptions about racism and injustice; 2) development in teachers' thinking around issues of race, power and schooling; and 3) the group's development and the dynamics of its discussions. First, I analyzed the group's discussions for recurring themes using audio taped recordings and transcriptions of selected sections of these tapes as primary sources. My reflective journal, teachers' journals and interviews with teachers served as secondary sources. I first looked at the general flow of the conversations and then focused on particular aspects of the discussions – topics left hanging, engaged participation, problems or issues that came up frequently. Based on my study of related research (Roberts, 1999), I entered the analysis of the group's discussions with an eye toward possible indicators of

teachers' *consciousness* (how they interpreted complex societal problems involving race and class). I was particularly interested in 1) moments of conflict and consensus; 2) how teachers built arguments for or against a particular issue; 3) whether they interjected personal narrative; 4) how they dealt with "hot lava issues"; 5) how they interacted with each other; and 6) change in teachers' thinking and participation over time. I developed analytic categories to help organize the data around these issues or questions. These categories or themes were used to help triangulate the data and create a more nuanced analysis of teachers' thinking.

I also examined teachers' learning around the goals and philosophy of African-centered education, primarily through analysis of interviews and selected discussions. I was particularly interested in 1) how participants defined and framed African-centered education; 2) how they saw themselves as teachers in this school community; and 3) what teachers claimed to have learned about African-centered education through participation in the group.

### A Note on Objectivity

As with much of social science research, my own values and politics informed the research process: the questions I asked, the kinds of data I collected, and the interpretations I made. Indeed, my reasons for conducting this research are bound up with my own level of consciousness – how I "read the world" (Freire, 1970). And just as schools aren't culturally neutral (Bruner, 1996; Boykin, 2000), I was not entirely neutral either. I became a part of the context in which I studied, built relationships with students and teachers, and established ties with the larger school community.



As I became a part of the school community as a participant observer, I continually reflected on the extent of my role in this context. I tried not to position myself as the expert or the critic (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), being careful not to judge teachers for what they believed and valued. I tried in earnest to suspend my judgment as I analyzed the data, seeking insight into the local meanings negotiated and expressed by the teachers (Bruner, 1996; Geertz, 1983). Of course, my university affiliation and doctoral status made me the "expert" in teachers' eyes but my lack of K-12 teaching experience also made me a novice.

Throughout the year, I struggled to balance my role as both expert and novice as we discussed topics which required teachers to have background knowledge. As I wrote in my reflective journal following one of our sessions:

We started our discussion where we left off the last time – What is the value of having an African-centered education?... [T]here were a number of misconceptions about African-centered education – what it is and isn't... I found myself talking a lot more than I usually do. I tried to clarify and explain what the author meant using what I already knew about African-centered education and what I learned from the reading. I felt more like an instructor this time than a facilitator, but I did not want to leave questions hanging or allow misconceptions to go unchallenged. Somehow I felt more comfortable doing that this time than I have before. Perhaps because this was obviously an area that they knew little about but wanted to know more.  
(Reflective journal, February 20, 2001)

I also struggled with my role as "the researcher." As "the researcher," my perspective was sometimes privileged. I led the group, chose the texts, and prepared the questions for our discussions. Although teachers were invited to recommend texts and take turns facilitating the discussions, they deferred to my "expertise." And while I tried to be more observer than participant during our discussions, I found that teachers wanted to know how I felt about an issue, often redirecting my questions back to me. I grew to realize that teachers respected and trusted me and became increasingly comfortable around me. As Cheree noted in my follow up interview with her:

[Y]ou were a great facilitator. You let us speak our minds and give our views. You didn't dominate or control the conversation, which was good. It's always good to hear everybody out. You also shared your beliefs or philosophy with us. I think you gave us a little more insight on the subject matter that we were discussing at that time. I think you were very helpful and I definitely enjoyed being in your group (May, 2001).

While I struggled to balance my position as expert and novice, I resisted notions of myself as an "objective" researcher because my research is so intricately tied to who I am as a progressive, Pan African, woman scholar. I believe that who I am informs and shapes who I am as a researcher, and therefore it is impossible for me to separate who I am as an African American from my research.<sup>6</sup> As such, I deliberately use the pronouns "we" and "our" throughout the dissertation when referring to the Black community rather than "they" and "their," and by doing so suspend the boundaries of objective and subjective.

In the next chapter, I will examine how teachers "read the world" (Freire, 1970); that is, how they make meaning of the world. I will take a closer look at teachers' assumptions about educating Black children and how the politics of race, culture and language shape the process of schooling in this country.

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<sup>6</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings (1997) has helped me to see my research in this way.

## CHAPTER 3

### TOWARD A CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: CHALLENGING TEACHERS TO SEE THE WORLD WITH NEW EYES

#### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to look more closely at how the participants in the study group made sense of issues related to racism and inequity in the education of Black children. Issues such as race and culture and language were central to the texts we read, making these texts a good source of discussion. In my analysis of the group's discussions, however, I found our conversations remained on the surface; that is, we did not delve deeply into the politics of race, class and language, questioning the underlying structures that maintain race and class inequities in America's schools. Teachers rarely made reference to the relationship between the history and politics of race and the process of schooling in the U.S.; they saw the world "as is."

I have taken examples from the group's discussions to illustrate how difficult it was for teachers to step outside what I call their "local" Discourse – the limited, accepted ways in which they are used to talking about race and culture and schooling – and into a more "global" Discourse. Gee's (1989) concept of primary and secondary Discourses informed my thinking. According to Gee, participants in a primary Discourse, the Discourse we acquire through our primary socialization early in life, are likely to be uncritical of this Discourse. Like the fish in the fishbowl who cannot see the water surrounding him, it is, for them, "the way things are." And in preparing teachers, teacher education has been largely unable to compete with teachers' primary Discourse around issues of race and racism; this is a topic researchers have found difficult for teachers to discuss (Florio-Ruane with deTar, 2001; Roberts, 1999; Florio-Ruane, Raphael, Glazier, McVee & Wallace, 1997; Zeichner,

1992). For this reason, I mined teachers' talk (Kvale, 1996), looking closely at how they responded to the questions raised in our discussions around issues of race and culture and language, and what was revealed about who they were, what they believed and what they valued.

### Constructing a Critical Secondary Discourse

In my role as facilitator, I directed the group's discussions and pushed participants to think outside of traditional, Eurocentric educational models. I tried to challenge teachers to question their beliefs, attitudes and assumptions about what it means to be educated and what it means to teach, particularly in an African-centered school context. With every turn, teachers resisted my challenges and by doing so strengthened their existing beliefs about race, culture and language. As an example, in our discussion of Smitherman's (2000) chapter "Introduction to Ebonics," several teachers felt strongly that Ebonics was "just slang." I offered several challenges, supported by the text, but each was met with a counterargument.

Bridgette: It's just slang to me. I don't see it as a separate language, the way they did in like California... everyone has slang.

Janice I agree, and I don't think the article was very convincing to make me believe that it was a separate language.

Marissa Yeah, it's interesting, the background that they say... but even reading it, I still don't think it is.

Ebony You don't think it's another language?

Anita No.

Ebony What do you think?

Anita I think that, like Bridgette said, it's more slang than anything.

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Ebony            So, you ~~don't~~ believe that Ebonics is a legitimate language? *Why is that?*

Bridgette        Because it's not. It's English, it's just used incorrectly. A separate language is like... Spanish is a separate language, French, but this is just incorrect, broken English, lazy English. Instead of saying I am, I'ma. That's just being lazy. It's just broken English. Just like Creole is not a separate language; it's broken French and English mixed together.

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Ebony            What about the reference to West African languages. She's saying that... the reason why she says that this is not just slang, this is not just broken English, is because this was a language that was created out of a condition, out of a situation here in this country; that this language is actually, there's some continuity between the language that was spoken hundreds of years ago when Africans were brought to this country and the language that we still speak today... It's not something that was ignorant... They created that. That's ingenious to me... They did that so that their slave masters could not understand them; they did that so that they could communicate, because they came here with very different languages. That takes ingenuity and that's not something that happens overnight and it's not just incorrect English.

Janice            But it's code, I mean it's not a formal language. Like kids speak in code too, you know, so that they're parents won't understand them, and yes that's a much bigger deal for a whole culture to do that but at the same time I think that you can still separate, okay, here's where we need to talk code and then here's when we have to speak the norm, Standard English.

The conversation continued as teachers countered the major claims of Smitherman's argument. Although Smitherman provided historical and linguistic evidence to support her argument, these teachers firmly held that Black English was nothing more than incorrect English.

In my questioning, I tried to create a secondary Discourse, one that would make building a critical, African-centered consciousness possible. As the following example illustrates, however, teachers resisted arguments for a culture-centered pedagogy. The

teachers in this exchange did not see the *practical* value in knowing African and African American history. While having such cultural knowledge was said to build self-esteem, teachers did not believe knowledge of self/people/culture contributed to success in the “real world”:

Anita I guess my question would be, as a parent, how is this gonna... I know it's good for me to know my background or whatever but when you get to the real world, who cares about your culture? It's about what you *know*.

Ebony But should we change who we are [to be accepted] or should we [society] change how we think about cultural diversity. It seems like we should change the fact that they [society] only want to know what we know, what's in our heads, and they don't want to know who we are as cultural beings.

Janice But if you do that with every single culture, then you're gonna have clashes. You can't all come together and work and have the same... like in Spain, you know, they take siestas for two hours. Well, that doesn't really work here. You can't just do that... and if that's the way you're gonna make the school around that way of life, then there needs to be some sort of balance. You have to realize that you can't take everything with you out into society.

Anita Yeah, because the reality of it is, idealistically, it's wonderful, but the reality of it is, who cares? I mean, it might sound bold but that's the truth. Who *does* care?

Cathy Well, it's true, like if you're cashier in a store, nobody's going to ask you, well, what do you know about African Americans. You know, they're not going to ask you that or when you're in a corporation, you're not going to talk about that. Like my husband works at GM, he's not going to sit up there around Caucasian people and talk about it. So, that's what we have to think about, what value is it when you get out there in the real world?

Anita It builds up our self-esteem, and that's what I think it's there for, to build up your self-esteem and feel good about who you are, but the reality of it is, when you get out in the real world, nobody cares.

In this exchange, teachers seem to suggest that the purpose of schooling is assimilation and therefore students need to abandon their cultural identity – their language, traditions,

hairstyles, and dress – to succeed in the “real world.” They saw the United States as a melting pot where cultural differences are blended and one “American” culture is created. As Nieto (2000b) has argued, however, the goal of assimilation devalues students’ culture. When I suggested we question society’s values with regard to cultural diversity rather than try to fit in, they seemed to accept the status quo – what society expects – and by doing so defended the kind of Eurocentric hegemony that devalues the culture of “non-white” people.

As the above examples illustrate, constructing a secondary, critical Discourse was difficult. Participants rarely questioned their beliefs and assumptions about themselves or their students, in large part because teachers’ professional, secondary Discourse is grounded in a Eurocentric worldview, which shapes their values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities, and therefore how they see the process of schooling and their work as teachers. Together with teachers’ primary Discourse (i.e., cultural orientation), the traditional Discourse of teaching influences how they make sense of the world.

According to Gee (1989), a Discourse is like an “identity kit,” which “comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act, talk and often write, so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (p. 7). As part of their training to become teachers, teachers learn to speak, think, and act like a teacher. By enculturation or apprenticeship, they are scaffolded into the teaching profession by people who have already mastered the Discourse. However, few teacher education programs prepare teachers to address the needs of Black children (or other children of color for that matter) (Ladson-Billings, 2000). This means that teachers as a group have been socialized into a Discourse that limits the space of possibility for a pedagogy that can empower Black children to transform their lives, their community, the nation, and the world.

Expanding on Gee's (1989) concept of primary and secondary Discourses, I refer to this Discourse as teachers' "local" Discourse for two key reasons. First, teachers did not make connections between the social, economic and political realities of people of African descent locally, nationally and globally (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Many of them were raised in the Detroit area or have spent most of their adult lives in Detroit. They thought narrowly, focusing only on Detroit Public Schools and the education of Black children in Detroit. They did not make connections between what's happening in Detroit and the education of children of African descent in other major cities in the U.S. and throughout the Diaspora. Second, teachers thought within the boundaries of traditional, Eurocentric education. Educated and now teaching in traditional public school settings, that's what they know best; it is familiar and close to home. They know what to expect and understand their limits as educators in this system. Additionally, "I" is the central focus here. Feeling powerless to make a difference in the world, greater attention is given to what can be done in one's immediate surroundings (i.e., "I only have power over what happens in my classroom").

A "global" Discourse, on the other hand, looks beyond traditional, Eurocentric education to alternative educational models that reflect a commitment to justice and humanity, and acknowledges the interconnectedness of the human family. In the context of schools, a teacher sees her own future symbiotically linked to her students' future (Lee, 1992). "We" is the central focus here. Individuals look beyond their immediate surroundings, seeing themselves as part of a global community. They are concerned with the oppression of people around the world as they are with injustice in their own communities.

Depending on the extent of teachers' socialization into the traditional Discourse of teachers, constructing a secondary, critical Discourse can be difficult. As Gee (1989) argues,



the values, beliefs, and attitudes associated with participation in one Discourse often conflicts with the values, beliefs and attitudes in another Discourse, which can create some anxiety. In fact, when such conflict or tension exists, it can inhibit acquisition of one or the other or both of the conflicting Discourses (Gee, 1989), in this case a critical, African-centered Discourse and the traditional, Eurocentric Discourse of teachers.

As the data analyses presented in this chapter and Chapter Four illustrate, I found that teachers took few risks, rarely stepping outside their "local" Discourse to question their beliefs and assumptions about the process of schooling and the function of education. For the most part, they stayed in a "safe" conversational space and by doing so distanced themselves from the politics of education. In the following exchange, for example, I ask teachers to consider their role in passing on cultural knowledge. Overwhelmed by the increasing responsibilities placed on teachers, they shifted this responsibility to parents<sup>7</sup> and by doing so distanced themselves from the "messiness" of culture and the politics of education. What's more, they saw imparting cultural knowledge as an *add-on* to the standard curriculum rather than an important function of schools.

Ebony            Do you think that it's possible within the public school system to be educated in the way that Shujaa [1994] writes about?

Janice            No. I don't. Just because... like if you're trying to pass down cultural knowledge, that has to come from your family. And there's too many different cultures in one classroom for that to happen for every child. There could be up to, you could have, with 25 kids, you could have 25 different cultural backgrounds and there's no way that you're going to be able to fully educate that child about their heritage... There's just not enough time.

Anita            And with the curriculum how it is. Each year it's getting larger. I mean, they're adding something each year to our curriculum. So it's really hard. I mean, I would love to teach African American

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<sup>7</sup> Many educators would argue that schools should stay out of this area, leaving the primary responsibility for passing on cultural knowledge with parents. While I disagree, I respect the teachers' views on this issue.

education in my class but we just... with the curriculum the way it is now, it's difficult.

Janice      You can focus on several different cultures, but you have to be very, very dedicated to do that. And I'm not saying that we're not but it's just then you have to pick, well which ones do I incorporate and you know, how can I still get the math curriculum done while we're studying Japanese culture and how I can get my American history social studies in if we're studying something else. I think it's really hard to integrate that stuff.

Cathy      And then we have MEAP testing. We're focusing on skills more so than anything else.

Ebony      But what if your classroom is of the same culture? Like here at Ayo Academy?

In this exchange, teachers' views of teaching were limited to skills development. They saw themselves as "technicians" whose function is to implement curriculum (Giroux, 1985) rather than "cultural workers" whose work is fundamentally political (Freire, 1998). This tendency in education to reduce teachers' work to methodologies discounts "the very need for critical thinking" (Giroux, 1985) and in doing so ensures that the Discourse of teaching remains uncritical and unreflective of the mainstream, Eurocentric system of education.

While Gee (1989) has argued that secondary Discourses cannot be taught, opportunities can be provided where a critical, secondary Discourse can be acquired through scaffolding. Working closely over time with experienced teachers of critical pedagogy can provide the type and intensity of support necessary to help new teachers interrogate their beliefs about teaching and learning in substantive and powerful ways (Fecho, 2000).

I now turn to a discussion of teachers' views on the purpose of education for Africans in America and the politics of race, class and language in the American system of education as they were revealed in the concerns and questions raised in the conversations I

had with teachers across the six study group sessions. The analysis of these conversations revealed a consistent set of themes, among these were:

- 1) The Purpose of Education;
- 2) The Politics of Race;
- 3) White Teachers Teaching Black Children; and
- 4) The Politics of Language

In the remainder of this chapter, I take a close look at these themes and the complexities of race, class and language in American education uncovered in my analysis of the group's discussions.

### **The Purpose of Education**

In this group, by reading, writing about and discussing the work of Black scholars, teachers began a journey toward *consciousness* or a deepened understanding of the historical and contemporary struggle for economic, social, and political power in the Black community. As part of this journey, teachers were encouraged to question and critique contemporary educational policy so that they might begin to see the value of African-centered education, thereby redefining for themselves what it means to teach in this particular school context. As teachers in a school struggling to sustain its African-centered focus amid changes in district leadership and school staff, their participation in the study group offered them an opportunity to articulate their beliefs and reflect on their practice – who **they** were, what they believed, what they understood about African-centered education, and **how** they saw their role as teachers in an African-centered school context.

Early on, we began discussing the purpose of education and the role of schooling in the **lives** of Black children. A chapter by Mwalimu Shujaa (1994), "Education and schooling: You **can** have one without the other," focused our discussion on the ways in which

schooling as a process perpetuates and maintains society's existing power relations and "the institutional structures that support those arrangements" (p. 15). Before this reading, a number of teachers, myself included, had not thought about the difference between education and schooling. Cathy, for example, remembered always being told, "go to school and get an education." The implied expectation is that "education" will be the outcome of "schooling." However, Shujaa argues:

Education, in contrast to schooling, is the process of transmitting from one generation to the next knowledge of the values, aesthetics, spiritual beliefs, and all things that give a particular cultural orientation its uniqueness. Every cultural group must provide for this transmission process or it will cease to exist (p. 15).

The education of Black people must therefore be "strategically guided by an African American cultural orientation and an understanding of how societal power relations are maintained" (p. 16). In the American system of education, however, schools are not set up to "educate" Black children in the ways Shujaa suggests. As a consequence, many of our children know very little about the past, present and future of African people.

While the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court decision ended school segregation and promised to provide an "equal" education, the education Black children now receive is more "unequal" today than it was fifty years ago. In some ways, integration created an illusion and convinced many Americans, Black folks included, that institutional racism no longer existed. We could dine in the same restaurants, live in the same neighborhoods and attend the same schools with white folks, and therefore it was assumed that "the struggle" was over. Naturally, with integration, the function of education changed; education was no longer seen as the "practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994). As Haki and Safisha Madhubuti (1994) argue:

Many believed that if we had first-rate facilities, buildings, supplies, environment, teachers, and support personnel, a quality education would follow. This is obviously



not true. We now understand that there is a profound difference between going to school and being educated (p. 4-5).

In large part, it was assumed that we were being taught in “better” schools by “better” teachers; however, in these “better” schools, Black children were no longer seen as scholars and naturally gifted but “intellectually inferior” and “culturally deprived.” This way of thinking has been passed down to today’s generation of teachers and is largely unchallenged in conventional teacher education (Ladson-Billings, 2000b). Operating from a deficit perspective, teachers too often see Black children as solely having needs rather than strengths (Ladson-Billings, 2000b; King, 1994).

Moreover, teachers have bought into the rhetoric that school “levels the playing field,” in which educational opportunities are equal and students are free to pursue success, and where, by their success, they will garner opportunity and advancement in U.S. society.

As an example, Janice wondered:

Why is it that people of the same socioeconomic background in similar places can achieve and can come out of where they’re at and some places they don’t?

Janice seemed to believe that individuals who succeed *want* to succeed and the others *choose* not to succeed. This view of society “blames the victim” rather than questioning the historical, social, economic and political forces that allow some to succeed and not others. This view also assumes that all students, regardless of race or class or gender, are equally free to learn in school and have equal access to the “culture of power” (Delpit, 1988). An “ideology of whiteness” has led Janice (and other white female teachers) to believe in the myth that “hard work and perseverance are intrinsic, equally distributed among the races, and equally available to all” (McIntyre, 1997, p. 123).

As bell hooks writes in her book Teaching to Transgress, “[t]he classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.” Yet if teachers perceive no problem in

the classroom or uncritically accept the status quo, then they are likely to reproduce the dominant discourse that marginalizes people of color. Thus, as is, the classroom plays only a minor role in increasing the transformative possibilities for individuals and communities.

This question of the function of education continued to surface in our readings and discussions. I challenged teachers to think of education as more than the acquisition of skills – reading, writing, and arithmetic. We questioned whether the purpose of education was or should be to uplift the race. There was agreement that for a people to survive, individuals must give back or help others in the community come up – each one, teach one. *Survival*, therefore, was seen as one function of education:

Faith            I think it's for survival and how well you survive. Because I've always thought that the Black child has to be better when it comes to jobs because who's in charge of the country? I saw more people in office, high office, under the Clinton administration than ever, and it's not because they weren't educated; it was the color of their skin.

Bridgette       Well, I agree. I tell my kids that all the time. I say that you have to be 50 times better than everyone else just because you're Black, and then if you're a woman, of any race, especially a Black woman, you have to be better. You *have* to be to get the same respect. That's just the way it is, it's not right, but that's reality... you have to be better, especially because they don't expect much from Black children, or people, anyway.

Ebony            So is this survival of the individual or survival of the group?

Bridgette       A little of both maybe.

Cathy            I would say the individual because my husband works at General Motors and he's in an office with all white men and they give him high respect and high regard, and especially the engineers. They wrote him a letter that was awesome. I guess it depends on how you carry yourself and how you walk through that door.

Here, education is seen as providing opportunity for job success and upward mobility rather than achieving self-determination and self-sufficiency for African Americans. In this exchange, teachers seemed to suggest that individuals stand alone rather than as part of

communities which are interconnected and interdependent. Education was also seen as an apolitical societal structure. That is, teachers did not speak about education in political terms (i.e., as a means for self-determination and liberation) but simply as a way to move up the socioeconomic ladder. They seemed to place greater emphasis on the survival of the *individual* rather than survival of a *people*. Many of us, however, see education as “essentially a preparation for jobs, as a preparation for moving up in social status, and as a means of securing a better lifestyle” (Wilson, 1991, p. 1). But if education is to be “critically transformative” (King, 1994), the function of education should be to help secure the social, political, economic and cultural survival of a people. As Amos Wilson (1991) contends:

When we talk about maximizing the intelligence of Black children we are speaking not just in terms of their ability to go through school and to get better reading and writing averages and go to the right colleges. We are concerned about enhancing their intelligence so that it can serve as a means for maintaining the actual physical survival of Black people (p. 1).

This conversation continued as teachers considered the responsibility we have to reach back into our community to help others:

Cheree        I think in this society, African Americans have the same view as Western civilization; you got that good job, you got that house, you got that car, you moving up. You got it made. You're on top of the world. And that's how I think most people in this society, African Americans or white society or any other race, they really actually think that's the way you move up.

Ebony        So education is for that purpose; to get a good job, to get a nice house.

Cheree        To me, yeah, I really think most people believe that. They really do.

Janice        We live in a very individualistic society, like we're self-centered. We're not concerned about our neighbors or our community... that's just not how our society is set up.

Ebony        Do you think it should be? Do you think that education should be set up to secure the survival of Black people?



Faith            Well, if you don't have a job, you're not going to survive. And that's what I told my sons, hey, if you like the way you live, then you have to get it because this is ours.

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Ebony           So you sort of see then that surviving is getting a job; that in order to be able to help the Black community, you have to have a job.

Faith           Well, to get a job, you have to be educated. It goes hand in hand. And then you're educated enough to know how to help.

In this exchange, teachers continued to place emphasis on the individual and the material standards used to measure success in American society. This time, however, while they acknowledged society's individualistic values, they also seemed to question society's focus on the individual rather than the group and suggested that we give back to our communities. But, they agreed, in order to give back to your community you must have a job, which requires an education. Too often, however, when individuals become "educated," they lose touch with the needs and interests of their communities (see Woodson, 1933). Our children must therefore be taught the value and importance of giving back and the ways in which the individual and the community are interconnected and interdependent.

One other function of education is to transmit cultural knowledge from one generation to the next (Shujaa, 1994). This knowledge it is argued is needed for the survival and liberation of Africans in America and throughout the world (King, 1994). Cheree, for example, maintains that Black children need to know their ancestors so that they will have pride in themselves, their people, and their culture. Both Cheree and Faith believed that children would behave differently if they knew their history; the sacrifices their ancestors made for them to be educated. As Faith explained:

[I]f they really, really get it, then their character will be developed in a different way, in a good positive way because certain things just weren't allowed and I think if they

are reminded that our forefathers even lost lives so they could be educated, then they would act differently...

Likewise, Asante (1991) has argued that the purpose of education is as much cultural as it is academic:

Certainly, if African American children were taught to be fully aware of the struggles of our African forebears, they would find a renewed sense of purpose and vision in their own lives. They would cease acting as if they have no past and no future (p. 177).

While research has found that children do well academically and socially in culturally affirming school contexts (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Watson & Smitherman, 1996; King, 1994; Hoover, 1992; Lee, 1992; Lomotey, 1992), the teachers in the study group did not place great value on having cultural knowledge. As discussed in the previous section, they felt this knowledge meant little in the "real world."

We continually questioned whether knowing African and African American history and culture actually improves academic achievement and self-esteem. While teachers generally felt that Black children should know their history, in the following exchange teachers noted other factors which they believed are more important and have a greater influence on achievement and self-esteem.

Ebony            In this book, we again see an emphasis on learning and knowing African and African American history. He [Jawanza Kunjufu] talks about that as part of the SETCLAE [Self Esteem Through Culture Leads to Academic Excellence] curriculum... He sees knowing your African history as a way of improving academic achievement and self-esteem. Do you think that this will "save" Black boys from failure, knowing their history? Do you think that [knowing one's history] is a big part of [being successful in school]?

Anita            Do you mean Black boys knowing their history, would that help them to succeed in school?

Ebony            Yes.

Anita            Um, no, because you still have that peer pressure.



- Janice            Right. It's the environment.
- Cathy            And parental involvement.
- Anita            I mean, sometimes the peer pressure is more, what am I trying to say, has a greater effect on, boys especially, than the parents, parental involvement.
- Ebony            But... I'll just be devil's advocate. What if a child was sort of, their self-esteem was bolstered by knowing about their history that when they were faced with a challenge, you know, at a crossroads when they were with their peers, having higher self-esteem, knowing who they were culturally, would make them make a better choice when they were faced with a dilemma, when they were with their friends. That's possible. So even though there will still be peer pressure, perhaps they'll have higher self-esteem, and they won't be as influenced by peer pressure.
- Janice            But I don't think that that alone is going to save the boys.
- Anita            No, not the history.

On probing, a majority of teachers placed very little value on knowing African and African American history in the grand scheme of things. They believed environmental factors such as peer pressure and parental involvement had a greater influence on achievement and self-esteem. When asked what importance cultural knowledge had in a child's overall development, many of the teachers felt knowledge of self/people/culture had little significance in the "real world," and therefore should not be an integral part of the schooling process. This view suggests that the purpose of education is primarily academic and reduces the liberatory potential education holds.

### The Politics of Race

The study group offered teachers opportunities to explore and begin to articulate their attitudes and beliefs about race, class, and language difference. As a body of work written by Black scholars about the (mis)education of Black people, our readings centered

the group's discussions on issues of race. There was no way around it. Even so, teachers tiptoed around the race button, speaking indirectly about it. They often spoke of education in general rather than the education of Black children specifically. While African American children comprise 91% of Detroit schools, teachers often discussed the city's schools without reference to race. Teachers' talk would seem to suggest that they were neutral on the topic of race; however, in my direct questioning, the conversation focused more squarely on issues of race and class. In these moments, they talked about their own schooling experiences both as students and teachers in public schools and shared stories where race was central. Taken together, our discussions illustrate how taboo issues of race and racism are while also bringing race and class inequities in American education to the fore.

More than thirty years after *I Have a Dream*, race continues to divide this country and has become a source of discussion and debate in educational circles. But the politics of race have now become obscured by the intersection of class with race (W. Wilson, 1980; Rist, 1996). In the U.S., schooling is enacted in ways that virtually guarantee race and class inequities; the majority of minority students attend the poorest schools, which often have few resources to support the educational needs of students (Kozol, 1991). However, the teachers in the study group did not problematize schooling in this way. While they made comparisons between urban and suburban schools with regard to resources, they did not consider the intersection of class with race in urban education or question why an overwhelming number of poor Black and Latino students attend the poorest urban schools, which have a greater number of underprepared and underqualified teachers. As an example, Faith remarked on the differences in tax base between urban and suburban communities and the lack of parent involvement at the district level as the reasons for the differences between

the schooling experiences of Black children in urban schools and white children in suburban schools:

*I really don't know, all I can do is speculate. Maybe the taxes... I think it might be mismanagement. I don't think parents are as strong as they should be when it comes to demands of the people in charge, the Board of Education, even though they're so ready to attack teachers. But I don't think they put their voices where they should be. It's almost like they have gotten into this mindset of acceptance and so therefore it's almost like, and I hate to say it, but "This is all we deserve," and then it carries over to the child (Interview, November, 2000)*

Here, Faith places the onus of responsibility on parents rather than questioning the institution of schooling and the structural inequalities that exist in American education. This perception that institutional racism no longer exists and therefore individuals are largely responsible for their circumstances prevailed among the group of teachers in this study. They did not take into account the history of racism and injustice in the U.S. and the institutional racism that exists in the American system of education.

A majority of teachers' comments seemed to suggest that they believed in the system. They questioned whether schools reproduced inequality; they saw schools as places of equal opportunity for everyone. Their arguments assumed that the reasons an individual does not succeed are personal rather than institutional. As an example, Janice could not see how institutional racism exists in schools. She argued, "it's not schooling that does that [reproduce inequality], it's the people that are in that school or those schools." Janice suggests that there might be individual teachers or schools who are racist but the institution of schooling is neutral with respect to race and therefore provides "equal" educational opportunities for everyone. She felt strongly that "schools are no longer intended to keep people in their place":

*I don't think school is now set up that way. I know that it was, used to be set up that way; kids were tracked into certain jobs based on their abilities and their race and their socioeconomic background. But I don't think that that's the way it is anymore.*

Janice saw schools as neutral places where racism might exist at some level, in one classroom or one school, but not throughout the institution of school. She located racism within individual teachers and schools; that is, individual, isolated people (teachers, administrators) or schools might be racist but the *institution of schooling* is not designed, even implicitly, to reproduce race and class inequalities inherent in the larger society. Such uncritical acceptance, McIntyre (1997) argues, serves to maintain the oppressive structures that “ensure the sanctity of the dominant group’s power, privilege and ideology” (p. 117). As a white teacher, Janice embraced what McIntyre (1997) refers to as an “ideology of whiteness,” which “refutes the legacy of racism, dismisses the race inequities that exist in our schools, and resists the restructuring of educational institutions” to make resources equitable to all students, thereby reproducing the inequalities inherent in the larger society (p. 120).

Reminiscent of the kinds of arguments launched against Affirmative Action, Janice argued further that Black people are no different from other groups of people. That is, their circumstances are not unique; every cultural group has its problems. Therefore, Black people do not deserve preference or special attention:

It [society] is asking them to take on this certain persona. It is asking them to put aside certain beliefs or behaviors or something... but that’s expected of everybody, not just African Americans. I mean, there’s no teaching of Japanese culture, no teaching of Polish culture, and I’m not asking there to be, but I’m just saying that there’s no taking into account other people’s culture as well. I don’t think it’s just African Americans.

She was unsympathetic to the Black community’s struggle to gain economic and political power; to be respected and honored for their contributions to the world; to be educated in the context of their own history and culture. Janice suggests here that because other cultural groups are not given focused attention in the curriculum, African history and culture should not be an exception. Like other teachers in the study group, Janice suggests that American

society is a melting pot (i.e., many becoming one) and that everyone is expected to act and talk a certain way.

As Janice saw it, every cultural group has to compromise something of their culture to become American, so why create schools for Africans in America to preserve their culture? What makes them any different from Japanese Americans or Latin Americans? According to Ogbu (1992, 1978), the schooling experience of minority groups is influenced by a complex set of social, economic, historical and cultural forces, which differentially impacts their experience as a minority in the U.S. African Americans, for example, are what Ogbu refers to as "involuntary minorities" because they were brought to the U.S. "against their will" and have been denied true assimilation into mainstream society as compared to Japanese Americans who immigrated to the U.S. for better economic opportunities and political freedom. Likewise, Ladson-Billings (2000b) maintains that there are important differences between the African American experience and the experiences of other non-white groups. She argues, "Our understanding of the commonalities of oppression cannot wash out the particularities and specifics of each experience" (p. 207). She writes further:

The African American social and cultural experience, like those of each cultural group, is unique. African Americans are the only group forcibly brought to the Americas for the expressed purpose of labor exploitation. As one of the earliest nonindigenous groups to appear in the Americas, African Americans have a history in this country that predates most European Americans (p. 207).

Thus, by compressing the experiences of all non-white groups into a singular category of "other," we ignore the very different histories that shape the present and future realities of these groups. Although Janice stood out in this regard, there was agreement among the majority of the teachers that if there are African-centered schools where African culture is reflected in the school's texts, curricula and practices, then there must be something comparable created for every other cultural group so that no one group is excluded.



Finally, the majority of teachers maintained that all children ~~are~~ *fundamentally* the same despite physical differences such as skin color and hair texture. *They embraced a doctrine of colorblindness when it came to thinking about teaching children. There was agreement that Black children are no different from other children developmentally but rather the difference lies in how they are raised (i.e., their home environment). While teachers recognized that Black children have different needs and that instruction should be culturally relevant, they maintained that "we all bleed the same color blood" and therefore there is no significant difference between Black children and other groups of children developmentally. As Cathy noted, "When you're on the operating table, you don't know whose blood you're getting." For them, the home environment was key. They attributed student failure to deficiencies in the family structure rather than to institutional racism and structural inequalities.*

While it was agreed that Black children are no different from other groups of children developmentally, the Black teachers in the group felt that the Black child had to be better than other children (i.e., perform better academically). Bridgette, for example, remarked on how little society expects from Black children, which is why she explains to her students that they have to be better than other groups of children:

I tell my kids that all the time. I say that you have to be 50 times better than everyone else just because you're Black, and then if you're a woman, of any race, especially a Black woman, you have to be better. You have to be to get the same respect. That's just the way it is, it's not right, but it's reality.

And even Faith, who maintained that children are fundamentally the same, acknowledged that since she's been at the Academy, she has tried to build up her children's self-esteem more:

To me, children are really... they're just really children. And I was really surprised when I started teaching, they all act alike, they all can misbehave, they're loving. But

here I found myself trying even harder to get them to act as ~~un~~intelligent as they are because I know what they have to face once they get into the world.

As Black teachers, both Bridgette and Faith recognized the challenges that their students will face being Black in this society. They understood the politics of race and sought to prepare their students for the harsh realities of racism. Other studies (Foster, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Henry, 1994) have also found that Black teachers see their work with Black children as political.

While race was central in many of our discussions, discussions of race and racism are largely absent from educational discourse (Ladson-Billings, 2000b). Such issues are seen as taboo (Henry, 1994) or "hot lava" (Florio-Ruane, Raphael, Glazier, McVee & Wallace, 1997). And as McIntyre (1997) argues, teachers "are not accustomed to examining the intricate web of racism that exists in the education system. Thus, many of them tend to reproduce the dominant discourse through uncritical acceptance of myths and stereotypes as well as through unreflective teaching practices" (p. 131). Teachers, however, must understand that racism exists in society, and therefore the school as an institution of society is influenced by racism (Lee, 1985).

### **White Teachers Teaching Black Children**

The teaching force is generally white, middle class, English-speaking and female. Some have argued that white teachers are unable to teach Black children effectively because they do not share the same cultural background as their Black students. Others believe that a teacher's race doesn't matter. Foster (1993) argues, however, that African American teachers are important in the educational lives of Black children. First, African American teachers often serve as role models and parent surrogates for Black students. Second, they often value the cultural resources they bring to the classroom, have an ability to

communicate with them, and often use culturally relevant pedagogical strategies. In contrast, white teachers may not understand Black children's language and behavior or appreciate the cultural resources they bring with them to classroom, especially if they have not had the opportunity to learn about and experience African and African American culture.

What's more, research has found that while white teachers comprise more than 90 percent of the teaching profession (and these statistics are rising), they are rarely prepared to teach the increasingly diverse student population in which many of them teach (McDiarmid, 1992; Paine, 1990). Meanwhile, the number of African American teachers has been declining. During the period between 1970 and 1990, the percentage of African Americans in teaching declined from 12 percent to 8 percent (S. King, 1993). In this same period, the percentage of African American students enrolled in public schools rose 2 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001).

This question of a teacher's race is often raised in discussions on the education of Black children. For some, whether white teachers can and should teach Black children is not just an issue of "good teaching" but also one of cultural relevance. "Can white teachers relate to Black children?" There was agreement among the teachers in this study that Black children can be taught as effectively by white teachers. They felt strongly that one's race or ethnicity is not as important as, "Can you teach? Do you care about children?" Their view of teaching centered on "caring" for children. What was striking about this view of teaching was teachers' uncritical acceptance of their own sets of values, attitudes and expectations with regard to teaching disenfranchised groups, and their belief that all they have to do is care about children. This created what McIntyre (1997) refers to as a "caring without critique" discourse that uncritically accepts the status quo. As McIntyre (1997) argues, "no amount of caring... is going to dismantle the foundations of racism" (p. 131). Teachers,

therefore, must do more than “care” about children if education is to be “critically transformative” (King, 1994).

While a majority of teachers agreed that a teacher’s race did *not* matter, Marissa and Janice, the white teachers in the group, recounted experiences where their race was an issue. Marissa, who is Italian American, described a situation where a parent did not want her child placed in Marissa’s classroom:

Last year, another parent had a white teacher and she had this stereotype that all white teachers were the same and she said to Mrs. Gibson, “I don’t want my daughter to have...” Was it me? Did she say my name? And then I had her for summer school and it was like a total change. But she was comparing me to the other white teacher that she had... she gave me a chance and she found... at the end, she was like, “My daughter loves school because of you. She looks forward to school.”

Marissa seemed proud that her teaching ability swayed the parent’s opinion of white teachers. Both Marissa and the parent in this situation realized that a teacher’s race didn’t matter when it came to “good teaching.”

Janice also shared her experience teaching fourth grade at the Academy. As a first year teacher, she relied heavily on the support of a teacher next door to her classroom:

I go over to Mrs. Henson’s class and I’m like what does this mean? What did they say? I have no idea... Sometimes I don’t even know that they’re doing something wrong, and she’s like that’s because you’re white and they’re taking advantage of you. And that’s true...

Unfamiliar with the language and interactional style of her students, Janice’s race mattered in her ability to understand her students and deal with problem behavior. She understood that her students were taking advantage of her because she was “too nice.” Janice’s story led us to a discussion of the difference between the ways white and Black teachers discipline students. Black teachers are known to be more strict and demanding of Black children than white teachers, who are perceived to be pushovers. Lisa Delpit (1988), who introduced this

notion of the “culture of power,” sheds some light on this issue. She suggests that white middle class teachers’ indirect teaching style is “an attempt to reduce the implications of overt power in order to establish a more egalitarian and non-authoritarian classroom atmosphere” (p. 290). Black children, however, operate under a different notion of authority Delpit argues:

The Black child may perceive the middle class teacher as weak, ineffectual, and incapable of taking on the role of being the teacher; therefore, there is no need to follow her directives... But of course the teacher may not view the problem as residing in herself but in the student, and the child may once again become the behavior-disordered Black boy in special education (p. 290).

This is one reason why scholars have argued that teachers who share the same cultural background are more effective with Black children (Foster, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Henry, 1994; Irvine, 1990).

We also questioned whether Black teachers/white children would be the same issue. Bridgette, in particular, had some uncertainty. She didn’t know whether she would be as effective with white children:

I don’t know how I would do teaching white children. I don’t know if I could because I would be, I don’t know if I would be afraid of some things that I would say. I don’t know if you feel that way [referring to Janice], but I’ve never taught in a diverse classroom. I’ve always taught in Detroit, it’s always been Blacks so... my aunt tells me, “Bridgette, you need to apply in Troy,” and I’m like, I don’t know if I could. I don’t know how the parents would feel about me. I don’t know how the kids would feel about me. I don’t know how many Black people they come in contact with so I would be very, very... I would feel out of place and I don’t know if I would be effective teaching white children. I really don’t know.

Bridgette raises an important issue regarding the preparation of teachers, regardless of cultural background, to teach children from different cultures (see Nieto, 2000b). Faith, who remembered her first year teaching at a white elementary school in Ecorse, MI, thirty two years ago, offers Bridgette some reassurance:

You don't have to leave Detroit, first of all, to teach white children. I, coming from Birmingham [Alabama] and southern schools, straight out of college, 21, I was placed in a school, there was one Black child in the school. My class was white and I was nervous but do you know, after no longer than a day, I didn't even see color. And I surprised myself. I said, "These kids act just like Black kids." Kids are kids, and I can't say that they need a Black person for the experience because even in the Black race, the African American race, each house is different. So I didn't grow up like you or you... so I don't think it's necessary for a Black person to teach Black children because, like I say, their home life is different.

Faith points out that she no longer saw color by the end of her first day of teaching; this experience taught her that children are fundamentally the same. She also challenges the notion that African Americans are homogeneous; even in the Black community, she argues, there are social and economic differences that shape our life experiences, therefore we cannot assume that a Black teacher will be able to understand and relate to every Black child in her classroom. As Faith argued further:

I think we have to put our trust in people. You can't say just because a person is white they aren't going to do their best. In the end, I come back to my spiritual thinking on that... that's not Godly thinking and I don't think you can make it with thoughts like that.

As a group, teachers maintained, "As long as you know your subject matter, your race doesn't matter," and even felt that this could be a valuable learning experience for teachers and students.

While the majority of teachers agreed that a teacher's race does not matter, this issue is particularly important in an African-centered school context. Should white teachers teach at an African-centered school? Are white teachers able to be "cultural representatives" (Akoto, 1994)? Can white teachers ever know enough about African and African American history and culture to teach in an African-centered school? These and other questions remain at the heart of the African-centered schools movement, especially in the public school context where an increasing majority of teachers are white.

## The Politics of Language

Black people have been taught (both in school and out) to ~~d~~<sup>despise their own</sup> language instead of seeing and ~~va~~<sup>valuing</sup> it as a broken down African ~~to~~<sup>ngue</sup> (Woodson, 1933).

On the contrary, speaking Black **English** or Ebonics is not a sign of *ignorance* or an uneducated person. Black English is a language grounded in the history of Africans in America (Smitherman, 2000) and should be valued as such. According to Smitherman (2000), Ebonics is:

rooted in the Black American Oral Tradition, reflecting the combination of African languages (Niger-Congo) and Euro American English. It is a language forged in the crucible of enslavement, US-style apartheid, and the struggle to survive and thrive in the face of domination. Ebonics is emphatically not “broken” English, nor “sloppy” speech. Nor is it merely “slang.” Nor is it some bizarre form of language spoken by baggy-pants-wearing Black youth. Ebonics is a set of communication patterns and practices resulting from Africans’ appropriation and transformations of a foreign tongue during the African Holocaust (p. 19).

Many critics (both scholars and laypersons), however, argue that Ebonics is nothing more than broken English. Likewise, the teachers in this study, both Black and white, felt Black English was “just slang,” had no cultural significance, and therefore should not be recognized as a language distinct and separate from Standard American English. In the following conversation, Janice and Bridgette questioned the legitimacy of Black English. They compared Black English to classical languages such as French and Spanish, using these languages to leverage their argument that Black English was nothing more than broken English.

**Janice** But like, who speaks it? I mean, like, in France, they speak French and in Spain... but who speaks Ebonics?

**Ebony** Black people do.

**Bridgette** In America, we speak English.

**Janice** But not all of them [Black people] do.

Bridgette

Not all.

Ebony

Most of ~~them~~ do. She says here 90% of African Americans speak Ebonics at some time or another.

I referred them back to the authority of the text and reminded them that the author was a sociolinguist that had built her career on the study of Black English Vernacular. They continued to question the legitimacy of Black English, but when challenged to provide an argument to support their reasons why Black English was not distinct and separate from Standard American English, they simply replied, "it's just slang." I pushed them further to build a coherent argument that went beyond the "just because" reasoning they had provided. By the end of the discussion, I became frustrated. As I wrote in my reflective journal following this session:

These two were the only teachers whose shell wasn't even slightly cracked by the reading or discussion. [Janice] and [Bridgette] held firm to their position... In my view, they weren't being critical enough and did not provide any evidence to support their argument or counter Dr. G's argument. Bridgette consistently noted, "It just isn't." (Reflective Journal, March 13, 2001)

Relying on the Eurocentric status quo as a standard, Janice concluded, "It needs to be recognized worldwide in order for it to be okay." Faith reminded the group, however, "that's because the white man has told you that's not proper English. They made the standard." Cheree went even further, pointing out how everything associated with Black folks seems to be stigmatized:

See my personal opinion, seems like everything that's about African Americans, most of it, is stigmatized as being negative. In America, from our hair to our appearance, it just seems negative and I think hopefully someday we'll get out of that but still we have a long way to go but at least she's trying to be one of those to, I guess, open our minds up and understand that.

Carol Lee (1996) has also argued that Black English has been stigmatized in the larger society and specifically in schools. As Lee (1996) contends, Black English-speaking children are



commonly seen as "culturally **deprived**" and the curriculum is there ~~for~~ <sup>more aimed at</sup> "fixing" this "cultural deprivation." ~~With~~ the exception of Cheree and Faith, ~~the other teachers in~~ the group overlooked the relationship between racism, power and ~~language~~ in society's perception of Black English; they ~~bought~~ into the larger society's view of the language. They did not question why Black English is **not** recognized as a distinct language by mainstream America. Rather than question society and the way we are wired to think about anything that is African in origin, they accepted mainstream America's perception of Black English. Again, I wrote in my reflective journal:

It was as if they were saying, "If white America doesn't say it's legitimate, then it's not." Again, they weren't taking a critical stance and asking themselves why white America didn't see Ebonics as a legitimate language. Just because the majority doesn't see it as legitimate doesn't mean it's not legitimate — much larger issues of racism and power are involved. (March 13, 2001)

Marissa, on the other hand, shared a culturally relevant story around language use in the Italian community:

Being Italian, and I'm Sicilian, northern people think that Sicilians talk slang. They think that... If I were to listen to a northern Italian, I couldn't understand what they were saying. I would have no idea. It's a total different dialect. But if a northerner met me, they would say, "Oh, she talks slang." And they look down on Sicilians and southern Italians.

By explaining issues surrounding the language debate between northern and southern Italians, Marissa seems to be trying to relate to the Ebonics debate. She makes a connection between what she has experienced as an Italian American who speaks what other Italians consider slang and the African American experience with Black English.

An important aspect of African-centered education is the acknowledgement of students' culture, history and language in the schooling process. Therefore, we also discussed whether schools should be responsible for bridging the language gap that often exists in mainstream schools between white teachers and Black English-speaking students.

Educational researchers have long argued that schools must acknowledge the legitimacy of students' home language and use it as a bridge to Standard English (Lee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Au, 1980). While the teachers in this study did not believe that Black English should be a co-equal language of instruction, there was agreement that schools should be responsible for ensuring the success of all children, by any means necessary. As Marissa explained:

Everyone's goal is to make children successful and to learn and if that's what it takes then no matter what their needs are, and that's something that they need help with, then that's their obligation to help them.

Similarly, Janice remarked:

[T]here should be some sort of, I don't know, program but at least recognition that they're not doing well because they're having language barriers. But to recognize it as a completely different language, I don't know, because then that brings in the whole like, then do we teach Ebonics?

If we agree that schools should provide "cultural scaffolding" (Lee, 1996), what does this involve? In our discussion, we debated whether and when to correct a Black English-speaking child. Cheree felt that Black children should be allowed to speak Black English because "it's part of their culture":

Ebonics is a part of our culture and the students should be allowed to speak it and also with Standard English, but I think they should still be allowed to speak it because that is to me, a part of who they are.

On the other hand, Bridgette and Janice felt strongly that Ebonics was incorrect, broken English and children should be corrected every time they used Black English. As Janice explained:

I correct almost everything except like when they're talking in conversation amongst themselves, I don't correct that or when they're telling like what they did on the weekend or something. But I want them to know that when they come to my room and they're speaking to me that they need to be aware of what they're saying and how they're saying it, and that yeah, when they leave the room and they're in their own little setting, that's fine, they can speak however they want to be. But they need to realize there's a time and a place to speak a certain way, and my classroom is one of those places.

Janice explained further, "if I **don't** correct them, then they're not **going to learn**." She saw herself as the "guardian of the **national tongue**" (Smitherman, 2000) - Bridgette also noted, "Sometimes they correct [themselves]... they say 'Is we, oh, I mean, are we...' So they know to correct themselves." She felt that correcting her students was making a difference because they often caught themselves mid-sentence when they weren't speaking Standard American English.

In Anita's opinion, however, always correcting children might delay language development and discourage classroom participation:

My thing with correcting kids all the time, if you just sitting there always correcting them, then they're going to start being shy and not saying anything at all.

Anita explained further:

I don't want to discourage it but I don't think that we should really push it. But I really think that we need to... because I didn't know the history of it and I'm really intrigued by it and I think that we should probably explain to our children where it comes from.

Anita's comments illustrate how complex issues of language, culture and power can be.

While she disagrees with correcting Black English-speaking children all the time, she also fears that acknowledging Black English formally would further disadvantage Black children. Rather than discourage the language, she proposes that we teach children about the history of the language so that they can understand and value their "home" language.

Generally, I found that teachers corrected some things and not others, and this varied by teacher. Both Marissa and Anita took a more developmental approach; they said they allowed children to use the language they were most comfortable with, particularly when speaking with friends. As Marissa explained:

I don't correct them in class though... if they say ain't, I'll correct them on that, but that's about it. I guess I just realized they're just comfortable and they're talking, that's their conversation and why stop their thoughts, you know what I mean, the natural flow. They're just being themselves and I guess I don't look at it as a bad

thing. Because even if I were to correct them, when they leave my room, they're going to go back [to speaking that way]... that's them. That's part of them, and I guess I just accept them. -- I understand them and I accept them for who they are.

Here it seems Marissa is trying to understand and value her students' language and culture.

Without questioning her own beliefs, values and assumptions about the language and culture of her students (Ladson-Billings, 2000b; McIntyre, 1997) and acknowledging the "culture of power" (Delpit, 1988), she runs the risk, however, of reproducing the dominant discourse that marginalizes Black students. While teachers should acknowledge the legitimacy of students' home language, their reasons for allowing Black children to speak Black English could be disempowering. That is, they might believe that Black children speak Black English because they are slow or "culturally deficient" and therefore do not correct them because they "don't know any better." Or they can acknowledge and validate their use of Black English but also take the responsibility to teach them the "rules of power" (Delpit, 1988).

As Delpit (1992) argues, once teachers help students understand the inequities of the system, they can show them "how to cheat." And to cheat, she writes, "is to learn the Discourse that would otherwise be used to exclude them from participating in and transforming the mainstream" (p. 301). Teachers, therefore, must talk to their students about the history of the language, and teach them how and when to move between these two languages. By making this explicit, teachers are enacting a critical pedagogy that can empower students beyond the classroom so that they can participate in the culture of power (Delpit, 1988). As Delpit (1988) explains, she tells her students that their language and cultural style is unique and wonderful but she also tells them "there is a political power game that is being played and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games that they too must play" (p. 292).

We discussed this **notion** of code switching and whether ~~teachers should teach Black~~ children when and where it is "**acceptable**" to speak Black English ~~and when they should use~~ Standard American English. However, Marissa questioned whether ~~young children (PreK-3)~~ would be able to understand ~~what~~ **code switching** means and the **sociopolitical implications** of speaking Black English:

Do you think that age is **appropriate**... that the fourth grade classroom would be more appropriate to say that. Like in second grade, I think if I were to say that to them, I think I would **confuse** them. They're not ready for that.

Similarly, Janice questioned whether elementary age children would be able to make the connection or would they just be **more** confused. Considering this possibility, the majority of teachers agreed that there **should** be less focus on **code switching** in early elementary because children at this level **may not** be able to pick up on the **social cues** to determine when certain language or **behavior** is expected and **why**, but **overall** this was seen as a valuable and important function of schooling.

Compared to the **other** teachers, Anita felt seven year olds were capable of understanding the purpose of code switching and therefore teachers should be explicit:

I guess I keep it **real** with my students. I'm just like, when you try to get a job, you know, things that they know about, when you try to get a job, you can't go in there saying this, that and the other but when you're with your friends, you can do this, you know, you can speak a certain way. And ~~that's~~ just whatever I teach, I try to apply it to their lives.

She says that she explains to her second graders that **they** need to speak and act a certain way in **certain** situations, and by doing so politicizes issues of culture and language so that her **students** can begin to understand and learn how to participate in the culture of power. This **dilemma** reminded me of W.E.B. Dubois's concept of double consciousness - living in and **between** two worlds, **one** Black, one white. Although many of the teachers felt that Black **people** should not be **ashamed** of how they speak, they felt strongly that there was a time

and place for Black English. They made a clear distinction between "home" and "school" language; Black English was acceptable at home or around family and friends but it was inappropriate in school and professional work settings.

A large part of the Ebonics debate centers on whether the language should be used as a co-equal language of instruction to help build a bridge for struggling readers and writers. While the majority of teachers in this study agreed that the language barrier between teachers and Black English-speaking students should be recognized and that schools should be responsible for narrowing the language gap, some felt that Black English should not be used as a co-equal language of instruction. There are a number of instances, however, where Black English has been used successfully to bridge the "language gap." At the Nairobi Day School, for example, an independent school in Palo Alto, California, the use of and respect for Black English was encouraged through songs, games, poetry and drama. Far from viewing their students' language as broken English or the result of cognitive deficits, the teachers there came to view Black English as rule governed and complex (Hoover, 1992). A number of research studies have also found that "cultural scaffolding," building on Black English language patterns during reading instruction, have improved literacy learning for Black students in elementary and high school (Morrell, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 1996; Heath, 1983). Ann Lewis, as an example, a teacher in Ladson-Billings's (1994) study of successful teachers of African American children, encouraged students to use their home language while they acquired the secondary Discourse of Standard English:

Her students were permitted to express themselves in language (in speaking and writing) with which they were knowledgeable and comfortable. They were then required to "translate" to the standard form. By the end of the year, the students were not only facile at this "code-switching" but could better use both languages (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 161).

This research has directly challenged the prevailing wisdom within education regarding the use of Black English in instruction.

With such a negative perception of Black English, I wondered whether the teachers in this study would have low expectations of students who spoke Black English. A prevailing assumption among educators and researchers is that Black English interferes with the development of early reading abilities (Lee, 1996) and is an indication of low intelligence (Smitherman, 2000) so I questioned teachers to think about how they perceive Black English-speaking students. Smitherman (2000) cites research on teachers' attitudes, which indicates that teachers often believe Black English-speaking children are nonverbal and possess limited vocabularies. Like many of the teachers in this study, teachers often perceive Black English-speaking children to be slow learners and their speech in need of constant correction. In the following exchange, teachers discuss why they would draw certain conclusions about a child's intelligence based on their use of Black English:

Bridgette

I would assume that they would be slow. That would be my assumption; I probably wouldn't say it but I would assume that... I would assume that they didn't know any better and if they spoke like that they weren't bright... that's what I would assume, not saying that that's what they were but I would assume that. Now, I would also assume that a child that speaks grammatically correct is going to be smart but that's not always true, so it goes both ways. I would assume that someone who spoke Ebonics would not be smart and would be slow and someone who spoke Standard English I would assume for them to be smart. Usually... I wouldn't say that's the case. I'm not going to say that.

Ebony

Is that true for other people, that you would associate someone who spoke Ebonics to be slower than someone who spoke Standard English?

Marissa

Isn't that a stereotype in a way, though?

Anita

Yeah, I was going to say, isn't that stereotypical?

Bridgette

It is but everybody does it.

Marissa

I'm just saying, but we don't know the background. Like I would look deeper, like where has this child come from? What is his family like? We don't know if his parents... we don't know anything about him or her. There could be more to it than he's slow. I wouldn't think they're slow. I would think... I would want to know more about their background, where he lives.

Janice

I agree though, I wouldn't assume, I guess, that they're slow. I would think that there's a cultural difference between us. But at the same time, when Bridgette was talking about if a Black child was in her classroom and spoke very eloquently, I would assume that that person is smart. So I do still have some stereotypes then.

Bridgette

I mean, they could prove me wrong. I'm not saying they are slow but that is what I would think. I'm not saying that it's true.

Consistent with research on language attitudes, Bridgette assumed that there is a direct relationship between language and intelligence<sup>8</sup>. This perception often leads to negative expectations of the child, which can create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Smitherman, 2000). Such perceptions can be damaging to a child's self-concept and have a negative impact on their behavior and achievement. For this reason, teachers must begin to build on the linguistic resources Black children bring with them to school so that they can acquire school-based literacy (Heath, 1983). As Lee (1996) has argued:

If teachers are going to become reflective practitioners, they need to possess both theoretical and practical knowledge of how to use cultural, linguistic and sociolinguistic information to develop ways of teaching that not only respect cultural diversity but insure high levels of literacy (p. 309).

By the end of our discussion, teachers began to experience moments of uncertainty. Following much discussion and debate, many of the teachers acknowledged that they did not know enough about the study of Black English to determine whether it was distinct and separate from Standard English. For example, Marissa admitted:



I'm a little confused. Like, at first I said it's not a language but now I'm feeling... I don't know if it's a language... I'm thinking what is the definition of a language? We talk about what is a language. Isn't it something that a group of people talk, a way of communicating? So if you base it on that stuff, it is a language.

Anita also expressed some confusion but felt redeemed knowing that Black English, which she too used, might actually be "okay":

I guess I just felt better about it because I know sometimes I use a lot of Ebonics. You just feel like okay, like when I'm in certain places, am I speaking right? You know, but I guess it made me feel like okay, well maybe some people accept it and maybe it's okay. I don't know. I'm still a little confused on it.

### Teaching to Transgress

Classic and contemporary work by Black scholars in education, psychology and sociolinguistics served as a platform for discussing the intersection of race and power in the schooling of African American children. The substance of our conversations was less about method and materials (although this was an occasional focus of our discussion) and more about the nature of teachers' work in an urban, African-centered public school context. The study group was designed to help move teachers toward a critical pedagogy, to develop a critical consciousness; however, there was some resistance. Some teachers pushed their thinking and challenged other group members to do the same; however, most teachers' beliefs and attitudes were so firmly rooted in traditional, Eurocentric thought that a secondary, critical Discourse was difficult to construct.

If, however, education is to be "critically transformative" (King, 1994), teachers must examine their beliefs, values and assumptions about the world and how their practice conserves or transforms the dominant discourse. Without examining their beliefs and assumptions, teachers' reproduce the status quo (Henry, 1994; McIntyre, 1997; Howard,

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<sup>8</sup> This view was uncommon among the other teachers.

1999). This uncritical habit of mind, what King (1991) refers to as "dysconsciousness," justifies inequity and injustice by accepting the existing order of things as given:

Dysconscious racism is a form of racism that tacitly accepts the dominant White norms and privileges. It is not the absence of consciousness (that is, not unconsciousness) but an impaired consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race as compared to, for example, critical consciousness (p. 135, emphasis in the original).

This "dysconsciousness" or uncritical habit of mind seemed to be common among the teachers in this study. They rarely questioned the schooling process and the ways in which race and class function as "inequalizers" in America's schools. Teachers, therefore, must be challenged to rethink traditional, hegemonic ways of thinking about race and inequality so that they can construct a more critical consciousness that empowers themselves and their students.

Moreover, teachers must do more than "affirm" and "celebrate" diversity. They must begin to examine the historical roots of institutional racism in the United States as well as the ways that texts and curricula and schools as institutions support racism (Ladson-Billings, 2000b; Nieto, 2000b). We must, as bell hooks (1994) urges,

open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions. I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom (p. 12).

In the next chapter, I look more closely at teachers' conceptions of African-centered education, in particular, which were shaped by and large by their beliefs, values and perspectives on issues such as racism, injustice and educational inequality in American society.

## CHAPTER 4

### SEEING THE VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF AFRICAN-CENTERED EDUCATION

#### Introduction

In addition to reading texts such as Jawanza Kunjufu's Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys, which focused on the sociopolitical context in which Black children learn and develop, we also read two texts (Kenyatta, 1998; Akoto, 1994), which focused on African-centered education. These texts served as a focal point for several of our discussion and provided a conceptual framework for beginning and practiced teachers at Ayo Academy who knew very little about the goals and philosophy of African-centered education. In this chapter, I describe the study group participants' efforts to understand African-centered education and make meaning of their work as educators in this context. I argue that a shift in teachers' paradigms or folk theories about teaching (Bruner, 1996) and the purpose of education is required in order for them to understand and embrace African-centered education and see its value in the educational lives of Black children. Given the ongoing challenges of working in urban school contexts, such study and collaboration may be especially valuable to both beginning and practiced teachers as an ongoing part of professional development.

Listening to the discussions from the study group sessions, I was struck by how conventional teachers thought – they thought only within the boundaries of mainstream education and remained critical of African-centered education. Knowing very little about African-centered curriculum and pedagogy, the group criticized the tenets of African-centered education in our first few meetings. What they eventually learned about African-centered education through the readings made little difference in their opinion, however.

They maintained their position that Black children should learn about other cultures, which they assumed did not happen in African-centered schools, and that African-centered schools did not prepare Black children for the "real world." Oddly enough, they felt this way even though they taught in an African-centered school.

Despite the claims made in the readings, they did not see the value in African-centered education and gave little thought to the possibilities. They thought *within* rather than *outside* the margins of possibility – either they were unable or unwilling to reconceptualize education for Black children that reflected African people and culture without excluding or oppressing other cultural groups.

I will begin my analysis by defining African-centered education based on the work of leading scholars and educators in the field and provide a conceptual framework for understanding the goals and philosophy of African-centered pedagogy. I will then compare this to the ways in which African-centered education is perceived and understood by the teachers in this study. I will illustrate how teachers' histories – their beliefs, attitudes, folk theories – made it difficult for them to see the value and importance of African-centered education for the academic, social and psychological development of Black children. In the sections that follow these comparisons, I will analyze themes from the group's discussions to examine and illustrate the ways in which teachers responded to the African-centered philosophy of education.

### What is African-Centered Education?

African-centered educational philosophy is grounded in Pan Africanist thought.

Born out of the struggle for Black self-determination, African-centered education seeks to develop the knowledge and skills needed to purge the process of education itself and the nation as a whole of the perverse effects of current, recent, and remote

domination. Language, values, behaviors, images, systems, institutions, and relationships must all be thoroughly and critically re-examined. African-centered education includes the rediscovery of the essential truths that characterized the educational systems that were its immediate forebears in traditional African societies (Akoto, 1994, p. 322).

It is a celebration of African history and culture as much as it is a counterhegemonic act; it challenges the ideology of white supremacy and provides an alternative to the traditional, Eurocentric system of education that has alienated Black children (Asante, 1991; Lee, 1992; Madhubti & Madhubti, 1994; Shujaa, 1994). A response to calls by scholars and activists for schools controlled by Black people for Black people, African-centered schools were created to counter the perceived conspiracy (Kunjufu, 1985) against Black children in traditional, Eurocentric schools where African culture is often devalued and African history distorted. It is grounded in the work of scholars such as Yusef A. ben Jochannan, Maulana Karenga, John Henrik Clarke, and Leonard Jeffries.

Specifically, African-centered education 1) puts human history in its proper perspective and defends the African origin of civilization; 2) uses sources and references which are African whenever possible; 3) takes place in an environment which reflects African history and culture; 4) promotes a holistic approach to learning that combines the various disciplines into a harmonious whole; 5) seeks to develop the whole child, intellectually, physically and spiritually; 6) uses a multimodal approach to teaching knowledge and skills; 7) uses cooperative learning and encourages the sharing of knowledge and resources; and 8) helps Black children understand and change the social, economic, and political status of Africans in America and the Diaspora (see Yakini in Kenyatta, 1998).

As an educational model, African-centered education is difficult to translate into everyday classroom practices. While a number of scholars have helped to create a conceptual framework for understanding the philosophy of African-centered education

(Akoto, 1994; Madhubti & Madhubti, 1994; Asante, 1991), its *meaning* is being reinvented and renegotiated as growing numbers of principals and teachers work to develop and implement African-centered curriculum in their school community. Such is the case in Detroit where each of its three African-centered academies looks and feels very different.

As an example, though many of the teachers in this study had been teaching at Ayo Academy for two years or more, they did not have a full understanding of African-centered education or what the curriculum should involve beyond teaching Black history. And while they taught at the same African-centered school, their conceptions of African-centered education varied considerably and in many instances were misunderstandings of the philosophy and pedagogy of African-centered education as it has been conceptualized by scholars (see Akoto, 1994; Lee, Lomotey, & Shujaa, 1990).

In an analysis of teachers' conceptions of African-centered education in November 2000 when I first interviewed them, I found teachers' understandings centered on teaching Black history and building on the cultural resources Black children bring with them to school. As an example, Marissa, who had been teaching at Ayo Academy for two years, focused on the curriculum:

We're an African-centered school, and I think we're supposed to... we are supposed to integrate African curriculum into our regular curriculum, so we integrate them within the subjects... Well, I really don't do it with all the subjects. I focus more on... just in social studies. We talk about Africa; we talk about things African Americans have done; and we talk about the community. That's where I add that to my classroom. As far as the other subjects, I haven't mastered how to pretty much do that. I don't have any background on African-centered schools so it's hard for me.

As Marissa's comments illustrate, teachers often limit the study of African and African American history and culture to social studies. They do not readily see how the African

perspective can be integrated throughout the curriculum in math, science, and language arts.

In our first interview, Cathy also focused on teaching an accurate history of Africa:

African-centered education not only applies to African American people, it can apply to everybody because it's a whole history; it involves everybody, you know... when I was growing up, I remember Tarzan and the jungle and that's all I thought Africa was until I got older and I realized, "Ah, Africa's not like that." They have cars and buildings, you know, we weren't standing on the island when they came to capture us. We had education over there in Africa, like Timbuktu. And all of a sudden here come these European people to take us over here to another country and its like we were never told that, we were never told the real history... and that's why it's up to us as African American teachers to let our children know the real truth.

Cathy speaks to the distortion of Black history by European historians and the importance of teaching Black children the truth about slavery and the history of Africans in America.

Cheree, on the other hand, focused on identifying children's strengths:

African-centered education, what I know of it, is educating the African American child by their strengths and weaknesses, trying to target what their weaknesses are and what their strengths are and trying to, in a sense, balance it, because we all have weaknesses... so I think it's about building strengths in African American children, to find those strengths. And that's the key, to find them.

These conceptions are examples of teachers' sense making and represent the range in their understandings of African-centered education.

The texts we read (Akoto, 1994; Kenyatta, 1998) challenged their conceptions of African-centered education in theory and practice, and in some cases led teachers to a clearer understanding of what African-centered education is and is not. In my first interview with Janice (November 2000), for example, she admitted that she knew very little about African-centered education. She expressed frustration with the school's administration because she had not been given a curriculum guide or background reading that would explain what African-centered education was and what she should be doing in her classroom:

I know that it consists of Harambee, which is being proud of your African heritage and being proud of who you are. I know that they do a lot of things with African heritage and African ancestry, and African customs. But as far as incorporating that

into the everyday curriculum, I don't see it. I don't see it happening in other classes; it certainly doesn't happen in mine because I don't know what that means. And I've asked. Do you have a booklet of what that means? Do you have some sort of instruction on what I'm supposed to be doing to make sure that this is African-centered?

Janice, like a lot of new teachers at the Academy, was not given direction by the school's administration and therefore did not know how to implement African-centered curriculum; she does as much as she can with what little she knows. Once reading and discussing Akoto's (1994) chapter "Notes on Afrikan-centered pedagogy" (February 2001), Janice had begun to develop a better understanding of African-centered education:

Afrocentric just means that it's centered around the African culture so all the... like math would be based on African culture, and science. All the curriculum would be based around African culture and heritage.

As evidenced by the development of Janice's responses from November to February, our January reading (Akoto, 1994), which was discussed in our February meeting, provided a conceptual framework for understanding the philosophy of African-centered education and the goals of African-centered pedagogy. In November, Janice was unsure when she responded to the question, "What is African-centered education?" She was tentative and seemed to be making an educated guess based on her observations first as a student teacher and then as a contract teacher at Ayo Academy over the last year. In comparison, Janice was more confident when she responded in February. In Janice's case, the Akoto reading provided some clarity. This is important to note as the study group was designed to provide participants with opportunities to develop a better understanding of African-centered education through reading, discussion, inquiry and reflection.

While this reading and others I selected provided a conceptual framework for teachers like Janice who know nothing or very little about African-centered education, it was not written for teachers. By that I mean, it did not explain *how* to develop and implement



African-centered curriculum – what African-centered education looks like *in practice*. Thus, while the readings provided some clarity conceptually, a number of teachers were still unclear about what they should be doing to make their instruction African-centered.

What's more, most teachers saw African-centered curriculum as an *add-on*. As an example, Anita remarked:

With the curriculum how it is, each year it's getting larger. They're adding something each year to our curriculum. So it's really hard. I mean, I would love to teach African American education in my class but we just... with the curriculum the way it is now, it's difficult.

Like many urban teachers, Anita felt overwhelmed by the district's curriculum and therefore was unable to see how African and African American history and culture could be *infused* throughout the curriculum – math, science, language arts and social studies. Many of the teachers saw clear connections between African and African American history and culture to the traditional social studies curriculum and could easily add cultural themes there; however, if we think of African-centered education solely as teaching history, then we limit the curriculum to social studies. Africans, however, have contributed to art, literature, math, philosophy, and science and the African value system can be applied to all aspects of human life. As Lee (1992) argues, a critical element of African-centered pedagogy is linking content knowledge in the subject areas to philosophical and social principles grounded in African thought. African-centered education, for example, involves including the African perspective into science beyond simply naming the contributions of African American inventors. As an example, in the African perspective of the universe, all human, animal and plant life is symbiotically linked. Similar to Native American culture, Africans revere the earth and respect the inherent order of the universe. This concept of balance and order is integral to the African philosophy of Maat and can be incorporated in the science



curriculum. And in math, just as students learn to use Roman numerals, they can also learn to count and use the notational systems of ancient Egyptians (Lee, 1992).

Although much emphasis has been placed on the curriculum, African-centered education is as much about *what* you teach as *how* you teach. In teachers' conceptions, the notion of an *African-centered* pedagogy was absent. They did not define their work in an African-centered school context different from traditional conceptions of teaching.

Bridgette, for example, felt that the teaching in an African-centered school is no different from traditional schools. In our first interview (November 2000), she focused on product rather than process. She indicated that her students do Black history reports and there are pictures of Black entrepreneurs around her classroom:

I don't think the teaching is any different, I think it's *what* you teach. Black history everyday in this classroom. They learn about... learning about Black history on a daily basis.

In isolation, however, including African and African American history in the curriculum is incomplete (Lee, 1992). This knowledge must be accompanied by a critical pedagogy, one that empowers children to question and critique the status quo. An African-centered pedagogy constantly challenges students to think analytically and critically and encourages them to develop a deep understanding of, respect for, and commitment to themselves, their family, community and race.

By February, Bridgette's conception changes, becoming more critical:

[E]verything is centered around African culture – African math, science, learning only about African Americans, not learning anything other than what you need to know. Just basically, what's the word I'm looking for, ethnocentrism, teaching one's culture is the best one. That's how I see African-centered schools, teaching that the African culture is the best one, and to disregard the others. That's the way I see it and I don't think that's a good idea.

In November, she seems to support the concept of African-centered education, highlighting the importance of knowing one's history. In February, she indicts African-centered

education, calling it ethnocentric and supremacist. The way she sees it, African-centered schools only teach African history and culture and by doing so negate other cultural groups.

Bridgette was not alone in this regard. There was a general consensus among the teachers that *everything* in an African-centered school is centered on African culture, and therefore students *only* learn about African Americans. They believed that African-centered schools teach that African culture is *better* than others. For these reasons, they felt strongly that the curriculum should be more multicultural where other cultural groups are given equal attention.

While teachers felt that it was important to teach African and African American history, a majority thought it would be unfair if schools did not teach other histories. They were sensitive to the representation of other cultures in the curriculum and felt that African-centered education would unfairly exclude others. As an example, Faith remarked:

I think it's okay for each school to teach African history but I don't think it's fair not to teach the other histories because I put myself in a child, maybe from Romania or one of the other countries, and it's just not fair to me. I think it should be equal, especially if you are the person in charge of their learning; otherwise we're doing what has been done to us. So I don't think everything should be totally all African.

Bridgette agreed, arguing that the curriculum should equally represent the cultures of the school community:

I agree with that too. I think it should be equal. It should be equal. If you have, like there's this new Oriental girl that goes here, in fifth grade, so there should be something for her to relate to. So it should be equal. It shouldn't just be all European history or African history. It should be a combination of the two.

Their conception of African-centered education focused solely on teaching Black history. It was assumed that African-centered schools only teach one group's history. On the contrary, the goal of African-centered education is to present a "correct, accurate history" of the world as compared to the Eurocentric version of history which distorts the history of people

of color and marginalizes the contributions of Africans, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans to the world (Asante, 1991).

In the literature, African-centered education, unlike traditional Eurocentric education, is described as a “non-hierarchical approach” that respects other cultural perspectives (Asante, 1991). While the emphasis is placed on African people and culture as a foundation or lens for understanding the world, one’s family and community, African-centered schools do not take a position of African superiority or negate the history of other groups of people. Instead, African-centered education provides an opposing worldview to the Eurocentric educational model upon which the American educational system has been built (Kenyatta, 1998; Akoto, 1994) and which continues to alienate Black children. As Asante (1991) argues, “Afrocentricity does not condone ethnocentric valorization at the expense of degrading other groups’ perspectives” (p. 172).

Cheree disagreed with the others. She did not believe African-centered education excluded other groups or positioned African people and culture as superior:

Well, I don’t see it that way. I don’t see Afrocentrism being about one culture, being just one way, the only way... I think African-centered schools and African culture altogether has gotten per se so large because we did not know about our history for a lot of us, as people, did not know about our history... I just think that it’s good to know, be knowledgeable, like with any race. Like the Mexicans and Hispanics they want someone that their kids could look up to or know about their culture... I believe that it’s past due.

Cheree remarked on how knowing the history of one’s people, regardless of race, is important and therefore should be an important part of the school curriculum.

While teachers understood that Black history has been omitted or distorted in traditional, Eurocentric curriculums, and therefore Black children need to be taught the truth about their history, they feared that if African history and culture were emphasized too much, it would create a feeling of superiority among children. As Faith explained:



You have to just be careful how you teach it... when you teach that Blacks... you hear Black African Americans just over and over and over so much instead of well, these are facts that the first architects, engineers, and the people to organize communities were from Africa, they are Africans, which is a good thing. Now, those are facts. And those are facts that I can give even my seven year olds but you give them the facts, but not to the point that, so since they did that, we're superior... I would turn right around and say, yeah people that were architects and to organize communities were Africans but that doesn't make us better than anyone else. We're just the ones God chose to do that. It's hard a lot of times for me to separate my faith from history because that's just the way it was. The first man was a Black man, a dark skin man but I don't do it to the point that everything that I do or say is African American all the time.

Faith argues that children need to know the truth – the facts as she says – about Africa's contributions to the world but not so much so that they see themselves as superior. While she is confident in her knowledge of African history and takes pride in her heritage, she makes a point to say that she is not overly race conscious.

While teachers defined African-centered education differently from each other and the literature, they understood that African and African American history and culture should be infused throughout the curriculum. However, this focus on the teaching of Black history overlooks the transformative and liberatory possibilities in African-centered education. African-centered education is “more than merely teaching children to recite African proverbs, wave red, black and green flags, and recognize Black heroes and heroines on a wall” (Lee, 1992, p. 174). On the contrary, it connects education to the political, economic and social realities of contemporary American society (Madhubuti & Madhubuti, 1994) and prepares Black children to positively transform themselves, their communities, nation and race.

## **What is the Value of African-centered Education?**

With the Civil Rights and Black Power movements came a newfound sense of ourselves as African people and a thirst to learn more about African history and the truth about slavery. Black scholars and activists indicted the American educational system, citing that African history had been omitted from the history books or distorted. They called for more accurate representations of African people and culture and an acknowledgment of Africa's great contributions to the world in agriculture, architecture, literature, math, philosophy, and science. This omission became the guiding force behind the African-centered schools movement in many urban cities.

In our conversations about African-centered education, both Black and white teachers in the study group remembered their schooling experiences and told stories of how little Black history was covered in the curriculum. Cathy, for example, remembered what she had been taught about Africa:

Tarzan and the jungle. That's all I ever knew. Tarzan swinging through the trees, and I found out that there are cities. Africa is not what it's portrayed to be. And they have cars, everything, just like we do. And it's like, "Wow." So I think children should see more how Africa really is. Some of them really think it's still like that. And it's not.

Because the curriculum was void of African and African American history when Cathy went to school in the '50's and '60's, she wanted to be sure her students were taught their history. Bridgette also remembered there being very little mention of African and African American history when she attended school during the '80's and '90's:

When I went to school, the only time we went over [Black history] was in February, even though the school I went to was multicultural and all my teachers were Black, except maybe two and we never really discussed a lot either.

Although there is a thirty year difference in the periods Cathy and Bridgette attended school, their comments illustrate how little has changed in the education of Black children





and the continued omission of Black history in traditional school curricula. And in many cases, as Bridgette suggests, the history of Africans in America is only discussed in February during Black History Month.

In addition, teachers agreed that Black history, when discussed, should go beyond slavery and the Civil War, and that children need to learn about historic figures other than Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Harriet Tubman. As Faith expressed:

To me, kids hear over and over about Harriet Tubman, and I'm not putting that down. That's fine, but what about... there's so much more than just these... so everyday you can learn a little bit of something.

Faith, whose children attended predominantly white schools in a suburb of Detroit, recounted one day her son came home from school:

My son came home from high school one day and he was telling his dad and I it was nothing worse that had happened to a group of people worse than the Jewish Holocaust... and we looked at him, and that's when my husband said, "Come here son, let me tell you about slavery." Because see... and we didn't blame the teacher because it was probably a Jewish teacher and to them nothing was worse but see what had happened to my son's mind and if we hadn't stopped that, and put our influence, our education about our race, then he would have just gone on and then told his children or whoever else he was around...

Faith's story illustrates how important it is for Black children to know the truth about the Maafa (the African Holocaust) so that they understand the historical, social, economic and political forces that shape the past, present and future realities of African Americans. By having this knowledge and understanding the sociopolitical implications of slavery as an institution, Black children can begin to discern for themselves what is truth and what has been distorted. Moreover, as Asante (1991) has argued:

If our students only knew the truth, if they were taught the Afrocentric perspective on the Great Enslavement, and if they knew the full story about the events since slavery that have served to constantly dislocate African Americans, their behavior would perhaps be different (p. 175).

This idea that knowledge of self/people/culture is important to a Black child's developing identity and sense of self as an African person is part of the guiding philosophy of African-centered education and should be integral to an African-centered pedagogy. Indeed, this cultural knowledge is an added value of African-centered schools.

Janice also recalled hearing very little about Black history in the suburban district where she went to school:

The history books are like, "This is what happened to Blacks," and it was all negative. And it never said, it never mentioned all the positive people, all the heroes of the Black community. It never mentions that. So, yeah, I think you would have some sort of inferiority complex reading a typical white history textbook.

She recognized how the deliberate distortion and omission of African history might create a sense of inferiority in African Americans and seemed to understand why teaching an accurate and complete history of Africans in America is important to the psychological, emotional and social development of Black children.

Many of the teachers believed that African history continues to be distorted in the history textbooks. They acknowledged that the newer textbooks are more diverse (e.g., different racial groups are represented) but believed that much of African and African American history is omitted. For this reason, Henry (1994) argues that educators must rewrite existing texts in order to create "more just and humanizing views of African cultures and peoples" (p. 303). She argues further that in their search to find historically accurate and culturally relevant texts to replace the traditional, Eurocentric texts that occupy their shelves, teachers might just have to settle with an empty shelf. She suggests, therefore, that teachers be resourceful. Too often, teachers rely on the textbooks provided by the district as the basis of the curriculum. The work of Black historians such as John Henrik Clarke (1992; 1991; 1958) and Ivan Van Sertima (1976), however, can be adapted and used in place of the

Eurocentric textbooks provided by the district. Faith, for example, remarked on how she has taken a history book and modified it for use with her second graders:

With second graders, even, I have taken the book African American History and as a fact, I just take as much as they can understand, maybe a couple sentences and use it daily. So therefore you're able to explain it and get them to soak it in because I think Black history is everyday, especially here... and I'm learning myself because in teaching these children, I just found in 1994, there were 10,000 miles of tunnels discovered that the Idu people constructed many, many years ago...

Here, Faith pointed out how valuable this research has also been for her own learning.

Many of the teachers in this study, however, felt that they should not have to search out additional resources and materials to supplement the curriculum. And they shouldn't. This information should already be a part of the curriculum; however, the reality is that the district is unlikely to provide these materials. Therefore, teachers must take responsibility to search out this information for themselves and their students.

While there was agreement that children should be taught about their history, teachers felt strongly that parents' shouldered much of the responsibility for "teaching culture" – the history, values, and traditions of a people. They stressed the importance of the parents role in teaching children about their history or "where they come from." As Anita noted:

I think it's really the responsibility of the parents to teach the child where they come from, who they are.

They positioned home and school as separate and distinct domains, acting independent of each other. Their comments seemed to suggest that the lines between home and school were visibly drawn and the roles clearly defined. They felt there is little schools can do beyond the basic history curriculum, particularly with the increasing responsibility being placed on teachers. They held firm that cultural knowledge should be passed on by parents. Take Anita for example. As a Black teacher and mother of two preschool aged children, she

understood the importance of teaching Black children about their culture but just could not find time in her classroom to do so:

I do believe it's true that, just as a parent, that it's important to talk to your children about their culture because a lot of times in the school day, even with me, we don't have a lot of time with the curriculum to talk about African American studies.

Teaching Black history is not enough, however. The American system of education is based on Eurocentric institutions, values and practices which devalue the language, history and culture of Black children; therefore teachers must challenge (and prepare their students to challenge) the status quo. As Carter G. Woodson asserts in Miseducation of the Negro, "The mere imparting of information is not education" (x). Indeed, Black children must have deep understandings of the political, social and economic realities that confront the very survival of African people locally, nationally, and internationally, and be committed to the struggle for liberation and justice for people of African descent (Madhubuti & Madhubuti, 1994). Therefore, if African-centered education is to "work" in this sense in the public school context, dramatic changes in the school's structures, policies and procedures must be made (Irvine, 2000). As Asante (1991) argues, "When it comes to educating African American children, the American educational system does not need a tune-up, it needs an overhaul" (p. 179).

The texts we read in the study group emphasized the importance of African-centered education as a culturally relevant alternative to mainstream, Eurocentric education. Beyond teaching Black history, the majority of teachers, however, did not see the value in an African-centered approach to teaching and learning; they questioned the value and importance of African-centered education throughout the group's discussions. Their knowledge of Black Nationalist ideology was limited, and they knew very little about African-centered education in theory or practice. This lack of knowledge and understanding greatly influenced how they

saw African-centered education as an alternative educational model for Black children. They did not see how it made a difference in the collective lives of African people. Essentially, African-centered education was lumped together with other educational reform efforts that had failed African American children.

While many of the teachers agreed that children needed to “know where they come from,” they felt African-centered schools did not prepare Black children for the “real world” because “the world is not just African American.” As Bridgette explained:

I don't personally think that African-centered schools are a... they're not totally a good idea because the world is not just African American. That's not a good way of growing up, only knowing one thing because when you're out in corporate America, how are you going to deal with other races if you've never learned anything about them. Same goes for other races... but the African-centered concept is not always a good idea. I don't think it is.

Similarly, Janice remarked on how African-centered schools can create a distorted view of the world:

It's just not how the world is. You're setting up a false pretense for these children. They're going to be like, “This is how it's gonna be,” when, you know, they're gonna move on at some point, and be like, “Wait a minute, this isn't how it is but this is what I was taught in school.”

Teachers maintained that Black children needed to know how to deal with people who “do not look like them,” and therefore need to be exposed to different cultures. This view was based on the fact that the student population at African-centered schools is often exclusively Black. What teachers did not take into account, however, was the reality that *de facto* segregation has almost guaranteed that a majority of Black children already attend schools with children who “look like them.” In these settings, however, their language and culture is devalued and their history absent.

What's more, once teachers had an opportunity to see a set of guidelines for implementing African-centered education (Kenyatta, 1998), they were hard pressed to see

the difference between African-centered education and what public schools should already be doing. They felt that many of the ideas for creating an African-centered classroom (e.g., decorating walls, having bright colors, class pets, plants) should be in *every* classroom, African-centered or not. They also felt that the expectations for teachers were common sense (e.g., show love, care and concern; respect all students; come to class prepared to teach) – nothing new or different from what “good teachers” already do. None of these things were seen as uniquely “African-centered.” Marissa, for example, pointed out:

I think it's necessary for any classroom, just take the African word out or put it in, whatever you want, and it's the same thing. Whether you have current events that are African-centered or regular current events, you should probably have those up. All those things.

In some ways, Kenyatta's book served as a double-edged sword. While it provided the nuts and bolts of implementing the African-centered educational model such as how to create an African-centered classroom, it also oversimplified African-centered education to the point that teachers did not see a difference between African-centered education and mainstream public education.

The overall sense of what African-centered education is designed to do beyond the curriculum remained illusive to teachers. Their view of African-centered education was limited to teaching Black history. They did not see African-centered education as a tool in the ongoing struggle for justice and liberation for people of African descent, and therefore did not see the value and importance of having African-centered schools.

### **Multicultural or African-Centered Education?**

Multicultural education is seen as a panacea for all educational problems. It has been recommended as a comprehensive school reform to raise the achievement of all students by celebrating the pluralism – ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender

differences – that students and their communities reflect (Nieto, 2000a). In our group's discussions, multicultural education was suggested as the alternative to African-centered education. There was a perception that African-centered education excluded the history and culture of other groups and multicultural education was all-inclusive.

Throughout our discussions, teachers maintained their position that Black children should be taught about “everybody.” Again, they felt Black children must be prepared for the “real world” (i.e., dealing with people who aren't Black). On one occasion, Anita admitted:

I wouldn't want my daughter to go to... I want her to go to a multicultural school. I mean, I don't want it to be all African Americans because she has to learn how to deal with other people that don't look like her.

And Faith argued further:

I don't think all of one thing is good for anybody. I think because, as you say, this is the real world. I don't want all of one kind of neighborhood; I don't want just all one race school. Now this is a different experience for me because I taught 26 years in a multicultural school. And coming here, it was different.

Consistently, teachers said that they would prefer a multicultural curriculum to an African-centered one. They believed whole-heartedly that students should learn about other cultures and emphasis should not be placed on any one culture; this would make them more well rounded they argued. The way they saw it, Black children are going to meet people from different cultures and they need to know how to interact with other groups of people. This view made sense absent an understanding of the theory and rationale for African-centered education in which education is more than a celebration of diversity but an act of resistance against the kind of cultural hegemony that negates and devalues African people, particularly given the history of Africans in America. Acknowledging the contributions of African people to the world, African-centered education cultivates a self-awareness and cultural



identity needed so that Black children can participate powerfully and responsibly in their communities and the larger society. But as Marissa explained:

I think students should learn about other cultures, not just their own. It makes them more well rounded because they're gonna people in the world that are from different cultures and it's good to know about them.

Although teachers had strong opinions about African-centered schools, their comments were based on a partial understanding of African-centered curriculum and pedagogy<sup>9</sup>; as discussed earlier, they assumed African-centered schools *only* taught African and African American history and culture. They knew little from the start and the two texts we read, which described the philosophy and goals of African-centered education (Akoto, 1994; Kenyatta, 1998), were not enough. Rather than provide a conceptual framework, the texts led teachers to develop a negative conception of African-centered education as ethnocentric and separatist.

While the teachers in this study were quick to support multicultural education, Nieto (2000a) has argued that teachers often do not fully understand multicultural education. Multicultural education is more than the study of the superficial aspects of culture – dance, dress, food, music. Rather, it takes into account racism and injustice and the continued exclusion of people of color in the United States. Like African-centered education, multicultural education “permeates the schools’ curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and families, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning” (Nieto 2000a, p. 305). It is not *added-on* to the standard curriculum and should not be reduced to food and festivals. As Ladson-Billings (2000b) writes:

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<sup>9</sup> While teachers’ views of African-centered education were based on limited knowledge, it is possible to fully understand the philosophy of African-centered education yet prefer a more “multicultural” education.

Instead of really understanding culture, students are led through a series of “exotic” experiences – eating different foods, doing strange dances, and wearing quaint costumes. This approach serves to reinscribe Euro-American culture as normative and natural (p. 191).

This approach to multicultural education ignores issues such as racism and injustice, power and politics, and avoids asking difficult questions related to race and class inequities (Nieto, 2000b). On the surface, then, multicultural education seemed “safe” to the teachers in this study, compared to African-centered education, because of its emphasis on cultural diversity. In both cases, however, teachers did not fully understand what these philosophies of education were really intended to do. Both models call teachers to challenge the status quo and encourage their students to do the same. To do this, teachers must begin to question their stereotypes and assumptions about students and their views on teaching and the purpose of education. Teachers assumed, however, that multicultural education was simply about “celebrating diversity” and in doing so lessened the importance of the teachers’ role in this change process.

While multicultural education “celebrates diversity,” Joan Ratteray (1990) argues the center of most multicultural curriculums is Eurocentric. Ratteray argues that there is no such thing as a multicultural curriculum with a multicultural center:

While a multicultural curriculum involves discussions of academic subjects from the perspective of various cultural groups, the center of these discussions inevitably is located in the experience of *one* of those cultural groups. Thus, it is possible to have a multicultural curriculum with a European and European-American center or a multicultural curriculum with an African and African-American center (p. 12-13).

Therefore, grounded in an African-centered perspective, Black children are more likely to embrace what Asante (1991) calls a “non-hierarchical” multiculturalism in which they have a clear sense of their own place in history and thus are better able to understand their relationship to other people of the world (p. 172). As a consequence, they do not learn to see African people as superior, and most importantly, they do not learn to see themselves

and their culture as inferior either. Many of the teachers in this study, however, viewed African-centered education as ethnocentric because of its emphasis on African people, culture and history. This view makes sense absent a deeper analysis of schools as institutions which reflect the dominant Eurocentric ideology. Although the American system of education is centered on European culture and history, Eurocentric values and ideals have become so deeply institutionalized that schools seem *culturally neutral*, making African-centered education appear *culturally biased*. Such uncritical acceptance of mainstream education led teachers in this case to see little value and importance in an African-centered education.

### **African-centered Pedagogy**

Much of the literature has focused more on “what” to teach in African-centered schools than the issue of “how” to teach (Irvine, 2000). As Lee (1992) argues, teachers must be more than knowledgeable about African history and culture and like children to effectively teach in an African-centered school. According to Lee, Lomotey, & Shujaa (1990), implementing African-centered pedagogy demands teachers who advocate and are well grounded in the following principles (see p. 52-53):

1. The social ethics of African culture as exemplified in the social philosophy of Maat – truth, balance, order, harmony, and reciprocity;
2. The history of the African continent and Diaspora;
3. The need for political and community organizing within the Black community;
4. The positive pedagogical implications of the indigenous language of Africans in America, Black English;
5. Child development principles that are relevant to the positive and productive growth of African American children

6. African contributions in science, mathematics, literature, the arts and societal organization;
7. Teaching techniques that are socially interactive, holistic and positively affective;
8. The need for continuous personal study;
9. The African principle that “children are the reward of life”;
10. The African principle of reciprocity; that is, a teacher sees his or her own future symbiotically linked to the development of students.

To embody such principles in one’s teaching, Lee (1992) maintains that a teacher must be well read in what she calls “Black Classical Education.” They must also be well read in contemporary theories of learning and prepared to view such theories critically. This requires extensive study and opportunities to engage in a critical dialogue. This might be a lot to expect of urban teachers who are already overwhelmed; however, Lee (1992) writes:

To expect teachers to be such well read individuals may appear demanding and unrealistic, yet the liberatory objectives of African-centered education demand that teachers, students, and parents alike must learn to be more than they think possible (p. 168).

The study group I led was created to provide teachers with the opportunity to read some “Black classics” such as Carter G. Woodson’s (1933) Miseducation of the Negro as well as some contemporary work (Smitherman, 2000; A. Wilson, 1992; Kunjufu, 1985) while also offering teachers opportunities to engage in a critical dialogue. Together, the readings and discussions gave teachers an opportunity to learn about the principles of African-centered pedagogy and laid the foundation for further study. While the readings did not delve into the principles of African-centered pedagogy as described by Lee, Lomotey and Shujaa (1994), they provided a conceptual framework for understanding the philosophy of African-centered education more broadly.

Having a foundation in Pan African thought and a knowledge of African and African American history, teachers can begin to construct an African-centered pedagogy. To work in an African-centered school context, however, Akoto (1994) argued that teachers must also be active members of the Black community and invested in its cultural, political and economic development:

The individual who assumes the role of mwalimu (teacher) must not only be involved in the study of the culture, but must be involved in a concrete and ongoing way with advancing the cultural and/or political interests of Afrikan people. The mwalimu comes before her/his students (wanafunzi) as a representative of the whole culture. Walimu (teachers) are entrusted with the task of inculcating the essential values of the culture and thereby play an essential role in guaranteeing its continuation (p. 325).

Akoto maintains that teachers should be representatives of the culture, which suggests that non-Black teachers are not the best cultural referents for Black children. Other scholars (Foster, 1993; Henry, 1994) have suggested that Black teachers' knowledge of the Black community's values and norms contributes to their success with Black children. Janice, who acknowledged early on that she was unfamiliar with African American culture, realized once reading Akoto's chapter that she could not be a cultural representative for Black children:

I think that the teacher needs to be an active member of the African community in order to know what that means... because they say you need to pass down like cultural heritage, but heritage is more than just subject matter, like you were saying, it's ideals, and morals and values, and if you're not a member of that community, then you wouldn't know what those are and you can't be taught those. They need to be experienced. It's not just something you can read out of a book and pass down.

She continued, making a statement about this notion of "cultural fit":

According to [Akoto], where he talked about the teacher being an active member of the African community, I mean, I'm not. So, in that sense, I certainly don't fit into the African-centered school and I think that's true of a lot, well not a lot, but some of the teachers here, and I have no basis... I have nothing to go on. I don't know African culture. I don't know ideals, I don't know customs, and I've been given no information on that either. So it's not like I can even... well, I can, I can learn about that... I can look that up on my own, but it hasn't been stressed that that's important.

In previous discussions, Janice argued that a teachers' race did not matter, but then acknowledged perhaps race did matter in the African-centered school context after reading Akoto's chapter. Also agreeing with Akoto, Cathy argued:

The teacher has to really know African culture real good to present it to the students. You just can't like half step, pretend like you do know. You really have to know what you're doing.

Similarly, Cheree remarked on the added value of having a teacher who can relate to students culturally:

I believe that any good teacher can teach the history of Black students but as far as to get that in depth personal experience, no other race can get it except from that race that's teaching. Like, I can't teach a child how to be white because I'm of color and vice versa... another race can teach it but to really get that experience, you know, to really be a role model, I think it's essential that our people would teach it. That's just my personal opinion.

Bridgette, on the other hand, argued that teachers do not have to be Black to teach African and African American history and culture:

There are some people of other races that know more about African culture than some Black people do so I don't think that has anything to do with it.

Bridgette raises a good point given that a majority of so-called African scholars in the U.S. are white. This is precisely what Carter G. Woodson argued more than 60 years ago – Black folks have been miseducated about their own history and therefore lack knowledge of traditional and contemporary African history and culture. This does not mean, however, that Black teachers cannot be what Akoto (1994) refers to as “cultural representatives”; rather they must be given opportunities to study African history and culture through study groups such as the one I created and led or through university coursework.

Outside of being a cultural representative, if teachers are to work in an African-centered school, they must also share the school's philosophy. The teachers in this study agreed that educators who are uncomfortable with the philosophy of African-centered

should not teach at an African-centered school. They maintained that teachers must buy into the philosophy, and pointed out that there were teachers at Ayo Academy who did not share the school's philosophy. In their view, these teachers were not committed to the concept of African-centered education and therefore should not teach at the Academy. In the following exchange, teachers discuss whether teachers should be expected to share the school's philosophy:

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Ebony     | On the very top of that page it says, "Under no circumstances should educators of any background who display levels of discomfort or intolerance with the African-centered philosophy be designated as instructors." So basically, if you don't buy into African-centered education, you shouldn't be teaching at that school. |
| Marissa   | I agree because I just feel like if you don't have the same philosophy, how can you teach something... that's being hypocritical.  |
| Cathy     | You'd be surprised.  |
| Marissa   | Well, I know people do it. I'm not saying that they don't... I don't think they should teach... any philosophy. Like if you're not comfortable with Montessori, you cannot teach in a Montessori school if you don't believe in individual success.  |
| Bridgette | That's true because I wouldn't teach at a Montessori school because, to me, I would be uncomfortable.  |
|           | .  |
|           | .  |
|           | .  |
| Marissa   | There's teachers here who probably don't do what they're supposed to be doing. They're not teaching African-centered; they're just here.   |
| Faith     | They just tolerate it.   |
| Anita     | They get a paycheck.   |
| Marissa   | There are educators that just work for a paycheck.   |

Although the teachers in this exchange were critical of their colleagues, the majority of teachers who participated in the study group did not buy into African-centered education.

As I noted earlier, teachers were resistant to the concept of African-centered education, citing a variety of reasons. But as this example illustrates, teachers were frequently unaware of the contradictions inherent in their comments. In their minds, they cared about their students and sought to create an African-centered classroom as much as possible compared to those who were “just there for the paycheck.” However, as Faith continued:

And then, there are some like me who don't teach the principles everyday, Harambee everyday. Because for one thing, part of it, I don't even think the children understand because it's too advanced for them... and it is a waste of their time when I could be teaching something they really get and they're going to *need* in the world.

As the conversation continued, Faith confessed that she does not follow the school's African-centered educational model very closely and questioned whether children could understand the tenets of African-centered philosophy. She believed teaching the principles of Kwanzaa (unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith) was a waste of time when children need to learn how to read and write – skills they're going to need in the “real world.” While just reciting the principles and defining them without making a connection to children's lives is a waste of instructional time, Faith's raises a good point. One teacher in the African-centered middle school that Pollard and Ajirotutu (2000) studied expressed similar views. She too felt children needed to learn basic skills such as reading and arithmetic so that they could function in the “real world”:

I think they [the goals] need to be narrowed and more focused. I can agree with implementing the African American concept into the curriculum, but the bottom line is these kids have to be able to go out and function in the total world. Which means you got to read and... be able to do math... So I feel these are the skills that these kids need. They need the basics. You give them the basics, they'll be able to get the other stuff (p. 75).



Both teachers make a clear distinction between what's needed to function on a daily basis and what they would consider extracurricular. In their minds, cultural knowledge is disconnected from subject matter knowledge; cultural competence incompatible with academic achievement (see Ladson-Billings, 2000a). The issue for these teachers is whether and how children will use this information beyond the classroom. Essentially, then, they're asking, what is the practical value of African-centered education? Empirical research has yet to answer this question but descriptive studies of African-centered schools show some promise (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Watson & Smitherman, 1996; Hoover, 1992; Lomotey, 1992; Lee, 1992).

While the work of educational researchers such as Kofi Lomotey, Mwalimu Shujaa, Agyei Akoto and Carol Lee have added to our understanding of African-centered education and pedagogy, empirical research is needed to persuade practitioners and others that African-centered education is a viable alternative to mainstream education. I found through my work with the teachers at Ayo Academy that a greater emphasis must be placed on the value added in terms of academic achievement if teachers are to buy into an African-centered philosophy of education. Although Black scholars (Woodson, 1933; Asante, 1991; Lomotey, 1992) have argued for some time that if Black children are taught within the context of their own history and culture they would become more active participants in the learning process, teachers need evidence of this. Essentially, teachers' goal is to raise student achievement; therefore there needs to be data to substantiate this claim. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2000a) has argued, however, "While the academic achievement is the element most on the minds (and lips) of reformers, academic achievement must not come at high psychic and social cost" (p. 193).

Yet another important question to consider in implementing the African-centered educational model in public schools is whether to infuse African and African American history and culture into the *existing* curriculum or create an African-centered curriculum all its own. Many efforts to implement African-centered education simply add African and African American cultural knowledge into the existing curriculum using existing materials. Consequently, African Americans are often discussed tangentially and reduced to people and events rather than integrated throughout the curriculum (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000). A number of scholars have recognized the dilemma of implementing African-centered curriculum in traditional, Eurocentric schools (Ratteray, 1990; Kenyatta, 1998; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000).

In public school settings where there is an existing curriculum, teachers must learn how to *infuse* African and African American history and culture so that it does not become an *add-on* or marginal to the traditional, Eurocentric curriculum. This sort of “drive-by” instruction gives the appearance of African-centeredness, but does not provide worthwhile learning opportunities for students. However, teachers are less likely to *add-on* to the curriculum if they are well grounded in African and African American history and culture. Very few teachers, however, have ever taken an African History or African Studies course, which means that most are unable to provide comprehensive information about Africans in America and the Diaspora (Asante, 1991).

While knowledge of African and African American history and culture is essential, we cannot assume, however, that teachers who know content are able to use that knowledge in their teaching (Ball, 2000). Therefore, teachers need opportunities to learn about the history of Africans in America, on the continent and in the Diaspora, and find ways to integrate this knowledge into their practice. Foster and Peele (1999), for example, found that the teachers

they studied often made superficial changes in their classroom displays and routines. Boykin (2000) makes a distinction between what he calls *surface* and *deep* cultural transformations. Compared to *surface* cultural transformations where the history of Africans in America and the Diaspora are presented through images, stories and facts, *deep* cultural transformations consider the purpose of education and the influence of societal institutions, values and practices on the process of schooling. Teachers must therefore move beyond the surface if education is to be “critically transformative” (King, 1994).

Since an African-centered curriculum guide was not provided by the school’s administration, teachers’ efforts to infuse African and African American history and culture into the curriculum at Ayo Academy was fragmented and varied considerably from classroom to classroom. While a majority of the teachers in this study decorated their classrooms with African fabrics and artwork, and maps of Africa and pictures of famous African Americans were hung on the walls in a number of classrooms, teachers had not made the kind of deep cultural transformations Boykin describes. A number of teachers did list, however, some of the activities they had done in their effort to supplement the curriculum with African and African American history and cultural themes. Overall, there were a number of promising activities aimed at creating an African-centered classroom. In the following comments, Bridgette describes what she does in *her* classroom but makes a point to say that other teachers might be doing something different or nothing at all.

I do my own thing in my classroom. We’ve been doing Black History reports once a month since September and we do it September through May, and we also once every two weeks, I have an African American... I have this book of 365 facts. We take a test every two weeks, so I’m doing my part but is everybody else?

This “island” phenomenon seemed to be common at the Academy. A majority of the teachers who participated in the study group noted that they were “doing their own thing” but were unaware what other teachers were doing in their classrooms. Thus, although there

were consistent efforts by individual teachers to infuse African and African American history and culture into the curriculum, these tended to be isolated instances.

Janice and Bridgette, both novice teachers and new to the Academy, were frustrated with the lack of direction from the administration and felt that it was the principal's responsibility to communicate expectations to teachers. While Janice was willing to collaborate with teachers, she explained, "But I don't know what he wants as an African-centered school. I have no idea." She explained further:

I'm not saying that I wouldn't like to find out but I'm saying as a school, there's 40 teachers here, there's no way... it's not stressed as a school that that's what's important so I'm not going to go to every teacher and find out "Are you doing your part to be an African-centered school?" Well, yeah, I'll talk to my colleagues about it, you know, my immediate ones but I'm not gonna... as a school, I would say no, this is not an African-centered school because there is not that overwhelming feeling that everybody is doing their part to make it an African-centered school.

Marissa, who taught at the Academy during the 1999-2000 school year, pointed out:

Last year we had Harambees every week... we did every day for half the year and then we did it every week in the chapel. We *really* talked about it. They knew "I am somebody"; they knew everything. This year, we haven't even had one so why am I gonna do that in my classroom when their not really doing it anywhere else. You know what I mean. I think the philosophy of the school has changed this year. It's really not African-centered anymore unless you're, maybe in your class.

The teachers in this study felt strongly that teachers need to be prepared and given direction by administration. They want to know what is expected. As Marissa noted, "You have to be trained. You can't just come and say now you're teaching African-centered. You have to learn about it." The teachers felt that few resources were made available to their staff and that new teachers need training, support, and resources. There was also agreement that teacher collaboration is key; teachers need to share materials and ideas so that they can be on the same page. They felt teachers needed to be on the same page for the curriculum to work rather than "doing their own thing." As Cathy remarked:

[I]f we had more collaboration with the teachers from day one, starting off in August when we go back to school, we're all going to be on the same accord and we're gonna do this or that... that's the only way, make sure everybody is sticking to the curriculum. If not, it seems like everybody is doing their own thing.

However, the high rate of teacher turnover at Ayo Academy has made it difficult for teachers to build sustained collaborative relationships. As Pollard and Ajirrotutu (2000) found in their study of Milwaukee's public African-centered elementary school, the stability and longevity of the staff determines whether teachers are able to build the kind of ongoing teacher collaboration that is necessary to sustain the African-centered educational model.

### **Toward a Critical, African-centered Consciousness**

Our discussion of African-centered education raised some difficult questions. What is the value of African-centered education to children in the "real world?" Will cultural knowledge improve student achievement? Will African-centered curriculum and pedagogy open up a world of transformative possibilities or give our children a false sense of the world? Is African-centered education a new form of ethnocentrism masked in new terminology and contexts? To begin answering some of these questions, teachers must begin to challenge traditional, Eurocentric conceptions of teaching and the purpose of education.

A critical African-centered pedagogy goes beyond infusing African history and culture simply because it's the right thing to do. It involves empowering Black children to transform their lives and their communities, to become activists and advocates, and resists dominant schooling practices that alienate Black children (Henry, 1994; Pollard & Ajirrotutu, 2000). It moves beyond the mere acknowledgement of diversity and difference in schools to a "rupturing and radicalization of the notions of institutional power, educational equity and democratic principles" in American society (Dei, 1995, p. 191). African-centered schools



must therefore be radically different from mainstream, Eurocentric schools if they are to have transformative and liberatory potential (Shujaa, 1994; Akoto, 1994; Asante, 1991; Dei, 1995). And perhaps more importantly, teachers must begin the work needed to uproot the "oppressor within" (Lorde, 1984); that is, they must challenge their beliefs, attitudes, values and practices which keep them from seeing the world with new eyes (Henry, 1994). As Audre Lorde (1984) writes:

The true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactic, the oppressors' relationships (p. 123).

Participation in a study group or other form of inquiry which supports a critical stance and challenges teachers to question seemingly natural and neutral practices, will begin the journey of transformation that is needed to uproot the "oppressor within" so that education can be "critically transformative" (King, 1994). A critical Discourse of teaching might help teachers see the value and importance in an African-centered education and begin to see the importance of their role in transforming the status quo. Becoming immersed in critical literature (Freire, 1973, 1970; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1989) and exposure to Pan Africanist thought (Clarke, 1991; Asante, 1988, 1980; Akoto, 1992), teachers might become more open to the concept of African-centered education and more likely to see it as a viable alternative to mainstream education<sup>10</sup>.

Although studying educational philosophies and theories are important aspects of teachers' professional development, they need solutions to immediate and pressing problems of practice. Sustaining teachers' commitment and interest in study groups, therefore, hinges

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<sup>10</sup> I have assumed throughout this dissertation that if teachers had a more informed understanding of African-centered education that they would see its value and importance in the education of Black children. It is possible, however, for teachers to fully understand African-centered education but still disagree with its tenets.





on making the connection to practice (Lieberman, 2000). As Lieberman (2000) has argued, keeping a balance between theory and practice is important to the success of teacher collaboration of this kind. While the focus of our discussion was more theory than practice, by the end of the school year, teachers had begun to make deep cultural transformations of the kind Boykin (2000) describes. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, a few teachers had begun to change their perceptions of their students and had become more reflective about their teaching.

In the next chapter, I address teacher change and whether and how the readings and group discussions appear to have helped teachers begin to think and teach critically. I consider how participation in the study group challenged teachers' views, sometimes leading them to change what they believed previously.

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Disagreeing in this case does not mean that they are "wrong." I respect the right of teachers to disagree with the philosophy of African-centered education.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I will examine what participation in the study group offered teachers; that is, whether teachers grew in their knowledge and understanding of African-centered education and whether they came away with a deeper understanding or awareness of the historical, social, economic, political and cultural forces that shape the educational lives of Black children. This chapter considers the power of study groups as a professional development tool that 1) supports construction of a critical, African-centered consciousness which challenges teachers to see their work critically; and 2) provides teachers with a better understanding of African-centered education and its value and importance for Africans in America.

#### **Study Groups as a Possible Site for Constructing a Critical, African-centered Consciousness**

Teacher study groups are central to the development of an African-centered worldview (Lee, 1992). Like the students they teach, teachers, both Black and white, may have been miseducated themselves about African history (Asante, 1991) and therefore must go through a process Freire (1970) called "conscientization." In an independent African-centered school in Chicago, New Concept Development Center, the school's staff met monthly to study as a group (Lee, 1992). Together, they read such classic texts as The Destruction of Black Civilization by Chancellor Williams (1974), Miseducation of the Negro by Carter G. Woodson (1933), and The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual by Harold Cruse (1968). Other African-centered schools have required college credits in African and African

American history and culture (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000). Regardless of the form teacher professional development takes (a study group or university course), it is understood that teachers at an African-centered school (or any other school with a large Black student population) need to study Black child development and the history and culture of Africans in America and the Diaspora.

In this study, I created and led a study group where the work of Black scholars in education (Woodson, 1933; Kunjufu, 1985; Shujaa, 1994; Akoto, 1994), psychology (Wilson, 1992) and sociolinguistics (Smitherman, 2000) served as a focal point of discussion and provided a conceptual foundation for beginning and practiced teachers at an African-centered public school who knew very little about the goals and philosophy of African-centered education. Informed by a growing body of research on dialogue in teaching (Burbules, 1993) and the role of dialogue in teachers' learning and professional development (Clark, 2001; Berne, 2001), I created a context for teacher learning and researched the ways a study group could engage teachers in a dialogue around the historical, social, political and cultural forces that shape the lives of Black children and the transformative possibilities of African-centered education.

In designing this dissertation, I wondered what experiences could lead teachers to a different set of assumptions about Black children given the power of teacher expectations (Grant, 1984; Rist, 1970) and the negative perceptions teachers might have of Black children (Roberts, 1999). I sought to "challenge, confront and engage" teachers' understandings (B. Cross, 1998) of the sociopolitical context in which Black children are schooled and the value of African-centered education for Africans in America. As facilitator of the study group, I pushed teachers to think critically about schools – who influences them; whose interests they serve; what ideologies guide them. In doing so, I hoped to interrogate teachers' assumptions

not only about their students but also about the process of schooling. As a participant observer, I challenged and supported teachers as learners, and continually questioned how the study group could leave teachers as different “thinkers, believers or perceivers” (B. Cross, 1998).

In follow up interviews (May 2001), teachers agreed that the group got them thinking and in some cases made them rethink their beliefs and practices. In this section, I use this follow up interview to discuss what teachers gained from their participation in the study group as evidenced in their responses to questions asked in the interview.

One of the most important goals of the study group was to challenge teachers’ beliefs and assumptions about Black children. Often teachers’ beliefs are based on a deficit view of Black children and therefore their perceptions of them are negative (King, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2000b). For Janice, who was raised in an affluent white community and had few interactions with Black folks, the readings and discussions helped her see her students differently:

I think I have a deeper appreciation of where they’re coming from, what they’re up against but I don’t think that... I haven’t lowered my expectations; I haven’t changed what I think that they’re capable of doing.

Marissa, who was also raised in an affluent white community, compared her views on teaching diverse students before her participation in the study group to her current views:

Prior to the study group, I didn’t really think that it was much difference. I kept saying, I know you probably remember, I kept saying, well children are children and I just teach children. Now by the end of the study group, I guess I know that there are differences, or they claim there are different ways that they learn.

Taking a close look at Marissa’s comments, it seemed she now agreed that there are important differences between children *culturally*. But then she ends her comments by saying, “they claim,” which suggests that she was not entirely convinced by the readings. And when I asked Marissa whether the study group challenged her beliefs and assumptions

about Black children, she said that her master's courses had a greater impact on her thinking than her participation in the study group:

Probably more because of my master's courses, I've learned more about how to reach children and multiple intelligences and multiple learning styles and things like that, and I understand more of what I need to do in my classroom, so I think I've learned more. And I've learned more about diversity and understanding... in the beginning I kinda thought that all kids were pretty much the same and I could reach them all because I was doing *my* job but now I know more that I have to really understand the group of kids that I have and learn more about their culture and more about them and that helped me reach them more.

Marissa's comments illustrate just how difficult it was to determine what kind of impact the study group had on teachers' beliefs and attitudes. Conducted in the messiness of the "real world," other variables – graduate coursework, district in-services – competed with the study group and therefore also helped shape teachers' beliefs and practices. Consequently, I cannot attribute the changes in Marissa's thinking to the study group alone; she attributes her growth to her master's courses. When I asked her whether the study group had *any* impact on her thinking about these issues, she clarified:

Maybe a little. I just think experience and also I think my Marygrove classes have helped me with that and some of that stuff I brought to the table in the study group. I kinda combined everything together.

Both Faith and Bridgette indicated that while they had learned some things, their beliefs and assumptions about Black children were not *questioned*. The majority of teachers, in fact, said they learned something new and in some cases said the readings and discussions made them rethink their beliefs and practices; however, there were some beliefs they held on to strongly. For example, Janice concluded, "I still don't see differences developmentally between Black children and white children, or just children in general, but maybe again I need to read more about that." Although Amos Wilson's (1992) book, Awakening the natural genius of Black children, did not convince her that there was a significant difference



between Black and white children developmentally<sup>11</sup>, she was open to learning more so that she could make a definitive statement on this issue, whereas her views seemed to be more firmly rooted at the beginning of the school year.

In some cases, the study group affirmed what teachers believed and practiced in their classroom. As Cheree pointed out, “[M]ost of the things that we discussed I had knowledge of anyway so it just helped broaden and helped review my train of thought.” She later noted, “It’s always helpful when you see things in print that can help sorta back up what you’re thinking, to reinforce.” As she explained further, she didn’t learn anything about educating Black children that she did not know before:

I know that teaching Black children is different from other children, so nothing in the literature that we read was surprising or shocking to me. I pretty much expected it.

The study group was also intended to help teachers understand the historical, social, economic, political and cultural forces that shape Black children’s lives. Cathy, Bridgette, and Janice found Jawanza Kunjufu’s (1985) book Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys particularly valuable. As fourth grade teachers, Kunjufu’s notion of the “Fourth Grade Failure Syndrome,” a persistent pattern of failure among Black males that begins in the fourth grade as the classroom environment becomes more competitive and individualistic, fascinated them. They did not know fourth grade was such a critical year for Black boys and said they planned to do some things differently in their classroom with this in mind. For example, Cathy pointed out:

I know next semester to watch out, especially for our boys, give them more hands on things to do and keep them really challenged.

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<sup>11</sup> Teachers generally agreed that there are no differences developmentally between Black and white children. While there has been scientific research documenting developmental differences between Black and white children at birth, this data can lead to deterministic thinking.

This book also helped Marissa understand her male students. As she explained, "I learned a lot more about them and where they come from and why they behave the way they do."

Janice, who said she enjoyed Kunjufu's book the most, remarked:

I enjoyed the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys the most only because it brought to light so much information that I wasn't aware of. There's so many hidden things that are really out there kind of to, I don't know if they're intended purposely to destroy Black boys but are there nonetheless and are destroying them. And it was really cool to read because I am a fourth grade teacher so the Fourth Grade [Failure] Syndrome, I was like, yeah, yeah, I can see that, I can see that. So I liked that a lot.

Janice explained further that she also learned more about the social, economic and political forces that impact the lives of Black children in general:

I also, in the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys, I think I have a new awareness of what it's like to be a Black child. Certainly, I'll never know but it made me understand that this is a lot more out there that, it just dealt with Black boys, but I think it's with Black children in general, that they just have to deal with that I just don't see or recognize or know about. So yes, I think it gave me more, maybe compassion... maybe more... you know like, there is a reason that my students are acting the way they are and it's not just because they don't enjoy school, there's just so many other factors that are fighting against them.

I did not observe teachers in their classrooms to determine whether the study group had an impact on their practice; however I wondered whether their participation in the study group prompted them to do things differently or reaffirmed what they were already doing in their classroom. In follow up interviews, I asked teachers to reflect on what they had learned and whether the readings and discussions prompted them to modify their instruction. A few teachers felt they were already effective practitioners and said they did not change anything in their classroom as a result of their participation in the study group. Cathy, however, said that the group inspired her to do more cooperative grouping, conduct Internet research to learn more about African history, and assign more student projects. Even Faith, the veteran of our group, said she "learned more and it enabled me to go back to the classroom to try different things." What's more, participation in the study group



prompted Faith “to speak even a little bit more about our heritage and I have actually started pulling information from a book I have on African history.” She explained further that, “it has inspired me to even search for more information for myself and to share” with others. For Faith, the study group’s influence extended beyond the group itself. Participation in the study group inspired her to learn more about African and African American history for herself.

Bridgette, a second year teacher whose classroom is very structured, indicated that this experience prompted her to give her students more “talk time.” Her classroom is more teacher-centered and she prefers children raise their hands before speaking, and only speak when they’ve been called upon by her. She learned, however, that her students needed more opportunities for discussion and spontaneous interaction:

It’s prompted me to give more talk time, for them to talk and me to do less talking... just let them give answers as they come. I let them do that more instead of just saying don’t talk unless you’re called on. So I let them talk a little bit more and say what they feel and not just wait until I call on you.

By creating more opportunities for discussion, Bridgette was shifting gradually from a teacher-centered to a more student-centered classroom. And although she preferred a more structured classroom, she began to reconsider her approach to teaching Black children:

They need to learn a different way. A lot of them need more I guess freedom. They need the strictness and the rigidity as well but they need a lot more freedom and more interactive, more hands-on I think... as opposed to just sitting in a desk, paper and pencil and everything. And that’s what I did 85% with this class this school year.

Compared to the other teachers, Marissa felt that she was already a “good teacher,” and therefore did not readily see possible areas of improvement. For Marissa, the study group did more to help her understand her students than prompt changes in her instruction:

Not doing anything really different, it just helps me understand the kids more. But I haven’t done anything different because I didn’t think I treated them bad or wasn’t effective before. It really just helped me for my own background knowledge just to understand and maybe I’ll look at it a little deeper and into knowing them more... It

definitely couldn't hurt me to know more, to learn more but I don't think that I was that out of it, because I really have tried to look into really understanding them and learning as much as I can from around the school.

As Marissa pointed out, she's not "that out of it," and had already made an effort to understand her students prior to her participation in the study group.

Looking across the six study group sessions, our discussion of Ebonics was the most heated. As discussed in Chapter 3, a majority of the teachers felt that Ebonics was "just slang"; however, our discussion challenged them to think more critically about the legitimacy of the language. This discussion ended up being the one that teachers enjoyed the most and got the most from personally and professionally. For example, Janice felt strongly that Black children needed to be corrected when they spoke Ebonics – or incorrect English as she saw it – so that they learned how to speak Standard American English, the "norm." After much thought, however, she reconsidered her position:

[T]he Ebonics [discussion] really struck me. The one thing I let go more, is correcting their speech or always kind of nit picking. I thought that that was important because it was incorrect but just because it's a different language that doesn't make it wrong. So I make them aware especially when they're speaking to an adult, but in the classroom setting, I don't. Like before I would be like, no, what you meant to say or you should have said or what do you mean. I don't do that as much. And even in their writing, writing papers, I only correct it if that's the topic that we're working on, you know, like subject/verb agreement, then I'll correct it but otherwise I let it go, unless I specifically tell them, I'm looking for this, I want this. Or like when they're writing creative writing, a personal narrative or something, definitely not. If I'm telling them it's a research paper, yes. So there are different times and places when I now correct their language, or grammar, when I used to do it all the time.

Similarly, Bridgette, who firmly believed that Ebonics was lazy, broken English, commented, "I would have to read more myself but I didn't know it was like a separate language. I came in thinking it was just incorrect English, so I can say [my views on] Ebonics, that's changed."

Anita's views were also changed as a result of our Ebonics discussion. As she explained:

I really enjoyed the Ebonics discussion, to get an understanding of it because a lot of people don't understand it. They think that slang is Ebonics but it's really not, so

that was interesting... at first, with what the media was feeding us, I thought, "Oh, wow, why would anybody want to talk like that or accept that." But once we read and listening to [others'] views on it, it helped me to accept it because most African Americans speak it.

While Janice was a novice in more ways than one and was prompted to do some things differently in her classroom as a result of her participation in the study group, this experience also reaffirmed what she had already begun to do with her students:

One of the things that I have my students do is, they have to tell me what they want to do when they get older. One of the conspiracies was that young Black boys always want to play sports and that's their goal. I tell them that it's OK if they want to play sports but they should always have something as a back up, and so they have to give me their strengths and weaknesses. What kind of job could you do with those strengths, other than play sports? So I think a lot of them have come around in thinking that they don't have to play sports for a living.

In creating the study group and selecting the readings, I hoped teachers' participation would also lead them to view their role in an African-centered school context differently. In general, teachers began to see their work differently as they learned more about African-centered education. Cathy, for example, saw her role involving more collaboration with teachers. She was a huge advocate for teacher collaboration; throughout the year, she emphasized the importance of teachers being "on the same accord":

We should have more discussions, collaborations. We should be able to collaborate, have time for that during school time. We should have a lounge where we can go and talk about different kids. How we can help that child instead of putting them off into special ed class or send them home, suspend them.

Anita, on the other hand, indicated that she felt a greater sense to be a positive role model for Black children as a teacher at an African-centered school. She did not attribute this sense of responsibility to her participation in the study group, however. When I asked her if the study group had any influence on this, she noted, "that's just something that was really important to me to do." As she explained:

I've always felt like I had a very important role, because of this being an Afrocentric school, because a lot of times our children don't see positive African Americans, so I'm that positive figure that they look up to. So I try to present myself in a positive way so that I can instill in them the same things.

Similarly, Faith explained that she did not see her role any differently than she had before because she had already been teaching her students "not to go out and forget but to always look back and see how they can be a help to their community."

Marissa, who felt she wasn't "that out of it," also did not view her role in this context any differently, but for different reasons. She felt she was already a caring and supportive teacher and had high expectations for her students. While she felt she understood her students more, this awareness did not influence her practice in any significant way. Janice, on the other hand, saw her role differently. As a white teacher, she felt she could not be the kind of cultural representative (Akoto, 1994) that children should have in an African-centered school:

I don't think that I can fully give what students in an African-centered school should have, being a Caucasian person. I just don't think I have that background. So where I used to think that it doesn't matter... I don't think it matters here because I don't think that we participate in an African-centered curriculum but if a school was to be strictly African-centered, I don't think that I would go into that school, not because I didn't want to be a part of that, but because I think I would be doing the children a disservice because I couldn't give them everything the parents and they hoped for in an African-centered curriculum.

Janice went on to explain:

I really enjoy teaching Black children. I don't know that I'm necessarily cut out... well... I think that I'm a good teacher for them but I can't relate to a lot of things and I wish that they had strong Black teachers that could be their role models but there just aren't. So I feel that the next best choice is to have a good teacher regardless of their race. The best choice is to have a good Black teacher, and then have a good teacher. I would rather see them have a good Black teacher. I think that's important... I mean, I would really like to be a strong role model for them but I do think that sometimes they do need somebody from their own culture to give that to them, to make it more meaningful for them.

An unfortunate consequence for Janice is that this reading may have discouraged her from teaching Black children. She no longer felt she could be as effective as a Black teacher teaching Black children because of the cultural difference. She saw herself as the "next best choice." While I hoped the readings and discussions would challenge teachers to view their role in this context more critically, I did not intend for this experience to be disempowering as it seemed to be for Janice.

Conceived as a professional development tool, I also wanted to know whether the study group contributed to teachers' development as practitioners. As a beginning teacher who was unfamiliar with Black culture, Janice felt both Smitherman's (2000) and Kunjufu's (1985) texts contributed the most to her development as a teacher:

The Ebonics just because I am more aware, I've changed my behavior because of it. And I think this one [pointing to Kunjufu's book]. That's why those were the two that really struck me because it's changed my attitude and behavior as a teacher, because I want to find out more about their socioeconomic background, their cultural background whereas I didn't think that was necessarily that important before. So my attitude is that I need to do some research or need to have some experiences where I can relate to the kids more.

As evidenced in her comments, these texts had a powerful influence on Janice's beliefs and practices, and inspired her to get more involved in the Black community so that she would be able to relate to her students more.

Finally, I wanted to know whether the study group contributed to teachers' personal development. It is difficult to separate the personal from the professional, however. Therefore, I asked teachers to consider whether the readings and discussions influenced more than their professional lives as teachers. Janice, for example, remarked on how the discussions helped her be more open to other points of view:

What the discussions made me do was listen to other points of view and think about them... I'm not exactly sure what off the top of my head, specific examples, but I do know that there were things brought up in discussions that I was like, oh yeah, I guess I didn't even think of it that way or having not been [from] that background or

from that culture, I would have never realized that. So I think things like that changed and that was almost with all of the discussions, where it just kind of opened up my eyes to different things that I wouldn't have otherwise seen.

Cathy and Anita, on the other hand, both enjoyed Amos Wilson's (1992) Awakening the Natural Genius of Black Children. As parents, they liked the developmental aspect of the book and learned about the unique developmental stages of Black children. Collectively, the readings and discussions helped Marissa get a sense of the social, economic, and political forces that shape our lives:

It's kind of interesting when we all come to together and we share our experiences with other people of other races, and it kinda just helped me to see more of what the world is like and it helped me to understand more about what minorities go through; I learned more about that. There are some things being white that I didn't know about, even personally, with the male book [Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys], the last one that we read, because I do date outside my race. It helped me understand my boyfriend more, like oh, no wonder he...

Compared to the other teachers, Janice experienced the greatest growth in her thinking around issues of race, culture and language as evidenced by her comments in my follow up interview with her. Perhaps because of her position as a novice teacher and her own admission that she knew very little about African American history and culture, the study group offered Janice the opportunity to learn more about her students and her role as an educator in this context. What's more, Janice's thinking toward the beginning of the school year reflected an uncritical habit of mind. An "ideology of whiteness" (McIntyre, 1997) led her to dismiss the race inequities that exist in our schools and underestimate the legacy of racism in the U.S.; however, this ideology was not evident in her comments during her follow up interview.

As I have described in Chapters 3 and 4, construction of a critical, "global" Discourse was difficult. Throughout our discussions, teachers held on to their "folk theories" (Bruner, 1996) about teaching and the purpose of education. While individual

teachers occasionally took a critical stance, collectively the group remained uncritical. Yet the readings and discussions seemed to move teachers closer to a critical, African-centered consciousness, a new awareness of their work and their students' lives. What's more, while many of the teachers seemed to be uncritical on the surface, I believe seeds were planted as evidenced in their comments in the follow up interviews that I had with them. By and large, by the end of the school year, teachers had begun to view their students and the process of schooling a little differently. Thus, in light of what teachers said they gained from the study group, this remains a space of possibility for teacher professional development.

### **Building a Knowledge Base through Study Groups**

This focused, inquiry-based form of professional development was based on the notion that constructing a critical, African-centered pedagogy requires an in-depth knowledge and understanding of African and African American history and culture and the sociopolitical context in which Black children are schooled (Lee, 1992; King, 1994; Ratteray, 1990). Too often, in teacher preparation programs, the history and culture of Africans in America as well as other people of color are ignored or distorted and Black children are only discussed from a deficit perspective (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Lee, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 2000b). Not only do mainstream teacher preparation programs not prepare teachers to be responsive to cultural diversity in their instruction, they certainly do not prepare them to teach in African-centered schools (Lee, 1992). Thus, the need for in-service learning experiences that provide the knowledge base or conceptual framework necessary for teachers to develop and implement African-centered curriculum.

Given the fact that most teachers have never taken an African History or African Studies course (Asante, 1991) or learned about the unique developmental psychology of the Black child (A. Wilson, 1978), the discussion of Black scholarship in education, psychology

and sociolinguistics offered teachers opportunities to learn more about what shapes Black children's lives, what cultural resources they bring to the classroom, and what challenges they face. Not surprisingly, many of the teachers in this study said that what they knew already, they learned on their own. As Faith pointed out, "What I've learned so far is things I picked up here and there or on my own." For both Cathy and Faith, who both have adult children, there wasn't much they learned about Black children that they did not already know because they had successfully raised children of their own. As Faith explained: "It's almost like raising children. I never had books on how to be a parent, I just reached back from my own experience." Marissa, on the other hand, noted, "I've read about African Americans but I've never read books about Black children."

Reactions to individual texts were mixed. Some teachers enjoyed Miseducation of the Negro and felt that the issues raised in this classic text were relevant today. Cheree said she enjoyed this book the most, pointing out that in our efforts to teach our children about African history, we must also educate ourselves:

I would probably say reviewing the Miseducation of the Negro really helped a lot... understanding not only Black children but understanding African Americans in general. Knowing that we have to really not only educate our kids but we have to be re-educated ourselves.

Faith also enjoyed this book the most because she said she could "relate because of my age and experience." As she explained, "I grew up in segregation and I was able to understand what the author was saying. I said, 'Wow, this is so true.'" And although there is a thirty year age difference between Faith and Bridgette, Bridgette said she too could relate to the book:

I really got into that one... a lot of the stuff he talked about is true still in 2001, so a lot of it has not changed. I find it to be relevant today and I can relate to it.



Bridgette went on to explain that reading Miseducation of the Negro contributed to her growth personally. She saw herself and her parents in the “educated Negroes” that

Woodson criticizes:

The way he was describing some of the educated Black people and how they would act, I see that a lot in my parents, a lot, the way that they act. And the way that sometimes I come off on people that are not as educated or educated at all, meaning not pass high school, have only a high school diploma. So sometimes I tend to, I don't want to say look down on them, but think just like, why is that all you have? A lot of what he said describes me and I don't see it as a bad thing because... it's not a bad thing all together because I'm proud of what I have and I think everyone should want to be more educated. Sometimes I just don't understand why people are not, so that kind of describes me a little bit and my parents.

Bridgette's comments illustrate how relevant Woodson's social critique is today and the pervasiveness of bourgeois values among the Black middle class.

Others felt the book was dated, and the issues were more relevant to the postbellum period in which it was written than contemporary American society. There was also a general consensus that the early twentieth century prose in which Woodson wrote made the book difficult to understand. As Marissa noted, “I had a hard time understanding it because it was written a long time ago.” Cathy expressed similar problems understanding Woodson:

I guess because it was back in what 1920 something, 1930, and it was kind of confusing at parts. I understood what he was trying to say but it probably wouldn't be anything I would pick up if I were in a bookstore... it's still relevant for today but I guess because the way the wording in the book, I guess it was just too much. It was dated.

Two of the six readings focused exclusively on African-centered education (Kenyatta, 1998; Akoto, 1994). These readings helped teachers get a better understanding of African-centered education but I would argue additional readings are needed to provide the kind of foundation necessary to fully understand African-centered educational philosophy. A majority of teachers found Kwame Kenyatta's book Guide to Implementing Afrikan-

Centered Education to be most useful. They said they liked the way the book laid out the curriculum by grade and felt it was easy to read. As Anita pointed out:

I really didn't know exactly what [African-centered education] actually entailed but I got a better understanding after reading that book, that guide on Afrocentric education.

In this book, the author compares the Black child's African-centered style of learning to the Eurocentric teaching style. Bridgette was fascinated by the differences, but as a beginning teacher did not feel comfortable experimenting with new pedagogical strategies; she could not see tailoring her instruction to an African-centered learning environment:

I also didn't know that the teaching style for the African-centered classroom and the Eurocentric are different. And I also learned that the way I teach is Eurocentric... It's going to stay that way for the most part, but maybe I can kind of integrate it, but once I have more experience, then I could veer off into that because I don't have enough experience to let them be as free as they're supposed to be. I'm not ready for that because to me I think it would be chaotic with me because I'm too new.

Bridgette realized that the way she taught – according to the way the author delineated Eurocentric and Afrocentric teaching styles – is Eurocentric, and that the reason she has had problems with a few of her students might be attributed to her Eurocentric pedagogical style.

Although Kenyatta's book was easy to read, there was more rhetoric than theory, which wasn't enough to get teachers to develop a fundamental understanding of African-centered education. As Janice explained:

I felt it was really easy to read, but it didn't give me... I don't think it gave me a real good understanding of how to implement African-centered education. I think everything in here is good but I think it's universal and I wrote that in my journal. There is no reason that all of these things shouldn't be in place in all educational settings. So I wasn't really sure what the difference was between African-centered and just regular education, which I think I would have liked to learn more about... I don't know what it is in that culture that's valued the most that should be brought into the classroom or should that stay at home. I don't know and don't think that book helped me answer that question, which I thought it was going to do.

A comparison between the African-centered and European-centered philosophies of education that explicitly outlines what is involved in each would have helped Janice (and the other teachers as well). Although I would recommend this book as a reference for new teachers, alone it is not enough to provide teachers with a foundation in African-centered educational philosophy.

With the exception of Janice, none of the teachers said they enjoyed Akoto's (1994) chapter, "Notes on an Afrikan-centered pedagogy." Janice remarked on how her views on whether a teacher's race was relevant changed after reading Akoto's chapter:

I liked the African-centered pedagogy [Akoto, 1994]. I agreed with a lot more than I thought I was going to, like when it said that in order for it to be a real African-centered curriculum, it needs to be an African American teachers, I was like no. You know, my initial thought is no way. The more I think about it, the more I think that's true, for it to be truly realistic... because I don't have that background. I don't have the cultural background; I don't have the family background; I didn't grow up in that environment, so I think that an African teacher could relate to more and make it more African-centered than I ever could, even with the research and looking into different African curriculums. I just don't think that I could ever get to the point where an African American teacher could.

While this chapter was intended to provide a foundational understanding of African-education, it was difficult for teachers to read. Several teachers said that this text wasn't as interesting as the others, was more abstract, and "too theoretical."

By design, I started the study group with more theoretical pieces as a way to provide teachers with a conceptual framework from which to start our discussions. While I understood the importance of providing teachers with opportunities to learn how to develop and implement African-centered curriculum, I believe it is important that teachers first understand the philosophy of African-centered education and see the value of an African-centered curriculum in the lives of Black children. However, as Marissa explained, "The first couple of books I forced myself but these last couple, I couldn't wait to finish them, I was

interested in them.” She especially enjoyed the practice oriented books “because they actually had to do with kids in my class.” The more theoretical pieces on the other hand, “were talking about children, but I really didn’t see how I could relate it. It was above that [the classroom].”

In general, however, the teachers said they liked the texts we read. Faith remarked on how much she enjoyed the readings, so much so that she shared them with others:

Wonderful books. Wonderful choices. As a matter of fact, I’ve even share with friends and acquaintances the books and the material that was in them and found out that my husband even went to work sharing. He read some along with me. They were some wonderful choices.

Janice expressed similar feelings about the selection of texts. She indicated that she did not have prior knowledge in this area and therefore liked the fact that I chose the texts that the group read:

I wouldn’t have known what to pick. I have no knowledge of African American literature and what’s out there on teaching African American children so this was really good for me. If maybe I was studying it or had previous knowledge about it, then maybe, but I didn’t, and so that’s why it was perfect.

Janice commented further that she would have liked to have a reading list that recommended other books that built on the issues discussed in the study group:

It’s just that we get little bitty pieces and then it’s up to me to go on. But I don’t know... I guess maybe what I would like to see is a list of books that relate to the same topic that we could read on our own, because I don’t even know where to go. I could go to the store but maybe you have a better idea of what are the good books and what books I’m maybe wasting my time on. Yeah, because there were some topics I’d really like to discuss.

For Janice, the study group sparked an interest to learn more about the history, culture and language of Black children.

Although the more theoretical texts were generally unpopular with teachers, I felt it was important for them to develop a conceptual framework before learning how to develop and implement the curriculum. With this approach (theory first then application), it is more

likely that there will be more meaning and purpose in the curriculum (for teachers and students) and a greater connection to the goals of African-centered education. Having a more informed understanding of the goals and philosophy of African-centered education (i.e., a sense of what African-centered education *is* and *is not*), the teachers in this study are perhaps better prepared than they were initially to develop their own African-centered curriculum.

On a different note, a valuable feature of the study group was the writing component. Teachers were given journals as a space for them to reflect on what they had read and what they may have learned through the readings and discussions; however, as noted in Chapter 2, many of the teachers did not write in their journal consistently. Janice was the only teacher to comment on the journal in her follow up interview. She remarked on how it helped her thinking:

I liked having to write before the discussion and after the discussion... because it showed me... Well, first of all, then I came to the discussion with more thought put into the readings, having to have written about it. And then also after the discussion having to reflect, I was able to compare and contrast, like oh, I kind of changed my opinion on this or I agree with this but maybe I think I still believe this but maybe I need to look into it further. I thought that was interesting because some of my journals did change. Some of my opinions did change from before to after.

Because the majority of teachers did not use their journal to reflect on the readings, the discussions were perhaps the most valuable aspect of the study group. In follow up interviews, teachers consistently noted how much they enjoyed being able to share their views and hear those of others. Teachers often commented on the social aspects of the group, emphasizing the openness of the conversations. In fact, Marissa enjoyed the discussions more than the readings:

I liked the different types of books you had, a variety of subjects and topics, I liked that. That was interesting. Some I liked more than others and I liked talking to everyone about, I liked being able to share real life experiences. I like situations where you just share and learn from each other, and you can watch growth in other

Cathy

Janice

kinds

how

people and in yourself... A couple of the books I just wasn't into as much but I liked the conversation. That was more appealing to me than actually just reading the book.

Cathy expressed similarly positive feelings about the group's discussions:

[Y]ou started generating questions and got us going and sometimes we didn't want to leave because [the discussion] was very, very interesting...

Janice enjoyed the discussions as well. In fact, the study group whet her appetite for similar kinds of conversations with colleagues. In the following comments, Janice remarked on how much she enjoyed the interaction with other teachers:

I was hesitant to join the group, I think as everybody was, but I thoroughly enjoyed it. I wouldn't have read any of this material otherwise. It was a great learning experience. It was. Communicating with colleagues was a good experience. In fact, that's one of the things that I'm looking for more now, is being able to share thoughts and ideas. It doesn't even need to be... I mean, this is not like curriculum related but it is educationally related. And even if I could have discussions like that with my colleagues, I'd be very happy. I want to read other books on things like this. I want to stay in the Detroit school system if I can, which I didn't think I would. I don't know, it's really been a good learning experience, like I can see the learning curve.

I believe my "active facilitation" (Reischl, 1999) in this setting significantly influenced the tone of the group and the level of teachers' involvement. In interviews, teachers indicated that they liked the structure of the study group – I chose the texts, prepared the discussion questions – and my active role as facilitator offered direction to the group. As Janice explained:

[Y]ou did a really good job of preparing because you had those questions for us and that was a good way of getting us going or moving us along... and I think that was really helpful because you picked out certain points that maybe we overlooked or wanted to discuss but didn't know how to get there.

Cheree too enjoyed the discussions and being able to hear others' views. She pointed out, however, that she was surprised by some of her colleagues comments:

Anita

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[I]t's always good to hear other views of other educators about teaching our children. It did let me know that there are still a lot of our African American educators out there that still need to understand what it really involves to teach a Black child.

Anita echoed this sentiment. She also felt that the Black teachers in the study group were “out of touch”:

I was surprised [how my colleagues felt]. A lot of them had some interesting views and I really didn't expect it. I guess, especially some of my African American teachers, I was a little surprised at the way they thought. I almost felt like they were kind of out of touch.

An important goal of the study group was to provide teachers with a knowledge base while also challenging their beliefs and assumptions about Black children and the purpose of education. While there were many more texts I could have selected, I would argue that the texts I chose started the conversation and in some cases, sparked an interest in learning more. As the selected comments in this and the previous section suggest, the teachers came away with a deeper understanding or awareness of the historical, social, economic, political and cultural forces that shape the educational lives of Black children and grew in their knowledge and understanding of the philosophy that guides African-centered education.

### **Development in Teachers' Consciousness: A Comparison of Teachers' Thinking in November 2000 and May 2001**

Each of the teachers in this study brought to our group a different set of beliefs and attitudes about educating Black children. As discussed in Chapter 2, their individual histories – where and how they were raised, where they went to school, where they were trained as teachers – shaped their views of teaching and the purpose of education. It was my assumption in designing this study that teachers would leave the group more informed, more critical than when they entered. But first I had to understand where these teachers were in their thinking (i.e., their existing beliefs, assumptions, expectations) before I could make any

claims about teacher learning; therefore, in November 2000, I asked teachers to complete an attitude survey (see Appendix A), which was intended to assess teachers' existing views on teaching including their beliefs and attitudes about teaching Black children specifically, *before* they were introduced to the texts. Based on teachers' responses to individual items (e.g., *I believe Black people should have their own independent schools in which their African heritage and values are an important part of the curriculum*), it became clear early on that a number of teachers were opposed to the concept of African-centered schools although they knew very little about the goals and philosophy of African-centered education. As expected, this baseline data supported the views expressed by individual teachers during our group discussions with regard to the value and importance of African-centered schooling and gave some indication of teachers' beliefs and attitudes with regard to educating Black children more broadly.

In the table below, I provide the total scores for each teacher on the three dimensions measured in the attitude survey: *African Consciousness*, *Collective Consciousness*, and *Teacher Efficacy*. A total score closer to 5 on each dimension indicates a higher degree of *critical, African-centered consciousness* (as described in Chapter 1). As Table 3 shows, Cheree, who had read the work of a number of Pan African scholars before participating in the study group, had the highest scores on two of the dimensions: *African Consciousness* (5) and *Collective Consciousness* (4.3). However, Cheree's score was lower on the *Teacher Efficacy* dimension (4) compared to the other Black teachers in the study<sup>12</sup>. Anita, who had taught in Romulus and Highland Park before teaching in Detroit, scored the highest on the *Teacher Efficacy* dimension (4.8) but lower on the other two dimensions (3.7 *African Consciousness* and 4.3 *Collective Consciousness*). Anita's resistance to the concept of African-centered education was evident in her score on the *African Consciousness* dimension and was reflected in her

comments throughout the group's discussions (she was one of several teachers who felt strongly that African-centered schools did not prepare Black children for the "real world"). Marissa, one of the two white teachers in this study who was raised in a suburban white community, had a moderate score on the *African Consciousness* (3.3) and *Collective Consciousness* (3.8) dimensions but relatively high on *Teacher Efficacy* (4.3) given her four years of teaching experience. Janice's scores, on the other hand, were middle of the road on all three dimensions (3.3, 3.2, and 3.4). As a first year teacher who was unfamiliar with Black culture and had few interactions with Black people, I found Janice's scores to be consistent with her comments throughout the group's discussions. Overall, the survey data I collected supported my initial impression of the teachers in this study (i.e., what they believed and valued) and proved to be consistent with the views expressed by teachers throughout the study group sessions.

**Table 3: Teachers' Scores on the Attitude Survey by Dimension**

<i>Teachers' Name</i>	<i>African Consciousness</i>	<i>Collective Consciousness</i>	<i>Teacher Efficacy</i>
Cheree	5	4.3	4.0
Faith	3.7	4.1	4.5
Bridgette	4.3	4.1	4.5
Anita	3.7	3.8	4.8
Cathy	3.7	4.3	4.3
Marissa	3.3	3.8	4.3
Janice	3.3	3.2	3.4

By May 2001, seven months after teachers had completed the attitude survey, there was evidence of change in teachers' beliefs and attitudes based on their comments in follow up interviews. As suggested earlier, teachers had begun to rethink their initial views on some

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<sup>12</sup> Cheree's score on this dimension could be attributed to the fact that she was a beginning teacher and had yet to receive her teaching certification at the time she completed the survey.

of the issues raised in our discussions, namely their views on Ebonics. Although I did not redistribute the attitude survey again following the last study group session to compare teachers' views on particular items in November to their views in May, teachers commented on their own development and the ways in which their views had evolved as a result of their participation in the study group. Below I provide a summary of teachers' participation, comparing their beliefs, attitudes and practices in November 2000 and May 2001.

### ***Faith Houston***

Faith was the veteran teacher in our group with 32 years of teaching experience. She brought a lot of wisdom both as an experienced teacher and as a parent of three, and served informally as mentor to Anita and Marissa. On many occasions, Faith challenged others' views and provided a fresh perspective to our discussion. Even with all of her years of experience, Faith explained in her follow up interview that she had been prompted to do some things differently in her classroom as a result of her participation in the study group. While her beliefs went unchallenged, she was inspired to research and learn more about African and African American history, and had begun to infuse more history into the curriculum in her second grade classroom.

### ***Cathy Mason***

Also a parent, Cathy's views were shaped by her experience raising two children. Combined with a number of years as a substitute teacher, Cathy brought insight to our discussions. While she felt the readings and discussions did not challenge her core beliefs, she was able to learn more about her students through her participation in the study group. As a fourth grade teacher, reading Jawanza Kunjufu's Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy

Black Boys opened Cathy's eyes to the challenges faced by her male students. She learned how critical the fourth grade year is for Black males, and had begun to make changes in the way she interacted with her male students by the end of the school year.

### ***Anita Gibson***

Anita learned a lot from Faith, who was a mentor to her, in the two years that she had been at Ayo Academy; therefore Anita learned very little from the readings and discussions that prompted her to do things differently in her classroom. If anything, she explained, her experience in the study group reaffirmed some of the things she had already been doing (i.e., reading African American children's literature) and helped her as a parent understand her own children. She did feel, however, that she had a better understanding of African-centered education than she had before and that the readings and discussions helped her realize the misconceptions she had about Ebonics.

### ***Cheree Sanders***

Cheree had already studied the work of several leading Pan African scholars and therefore agreed with much of what we read. If anything, the readings served to reinforce her views on the power of race and culture and language in shaping the schooling experiences of children of color. She explained, however, that she was prompted to be more compassionate and to make greater efforts to understand her students (e.g., their home environment, the challenges they face, their learning style). While the readings and discussions did not challenge her beliefs about educating Black children, participating in the study group did lead her to ask, "Am I doing enough?" She explained in her follow up

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interview that the readings and discussions led her to reflect on her practice and made her more conscious of what she was doing to help her children succeed.

### ***Marissa Vitale***

Marissa felt that she wasn't "that out it" and therefore did not feel she learned much about teaching Black children from the readings and discussions. She also felt she knew "enough" about African-centered education from conversations with her principal. She acknowledged, however, that the readings did help her understand the challenges her students face, especially her male students, and recognized that there was more she could learn. Compared to the other teachers in the study group, much of Marissa's thinking was shaped by her master's courses; therefore it was difficult to determine the extent of the study group's influence on her beliefs and practices. Marissa did feel, however, that the readings and discussions helped her understand the unique experience of Black children in America's schools.

### ***Bridgette Williams***

Although more comfortable with a well structured classroom setting, the readings and discussions prompted Bridgette to create a more flexible, student-centered classroom. Compared to the other teachers, Bridgette held very strong views, particularly on the Ebonics issue; however, in her follow up interview she acknowledged that her views had been challenged (but not changed). As a fourth grade teacher, she too learned a lot about her male students from reading Jawanza Kunjufu's book. However, Bridgette was very grounded and felt overall that her participation in the study group did not lead her to question her beliefs and assumptions about educating Black children. She felt that her

teacher training and experiences as a student at a historically Black college prepared her well to teach Black children, particularly in an urban school setting.

*Janice Lipinski*

Janice was hesitant to join the group in the beginning and was rather quiet and reserved during our first discussions. Eventually, she opened up and began to share her views freely. She often questioned the readings and brought a different perspective to the group as a “minority.” By her own admission, the readings and discussions really pushed her thinking and led her to rethink some of her beliefs. Compared to the other teachers, I believe Janice experienced the greatest growth in terms of her thinking around issues of racism and educational inequality largely because she had had such few interactions with Black people and culture and because of her position as a novice teacher. As she explained in her follow up interview, the study group made her more aware of her students’ language and culture but also made her question her role as a white teacher in an African-centered school setting.



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **PREPARING TEACHERS TO WORK IN AN AFRICAN-CENTERED SCHOOL CONTEXT**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I examine African-centered education in the public school setting and consider the potential of teacher study groups as a way to support a critical stance toward teaching and the schooling process. I end with a discussion of the limitations of this study and offer some suggestions for future research.

#### **The Challenges of Public African-Centered Schools**

In recent years, with the increasing number of African-centered public schools that have been created in large urban centers across the country, scholars have begun to recognize the challenges of implementing an African-centered curriculum in mainstream Eurocentric schools (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Ratteray, 1990; Lee, 1994). Ratteray (1990) argues that none of these schools is completely African-centered, although each makes important steps in this direction. For the most part, they remain grounded in the mainstream Eurocentric educational tradition (Akoto, 1994; Lee, 1992; Ratteray, 1990); therefore, African-centered schools must make dramatic changes in their existing curriculum, pedagogy and school culture to uproot traditional, Eurocentric ways of teaching and learning.

Policymakers, however, view African-centered schools as political rather than academic solutions. Consequently, when the political momentum that created the school subsidies, as in the case of Detroit Public Schools' African-centered academies, budgets and the availability of other resources to support these schools fades (Ratteray, 1990). In these

cases, principal leadership is key. In their study of Milwaukee's two African-centered public schools, Pollard and Ajirotutu (2000) found three key variables to implementing African-centered education successfully in public school settings: 1) district support; 2) school leadership; and 3) characteristics of the staff.

In Detroit, the concept of African-centered education was strongly supported by the school board and district superintendent who were in place in 1990 and 1991 when these schools were initially conceived and established. However, since the first three African-centered academies were established, there have been major changes in educational leadership in the district. Soon after these schools were established, David Snead replaced Detroit Public Schools General Superintendent Deborah McGriff, and then Eddie Green replaced Snead (who was later replaced by David Adamany) before the control of the district was eventually handed over to the state in 1999. Consequently, support for African-centered education in the district has waned.

Thus, although the *African-Centered Resolution* adopted by the Detroit Public Schools in 1993 made African-centered education a district wide goal, enthusiasm and support for the Afrocentric idea in education has all but died with changing leadership. As a consequence, there has been less focus on teacher development in this area from the district level, which has trickled down to the schools. In a 1996 survey by the Detroit Public Schools, the Office of Research, Evaluation and Testing found that building administrators varied considerably in their perceptions and understandings of African-centered education; therefore, schools varied in the extent to which African-centered education had been implemented. The report by the Office of Research, Evaluation and Testing concluded that "an extended plan for professional development is needed by building administrators in an

effort to properly equip their staff persons with required methodology and strategies for successful implementation of African-centered education” (p. ii).

This issue of staff development is of particular relevance at the three Detroit public schools designated as African-centered academies. Because each of these academies has a different conception of African-centered education, the strength of the African-centered educational model depends on the principal’s commitment to African-centered education as well as the structure and content of the professional development provided to teachers. As Pollard and Ajirotutu (2000) found, the role of the school principal becomes particularly significant in light of weak support from the district. In these cases, the principal must be able to articulate a clear vision for the school and support teachers in curriculum development and in developing pedagogical strategies. Ayo’s principal, who’s been leading the school since it was founded in 1991, is a dynamic public speaker and has been publicly recognized for his leadership; however, the teachers in this study felt they weren’t receiving the kind of leadership and support that they needed to develop and implement African-centered curriculum in their classrooms.

Moreover, teachers explained that the emphasis has been placed on student performance on the MEAP and MAT tests rather than developing and implementing a comprehensive African-centered education program<sup>13</sup>. As Anita explained:

That’s like not even a priority on their list... but it can’t be when you have this MEAP over your head. That’s how you get your funding. If you don’t pass the MEAP, you don’t get the money.

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<sup>13</sup> As public institutions, Detroit’s African-centered schools must negotiate between the goals of African-centered education and pressures from the state to perform well on state tests. Many would argue that high stakes testing such as the MEAP is counter to the philosophy of African-centered education; however given the tenuous state of Detroit Public Schools and a waning interest in African-centered education, I do not see this tension being resolved in the near future.

It seems, in districts like the Detroit Public Schools who are under immense scrutiny, the MEAP dominates the curriculum. The district's performance on the MEAP matters and everything else shifts in priority, particularly since the school takeover in 1999. For this reason, teachers feel constrained by district and state standards and feel they do not have the freedom to do what they want in their classroom, namely infusing African and African American history and culture throughout the curriculum.

Additionally, teachers compared African-centered *public* schools to African-centered *independent* schools. They agreed that it is easier to follow an African-centered curriculum in independent schools because the MEAP is not an issue. Even further, they felt district bureaucracy (i.e., lack of resources, lack of support for teachers) did not allow for Detroit Public Schools to follow African-centered curriculum guidelines closely. In their opinion, some African-centered classroom ideas just aren't feasible in urban public classrooms. For example, large class sizes prohibit teachers from arranging students' desks in a circle as Kenyatta (1998) recommends in his book Guide to Implementing African-centered Education. In this case, it's not a matter of how to infuse African and African American history and culture into the curriculum but finding ways to work through the logistical challenges of teaching in overcrowded, underresourced public schools.

In Milwaukee, three factors contributed to the success of its African-centered elementary school, which can be seen as prescriptions for success for other African-centered public schools: 1) Teachers need to have a **knowledge base of African and African American history and culture** (teachers cannot teach what they do not know); 2) teachers need to **revisit their conceptions of the purpose of education and the goals of teaching**; and 3) teachers need to **collaborate with colleagues** to develop and implement

African-centered curriculum and experiment with new pedagogical strategies. The study group described in this dissertation addressed these very concerns.

As this study has shown, teacher development is critical in the context of African-centered schools. As discussed in Chapter 4, a clear African-centered vision was not articulated by the school's administration and therefore teachers did not have a clear understanding of African-centered education. As a consequence, many of them did not see the value and importance of African-centered schools for Black children. If, however, teachers are provided opportunities to study Pan Africanist thought and the philosophy of African-centered education, they might be more open to the concept and better able to infuse the African-centered perspective throughout the curriculum. Either through university coursework or study groups, it is important for teachers to learn the history of Africans in America, on the continent and in the Diaspora as well as understand the value and importance of creating African-centered schools.

Essentially, teachers must be committed to the concept of African-centered education to work in an African-centered school. They must believe in the vision and purpose of the school and support the school's efforts to be African-centered. As this shows, the perception of teachers is key to implementing African-centered education in the public school setting; therefore, before African-centered education can be successfully implemented on a large scale as Detroit Public Schools sought to do, policy makers and practitioners alike must see the value in educating Black children within the context of their culture and buy into the concept of African-centered education.

## Implications

I have argued throughout this dissertation that teachers need a critical space where they can reflect on their practice and begin to question some of the beliefs and assumptions they have about their students and their role as educators of African American children. While it is particularly important for teachers at an African-centered school to know and understand African and African American history and culture, successful teachers of African American children, wherever they teach, must understand, value and respect the cultural resources that Black children bring with them to school. Likewise, if education is to be “critically transformative” (King, 1994), it is important for teachers to understand the historical, social, economic, political and cultural forces that shape the lives of Africans in America so that they understand how to “educate” Black children as Shujaa (1994) has described.

Like Ladson-Billings’s conception of “culturally relevant pedagogy,” a critical, African-centered pedagogy is about questioning (and preparing students to question) the structural inequality, the racism, the injustice that exist in society. Teachers can either choose to be agents of change or defenders of the status quo, to transform mainstream Eurocentric education or conserve it, to question inequality or reproduce it. The study group described in this dissertation sought to challenge to question mainstream Eurocentric education so that a critical pedagogy might be constructed and in doing so planted the seeds for transformation.

Teaching is a journey, characterized by movement and growth. All of us are “in process” and have much more to learn and experience. In designing this study, I did not expect teachers to reach the end of their journey as teachers. Rather, I hoped to push them further along in their thinking about issues of race, power and schooling in hopes that this

experience would be the beginning of a journey of transformation, the first leg in a lifelong journey characterized by ongoing inquiry and reflection.

I'd like to think of the impact of this work using the metaphor of planting seeds. Throughout the study group, teachers often resisted my challenges to be critical but in my follow up interviews with them, they shared what they had learned and unlearned about educating Black children. I found the readings and discussions did challenge their thinking although it did not seem so on the surface. By the end of school year, teachers were beginning to question themselves and their practice and it seemed the study group had planted "critical" seeds. While I may not be there to see the seeds planted by the study group grow and mature, I am inspired by the possibilities for growth that exist in just planting a seed. Someone else, somewhere else may nurture these seeds and see them blossom.

### **Some Recommendations for Creating Teacher Study Groups**

If we want teachers to be critical, reflective practitioners, then we must create opportunities for inquiry and reflection, what Lord (1994) refers to as critical colleagueship. I have learned a number of lessons in my work with the teachers at Ayo Academy, and argue that study groups are one possible professional development activity that might support a critical stance toward teaching. My experiences along with previous research of this kind (Florio-Ruane & deTar, 1999; Reischl, 1999; Murphy & Lick, 1998) have led me to develop several recommendations for creating and sustaining teacher study groups:

- 1. Participation should be voluntary.** Professional development has traditionally been required by school districts, which means that teachers often attend in-services reluctantly. Willing participants, however, are more likely to be committed to the goals of the group and work to sustain the energy of the group.

2. **Number of teachers should be kept low (no more than eight).** The larger the study group, the more difficult it will be to find common meeting times when all participants can be present. With smaller groups, each member will be able to participate more in the discussions and are more likely to take greater responsibility in the organization of the group.
3. **Teachers must be committed to the goals of the group and share a vision for the direction of the group.** It is important for the group to establish a set of goals upfront to be sure that everyone is on the same page. What does the group want to accomplish by meeting? What will be the focus of the group's studies? These goals may evolve as the group becomes more settled. If participants feel that they have played an important role in the establishing the goals of the group, they are more likely to be committed to the group.
4. **Teachers should play an integral part in structuring and leading the group (i.e., selecting books, preparing discussion questions).** Participants should not feel intimidated by other group members. This should be a joint enterprise where teachers share responsibility in deciding on the particulars of the group. Participants should take turns facilitating the group's discussions. This helps to build a sense of ownership. Participants feel more connected to the group and invested in its success.
5. **Writing is an important component of reflection.** Writing in a journal provides a space for participants to reflect on the readings and discussions before discussing them with the group. Group members may write about their thoughts, feelings, and reflections on the reading in their journals before they meet as a group and then again following the group to reflect on changes in their ideas and responses to the reading prompted by the group's discussion. This encourages teachers to be reflective practitioners.

While the teachers I worked with at Ayo Academy said they liked the fact that I selected the books and prepared questions for our discussions, I struggled with the extent of my role in the study group. In designing this study, I had hoped teachers would assume greater responsibility in the organization of the group so that they would feel a sense of ownership. I invited teachers to take turns facilitating the group and suggested that they bring questions for discussion. I believe, however, that teachers saw the study group as "my" group and as a consequence, attendance at the study group sessions fluctuated and in some cases it seemed participants had not read the text. For these reasons, I believe teachers must play an integral part in structuring and leading the group. As Ann Lieberman (2000)



argues, teachers are too often “developed” by outside “experts” rather than participating in their own development.

Although many teacher educators (myself included) would argue that groups of this kind should be teacher-led, the teachers in this study found my role invaluable. With this in mind, I would therefore recommend that future groups be led (if only initially) by some kind of “expert” to help support teachers’ learning and development and serve as a consultant to the group (i.e., to help select books). With the kind of scaffolding to which Gee (1989) refers, teachers will become increasingly more confident and more knowledgeable, and therefore better able to select books and other materials that support and sustain their inquiry without consulting outside “experts.”

### **Limitations of this Study**

While I would argue that the study group was a valuable professional development tool – it challenged teachers’ beliefs and practices, helped them understand their students and their work in an African-centered school context better, and provided an opportunity for them to interact with colleagues – there were several limitations to this study:

1. **Six sessions did not allow the group to delve deeply into the extensive body of work that has been published in this area.** And because we met only once a month for an hour and a half, I had to be very selective in the texts we read – and there were many more possibilities. It would be interesting (and perhaps more valuable to teachers) to follow a line of thinking or theme across several sessions. For example, the teachers really enjoyed the discussion on Ebonics and I would have liked to be able to read additional pieces that supported and challenged Smitherman’s (2000) argument.
2. **I did not observe teachers’ practice; therefore I cannot determine the extent to which the readings and discussions influenced their instruction beyond teachers’ self-report.** In follow up interviews, a few teachers were able to point out things they had begun or planned to do differently as a result of their participation in the study group. Others said they had not modified their instruction or changed their interactions with students. It is possible, however, that there might be a delayed response to the readings or discussions and with

additional time to reflect on what they may have (un)learned through their participation in the study group, teachers might begin to make changes next school year.

3. **In the interviews and discussions, teachers may have been telling me what I wanted to hear; therefore I cannot be certain that the views expressed reflect their true beliefs and attitudes.** It is also difficult to determine whether teachers learned what they said they learned in their follow up interview or made the kind of changes they said they made in their thinking and instruction.
4. **Teachers were only asked to complete the attitude survey in November before being introduced to the texts but not again in May following their participation; therefore, there is no comparison data to determine whether the study group had an influence on the dimensions measured by the survey.** The survey was solely intended to provide baseline data as a way to assess teachers' views of teaching and their attitudes and beliefs about Black children before being introduced to the texts. I chose not to have teachers complete this survey again at the end of the school year because this was not an intervention in the experimental sense. Moreover, six months just was not enough time to see a significant difference in teachers' beliefs and attitudes. In addition to this, there were teachers who were unable to attend all six sessions or who may not have read a given text but came to the study group session. Therefore, it is difficult to measure the extent of the study group's influence on teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and practices.
5. **The focus of the study group was on theory rather than practice.** Many teachers want to know, "How does this translate into practice? Why does this matter?" While theory is often unpopular with teachers, it is important for those who teach in African-centered schools to understand the goals and philosophy of African-centered education before they begin planning and implementing the curriculum. Without this understanding, the curriculum would be loosely connected to the goals and philosophy of African-centered education and likely no different from traditional school curriculum. In designing this study, I reasoned that if teachers had a conceptual understanding of the philosophy that guides African-centered schooling, they would be better prepared to develop and implement an African-centered curriculum. The study group, therefore, was not intended to provide the specifics of how to implement African-centered education. With more time to study together (beyond six sessions), the discussions would have gradually shifted to a more practice-oriented discussion.

### **Future Research**

In the spirit of the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child," a study group of the kind described in this dissertation with both parents and teachers would help African-centered schools build a shared vision for the school community. Parents should be

intimately involved in the schooling process and viewed as partners in their child's education; therefore, encouraging parents and teachers to study together could help schools build strong partnerships with families and provide opportunities for teachers and parents to collaborate with and learn from one another.

It would also be interesting to study the impact of films and documentaries on teachers' consciousness, particularly their beliefs and assumptions about Black children and the purpose of education, and how they see their work as teachers in an African-centered school context. Either a study group could focus exclusively on films as text or the films could be used to complement the readings. For example, Ethiopian born filmmaker Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* are powerful films that can be used as a platform to discuss the Maafa (the African Holocaust), its distortion by European historians and its continued impact on Africans throughout the world. And documentaries such *Eyes on the Prize*, a fourteen part series on the American Civil Rights Movement, might bring issues such as racism and injustice to the fore. Using archival footage and contemporary interviews with participants on the front lines of the struggle for civil rights, this documentary does more than write the history of Africans in America, it *shows* and *tells*. As the old saying goes, a picture is worth a thousands words, and I would argue the cinematography and thematic richness of film are perhaps more compelling than simply reading the words on paper, making this genre a potentially powerful professional development tool to raise teachers' consciousness.

### **Where Do We Go From Here? Future Research in African-centered Education**

Over the past three decades, African-centered schools have been providing an academically challenging school curriculum and a culturally affirming learning environment

that values the cultural resources Black children bring with them to the classroom. Very little is known, however, in mainstream scholarship about the theory and practice of African-centered education. While a number of scholars have described this school setting (Lee, 1992; Hoover, 1992; Lomotey, 1992), empirical research is needed to determine whether and how African-centered pedagogy and curriculum makes a difference in the lives of Black children in and out of school. Like the teachers who participated in this study, many educators want to know whether African-centered education “works,” which in many cases means improved performance on standardized tests such as the MEAP. What’s also important in the minds of many parents and educators is whether African-centered education improves children’s self-esteem and race consciousness; however, little is known beyond speculation.

Research is also needed to study the nature of teaching in this setting and the ways in which African-centered pedagogy differs from traditional teaching practices. There is much to be learned from the successes of teachers who work in African-centered independent and charter schools across the country. These successes can be modeled both in African-centered public schools and in traditional school settings with large Black student populations. I see my own work focusing on describing and documenting African-centered pedagogy so that African-centered schools can begin providing clearly defined, “tried and true” pedagogical models for its teachers.

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## **APPENDICES**

## **APPENDIX A**

## APPENDIX A: TEACHER ATTITUDE SURVEY<sup>14</sup>

Name \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions** The following statements reflect some beliefs, opinions and attitudes of teachers. Read each statement carefully and give your honest feelings about the beliefs and attitudes expressed. Indicate the extent to which you agree by using the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither Agree or Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>

Circle the number closest to your own feelings. Note that the higher the number you choose for the statement, the more you agree with that statement; and conversely, the lower the number you choose, the more you disagree with that statement. There is no right or wrong answer, only the answer that best expresses your present feelings about the statement. Please respond to all of the statements<sup>15</sup>.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Teaching Black children is rewarding to me.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I believe all students can succeed.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I believe students should learn individually.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I feel I am making a difference in my students' lives.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I see my classroom as a family.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I feel passionate about teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I am committed to teaching Black children.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I believe Black children should be	1	2	3	4	5

<sup>14</sup> This survey was written for the purposes of this study and therefore has not been normed.

<sup>15</sup> Items from this survey were adapted from the work of Baldwin & Bell (1985), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Pang & Sablan (1998).



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taught that they are African people.					
9. I believe failure is inevitable for some.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My students are expected to teach each other and be responsible for each other.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Educating Black children is a lifelong commitment for me.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I work most with those students who want to be helped.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I try to help my students make connections between their local, national, and global identities.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I encourage my students to learn collaboratively.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I feel connected to my students.	1	2	3	4	5
16. I believe I have the skills and knowledge that I need to teach Black children effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
17. It is important for Blacks in America to educate their children about racism and discrimination.	1	2	3	4	5
18. I believe competition is good.	1	2	3	4	5
19. Teaching Black children is more difficult than teaching other groups of children.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I see myself as part of this community and teaching as giving something back.	1	2	3	4	5
21. Sometimes I get discouraged because I feel I am up against insurmountable odds.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I believe my work (teaching	1	2	3	4	5
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Black children) is important.

23. I believe Black people should have their own independent schools in which their African heritage and values are an important part of the curriculum.	1	2	3	4	5
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24. I enjoy teaching Black children.	1	2	3	4	5
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25. I believe I can reach my students despite the challenges they face.	1	2	3	4	5
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26. What do you see the purpose of education to be?

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27. How do you see the relationship between teaching and learning? What metaphor would you use?

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28. What 1 or 2 words would you use to describe the community in which you teach?

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29. What 1 or 2 words would you use to describe your experience teaching at Ayo Academy?

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30. Are there Black leaders who have inspired you or your teaching? How so? Would you say this person is a good role model for your students? Please explain.

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31. What role do you think parents should play in their child's education?

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### Demographic Questions

Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Race/Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

How many years have you been teaching? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been teaching at Ayo Academy? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have an advanced degree? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, what degree?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Where were you raised? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you attend primarily public or private schools as a child? \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX B**

## APPENDIX B: TEACHER SURVEY DIMENSIONS

**African Consciousness**      Do teachers understand and value students' African heritage and believe that African history and culture should be infused throughout the curriculum?

### *Corresponding Survey Items*

- 8. I believe that Black children should be taught that they are African people.
- 17. It is important for Blacks in America to educate their children about racism and discrimination.
- 23. I believe Black people should have their own independent schools in which their African heritage and values are an important part of the curriculum.

**Collective Consciousness**      Do teachers feel connected to their students, the school, and the Black community?

### *Corresponding Survey Items*

- 1. Teaching Black children is rewarding to me.
- 3. I believe students should learn individually.
- 5. I see my classroom as a family.
- 7. I am committed to teaching Black children.
- 10. My students are expected to teach each other and be responsible for each other.
- 11. Educating Black children is a lifelong commitment for me.
- 13. I try to help my students make connections between their local, national and global identities.
- 14. I encourage my students to learn collaboratively.
- 15. I feel connected to my students.
- 18. I believe competition is good.
- 19. I see myself as part of this community and teaching as giving something back.
- 24. I enjoy teaching Black children.

**Teacher Efficacy**      Do teachers feel that they are able to teach Black children effectively and have the power to make a difference in their students' lives?

### *Corresponding Survey Items*

- 2. I believe all students can succeed.
- 4. I feel I am making a difference in my students' lives.
- 6. I feel passionate about teaching.
- 9. I believe failure is inevitable for some.
- 12. I work most with those students who want to be helped.
- 16. I believe I have the skills and knowledge that I need to teach Black children effectively.

20. Teaching Black children is more difficult than teaching other groups of children.
21. Sometimes I get discouraged because I feel I am up against insurmountable odds.
22. I feel my work (teaching Black children) is important.
25. I believe I can reach my students despite the challenges they face.

## **APPENDIX C**

## APPENDIX C: ANNOTATED LIST OF STUDY GROUP READINGS

Akoto, A. (1994). Notes on an Afrikan-centered pedagogy. In Too much schooling, too little education: A paradox of Black life in white societies, Mwalimu J. Shujaa (Ed), p. 319-337. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc. Akoto elaborates on the principles of an African-centered pedagogy and makes a case for an African-centered education that reflects traditional African values and philosophies. He provides a conceptual framework for understanding African-centered education that goes beyond superficial interpretations.

Kenyatta, K. (1998). Guide to implementing Afrikan-centered education. Detroit, MI: Afrikan Way Investments. Kenyatta describes the African-centered philosophy of education and provides a guide for parents, teachers and administrators who wish to implement African-centered education in public schools. Written by a former Detroit School Board member who was a strong voice in the African-centered schools movement in Detroit, this guide outlines the criteria for creating African-centered classrooms, teachers, parents, and students.

Kunjufu, J. (1985). Countering the conspiracy to destroy Black boys. Chicago: African American Images. Kunjufu argues that Eurocentric institutions, values and practices have alienated Black boys and inhibited their success. He maintains that Black boys need positive Black male role models, particularly in early elementary school. This first volume of four argues that the fourth grade is a critical year for Black boys and offers parents and teachers suggestions for countering what he considers the "conspiracy to destroy Black boys."

Shujaa, M.J. (1994). Education and schooling: You can have one without the other. In Too much schooling, too little education: A paradox of Black life in white societies, Mwalimu J. Shujaa (Ed), p. 13-36. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc. Shujaa maintains that there is an important difference between "education" and "schooling." This distinction, he argues, is fundamental to the transmission, maintenance and development of an African-centered cultural orientation. He argues further that the process of schooling perpetuates existing power relations within the society; therefore schooling for African Americans must be rooted in an African cultural perspective to counter Eurocentric hegemony.

Smitherman, G. (2000). Talkin that talk: Language, culture and education in African America. New York: Routledge. This book is a collection of Smitherman's papers on Ebonics, also known as Black English, written over the last 20 years of her involvement in the struggle for the recognition of Ebonics as a complex, rule-governed language. In Chapter 1, "Introduction to Ebonics," she explains what Ebonics *is* and *is not*, providing historical and linguistic evidence. In Chapter 8, "What go round come round: King in perspective," she provides an analysis of the landmark King case in Ann Arbor, MI which put the struggle for language rights for Black children at the forefront of education.

Wilson, A.N. (1992). Awakening the natural genius of Black children. New York: African World Infosystems. Wilson argues that Black children are naturally gifted; however, their "natural genius" is too often underdeveloped in the racist U.S. system of education, leading to their intellectual underachievement and social maladaptiveness. He contends that mainstream schools lack knowledge of the unique developmental psychology of Black



children and therefore early school experiences fail to stimulate and nurture their intellectual potential.

Woodson, C.G. (1933). The miseducation of the Negro. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc. A historian, Woodson discusses the psychological impact slavery had on Africans in America and raises questions about the function of education for African Americans. He suggests that slavery created an identity crisis and that African Americans have received a Eurocentric education, which by and large does not serve the needs and interests of the Black community. Written more than sixty years ago, the issues raised in this book are relevant today.

## **APPENDIX D**

## APPENDIX D: STUDY GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

November, 2000

Miseducation of the Negro (1933), Carter G. Woodson

1. What does Carter G. Woodson mean by “miseducation?”
2. Do you agree with him when he says that learning should be relevant and applicable to the “life of the Negro?” (See p. 38) Should the education of Black children be a means for uplifting Black people? How so? What can we do as teachers to make this possible?
3. Respond to second paragraph p. xiii:

The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worth while, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples.

4. Are there any parallels between the education Woodson refers and the process of education today? (See p. 19)
5. Is what he says about the miseducated and the educated “Negro” relevant today? What in particular did you find relevant? What can we gain from reading this classical work?
6. Do you see any implications for educating Black children today? Does Woodson suggest any particular method or approach to education that would be useful/relevant in your classroom (e.g., practical education, learning to think)?
7. Respond to second paragraph on p. 22:

An observer from outside of the situation naturally inquires why the Negroes, many of whom serve their race as teachers, have not changed this program. These teachers, however, are powerless. Negroes have no control over their education and have little voice in their other affairs pertaining thereto... the education of the Negroes, then, the most important thing in the uplift of the Negroes, is almost entirely in the hands of those who have enslaved them and now segregate them.

8. Respond to first paragraph on p. 23:

With “mis-educated Negroes” in control themselves, however, it is doubtful that the system would be very much different from what it is or that it would rapidly undergo change. The Negroes thus placed in charge would be the products of the same system and would show no more conception of the task at hand than do the whites who have educated them and shaped their

minds as they would have them function... Taught from the books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another have served no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do.

9. Respond to last paragraph on p. 27:

“What different method of approach or what sort of appeal would one make to the Negro child that cannot be made just as well by a white teacher?” some one asked not long ago. To be frank we must concede that there is no particular body of facts that Negro teachers can impart to children of their own race that may not be just as easily presented by persons of another race if they have the same attitude as Negro teachers; but in most cases tradition, race hate, segregation, and terrorism make such a thing impossible.

Do you think you have to be Black to teach Black children effectively? To connect to them?

10. Respond to passage beginning at the bottom of p. 28:

The emphasis is not upon the necessity for separate systems but upon the need for common sense schools and teachers who understand and continue in sympathy with those whom they instruct... Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better...

11. Do you think educational success is synonymous with “acting white” for Black children? (See p. 67) Why or why not?
12. Education was once used to control the history of African people so that they would feel inferior and therefore accept their circumstance. (See p. 96 & 102) Do you think this is subtly true today?
13. Respond to first paragraph on p. 109:

The lack of confidence of the Negro in himself and in his possibilities is what has kept him down. His mis-education has been a perfect success in this respect... the more “education” the Negro gets the worse off he is. He has just had so much longer to learn to decry and despise himself...

14. Respond to second paragraph on p. 138:

Such has been the education of Negroes. They have been taught facts of history, but have never learned to think. Their conception is that you go to school to find out what other people have done, and then you go out in life to imitate them... In this particular respect, “Negro education” is a failure, and disastrously so, because in its present predicament the race is especially in need of vision and invention to give humanity something new. The world

does not want and will never have the heroes and heroines of the past. What this age needs is an enlightened youth not to undertake the tasks like theirs but to imbibe the spirit of these great men and answer the present call of duty with equal nobleness of soul.

January, 2001

**Too much schooling, too little education: A paradox of Black life in white societies (1994), Mwalimu Shujaa (Editor)**

***Chapter 1: Education and schooling: You can have one without the other, by Mwalimu Shujaa***

1. Shujaa suggests, “schooling can both serve as well as betray their [African American] interests” (p. 14). Can schooling hinder African American progress? If yes, how so?
2. What do you understand the difference to be between education and schooling based on Shujaa’s analysis?
3. See definition of schooling on page 15:

Schooling is a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society’s existing power relations and the institutional structures that support those arrangements.

Do you see evidence of this?

4. See p. 15, middle of the paragraph. What “concepts, values, and skills” do you think schools transmit?
5. Shujaa believes that schools can do little to teach individuals about their own cultural history so that they can uplift their cultural communities. Do you agree or disagree? (See p. 16)
6. Shujaa suggests that African Americans are no better served in a reformed European centered school context because reform efforts continue to serve the interests of those in power. Do you agree that African Americans need their own independent schools? ...that there is hope in the public school system for the reform that will change the status of education for generations of African Americans? (See p. 23)
7. Respond to this statement. “One of the functions of schooling in the U.S. has been to effect a gradual destruction of the cultural identity of African Americans” (p. 30).
8. What is the difference between public schools controlled by Blacks (e.g., Detroit) and independent Black schools?

***Chapter 13: Notes on an African-centered pedagogy, by Agyei Akoto***

1. What is your understanding of African-centered education based on the author's description/explanation?

2. Respond to this passage on p. 322:

When the national educational system is modeled after the oppressor's, carried out in the oppressor's language, and the standards of success are still determined directly and indirectly by the oppressor, dependency and subordination of the indigenous culture can be the only result.

3. Does the author suggest we replicate traditional African educational models? Should we? Why or why not? (See p. 323)
4. Respond to passage on p. 325.

The individual who assumes the role of mwalimu (teacher) must not only be involved in the study of the culture, but must be involved in a concrete and ongoing way with advancing the cultural and/or political interests of Afrikan people.

Do you agree?

5. Describe, as you understand it, the relationship between the mwalimu (teacher) and the mwanafunzi (student).
6. Given the authors description of the goals of African-centered pedagogy, do you believe such a context exists at Ayo Academy?
7. Comment on "the transformation of student resistance" (p. 332-334).

**February, 2001**

**Awakening the natural genius of Black children (1992), Amos N. Wilson**

1. What is the purpose of education in your opinion?
2. Do you agree that the major function of education should be to help secure the survival of a people (and not simply as preparation for a job or securing a better lifestyle)?
3. If we see education in this way, what should our schools look like?
4. The author suggests that education makes people ignorant, brainwashes them so that they become out of touch with reality. Do you agree or disagree? What good can education have?

5. What does it mean to have equal education? The author suggests that Black people should not be concerned with equal education because the white standard is not good enough. Do you agree or disagree? Should our goal be to be better than white children?
6. The author writes, "The education of our children is too serious for us to leave it in the hands of other people." Again, we're being asked to question whether Black children should only be taught by Black teachers. What do you think?
7. The author states, "the Black child is not a white child painted Black." Do you think that Black children are different from other children in significant ways or are all children fundamentally the same? If yes, how so? If not, why not?
8. Respond to passage on p. 14:

It is the use of Europeans as our standard of measure that has turned Black psychology into a psychology of deviancy, which makes us talk about our children in terms of deviancies, deficiencies, as slow learners, and in other kinds of negative ways. We are using the wrong standard of measurement.

9. Do you think teachers know all they need to know about the development of Black children? Do you believe this knowledge would help nurture the intellectual potential of Black children?
10. The author suggests that to produce "truly intelligent" African children requires an African centered consciousness. "[I]t is of vital importance that the nurturers of African children – mothers, fathers, and/or other caregivers and caretakers – be assimilated into African culture and values" (p. 95). Do you agree?
11. Respond to passage, bottom of p. 103:

Many Afrikan American families seem to have been remarkably successful in maintaining the self-esteem of their children in the face of pervasive racism and economic hardship. However, this success might, in some instances, have been achieved through the unnecessary sacrifice of higher intellectual and academic achievement on the part of many African American boys and girls.

12. Discuss what "acting white" means and its consequences for Black children. (See p. 105)
13. Respond to recommendations on p. 110.

March, 2001

**Talkin' that talk: Language, culture and education in African America (2000), Geneva Smitherman**

1. Do you believe Ebonics is a legitimate language? Why or why not?
2. Do you understand the author's analysis of Ebonics as "Africanized English"? What does that mean?
3. After reading this work, do you feel differently about Ebonics? How so? Are you convinced by her argument?
4. Should Black people/Black children be proud or ashamed of Ebonics?
5. Do you understand the difference between Ebonics and other forms of English? How does slang fit in?
6. Respond to passage, bottom of first full paragraph on p. 34:

In historical moments of racial progress, the language is less Ebonified; in times of racial suppression, the language is more Ebonified.

7. Respond to passage bottom of p. 38:

Historically, Standard American English was the language of the oppressor, hence a lingering association of Standard American English with "talking white."

8. In order to be full participants in American culture and politics, do Black people have to reject Ebonics? Can we be "bilingual" and be successful?
9. The author argues that Ebonics should be officially recognized and used as "a co-equal language of instruction" in schools with large numbers of Ebonics-speaking students. Do you agree?
10. Respond to the King case.
11. Should schools be obligated to overcome language barriers such as these?
12. Respond to passage on top of p. 135:

The trial proceedings established that the school district had failed to recognize the existence and legitimacy of the children's language, Black English. This failure of the teachers to recognize the language as legitimate and the corresponding negative attitudes toward the children's language led to negative expectations of the children which turned into self-fulfilling prophecies.



13. Respond to passage on top of p. 141.

In the educational context, negative linguistic attitudes are reflected in the institutional policies and practices that become educationally dysfunctional for Black English-speaking children. Research on language attitudes consistently indicates that teachers believe Black English-speaking youngsters are nonverbal and possess limited vocabularies. They are perceived to be slow learners or uneducable; their speech is unsystematic and needs constant correction and improvement.

Do you find this to be true?

14. Respond to first full paragraph on p. 148:

Black teachers and educators are often more negative toward Black English-speaking children than are white educators.

15. Where do you stand on this issue? Do you believe Ebonics should be used to help students learn to read and write in school?

**April, 2001**

**Guide to implementing Afrikan-centered education (1998),**  
**Kwame Kenyatta**

1. Several people have attacked African-centered education saying that it promotes the teaching of inaccurate history and distorted facts. Do you agree?
2. Do you believe African-centered education is divisive and “un-American?”
3. What does the author mean by “re-centering?”
4. Respond to passage on p. 8:

The education of Afrikan children is fundamental to the continual survival and liberation of Afrikan people. As a people, we have been trained to accept our oppression and the will of the oppressors.

5. If not African-centered education, what do we need to change the current pattern of failure for Black children?
6. Compare the Eurocentric style of teaching with the African child’s style of learning. What major differences do you see? What kinds of problems might arise in a classroom with these two different styles of teaching and learning?
7. What do you think of the nine keys to developing schools that are African-centered? Any additions or omissions?



8. What do you think of the criteria for teachers? Are these obvious? Any additions?
9. What do you think of the criteria for classrooms? Any additions? Do you think all of these are necessary?
10. Respond to passage on p. 66:

Under no circumstances should educators of any background who display levels of discomfort or intolerance with the Afrikan-centered philosophy be designated as instructors.

11. Do you see the resolution (p. 30-31) manifested in the district's policy and curriculum today? If yes, how so? If not, why not? What do you think happened?
12. What did you think of this guide? Was it helpful? Did it help you understand African-centered education more? More specifically, did it help you understand the Detroit model for African-centered education?

**May, 2001**

**Countering the conspiracy to destroy Black boys, Volume I  
(1985), Jawanza Kunjufu**

1. Discuss the conspiracy. Do you believe it exists? Do you find his evidence convincing?
2. Discuss the "Fourth Grade Failure Syndrome." What have you observed in your classrooms? What do you think happens between third and fourth grade?
3. Refer to p. 14. What implications do these statistics have for the education of Black children, Black boys in particular?
4. Respond to passage on p. 15: "You are a member of the conspiracy if you allow a child to sit in a classroom one extra day with an unconcerned teacher!"
5. Respond to passage on p. 17:

When Black children are not compelled to attend school, and often when they are, they usually can be found in the streets. The streets become their text, instructor and subject matter. The curriculum for this asphalt institution incorporates many of the same courses that are found in the formal school setting: sociology, political science, history, biology and even the physical sciences. However, unlike the school, the courses in the Street Institution are structured around community norms and are more binding on its members.

6. Comment on the factors that contribute to the decline in African American boys' achievement (p. 19-24).

7. The author places great emphasis on the lack of Black male teachers. Do you agree that there needs to be more male teachers in the primary grades as role models for Black boys? If so, explain.
8. Do you think that all male academies are the solution? Why or why not?
9. Again we see an emphasis on learning and knowing African and African American history as a way of improving academic achievement and self-esteem. Do you think this will “save” Black children from the failure and despair they experience? Can African-centered schools accomplish this?
10. What can we as teachers do to counter the conspiracy?

## **APPENDIX E**

## **APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS**

### **INTERVIEW 1 (November, 2000)**

1. Tell me something about your background. When and where were you educated? When and where did you begin teaching?
2. How would you describe your philosophy for educating Black children? What do you believe "works"? Why is this approach effective/needed?
3. What kinds of things have you done in the classroom that have facilitated the academic success of African American students? Explain. What do you think Black children need to be successful in the classroom?
4. Are there qualities or characteristics that Black children as a group bring to the classroom that are noteworthy? Please describe.
5. How much of what you know about teaching African American children did you learn from teacher training, either pre-service or in-service.
6. How do you think the schooling experience of the students you teach differs from that of white students in middle class communities? Why do you think there is this difference?
7. What do you know about African-centered education? What does African-centered education mean to you?
8. Why are you interested in participating in this group? What would you like to gain, if anything?
9. Are you currently or plan to be involved in any activities or groups in the community?
10. Are there any books you would like to recommend we read?

### **INTERVIEW 2 (May, 2001)**

1. Describe your involvement in the group. In the beginning? Later on?
2. What did you hope to gain from participating in this group? Were your expectations met? Explain.
3. What aspects of the group did you like? Dislike?

4. Which reading(s) did you enjoy the most? Why?
5. Which reading(s) did you enjoy the least? Why?
6. Did you learn anything about educating Black children from the readings and discussions that you did not know before?
7. Do you have a better understanding of African-centered education as a result of your participation in this group? Explain.
8. Has this experience prompted you to do anything different in your classroom? Explain.
9. Has this experience reaffirmed what you already do in your classroom? Explain.
10. Do you view your role in an African-centered school differently as a result of your participation in this group?
11. Which reading or discussion contributed the most to your development as a teacher? How so?
12. Which reading or discussion contributed the most to your personal development? How so?
13. In our first interview, we talked about your philosophy for educating Black children. I'd like to revisit that question. Has your philosophy changed over the course of the year? If so, why has it changed?
14. Did participating in this group challenge you to question your beliefs and assumptions about educating Black children? If yes, how so?

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