

**“FEAR OF STIGMATISATION”:  
BLACK CANADIAN YOUTHS’ REACTIONS TO THE IMPLEMENTATION  
OF A BLACK-FOCUSED SCHOOL IN TORONTO<sup>1</sup>**

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The black-focused school introduced by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in 2009 has been controversial since the community consultations were conducted. Although media representations and Dei (1996, 2006) provide insight into what Torontonians’ reactions are to the proposed black-focused school, the reactions of black youth in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) have not been documented. We address that gap by providing a representation of black youths’ voices obtained via focus groups. Black youth from the GTA voiced their agreement with elements of the proposal, but resisted the idea of implementing the proposal by creating a separate school. These findings pose important implications for those in education fields, the TDSB and the black-focused school proponents.

### **Introduction**

The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) introduced a black-focused school in 2009 in response to concerns from the black community in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) about the high levels of academic disengagement among black youth (TDSB, 2008). During the consultation about the proposed school, contrasting opinions arose on the appropriateness of such a school in the GTA (Dei, 2005; Windsor Star, 2005). Some parties argued that the proposal was a progressive strategy to promote the academic achievement of “failing” black youth, while

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others saw it as a regressive step back to the days of segregation. Despite controversial media coverage and community consultation sessions about the proposal, the voices of black youth were underrepresented. Recognizing the importance of youth voice in educational decisions, we documented black Torontonians’ opinions about the implementation of the black-focus school. Youth were also asked if the proposal would address black youths’ academic disengagement

Academic disengagement is a considerable issue among black youth. Decades of research have documented black students’ struggles in Canadian education systems (see James & Brathwaite, 1996; Mata, 1989), and scholars have examined reasons for black Canadian youth disengagement (see Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; James, 1990). While many factors contribute to this academic disengagement and one must be careful to generalize one reason over another (Dei et al., 1997), this paper conceptualizes black Canadian youth’s academic disengagement in the GTA not as a problem of black youth, but of the inequality perpetuated by Canadian education (Brathwaite, 1989).

Despite the value black Canadian families place on education, research since the 1970s has shown that black Torontonians struggle to excel in Canadian education as they do not choose the courses or accumulate the credits needed to pursue postsecondary studies (Moitt, 1996). These struggles have been well documented in scholarly literature. Beginning in the 1960’s, Canada saw a large number of blacks immigrating to Canada from the Caribbean (Foster, 1996). In the 1970s, Canadian school boards and other independent researchers began to recognize that African Canadian students, particularly those with Caribbean heritage, were having difficulties at school (James & Brathwaite, 1996).

To illustrate, TDSB statistics showed that during the 1970s and 1980s a large percentage of black students were placed in courses that did not prepare them for university (Brown, 2005). Similarly Caribbean born youth were less likely to enter into college or university than Canadian born youth (Mata, 1989). Instead black students were often categorized as students with special education needs, or placed in behaviour classes rather than gifted programs. During these decades James and Brathwaite (1996) state that research “showed that Black students were second to Aboriginals in being most highly represented in basic level programmes of study” (p. 16). For example, Larter, Cheng, Capps, & Lee (1982) share that when using a group of grade eight students it was “found that Black and Caribbean students were the only groups who rated education as the most important to them; however, these were the two groups with the largest percentage (35% Blacks and 19% Caribbean) in special education classes” (as cited in James & Brathwaite, 1996, p. 17). These difficulties continued into the 90’s with alarming drop-out rates reported for black students (Dei et al., 1997). The TDSB released consistent statistics in the school year of 2001/2002 “which showed that 54 percent of students born in the English-speaking Caribbean had 14 credits or fewer at the end of Grade 10 (Students should have 16 credits at this point in their academic careers)” (as cited in Kalinowski & Brown, 2005, par.27).

Prior research has pointed to many ways in which such disengagement can be addressed (e.g., choice, performance contract, cooperative learning, and cultural responsive pedagogy) (see Ogbu, 2003). Black-focused or afri-centric schooling has been proposed as one of the ways to address this disengagement and provide a more supportive environment for black youth who may lag behind their white peers for various systemic reasons. However, while there are eleven schools or related initiatives that appear within the research literature (see Durden, 2007; Lee, 2005; O’Reilly & Gregory, 2006; Sadowski, 2001; Sanders, 1992; Teicher, 2006; Watson &

Smitherman, 1996) there is limited empirical support that any of these initiatives are successful in addressing disengagement or the achievement gap (Dragnea & Erling, 2008). There is some anecdotal and qualitative evidence that these initiatives are successful for some black youth. This paper explores the views of black youth on the implementation of a black-focused school as a strategy to address academic disengagement. Culturally responsive pedagogy, or in the case of this paper, Africentric curriculum, challenges the conventional educational environment by organizing itself around a holistic model of communal principles, while making the totality of black-lived experience relevant to all parts of the curriculum in order to foster the social, physical, spiritual, and academic development of students (Dei, 2005). King (2005) stated that “culturally appropriate education is understood to be a basic human right and not only as a condition of Black people’s individual success and collective survival but is also fundamental to civilization and human freedom” (p. xxiii). In this sense, the recent effort to address black Canadian youth academic disengagement in the GTA by implementing an Africentric alternative school could be seen as fulfilling a basic human right. Our purpose is not to assess whether or not the Africentric alternative school should be supported. Our focus is on exploring how black youth respond to the proposal and on considering the related policy implications.

### **Historical Context of Black-Focused Schooling in Toronto**

The idea of implementing a black-focused, Africentric alternative school in Toronto is not a new initiative (Kalinowski & Brown, 2005). Black-focused schools actually existed in some form in the GTA in 1935, 1968 (Moitt, 1996) and the Afro-Caribbean Alternative Secondary School was opened in 1986 (Shuttleworth, 2010). In fact, the push for the black-focused school that opened in September 2009 started in the 1990s (Brown, 2005; Monteiro,

2005). It was proposed to the TDSB between 1992–1995 by the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning and the African-Canadian Community working group as a strategy to improve the high drop-out rates of black youth (Brennan & Brown, 2005).

The proposals for an alternative school arose out of the deep frustrations of the black community in Toronto about the disengagement of their students and the need for strategies to encourage academic engagement. Despite recommendations for and evidence of underachievement, proposals for a black-focused school were not supported until 2005 when George Dei brought attention back to the black-focus school proposal during a black education forum. The proposal was controversial with the community and other stakeholders were divided over its implementation. For example, Wilson Head, a prominent black community leader at the time, is cited in two sources as claiming that the school was equivalent to segregation (Radical Solutions for black students: Focused schools the answer, 2007; Say no to black schools, 2005). This reaction was common, yet it signified a lack of awareness about the proposal, as well as a simplistic understanding of the overall issue. Dei (2005) explains:

[Some] argue that black-focused schools represent a revision to the days of segregation. But there is meaningful difference between forced segregation and separation by choice. Segregationists in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sought to exclude blacks from meaningful participation in society. By contrast, black-focused schools aim to address an educational crisis and help minority youth succeed. (par. 13)

There were various reasons why the alternative Africentric school proposal was suggested at that time (e.g., Zero tolerance policy; Safe Schools Act; gun violence; Atkinson reports; race-based statistics). Concerns around youth violence and race-based statistics created some political pressure to take concrete steps to address the perceived issue of black youth academic disengagement and being attracted to street life. The proposal for the black-focused school also drew support from three initiatives that had been implemented by the TDSB in the

2003–2004 school year. These three related initiatives were: the collection of race-based statistics, an Africentric Summer Institute (ASI), and an African-based Inclusive Curriculum. As results of these initiatives were released, more support was garnered for the proposal leading to a request from black community in the GTA to create a “real” Africentric Alternative School on June 27, 2007 (TDSB, 2008). In response, the TDSB developed a report on the feasibility of the Africentric Alternative School and initiated a consultative process with community and staff stakeholders that included several public meetings (TDSB, 2008). The decision was made to proceed with the school and the opening was slated for September 2009. The school was characterized by the TDSB (2008) as “a school open to all students, which uses the sources of knowledge and experiences of peoples of African descent as an integral feature of the teaching and learning environment” (p. 2).

Throughout this process, the views of those who would be most directly impacted, the youth who might attend the alternative school, were not broadly solicited. The public consultations provided a forum to primarily gather community opinions and while they did provide limited opportunities for youth input, they were not structured in a way that was conducive to youth participation. In the limited literature of black-focused schooling, there is only one study that explored the attitudes of young people towards black-focused schooling in Toronto. In the 1990s, Dei (1996/1997) utilized the narrative accounts of black youth about mainstream schools and their experiences in a Canadian inner city to advance the argument for a black-focused school. Two decades have passed since, and a new generation now fills Canadian schools. Student culture has continued to shift and change during this time requiring new consultations with youth which is why we have chosen to focus on the voices of black youth.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this research we draw upon the theoretical approach represented within recent developments in the sociology of children and childhood that calls for an increased focus on the “perspectives, perceptions, interpretations, opinions, and attitudes” (Johnson, 2010, p. xiv) in terms of the lived experiences of children and youth and their role as social agents in the creation of their environment (James, 2009). This builds upon Corsaro’s (1997) childcentric approach that offers an alternative to adultcentric approaches and proposes that children engage in iterative interactions with adults and other youth to create new understandings of their environments. Corsaro’s notion of interpretive reproduction (2011 [1997]) argues that children and youth act as social agents to produce peer culture through social interaction. In terms of educational settings, students’ produce their own culture within a school that does not necessarily conform to adult expectations nor does it result in the automatic internalization of adult norms and culture. However, students are constrained by wider social and societal structures that are represented and reproduced in school environments and systems.

While research focused on giving children and youth voice so that their perspectives and experiences are heard is growing (Johnson, 2010), youth are still seldom involved in the decision-making processes that attempt to create new strategies to help improve their educational experiences. Local administrators, community members, and parents usually take primary control. Youth are left voiceless and barely informed about decisions made for them about their educational lives. Consequently, youth are not always aware of new education initiatives until these programs are established. They are often oblivious and sometimes remain uninformed about what is being discussed in their schools’ board meetings and among the school authorities. Although most school boards selectively post meeting agendas and decision on their websites,

information on school board trustees; discussions and concerns are seldom disclosed through media. Furthermore, while school board personnel and school administrators make predictions and offer informed opinions about how certain decisions will impact students, their lack of in-depth knowledge of student culture combined with the speed at which these cultures shift and change call for more consultation with youth.

As previously mentioned, there is only one other study that explored black youth’s attitudes in reference to black-focused schooling in Toronto. Dei found that the students he spoke with were concerned with black youths’ marginality and subordination in mainstream schools, and claimed that students supported and opposed the idea of black-focused schooling, mainly identifying it as “a contested terrain.” Dei states that opponents of black-focused schooling (including students’ voices) had the following concerns: possible backlash, social stigmatisation of the school, problems of funding, provision of relevant resource materials, appropriate curricular, instructional, and pedagogical practices, and staff representation. The continued shift in student culture and attitudes towards education stress the need to explore the current opinions and conceptualizations of youth.

This study addresses the need for more recent consultation with black youth about the black-focused school proposal and its implementation. The focus groups occurred during the consultation phase of the proposal and examined youths’ reactions to the proposal and its potential impact on their educational environments. To stress the importance of valuing participants’ voices, when reporting data we have chosen to let the youth address the issues in their own words as much as possible in order to align with our theoretical framework of letting the youth’s voices speak for themselves and provide insight into their lived experiences.



## **Methods**

### *Research Design*

Our objective was to focus on and document black youths’ opinions and concerns about the black-focused school proposal and its potential impact on their education environments. An exploratory research design was employed to gain insight into black youths’ opinions about the proposal. The decision to use focus groups was informed by the research objective and theoretical framework as well as the importance of making youth comfortable. Focus groups provide a vehicle to elicit individual opinions within the context of group dynamics in keeping with our theoretical framework of youth co-constructing their realities (Corsaro, 1997).

As white female outsiders, we were aware that our own location and positionality (both as exhibited by us and as inferred by the youth) would influence what we heard and understood, as well as what the youth said and were prepared to say. We also recognized the importance of providing the youth with a setting that recognized potential power differentials (e.g. privileged white researcher and black youth). To address these issues, we hired a black student who was connected with various communities in the GTA to be part of the research team and decided that only one researcher (Gordon) would attend and facilitate each of the groups. The student attended all of the focus groups and provided technical support (e.g. setting up the video camera and monitoring its performance) while the researcher focused on connecting with the youth and facilitating the sessions.

### *Participants*

Prior to approaching black community youth organizations, clearance and approval was sought from our institution. We choose community-based recruitment to purposely sample black

Canadian youth more freely than would be possible within a school setting and to allow for a more representative sample of youth from the GTA. Purposeful sampling was chosen based on the rationale of our focus: to give voice to black Canadian youth regarding their views of the proposal (Creswell, 2012). Participants were recruited through the distribution of recruitment information and material via phone and email to black Canadian youth organizations that were found online or through word of mouth. Purposeful and snowball sampling allowed us to obtain as much variation as likely within our sample (Patton, 1980). During our recruitment phase, our research assistant communicated with organizations by phone, email, and in person. Whether or not this recruitment method minimized power differentials and influenced participants’ decisions to participate is unknown, but we feel this lessened youth’s reluctance to participate in the study.

Some unexpected matters and modifications arose during recruitment. To recruit participants, participating community organizations received a poster. This poster indicated our wish to speak with youth in or entering into grades 10–12. We preferred that participants had a minimum of one year’s high school experience so that they would have had some educational experience in that context. However, we ended up talking to a range of participants who were not solely between the ages of 15–19. The majority of organizations we worked with provided us with youth who were older than the requested age range. As a result, data collected was gathered from youth who were between the ages of 15–30. We could have taken stricter measures to ensure that our participants’ ages were within the 15–19 age range by asking for the participants’ ages at the time, or asking the organization leader to confirm ages and turn people away, however, we did not do so for the following reasons: 1) we were intrigued at the number of people who were interested in participating, 2) we did not deem it appropriate to turn people away who had taken the effort to show up, and 3) it was difficult to identify age differences

without making assumptions and causing embarrassment. Therefore, throughout this study *youth* refers to participants between the ages of 15–30.

In addition to changing the age range of participants, we excluded three participants from the analysis and reporting of data because they had extensive knowledge about the black-focused school proposal, history of educating black youth, and the black youths’ educational experiences. They were obvious experts on the topic and were not within the age range of 15–30. These three participants attended the same focus group session and did not, in our observation, influence the answers of the other participants the session. We ascertained that their participation did not appear to unduly influence the focus group participants’ opinions by carefully examining the transcripts. Through this examination it became clear that the participants actively resisted the adults’ opinions on the issues, rather than internalizing them, as Corsaro (2011) claims is often the case in peer group relations. Instead of agreeing with the older participants’ views, the youth in this session made comments that aligned more with the other youth participating in the discussion as well as youth in other focus groups. It was also clear that while some of the participants were certainly older than Corsaro’s conceptualization of youth, they were reflecting upon and drawing from their experiences as youth within the education system. Therefore, we found that Corsaro’s theory was still a useful lens within this research but it should be noted that it is an extension of what he initially proposed as we are looking a much broader definition of youth. In addition, the older participants preferred alignment with the younger participants and rejection of the adult expert participants (who were excluded) suggest that the older participants were still more closely connected with youth culture than adult culture.

A total of six different focus groups were conducted with community organizations who responded to the recruitment strategies (see the Table). Five different community organization

and Scarborough. Two of these sites were part of the same community organization and three of the focus groups were conducted with the same community organization. The selection of community organizations depended only on whether they dealt with black youth issues, thus, the different descriptions of youth described in this paper reflect organization type: “agency,” “LGBTQ,” “activist,” and not-profit. Fifty-seven black youth participated in the focus group sessions and the groups ranged in size from four to 12 participants. See the Table for a more detailed account of participant characteristics.

Table  
*Description of focus group sessions: participants’ demographic characteristics*

Session	TDSB Area	Number per age ranges	Number per gender	Place of birth
Youth Agency (n = 12)	Etobicoke Centre Ward	15–19 = 3 20–25 = 7 26–30 = 1	M = 7 F = 4	Canada = 8 Afghanistan = 1 Saudi Arabia = 1 Sweden = 1
Youth Agency (n = 11)	York South Ward	15–19 = 10 26–30 = 1	M = 10 F = 1	Canada = 8 Jamaica = 2 St. Vincent = 1
LGBTQ support program (n = 12)	Toronto Danforth Ward	15–19 = 1 20–25 = 5 26–30 = 4	M = 2 F = 8	Canada = 5 Grenada = 1 Jamaica = 1 Togo = 1 Trinidad = 1 Zimbabwe = 1
Youth Agency (n = 12)	Etobicoke Centre Ward	15–19 = 5 20–25 = 7	M = 8 F = 4	Canada = 5 Ethiopia = 1 Jamaica = 1 Kismaya = 1 Morroco = 1 Somalia = 3
Activist Group (n = 4)	St. Paul Ward	15–19 = 2 20–25 = 2	M = 2 F = 2	Canada = 2 Ghana = 1 St. Lucia = 1
Not-profit Social Service Agency (n = 6)	Scarborough Centre Ward	15–19 = 6	M = 4 F = 2	Canada = 3 Guyana = 2 Jamaica = 1

*Note.* Two focus groups were conducted at this same site at different times, and with different youth. The first and fourth focus groups were conducted at this site. One participant from the first focus group did not hand in a demographic questionnaire; therefore no demographic information was determined for this participant. Two participants from the third focus group did not hand in demographic questionnaires.

### *Focus Groups*

Data were collected via focus groups. The sessions occurred at the community organizations where the youth were members and ranged from 45–90 minutes. Prior to each session, informed written consent was obtained from each participant. The researcher reviewed the consent form orally to ensure that the participants understood their rights. The group discussions were video-taped and transcribed. The open-ended interview guide consisted of questions that centered on the young peoples’ knowledge and opinions about the black-focused school proposal: Have you heard of the black-focused school proposal? When and where did you hear about it? What have you heard? What are your initial thoughts on the proposal? What are some positives and negatives about the black-focused school proposal? Would you attend? Would your parents want you to attend? Would you send your children to this school? What sorts of things belong in this school curriculum, and would it eliminate drop-outs?

The interview guide was designed to elicit the youths’ opinions, and while it did not actively prevent participants from critically engaging in the issues it was not designed to prompt them to think critically about their current experiences at school, or see the project as a progressive or regressive strategy to improving the underachievement of black youth in education systems. All of the focus groups were driven by the research participants. They followed their own discussions and were only partially structured by the questions. Discussions also were determined by the questions the youth asked about the project and the issues they felt they needed to be share regarding their school experiences. The dynamics of each focus group influenced the responses of the participants. The opinions and perspectives of the focus group participants were affected by how well the entire focus group worked together to explain the philosophy of the proposed school. The participants shared knowledge with each other creating a

different dynamic level of knowledge in each group, even though the researcher facilitated the conversation and encouraged the information-sharing. Contradictions and agreements within the group led to much “echoing,” “complimenting,” and “building” (Messias, Jennings, Fore, McLoughlin, & Parra-Medina, 2008) on each other’s voices. For example, one youth would introduce a subject that resonated with someone else, and that might lead to that person “echoing” the first youth’s concerns, or “complimenting” them by adding additional information, or it might have been used by another youth as a segue into another area, thus “building” the conversation. These dynamics reflected a peer interactive space that Corsaro (1997) argues is the value of peer culture: youth doing things together. In the case of this study, the youth created meanings for the black-focused school “together.”

As some participants might not have been familiar with the proposal, a brief description (see the Appendix) of the black focused school project also was included. The description of the proposal was not presented as being either positive or negative because our main objective was to elicit our participants’ opinions about the proposal. The facilitator presented the description after the following open-ended questions: Have you heard of the black-focused school proposal? When and where did you hear about it? What have you heard?

At the end of each session, participants completed a short demographic questionnaire so their characteristics could be established (see the Table). Once the questionnaires were collected, the participants received three items: a \$10 honorarium, a feedback letter explaining the project, and a short list of counselling services if the participants needed support after the discussion.

### *Data Analysis*

The focus group transcripts were coded and analyzed in a question-based manner and then according to emerging themes via NVivo 8. All participants were given pseudonyms. Handling the data in a “question-based” manner allowed for the documentation of the voices of the participants. While several themes emerged from the data, this paper focuses on three themes that document and examine the participants’ opinions of the proposal: namely, fear of stigmatisation; views of the school and its elements; and, difficulty conceptualizing the school the school as a functioning space. The following section documents the voices of the participants as they were expressed in relation to the three themes. It primarily follows the discussions that emerged as part of the dynamics in the focus groups but also makes reference to the questions from the focus group guide that were asked by the researcher. Not only were the richness and representativeness of the responses considered when selecting quotes, but also issues of diversity of views, perspectives and voice (Messias et al. 2008).

### **Results and Discussion**

As previously mentioned, this section focuses on three key themes: fear of stigmatisation; difficulty conceptualizing the school as a functioning space; and views of the school and its elements. However, it is important to start with a sense of how the focus groups began and then shifted into conversations that were influenced by the dynamics in each groups. It is interesting to note that despite the dynamics that varied from group to group, the comments were remarkably similar across groups.

Focus group sessions began with asking participants if they had heard about the black-focused school proposal prior to the session. Among the groups, every participant in the not-for-

profit social service agency and the activist group previously had heard about the proposal.

Notably, these research participants were from organizations that focus specifically on issues concerning black Canadians while the majority of youth who were part of organizations that focused on broader social issues had not heard about the proposal.

Only one third of the participants had heard about the proposal, and most had heard about it over the past year. One black male aged 15–19<sup>2</sup> heard about the initiative at a York University conference but most indicated hearing about the initiative through media (e.g., News, CP24, CityTV), or “word of mouth” via peers and family. Information had come from the media directly or indirectly as filtered through peers or family members.

Before the participants were given a brief description of the proposal, they were asked what they had heard regarding the proposal. The most recurring answer was, “that they’re thinking about doing it.” The second most reoccurring response was that this school was only for black students. However, this response was often countered by the comment, “anybody could go there.” To illustrate, three youth aged 15–19 discuss their knowledge on the issue:

Penny: ...anyone can go there. It is not only for black students.

Pete: Oh, I didn’t hear that. I heard it was only for black students (Harry agrees)

Penny: No, it is not just for black students. They are just putting the black aspect into things...

The response that “anybody can go there” was the third most reoccurring response. The last two responses are given by one female aged 15–19, “they are putting in the black history... [and] the African aspect into every subject.” The rest of the participants who answered this question reported that, yes, they had heard of the proposal but they had heard “nothing specific” about the

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<sup>2</sup> Personal identifiers were not collected during the course of the research. Therefore, participants’ ages are identified only by age ranges 15–19, 20–25, or 26–30.



project. Most of the insights came from youth aged 15–19 in the non-profit social service agency group session. Most of the other youth who had heard of the proposal did not hear anything specific about the project. Therefore, knowledge around the project, whether or not it was true or false, was limited among these youth.

### *Fear of Stigmatisation*

As the participants got further into discussion about the proposed school, it became clear that the majority of participants expressed anxiety about the school that we identified as the theme, fear of stigmatisation. This theme captures participants’ concerns about how the proposed school might serve to label or set them apart from other students in the TDSB and reflects comments about the school being associated with being identified/treated as “different” or “special.” It also includes concerns about the title of the school and related conversations about the idea of racial segregation and around being “set-up” to fail. Throughout the discussions the expression of complimentary and contradictory individual opinions led to much “echoing,” “complimenting,” and “building” (Messias et al., 2008). The discussions also reflected youths’ need to control confusion triggered by adults’ realities and their resistance and awareness of the constraints imposed by adults and how those impact their lived experiences (Corsaro, 1997; Corsaro & Eder, 1990). One participant’s comments captured some of these concerns:

Jane: But then again I don’t want to be taught like I’m dunce, like I don’t feel to be in a different school and to be taught like we’re dunce, and we’re not stupid. I think everyone, everyone, no matter what race, class like you are, like you should have an opportunity to be taught like school or whatever. I don’t know (inaudible) it’s not just black people.

Fred: Yeah, the way it sounds, it sounds like a special school.

While some participants were concerned about the school being perceived as “special” others found the title of the school to be inappropriate and potentially stigmatizing. For example, a female aged 15–19 commented, “I think people will feel uncomfortable with that title.” Similarly, some males aged 15–19 expressed their concerns over the title of the school: “First of all, who chose that name?”; “Black-focused!?!”; and “They need to change that name because it’s going to confuse a lot of people.” These perspectives reflect fears that the school’s title itself would be stigmatizing.

Moving beyond seeing the school title as stigmatizing, discussion also centred on the issue of segregation that the students’ identified as being associated with the school. Some youth clearly saw the school as an example of racial segregation while others did not agree that segregation was associated with the school. As evidenced by the discussion below, the participants challenged each other around the issue of racial segregation:

Belinda: Why do they need to have their own school?

Amy: Because they don’t want to put it in regular school.

Belinda: Ok, exactly, so then how does that look? That looks like anybody who wants to learn about being more black has to go to their own separate, segregated school. That’s not cool. What’s cool about that?

Ray: They’re not fair. They’re not being fair.

Tara: Yeah. They should put that into the curriculum.  
[...]

Rudy: They don’t want to change the curriculum so somebody is trying to make it more accessible for all the people.

Amy: Exactly...to everybody. So, it’s like if you don’t want to go, you don’t have to. I don’t see the problem in it.

Belinda: No, okay, but you guys don’t see. Ok, after the whole Martin Luther King and all that jazz and segregation and all that stuff, right? And all that stuff went away. You guys don’t feel like it’s taking a step backwards. Instead of

making more protest, not more protest, but more progress. No, you know what I mean? Like instead of making more steps to try to make it be a part of regular curriculum in all schools...

Amy: They don’t want it to happen.

Belinda: But that’s what I’m saying then. Okay, so then why’s that fair to us? Why should they say, “We don’t want black student going on in school. So why don’t you take all your black kids and shove them in a school over there?”

Amy: It’s not ONLY for BLACK PEOPLE!

Belinda: Didn’t you hear what she said? (referring to the interviewer) It’s more Africentric than a Eurocentric—

I: Curriculum.

Amy: I don’t get it.

Will: What she’s (referring to Belinda) saying is you should put that in a regular curriculum rather than having a separate school.

Unlike the diverse opinions expressed around racial segregation the discussion about the school as a “set-up” reflected strong agreement among participants. Many participants questioned the integrity of the proposal when they discussed the school as “a set-up,” “seems like another conspiracy,” “it’s like a reservation,” and “sounds like a jail.” The conversation below from a group of 15–19 year olds reflects concerns around being set-up:

Cyrille: Yo, maybe what they’re trying to do yo is put all black people in a White area so if something goes down they can find them easier.

Thomas: It’s true.

Mario: That’s basically it.

Marcko: Yeah you go to that school. We have everybody on database. They know where everybody is.

Cyrille: “Oh you want Billy? Okay, I’ll get you Billy.”

Another view of this common response is reflected in this quote made by a female aged 20–25:

Coretta: It sounds like a set-up for a downfall; like they want this to happen so that when it doesn’t succeed they’re like “Oh oh, you see, like we let all the black people have their school and like, now it failed.”

These narratives clearly reveal the participants’ anxieties about potential stigmatisation associated with the school. While the concerns varied from being labelled or set apart by being identified/treated as “different” or “special” to concerns about the school’s title, racial segregation and being “set-up” to fail—they all focused on some level of stigmatisation. They also reflect the youths’ tendency to resist the adult initiated structure and constraints represented within the school proposal (Corsaro, 1997). This resistance and need to construct their own lived realities is reflected in the participants’ questioning of why the school had to be separate instead of the TDSB implementing a more inclusive curriculum.

#### *Difficulty Conceptualizing the School as a Functioning Space*

The resistance evidenced in the fear of stigmatisation discussions was also present in participants’ struggles to conceptualize the black-focused school as a functioning space. Many participants’ resisted the adult identified need for a separate school and continued to question why the proposed changes could not be implemented into all schools throughout the TDSB. While it is possible to identify the participants’ responses to the idea of the school as a functioning space as being difficulties in conceptualization, this presupposes that the adult conception of the school is superior to any conceptualizations by the youth. Such identification would also rely heavily upon traditional psychological understandings of youth in terms of developmental stages and is not aligned with our theoretical framework. From a sociology of childhood perspective and more particularly drawing upon Corsaro’s interpretative reproduction theory (2011 [1997]), we argue that the youth experienced difficulty conceptualizing the school as a functioning space not because they lacked the cognitive skill to do so but rather because they

struggled to connect the adult structured operating space with the space that they were projecting based on their understandings of school function and culture as created by themselves and other youth.

As previously mentioned, Corsaro (1997, 2011) has argued that youth act as social agents to produce peer culture through social interaction and this expresses itself within education systems by students producing their own culture within a school. As these youth school cultures do not necessarily conform to adult expectations or automatically internalize adult norms and culture, youths’ ideas about school functioning may differ significantly from those of adults both theoretically and practically while also being constrained by wider social and societal structures represented and reproduced in school environments. This was evident in the discussions that participants had about how the school would function as a space.

Most of the participants had difficulty conceptualizing what the school would “look like” and understanding the philosophy driving the ideas for the school in comparison to their mainstream schools. The difficulties were primarily expressed in the following areas: the incorporation of black-lived experience into the new curriculum; how this school would prepare and allow them to pursue a post-secondary education; why it would be called “Africentric” if they were just going to let everybody go to the same school; the holistic approach versus the hierarchal structure present in current school systems, where administration and teachers hold all the authority; alternative discipline methods to expulsion and suspension; and why students who do well in mainstream school now would decide to go to this new school. The common thread connecting these areas is the blending of theoretical aspects with practical aspects or the rationalization of the space blended with how the space would look and function. In addition, the concept of a black-focused school pushes against the boundaries understood to shape mainstream

schools and as an adult-initiated proposal fails to consider existing youth school culture. Thus, youth within focus groups struggled with their resistance to and encapsulation within mainstream school structures and were challenged to visualize how youth culture might be formed within this proposed school.

This struggle was reflected in many of the concerns youth raised while trying to visualize how the proposed school would function. For example, participants’ raised concerns about not being able to learn anything but African history at this new school, illustrating how they were constrained by mainstream approaches to teaching history. The related concerns voiced about whether the school would prepare them for post-secondary education demonstrates the blending of the practical and theoretical in so far as it questioned both how the space would operate through its connection to the teaching of history or other subjects as well as the more theoretical question regarding the overall outcome of preparing a student for acceptance into a mainstream system of higher education. The youth also experienced difficulty conceptualizing the school as open to students who were not black and grasping how alternative disciplinary methods such as suspensions or expulsions would work in a school with a holistic structure versus a hierarchical one. This demonstrated the participants’ struggle to translate their understandings of adult school culture and youth school culture within mainstream schools into an unknown school environment where adult school culture has been purposefully shifted and youth culture is an unknown. The question of disciplinary methods gets at the heart of the struggle as it is both a site of resistance to adult school culture and norms and a key site where youth school culture is influenced or informed by the adult school culture and norms in terms of how such disciplinary methods are responded to and understood. For example, being called to the vice-principal’s office for using cell phone might be a negative through the lens of adult school culture while being a positive

through the lens of youth school culture. Lastly, the participants were concerned about what type of youth would be attending the school. To illustrate this and some of the other concerns above, a conversation is documented between youth who vary in age:

Huey: ...Are there going to be kids that you can do homework with? Because I’m guessing all these people are going to be kicked out of the schools, right?

I: No, no—

Huey: Like special behavioural kids, right?

Coretta: NOOOO! It’s a REGULAR SCHOOL! It’s not a school—

Huey: Okay, but why would some kid pick some school over some—

Coretta: Because you feel like—

Grace: Because it’s black-focused—

Coretta: Yeah, it’s black-focused—  
[...]

Huey: I know but like just a regular kid wants to go to like [names a school]

Grace: You can, go ahead. It’s not saying that you have to go to this school because it’s black.

This exchange illustrates how youth are struggling to co-create their understanding of the new school environment by drawing upon existing understandings of adult and youth school cultures and shifting them into the new proposed school environment. One of the youth demonstrated more difficulty shifting these understanding than the others, but throughout the focus groups most youth experienced these difficulties at some point with some seeming to be able to make the shift for some aspects of the school but not others and some participants struggling to make the shift for any aspect of the proposed school. Most often the inability for the participants to foresee alternatives often led them back to the question: “Why don’t they just integrate these things into the mainstream schools instead of making a whole new school?”

### *Views of the School and Its Elements*

While the participants had difficulty conceptualizing how the school would function, they were able to discuss their views of the school and its associated elements. There were several aspects of the proposal that sounded appealing to the participants: having a different curriculum, being able to learn more about black heritage in a comfortable environment, having more black teachers and less police, and that it might change racist attitudes. However, many youth also identified negative aspects that included: the safety of the school space itself (including level of violence), media representation of black youth, and the school as a separate space. Youth were divided on their overall response to the proposal with some youth decidedly in favour or against the proposal and others identifying as being undecided or “on the fence.”

Youth who were in favour of the school proposal frequently spoke about how the positive elements of the proposal should be included in mainstream schools but also saw the value of having a separate black-focused school. One participant, Debra, spoke about the importance of learning from the black-focused school and implementing those lessons throughout mainstream schools— “I think that this will be the perfect blueprint to start as like a text general, (to) see how it works out (and) then build every school like that.” Another participant, Grace, spoke about the benefits that youth would experience in being more connected to their heritage— “I think it’s a good chance for the youth of Toronto to get to know about their backgrounds if ... like they’ve been here for a long time and they don’t know too much about where they come from.” A third participant, Mary, spoke about how she would have found the school empowering if she’d had the opportunity to attend. She was supportive of the black-focused school as she was not fully satisfied with the current school environments—“I feel that sometimes the ways the schools are setup right now, you learn one thing at school and then you



come home and your family is not like that.” Mary also thought that the school would provide a good alternative for students, “I think that for kids who choose to go the other way and not really trust like the Eurocentric way of learning ... I think that would be such a positive way.” These three participants are representative of the views expressed by other youth who were in favour of the proposal as they all saw various advantages to having the black-focused school as a separate space while also indicating that some elements of the proposal should be implemented in mainstream schools at some point.

In contrast, those youth who were not in favour of the proposal tended to focus on the negative aspects that they had identified. These youth often focused on what could go wrong at the proposed school. Pete spoke about the current safety issues and level of violence in the Toronto public schools and described the tension he already experiences—“You have the majority of the black people fighting other black people, and like yo... right now I am in a school where I see someone brush another person in the hallway and you are always ready to kill someone.” He argued that these tensions would be heightened in the proposed school as there would be even more groups brought together who want to fight with each other—“If you bring everybody into a school like that ... If you bring a majority of people like from my neighbourhood and all of the crime neighbourhoods and no one likes each other, you are bound to have problems.” Some youth connected this increase in tension with more police involvement and saw this as a heightened safety concern. For example, Harry saw himself as becoming a target for the violence and the police—“There’s going to be tension, there is going to be conflict, and if this black-focused school starts, we are all going to be targets. You’re always going to see police there.” Youth who thought that the proposal was a bad idea because of safety issues

tended to voice concerns like those of Pete and Harry. These youth voiced views that the schools would be “scary,” and that “the possibility of bad things happening was endless.”

Youth who were opposed to the proposal also identified concerns about how the media represents black youth and the role the school could play in heightening these negative characterizations. Pete provided an example of what he thought could happen at the school—“As soon as a fight happens ... that school is going to be on TV—‘Black-focused school gone wrong’, that’s going to be the headline, I already see it! And once that happens everyone’s going to be like—I told you it’s a bad idea.” Many youth agreed with Pete’s prediction and other youth offered similar comments. In addition, youth who were opposed to the proposal did not identify any advantages associated with having a separate black-focused school. They only spoke about the negative elements of a “separate school.” The youth did discuss positive aspects of the associated with the proposal, such as an integrated curriculum and more black teachers. They argued these aspects should be implemented in mainstream schools not housed in a separate school.

Similarly, youth who were undecided on whether or not the proposed school was a good idea expressed both positive and negative views on the proposal. For example, Ahmed was very mixed when assessing the proposal—“It has its ups and downs. It brings us black people together but then further apart at the same time.” Others, like Robert, were more concerned about rushing into a new school and wanted more consideration and a more gradual plan— “I think they should go back to elementary school and slowly change the processing ... it takes time to change things ... they can’t change things fast ... It’s going to be havoc.” Youth who were undecided tended to bounce between talking about how great some aspects of the school would be, “more black teachers, I’m down for that,” and worries about the negative aspects, “everyone’s just going to

get messed up and it’s going to be like hell.” Overall, youth saw both positive and negative aspects but unlike those youth who were in favour of the black-focused school, these youth were not convinced that a separate school was necessary and tended to agree that many elements could be incorporated in mainstream schools.

While participants were very mixed on their views of the school and its implementation, they were more positive about various elements included in the school. However, they often discussed how these were wonderful elements that should be included in all “regular” schools.

This tendency is illustrated by the response below from a 25-year-old female:

Coretta: Either this school or like just taking a lot of the aspects of the things that they’re trying to bring through this school to the regular schools we have now, because like it doesn’t have to be all black or black-focused school. If it’s not going to be specific for black people I mean like, why not just introduce more cultural programs or cultural classes in regular schools now? Why not have more people from diverse, more teachers from diverse backgrounds teaching in the schools now that people from other backgrounds can relate to and say “Ok, well, oh this is a really smart Asian guy, like I look up to him. If he can do it I can do it” like you know what I mean? Like things to relate to I guess.

Regardless of whether youth supported the proposal, opposed the proposal, or were unable to decide where they stood—these mixed opinions did not impact their ability to identify the elements that should be included in the school. Each focus group offered different perspectives on what should be included in the school with the most common responses being: inclusive curricula, more black history, learn more about business and life teaching skills, and self-motivation. Motivation was a common topic surrounding the issue concerning what youth needed to succeed in school, next to having an inclusive curriculum, and learning more about black history. The overall tendency among the participants was to identify elements of the proposed school, discuss them positively but then suggest that they should be implemented in all of the schools.

Thus, we can see from the focus group participants’ narratives that they had conflicting opinions and concerns about the proposed black-focused school. Most of the participants did not think that the black-focused school proposal was a good idea, even though they agreed with several of the proposed elements for the school. Also, they had difficulty conceptualizing “black-focused schooling” as an alternative approach to mainstream schooling.

### **Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

In summary, there are three key findings evident within the data. First, the youth feared that they would be labelled “different” from other mainstream students if they attended this black-focused school and that other aspects of the proposed school would contribute to stigmatise them. Second, the youth also had trouble conceptualizing the proposed school as a functioning physical space that acted as an alternative approach to mainstream education. Third, the majority of the youth disagreed with the black-focused school idea, even though they agreed with several of the proposed elements of the school. We drew upon Corsaro’s concept of interpretive reproduction (2011, 1997) as a way of understanding and contextualizing youths’ resistance to the black-focused school proposal. Corsaro was particularly helpful in understanding how youths’ difficulty in understanding or visualizing the proposal as a functioning school could be conceptualized not as a lack of cognitive ability but rather as a difference between how youth understand and work within youth school cultures and adult school cultures in iterative ways to construct new understandings of their environments.

This difference between youth understandings of school and adult understandings of school is essential and one of the key contributions made by this study. Throughout the TDSB consultations, the various media accounts (see *Radical solutions for black students: Focused*

schools the answer, 2007; Osorio, 2007) portrayed the adult positions as being camp-based with those claiming the alternative school was another form of segregation in one camp and those arguing for the alternative school as a supportive educational environment for black youth in the other camp. Dei (1996) conceptualized the community responses to the proposal as being largely informed by each individual’s own values, beliefs, personal educational experiences, and assumptions about educational systems. What our data has clearly shown is that youth’s perspectives are very different from those of adults. For example, the youth in the study did not settle into opposing camps when discussing the alternative school. Instead, they were able to look at various aspects of the school and while they did discuss the possibility of segregation and the need for change throughout the system as a whole, they were able to see the need for an alternative school even if they would not choose to attend the school. Another striking difference between what was reflected in accounts of the TDSB consultations and our focus groups with youth was around safety and the alternative school. In the TDSB consultations, the alternative school was largely discussed as providing a safe environment for black youth whereas the youth in the focus groups questioned the safety of the school and identified current issues such as gang and intergroup conflicts that they believed may be heightened in an alternative school.

While to a certain degree the perspectives and concerns raised within the TDSB consultations and within our youth focus groups were similar, there were important and often striking differences. These differences in how adults and youth conceptualize schools and school environments provide essential information that can be applied during policy, planning and implementation stages of changes to any aspects of school environments. Thus, the opinions expressed by the youth demonstrate the importance of gaining youth perspectives when considering significant changes to learning environments.

What other lessons can be drawn by educational administrators and personnel? Clearly, it is important that the TDSB and proponents of the black-focused school start engaging the youth in examining their perspectives to see what the youth identify through a critical self-examination. As the youth had definite opinions about the proposal, TDSB administrators and personnel would benefit from discussing those opinions with the youth and would gain insights into potential issues with the implementation and marketing of the school. Given the level of confusion around whether the proposal would target elementary or secondary school, it is interesting that in 2009 the TDSB did opt to open a black-focused school at the elementary level which coincides with some of the youths’ opinions about starting earlier than the secondary level. It would also be beneficial for the TDSB to conduct more consultations with youth that involve the youth deconstructing their own perspectives and offered opportunities for TDSB personnel and youth to examine where adult school culture and youth school culture concepts are similar and where they are different. This research speaks to the larger context of educational administration and policy within Canada as it offers broader lessons than those associated with the TDSB.

The challenge of meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student body is placing significant demands and challenges on school systems throughout Canada and has many implications for educational administrators and policy-makers. As the level of diversity increases and additional alternative frameworks are considered, it will become increasingly important to conduct effective consultation with the various stakeholders. It is important to remember that alternative schools and frameworks may only be a temporary solution to addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. In addition, alternative schools may only serve the needs of a portion of the population and may not be the school of choice for all members of a target

population. Caution needs to be exercised to ensure that alternative schools are recognized as an option for some students and a temporary solution that does not eliminate the need for changes to the system of schools as a whole. Lessons that are learned through the implementation of alternative schools and the adaptation of provincial curriculum in those schools needs to be studied and evaluated for implementation opportunities throughout the school system. This study offers insights into one segment of the most under-represented stakeholder groups in educational consultations—current students and those youth that have recently attended educational institutions. Their insights underscore the importance of not only implementing alternative schools to offer more choice and a varied educational environment but also for considering broader system wide changes that address diversity in all schools throughout various boards of education.

Failing to consult youth about various educational changes can lead to problems with implementation and to unexpected complications, such as low enrollment or conflicts being played out in media or court. There have been key moments throughout educational history when adults have failed to accurately predict students’ responses to educational change. One such memorable example occurred when the Ontario Ministry of Education eliminated grade thirteen and reorganized elementary and secondary curriculum accordingly. There are also more common examples such as when school boards fail to accurately predict secondary school enrollment as school boundaries and admittance becomes more flexible at the secondary school level. These examples highlight the difficulty that individuals who understand educational realities through the lens of adult school culture have in predicting how youth will react to changes within their educational environments.

We provide one example of how consultation with youth can reveal differences in how school cultures and environments are understood and how the conversations within these consultations can lead to insights that could inform educational change and lead to smoother transitions during the implementation of alternative education strategies or other educational changes. As pointed out earlier, youth school cultures differ from adult norms and culture and therefore youths’ ideas about school functioning may differ significantly from those of adults, both theoretically and practically, while also being informed by and at times resistant of wider social and societal structures reproduced in school environments. However, Corsaro’s interpretive reproduction (2011, 1997) argues that children and youth act as social agents in iterative interactions with adults and other youth to create new understandings of their environments. Thus, there is a great advantage to be gained by consulting youth about educational change and alternative strategies as educational personnel and students could work together to examine how these proposed changes and strategies would impact adult school culture and youth school culture. Such consultations would lead to more insight on both sides and a more informed approach to educational changes and alternative approaches.

We want to acknowledge and show appreciation for the youth’s participation in this project. The youth’s responses have provided us with a greater understanding of their views, and opinions on the black-focused school proposal. We continue to believe that involving youth in discussions about possible policy implementations and strategies for their well-being is a very important component of decision-making processes, and of social relations in education. We respect and value their positions, as well as admire their ability to be truthful about their perspectives.



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## **Appendix**

### **Black-focused School Description**

Over the last twenty years this idea of having a black-focused school has come out as a way to improve how well black students do in school. The school hasn’t happened yet because the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has not approved the idea. The two main people behind the idea are George Dei who is a sociologist at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and Lloyd McKell, the TDSB’s equity boss

There have been mixed thoughts about this idea from the Toronto community and the media. Some people think this is a good idea. Some people think it’s a bad idea.

The main goal of the black-focused school is to meet students’ needs in an equal and equitable way. The school would have a new curriculum that is different from the mainstream curriculum, as it adds the black-lived experience to all parts of the curriculum. This would give more a connection between a student’s cultural way at home and school. Discipline would also be different as the school would not use suspensions or expulsions, and would not use law enforcement as a disciplinary method.

The school would be “black-focused,” but would be open for all students. Dei and McKell think that this school could be helpful for any students whose needs are not being met in the mainstream schools.