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AFROCENTRICISM: SITUATING THEORIES OF BLACKNESS IN
EDUCATION

By

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A Major Research Paper
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ABSTRACT

This major research paper will apply theories of postcolonialism with blackness and social spatiality to understand how social discourses on race are reproduced within an educational context. It will argue that the construction of racialized spaces within the school has negatively impacted upon the academic performance of black students. This necessitates a critical analysis of the Eurocentric and racist educational practices and policies that have affected black academic achievement. An exploration of an anti-racist and culturally inclusive Afrocentric curriculum will also be undertaken to determine if an alternative teaching program, which is rooted in African cultural perspectives, can adequately address the effects of internalized oppression. However, Afrocentricism should not be interpreted as a culturally homogenizing theory of practice. It should instead be conceived of as a strategic essentialism. Ultimately, the psychological resistance to anti black racism, provided by Afrocentricism, should be linked to political actions which address socio-economic inequalities.

Key words: Afrocentricism; Blackness; Strategic essentialism; Community; Black marginality

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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION:	1
LITERATURE REVIEW:	4
<i>Educational and Racial experiences of African Americans:</i>	4
<i>Racism within an Educational context:</i>	4 *
<i>The underrepresentation of black teachers:</i>	6
<i>Anti-racism Education:</i>	6 ✓
<i>Curricular omissions and misrepresentations:</i>	9 ✓
<i>Safe School's Act: A zero tolerance policy</i>	9 †
<i>Eurocentricism: A social and historical construction of race</i>	14 ✓
<i>Whiteness and White privilege:</i>	15
<i>Afrocentricism: An anti-racist and anti-colonial discourse</i>	17
<i>Afrocentricism and Multiculturalism:</i>	18
THEORETICAL APPROACH:	19
<i>Postcolonialism:</i>	19
<i>Blackness:</i>	23
<i>Social spatial theory:</i>	27
METHODOLOGY:	30
THE LIMITATIONS OF THEORY:	36
<i>Postcolonialism:</i>	36
<i>Rethinking Blackness:</i>	37
FINDINGS:	38
<i>Afrocentricism: a strategic essentialism</i>	38
<i>Communities of Practice and black solidarity:</i>	44
<i>Addressing socio-economic marginalization:</i>	53
Systemic Discrimination: Labor market practices	53
Employment Equity:	56
Social Assistance:	58
Housing Policy:	60
Income Security and National Housing Policy:	61
Universal Child Care:	62
CONCLUSION:	64
REFERENCES:	67

Introduction:

A number of studies conducted on the academic performance of racial minorities have concluded that Toronto public schools fail to create an inclusive non-discriminatory environment that accurately represents the multicultural and multiracial identities of our diverse Canadian society (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1994; Dei, 1996/1997; Dei, et al., 2000; Dei, 1996; Dei, 2008; Henry & Tator, 2006). These studies have shown that the school curriculum tends to exclude, and at times, misrepresent the cultural identities, histories and contributions of minorities; white teachers have also been identified as having internalized stereotypical racist discourses that emphasize the athletic abilities and intellectual deficiencies of blacks; and there are also few black teachers who can act as positive role models for students (Codjoe, 2001; King, 1993).

Anti-black racism is therefore the consequence of attending schools which are largely populated by white teachers who have low expectations of the academic performance of blacks. When such racist perceptions of racialized students are coupled with a Eurocentric curriculum, which neglects to present a recognizable study program that reflects the histories, experiences or identities of black students, then students either lose interest in their education or they internalize the dominant groups' perception of their intellectual capacities (Shelby, 2005; Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 2008). The result, in either case, is a 40% high school drop out rate for black students.

Yet, I find it particularly interesting that my own personal experiences, as a black student, do not reflect the above findings. Granted, the public school curriculum, as I remember it, was undoubtedly Eurocentric and it was therefore not representative of the cultural diversity of Toronto. However, I would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to

identify individual experiences of racism and stereotyping from my former teachers. I, unlike most black students, was fortunate enough to be surrounded by instructors who were very encouraging and supportive of all my academic aspirations. But, my experiences can not be interpreted as being representative of the black student population, hence my interest in exploring the inequitable schooling practices that affect the majority of this identified population.

While the experiences with my former teachers cannot provide me with firsthand knowledge of racism, which I can use to personally contextualize my study on the discriminatory educational practices of Toronto public schools, the same cannot be said of the relationships with my former peers and classmates. Thus, what I do recall most, about my public school experiences, was that students, as opposed to teachers, were more likely to racially categorize and stereotype blacks. In fact, I was made aware on many occasions that in being attentive to my academic studies, I was somehow contradicting their understanding of black student academic achievement. What was even more difficult for me to observe was the ridicule which other black students were subjected to because they did not embody what was widely assumed and, reinforced by media representations, as the dominant expression of blackness. The bullying that some of these black students were subjected to forced them to adjust their behavior. They began to conduct themselves in a manner which reflected, and reproduced, what they perceived to be, and what was also socially constructed as, a valid or genuine representation of blackness (Foster, 2007; Henry & Tator, 2006). And, while I have always been critical of internalized oppression because it assumes a lack of individual agency, I do

acknowledge, mostly because of my experiences, that it is very relevant in understanding black students' underachievement.

Thus, despite the fact that my experiences do not completely reflect the literature's conclusions regarding the racist educational practices which contribute to the underperformance of black students, this major research paper will seek to analyze how dominant conceptions of blackness have been reproduced in the classroom and internalized by both black students and their teachers (Foster, 2007). I will therefore apply theories of social spatiality, blackness and postcolonialism, to argue that the identities of black students have been reconstituted by colonial discourses which as Mckittrick argues continue to impose "colonial geographies" (Mckittrick & Peake, 2005, p 40) upon racialized bodies (Gandhi, 1998; Mcleod, 2000; Said, 1995).

I will also be exploring whether Afrocentric schools can adopt and implement an inclusive, culturally appropriate and anti-racist curriculum which represents a decolonized interpretation of the histories and cultural identities of black students (Asante, 1998; Dei, 2008). However, while institutional racism and social economic disadvantage is similarly experienced by black minorities, this major research paper does acknowledge that the black community should not be culturally essentialized when considering the adoption of a black focused school. Afrocentricism should therefore be attentive to the fact that blacks may have different interpretations of what constitutes a black culture. In short, members of the black community should be able to identify with blackness differently (Shelby, 2005; Dei, 2008). In addition to exploring equitable educational practices, I will also examine policies and practices aimed at eliminating

structural inequalities that have contributed to the social and economic marginalization of blacks within our society.

Literature Review:

Educational and Racial experiences of African Americans:

It has been well documented that black students and other racial minorities continue to perform poorly in their academic studies when compared to their white racial counterparts (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1994; Dei, 1996/1997; Dei, 2008; Gordon, 1993). A study conducted in the early 1990s by the Toronto Board of Education concluded that not only were blacks underachieving but they were also disproportionately overrepresented in high school drop out rates. This 1994 report revealed that black students had a 44% graduation rate with a drop out rate of 42%. On the other hand, white students had a 59% graduation rate and a 31% drop out rate. A more recent study conducted in 2003 also reported similar findings. It showed that by the 10th grade black students originating from West or East Africa and the Caribbean had rarely acquired the mandatory credits that would allow them to graduate from high school (Dei, 2008).

Therefore, various studies have been undertaken to account for the underachievement of black students within the education system. Systemic racism, a lack of black teachers as role models and the absence of curriculum materials that represent African Americans' history and contributions have all been identified as contributing to the poor academic performance of black students (Dei, 2008).

Racism within an Educational context:

Racism, which is the differential treatment of racial groups that have been attributed with an inferior biological identity, has had a significant impact on the

education of black students (Miles, 2003). Teachers have therefore been implicated in reproducing and imposing socially constructed racist discourses upon black students. This is accomplished through their internalization of the dominant groups' perception of blacks as intellectually inferior (Codjoe, 2001).

Henry Codjoe's qualitative study documenting the racialized experiences of black students demonstrates how stereotypical and racist discourses have affected students of color. One student revealed that she was discouraged from pursuing a career in medicine because her teacher remarked that, as a black student, he didn't believe she was capable of obtaining the necessary grades required to successfully complete medical school. Other students also shared that their teachers displayed surprise and skepticism when they submitted assignments which were too "exceptional". Thus, when black students performed well, they were more likely to be accused of cheating (Codjoe, 2001).

Another concern that was raised was that teachers often encouraged their black students to focus on their "natural" athletic and musical talents as opposed to scholarly study (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1996/1997). When blacks are constantly advised to gravitate towards sports, which show case their "natural ability," (Codjoe, 2001, p364) their understanding of what they can academically or professionally aspire to become is limited (Asante, 1998). Thus, what has been internalized by students, in regards to their intellectual abilities, is significantly influenced by the feedback they receive from their instructors. This makes the psychological impact of racism central to discussions about the poor academic performance of black students. The dominant stereotype about blacks, which only emphasizes their athletic abilities or intellectual deficiencies, has undermined the development of black self-esteem (Codjoe, 2001).

The underrepresentation of black teachers:

Racism and the internalization of racist perceptions of blacks do not, independently, explain the high drop out rates and underperformance of this racial group. The low representation of black teachers in the schools has also been identified by researchers and students as having a significant impact on their academic performance. As argued by King (1992), increasing the representativeness of African American teachers can possibly ensure that the academic and professional aspirations of black students will be supported and encouraged. It can also be assumed that students will be better able to connect with teachers who have some familiarity with their culture, history, and experiences (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1996/1997). Furthermore, African American teachers are less likely to impose racist stereotypes on black students because of their poor or exceptional academic performance. They would instead introduce an anti-racist educational perspective which, rather than undermining a students' self-esteem, actually builds and supports their individual sense of identity (Dei, 2008).

Anti-racism Education:

Since the critical engagement with the historical and social construction of race has often been neglected in the classroom, an anti-racism education should be committed to identifying, analysing and responding to the dominant discourse on race (Dei, 1996). Thus, problematizing the continued differentiation and categorization of individuals into distinct races which are defined by biological and genetic characteristics is integral to anti-racist education. This would enable students to understand that the unequal treatment of racialized groups relies upon the emphasis that is placed on how they differ from a preferred racial or cultural norm. Differential treatment is therefore justified by

associating blackness with negative cultural and racial evaluations. But given the fact that the existence of race has been scientifically disproven, the above analysis would make it possible for racialized students to understand how dominant groups within our society are implicated in perpetuating the discourse of race and the images and representation that they are associated with (Miles, 2004; Foster, 2007; Henry & Tator, 2006). This is how Eurocentric conceptualizations of race, history and culture have contributed to the intended or unintended marginalization and racist treatment of black students (Asante, 1993; Fanon, 1968).

Deconstructing white privilege is therefore another important aspect of anti-racism education. This critique emphasizes that racialized discourses persist because they have been institutionalized within educational practices that advantage the white, male heterosexual groups in our society (McIntosh, 1990). But as identified by the acknowledgement that dominant groups shape racist and exclusionary institutional cultural practices, a critical engagement with race must consider the fact that black students also inhabit marginalized sexual and gendered social identities (Bonnett, 2000; Miles, 2004;). Thus, their experiences of discrimination are complex and varied. This would mean that addressing one form of racial oppression, within an educational context, without attending to the social, economic and political marginalization of women and sexual minorities would be a partial and inequitable response to the discrimination that black students are subjected to (Dei, 1996; Shelby, 2005). Since the main goal of anti-racism education is to eliminate racism and discriminatory treatment, it must seek to do so by recognizing how the multiple identities that students embody are represented or misrepresented within our society (Dei, 1996).

Thus, identities and how they are portrayed is of significant importance to anti-racist education. Teachers therefore need to recognize how black identities are constituted by dominant representations of blackness. Students should be understood as constructing and embodying identities which are externally imposed through media, schooling practices and other social and racialized discourses that their teachers have internalized. These representations provide a means for black students to understand themselves as a cultural and racial group. But since these images of blackness negatively portray black identity, minority students tend to find themselves internalizing, what is in actuality, a distorted sense of their identity. They come to know themselves through how they are perceived from a racist and Eurocentric perspective (Miles, 2004; Henry & Tator, 2006). Their understanding of blackness is further complicated when they have an internal perception of their identity which contradicts what is known about blacks in mainstream society. The attempt to reconcile and make sense of these internal and external constructions of blackness can potentially create a fragmented or incomplete perception of one's identity. This is because black students are not provided a full and unprejudiced account of what it means to be black. Instead, a Eurocentric school culture disassociates black students from their African histories, systems of knowledge, cultural perspectives and scientific of literary contributions to Canadian society (Dei, 1996/1997; Hall, 1990).

The fact that blacks students are not exposed to positive and anti-racist cultural and historical representations of blackness, significantly effects how they view themselves and their intellectual capacities. This has contributed to the alarming drop out rates of black students whose self-esteem is undermined by a curriculum and a faculty that reinforces their marginality and inferiority (Codjoe, 2001; Dei et al, 2000).

Therefore, the main objective of an anti-racist education would be to reverse the effects of being subjected to racist images of the lazy, unintellectual, violent and criminally predisposed black subject. This is achieved by first acknowledging that what is known about blackness is socially and historically constructed. Once it is understood that race, and what it has come to signify, is actually a human invention, black students can then undertake the task of relearning what has been excluded and misrepresented about their histories, cultures and identities (Dei, 1996; Dei, 2008).

Curricular omissions and misrepresentations:

Dei (2008) contends that if teachers can instruct students from an educational perspective that is culturally inclusive of the histories and experiences of blacks and Africans, thus making the learning process recognizable and relatable, this would help to engage the academic interests of students by constructing a less fragmented sense of self. Unfortunately, the present education curriculum has the opposite effect. It does not adequately reflect black students' perspectives and when it does, the curriculum tends to reproduce Eurocentric perceptions of black identities and histories (Asante, 1998; Dei, 1996/1997; Swartz, 1993). These only serve to reinforce the marginal status of blacks, while disregarding and misrepresenting their histories, worldviews and contributions. Being unable to find themselves positively reflected in what is established as historical knowledge, black students' feelings of marginalization are intensified. They eventually begin to question the relevance of schooling, which consequentially affects their engagement and interest in education (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1996/1997, Dei, 2008).

Safe School's Act: A zero tolerance policy

The Safe Schools Act, which was introduced by the Ontario provincial Government in September of 2001, specifically outlines the appropriate disciplinary measures that can be issued by teachers and principals in the pursuit of school safety. Teachers have therefore been granted the authority to suspend students for one school day, while the maximum period of expulsion which can be imposed by school principals is one year (Peiters, 2003).

According to an article, "Disproportionate impact", written by Peiters (2003), black male students appear to be singled out by this new zero tolerance policy that has been adopted by the Safe Schools Act. The Ontario Human Rights Commission also confirms that black students are overrepresented in the number of disciplinary measures that have resulted in a suspension or expulsion. However, it should be noted that these racist disciplinary school practices are not just reflective of a specific and separate discriminatory school culture. (They instead reveal how racialized ideologies are reproduced and embedded within institutional practices (Dei, 1996; Henry & Tator).)

Thus, a zero tolerance policy much like the Safe Schools Act that has been adopted by the Toronto District School Board and the disproportionate impact that it has had on racialized groups needs to be situated within the appropriate historical, social and criminological context. This would acknowledge that the general public, policy makers, school boards, administrators and teachers have all been influenced by the dominant discourse on crime (Jull, 2000). They have consequently adopted the widely accepted notion that the perpetration of crime amongst youth is increasing. While statistics on youth crime actually demonstrate that, since 1991, the overall youth crime rates in 2006 have actually decreased by 25%, significant increases in violent crimes have led to

contradictory conclusions about the extent of youth involvement in criminal activity. In fact, only one in ten youth perpetrated crimes were reported to have occurred on school property. Twenty seven percent of these were assaults; eighteen percent were drug related; seven percent concerned weapon offences and the possession or use of a hand gun was reported in less than one percent of these cases (Taylor-Butts & Bressan, 2006). However, media portrayals of youth crime have continued to emphasize a marked increase in school violence and a growing fear about the safety of students. This has consequently influenced how youth, especially black youth, are policed in their communities and on school property (Loader & Sparks, 2007).

Since blacks have been socially constructed as being more predisposed to criminality and social deviance they tend to be monitored and surveilled more often than their racial counterparts (Loader & Sparks, 2007; Philips & Bowling, 2007). This process of racialization which criminalizes blacks has resulted in the discriminatory application of the Safe School's Act. This act is prejudiced towards black students because it ignores the fact that what constitutes disruptive or aggressive behavior has been socially constructed from a male white heterosexual perspective. Instead of conceding that there are various socially aggressive acts, some of which are condoned and others which are prohibited, within our Eurocentric society, the Safe schools Act asserts the notion that what it defines as aggressive or violent behavior should be the universally accepted norm. Thus, what the Safe Schools Act has determined as inappropriate or threatening behavior neglects to include the multiple and varied perspectives regarding what kind of conduct ought to be sanctioned (Jull, 2003).

Granted, in certain cases, the physical or verbal assault of a student or teacher cannot be misconstrued as appropriate behavior. But there are circumstances when the actions of students who are unable to emulate the behaviors that have been deemed socially or culturally appropriate are classified as acting in a manner which threatens the safety of students and teachers. In fact, black students have often been suspended or expelled from school for challenging the rigidly hierarchical structure of schooling (Jull, 2000; Peiters, 2000; Peiters, 2003). Their unwillingness to conform to the expected behavioral norms has been interpreted as aggression and this behavior has consequently been criminalized. This outcome is made possible because of how our society has associated blackness with violence and criminality (Philips and Bowling, 2007). Thus, black students who fail to conduct themselves in a manner which has been deemed socially permissible have been disproportionately affected by zero tolerance policies that rely upon racialized perceptions of the behaviors which constitute a threat to the safety of students and teachers (Jull, 2000).

The zero tolerance of behavior that creates an unsafe school environment raises two further concerns. First, it adopts the notion that treating all students similarly, regardless of their race, class, gender or sexuality is consistent with an anti-discriminatory application of school policies. Therefore, according to school administrators, one's social location should have no bearing on how they are disciplined for contravening the Safe Schools Act. This is how the equal treatment of all students can be guaranteed (Jull, 2000; Peiters, 2000; Peiters, 2003).

However, the adherence to a "difference blindness" (Abu-Laban, 2002, p.462) principle of equality fails to acknowledge the inherent cultural and racial dominance of

particular groups (May, 1999). At times it may be necessary to treat individuals differently, especially those who have been historically discriminated against, in order to ensure true equality. In such situations it is believed, as stated by Jull (2000) that “Equal treatment is not a precondition of equality”. Since our society is stratified by class, race, gender and sexuality, the students who occupy these multiple and at times overlapping and oppressive social locations experience and interact with their world differently. To disregard these differences and how they impact on the behaviors of students perpetuates social inequalities (Henry & Tator, 2006; Jull, 2000).

The second concern that can be raised about the Safe Schools Act has to do with it's preoccupation with punishment as opposed to remediation. Zero tolerance policies, as argued by Peiters (2003), are not interested in introducing remedial programs for what they describe as aggressive or violent students. School administrators would instead prefer to punish students by removing them from the learning environment. This response is reflective of how our society has chosen to address violent criminal behavior. Like our penal policies which are no longer concerned, as they once were, with a psychosocial reintegration model that attempts to rehabilitate dangerous offenders, so too have Toronto schools dismissed the benefits of introducing remedial programs in the school (Jull, 2000; Loader & Sparks, 2007; Peiters, 2003).

Thus, the Safe Schools Act has implemented school disciplinary practices which discriminate against black students. Its zero tolerance policy disproportionately affects racialized students whose behaviors are classified as aggressive and therefore threatening to school safety. This policy has consequently had an impact on the education opportunities of blacks who are overrepresented in suspensions and expulsions from

school. This racist mistreatment has influenced how they choose to engage with a Eurocentric education system (Dei, 2008; Peiters, 2003).

Eurocentricism: A social and historical construction of race

The racialization of black students is legitimated by Eurocentric discourses on blackness which have been reproduced within educational practices (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 2008). Thus, to argue that the school environment is Eurocentric, is to refer to “an ideology or body of myths, symbols, ideas, and practices that exclusively and predominately values the worldview, and cultural manifestations (e.g. history, art, politics, language, music, literature, technology, economics etc..) of people of European origin, and that denigrates and subordinates the cultural manifestations of people from all other lands of origin” (Swartz, 1993, p.342).

Recognizing the importance of how Eurocentric discourses are implicated in the social and historical construction of “other” social groups acknowledges that colonial narratives have had a lasting and detrimental influence on societal relations. Thus, Philips and Bowling (2007) argue that central to the discourses which justified slavery, and colonialism, was the notion that civilization and reason were attributes which were assumed to be innately possessed by white Europeans. In contrast, racial groups with different phenotypes were constructed within everyday discourse as savages, but always in reference to an ideal European archetype (Smedley, 2007). As eloquently put by Audrey Smedley, such an epistemological point of view which the English used to justify Irish occupation claimed that the savage was:

... lazy, filthy, evil, superstitious and an idol worshipper and was given to lying, stealing, treachery, murder and double dealing. His nomadic

tendencies and presumed lack of social order or laws were the antithesis of the habits of civilized man who was sedentary and bound not only to land but also to other men by laws (Smedley, 2007, p.39)

Smedley (2007) argues that this discourse of the “savage” was adopted to legitimate the differential treatment of non white racial groups or “other” white ethnic groups that were deemed inferior. This socially produced knowledge has become embedded within institutional practices. However, black students are not referred to as savages within our contemporary society. But the colonial construction of the savage informs the negative stereotypes which are attributed to blacks (Smedley, 2007). This Eurocentric epistemology continues to manifest itself through strategies of whiteness.

Whiteness and White privilege:

“Whiteness” (Yee, 2005, p 89) is a social system which shapes organizational and institutional cultures so that they reflect the social, cultural, economic and political values of authoritatively situated groups (Nelson, 2009). To better explain this concept, Yee (2004) argues that whiteness sustains itself through “exnomination”: discourses which construct an invisible white category that racializes “other” minority groups, “naturalization”: the use of this white group as a hierarchically constructed comparative category that determines deviance or otherness and “universalization”: the general acceptance and imposition of a European or white interpretation of social reality upon “other” individuals. Thus, the poor educational achievement of minority groups when compared to their racial counterparts is not to be interpreted as a difference in their

intellectual capacities. It is instead indicative of how "whiteness" is perpetuated within the institutional practices of our public schools.

These "strategies of whiteness" (Yee, 2005, p. 89) disadvantage and discriminate against minorities because they are embedded within colonial discourses which have historically, and contemporarily, portrayed difference or race as being indicative of an assumed, cultural, biological or moral inferiority (Phillips & Bowling, 2007, p.423). This is consistent with Stuart Hall's assertion that, the manner in which individuals or groups are represented or "known" (Hall, 1992, p.58), allows them to be contained within the restrictions of this socially constructed idea of race and the "meaning or signification" (Saloojee, 2005, p.183-184) that is ascribed to racial differences. Racialization is thus the process which facilitates the association of negative or positive attributes to those belonging to a *different* race (Saloojee, 2005).

The following observations made by Peggy McIntosh effectively demonstrate how whiteness and white privilege have become entrenched within institutional practices.

1. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is
2. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
3. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
4. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, out numbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared. (McIntosh, 1990, p.32-34)

Thus, a critical engagement with Eurocentric discourses must seek to identify and unsettle the historical and social construction of racialized identities, the meanings which have been ascribed to differences and the social practices which reinforce racism and institutionalize white privilege (Giroux, 2000). This critical analysis recognizes that the black subject has been re-presented within a stereotypical and racist discourse. Black students have often consequently interpreted and internalized these colonial discourses of inferiority in a manner which deprive them of more accurate perceptions of who they are and what they can aspire to become, academically or professionally. The education system instead continues to reflect and privilege white, male, heterosexual identities which are representative of the dominant groups within our society (McIntosh, 1990; Yee, 2005). Transforming the current educational environment, to ensure that marginalized groups are represented and treated equally is therefore necessary (Asante, 1998; Dei, 2008).

Afrocentricism: An anti-racist and anti-colonial discourse

Afrocentric theory challenges the universalism of Eurocentric epistemologies by proposing that there are alternative yet equally legitimate ways of knowing and interpreting the world around us (Schlesinger, 1992). It presents an oppositional ideological framework which is philosophically grounded in African values of community. This black standpoint reconstructs the meaning of blackness from an African perspective (Dei, 1994). Knowledge, about blacks, which has been socially constructed from a Eurocentric standpoint, is therefore contested. Afrocentricism instead focuses on familiarizing black students with African cultural traditions and the histories, worldviews and contributions of blacks (Asante, 1998; Dei, 1994; Schlesinger, 1992). This

knowledge can potentially transform how racialized students have constructed an understanding of their intellectual capacities and professional or academic aspirations (Gordon, 1993). The school, thus, becomes a space for contesting established knowledge frameworks (Jhally, 1997).

Afrocentricism and Multiculturalism:

Because Afrocentricism strives to be an anti-racist and culturally accommodative ideological framework, it has been alluded to as a “left-essentialist multiculturalism” (May, 1999, p.21). However, some concerns should be considered when adopting this descriptive phrase.

The policy of multiculturalism theoretically attempts to address the concern that schools, universities, workplaces, and other societal institutions, are inclined to reproduce hegemonic, representations of minority ethnic groups, which results in their social, economic and political exclusion (May, 1999). This policy therefore strives to be attentive to the needs of marginalized and excluded groups. But multiculturalism in practice has not been successful in facilitating the full integration of minorities (Bannerji, 2000).

The continued social and economic exclusion of minority ethnic groups reveals the limitations and inability for the state to be responsive to the systemic perpetuation of racism within Canadian society (Nesbitt-Larkin, 2008). By fixating on how Canadians can be accommodative of diverse cultural groups, multiculturalism, as it has been implemented to date, neglects to challenge or adequately interrogate dominant discourses on race, gender, sexuality or class (Bannerji, 2000). It has, however, managed to encourage and support the cultural expression of diversity within various Canadian

institutions. But this only serves to obscure the reality that we, as Canadians, continue to live in a racially, gendered and heterosexually stratified society. Emphasis on the preservation of culture therefore ignores the socio-economic inequalities experienced by minority groups who are unable to identify with the white, male, heterosexual group (Bannerji, 2000 p 31) Thus, Richard Day contends that the policy of multiculturalism “does not recognize the value or equality of ‘communities’ rather it merely recognizes their ‘existence’ (Day, 2000: 198).

Afrocentricism, on the other hand, critically analyzes and deconstructs colonial discourses and how they have been reproduced and entrenched within racist institutional practices (Asante, 1998). It specifically provides a way of speaking, thinking and engaging with Eurocentric discourses which challenges racist conceptualizations of black histories and identities. This means that Afrocentricism is a theoretical framework that is concerned with naming whiteness and how this discourse perpetuates institutional racism (Dei, 2008; Yee, 2005). And while this might be accomplished through the identification and promotion of a historical and essentialist black cultural identity, Afrocentricism relies upon the reclamation of this African essence for purposes other than the cultural accommodation of immigrants. It adopts an African cultural essence in order to strategically subvert dominant constructions of blackness that have contributed to black marginality (Asante, 1998, Dei, 1996/1997; Dei, 2008).

Theoretical Approach:

Postcolonialism:

Postcolonial theory is academically committed to analyzing how socially constructed knowledge about marginalized groups continues to be shaped by the

discourses of colonialism. It is concerned with identifying, and addressing, European colonial processes which are being reproduced, internalized and used to structure social relations within our society. Thus, even though colonialism has ended, postcolonial theory acknowledges that the widely accepted beliefs and attitudes of the colonial era still remain. This is confirmed by the fact that the historical period when European powers established colonies in foreign territories, instituted forms of governance over native occupants and sought the extraction of economic resources no longer exists. However, socially produced knowledge, or discourses, which justified the subjugation and inferiority of colonized groups have not been so readily discarded (Gandhi, 1998; Healy, 2005; Mcleod, 2000). Our postcolonial society must still contend with colonial attitudes that have become entrenched within racist institutional practices. This is reflected in Memmi's assertion that postcolonialism is "a historical condition marked by the visible apparatus of freedom and the concealed persistence of unfreedom" (Gandhi, 1998, pp 6-7). He understands that a distinct colonial mindset still remains, which psychologically and materially organizes the social relations between racial groups that were constructed within colonial discourse as civilized and uncivilized (Gandhi, 1998).

Thus, postcolonialism must critically engage with how colonial discourse operates. Using Foucault, Stuart Hall argues that discourse is how we as a society structure and represent the world around us and those within it, in order to logically construct an understanding of what we observe and experience (Hall, 1992; Mcleod, 2000). But in order to create an intelligible interpretation of the world, individuals must also be able to identify and eliminate systems of knowledge which create internal inconsistencies. This means that discourses attempt to invalidate other forms of

knowledge that can potentially disrupt a preferred social construction of reality. In doing so, they marginalize certain worldviews or perspectives in favor of a specific way of knowing and representing the world. Thus, power is exercised when it is assumed that what is represented in a discourse about race, gender or sexuality is not only valid but it is also universal and unchangeable (Jhally, 1997).

Power, however, is not only implicated in the representation, or misrepresentation of a minority group identity, for example, as found within colonial discourse; it is also evident in the ability to make “others” perceive themselves as different and inferior (Hall, 1990; Hall, 1992; Mcleod, 2000). When colonized groups are able to think and conduct themselves in such a manner, which internalizes their subordinate status, while elevating Eurocentric beliefs and attitudes, then they have effectively been psychologically and culturally subjugated. Not only do they come to accept a colonially constructed cultural and racial inferiority but the internalization of such racist attitudes also legitimizes the dominant groups’ will to dominate and to treat racially distinct groups differentially (Mcleod, 2000).

According to Edward Said (1995), an influential postcolonial literary critic, understanding how discourse operates and structures social relations demonstrates to us how the occident was able to represent those inhabiting the East, otherwise known as the Orient, within colonial discourses that emphasized their foreignness and subordinate position in relation to the West. However, such representations are not objective truth claims about the orient (Mcleod, 2000; Said, 1995).

Those who accumulated “knowledge” about the Orient did so from a specific subject position, including one that influenced the comparisons made and conclusions

which were arrived at. Thus, orientalists constructed images of the other by simultaneously representing themselves as being inherently different from the orient. The West was therefore 'known' as an intellectually, culturally and scientifically advanced civilization because it represented itself as being superior to the 'other' who was different, barbaric and sexually deviant. This point of reference justified its imperial and colonial imperatives (Gandhi, 1998; Mcleod, 2000; Said, 1995). Much of the same logic of colonial discourse emphasized in Edward Said's book on Orientalism still operates today in structuring relationships between those who are representative of the preferred norm and others who deviate from the norm (Said, 1995).

Postcolonial theory is consequently tasked with unmasking European colonial relations for the purpose of understanding how present socially constructed identities and related socio-economic inequalities are rooted in a specific history of colonization (Gandhi, 1998; Healy, 2005; Mcleod, 2000). Knowledge, of the historical roots of oppression, can then be used to challenge and discontinue the psychologically embodied roles of colonizer and colonized, so that racialized and non-racialized groups can adopt different and anti-essentialist ways of thinking, perceiving and knowing one another and themselves (Gandhi, 1998).

While the attempt by subjugated groups to generate and embody new forms of knowledge is about de-essentializing what is known about minorities, marginalized groups may need to embrace a single shared identity, or essence, in order to resist and challenge oppressive social practices (Bonnett, 2000; Miles, 2003). Spivak understood this to be a "strategic essentialism" (Bonnett, 2000, p.136). She argued that individuals strategically embrace an essentialized identity with the full knowledge that it is a social

These construct. But despite how contrived or manufactured such racial, sexual or gendered identities may be, they are adopted because of how they can describe and resist discriminatory and oppressive practices which are experienced by marginalized groups. It would otherwise be very difficult to politically mobilize against discourses of racism, sexism, or heterosexism, without being able to identify and claim for oneself that cultural essence or identity which has been used to single out a particular group as different or abnormal and therefore deserving of differential treatment (Asante, 1998; Bonnett, 2000; Mcleod, 2000; Rutherford, 1990).

Blackness:

Blackness refers to a historically constructed identity which collectively racializes those who can lay claim to an African ancestry (Foster, 2007). It is the invention of what it means to be black, whereby the definition of blackness is assigned to all members of the black population as an inherently inferior biological identity. However, it is necessary to differentiate between a definition of blackness which is imposed upon the black community and one that is claimed and embraced as a more affirmative black cultural identity (Foster, 2007; Miles, 2003; Pugh, 1972). The former portrays blacks historically, and contemporarily, within our society as criminally deviant, idle, un-intellectual and primitive, while the latter rearticulates this socially constructed image in order to challenge racist stereotypes and socio-economic inequalities (Asante, 1998; Foster, 2007).

To identify the necessity of reinventing the meaning of blackness is to recognize that negative attributes have been constructed and associated to Africans by European colonial practices (Foster, 2007; Rutherford, 1990). Thus, blacks have not willingly

chosen to position themselves within this inferior category (personal communication, May 28, 2010). A negative black essence has instead been ascribed to this group by a comparatively superior white “race”, hence Fanon’s claim that “what is often called the black soul is a white man’s artifact” (Fanon, 1968, p14). In making this statement, Fanon was attempting to demonstrate that racial discrimination, against black Africans, generally resulted from how they were perceived by white Europeans and the significance that was attributed to any observable racial differences. In other words, there was, and still remains, no anonymity where the black subject is concerned; instead, one’s identity could be assumed by one’s race and biologically and socially defined by white Europeans (Bonnett, 2000; Miles, 2003).

Such an understanding of blackness relies upon the continued categorization of individuals into different “races” based on skin color, the size of one’s nose and lips, hair texture, and any other physical characteristics that can be used to distinguish one ethnicity from another. Once the idea that races do exist and individuals can be categorized based on such observable physical differences became an accepted reality, the assumption that one’s character or conduct, may be biologically determined by their identification with a particular racial group could also be adopted (Bonnett, 2000; Foster, 2007; Miles, 2003). While the scientific validation of race has been proven to be unfounded, the color of one’s skin has remained indicative of a black person’s psychological and behavioral makeup (Bonnett, 2000; Fanon, 1968; Foster, 2007; Miles, 2003). Not only has such knowledge been used to determine how blacks were expected to think or act, it has also influenced how blacks would construct an understanding of their identities from a European standpoint.

Dubois referred to the existence of a double consciousness in "The Souls of Black Folk", to explain how blacks attained knowledge of their history and identities through an external white gaze (Du Bois, 2003). The white gaze informed blacks of their difference and inferiority. But at the same time, blacks were aware that such perceptions provided a distorted representation of their own sense of self. Identity was thus consciously inhabited through an external negative perception of one's blackness from a white vantage point and an internal knowledge of the self, therefore creating a double awareness of one's identity (Du Bois, 2003; Fanon, 1968; Hall, 1990; Mcleod, 2000). This psychological experience of blackness has also been coupled with social practices which reinforce black marginality.

Thus, it should also be acknowledged that the dominant construction of blackness happens to be socially and economically imposed upon blacks, as evidenced in the racist treatment that they encounter within various aspects of their lives. This is essentially how racism, which is the unequal treatment of individuals because of their assumed inherent and inferior biological identity, as implied by their inclusion within a particular racial category, is experienced (Miles, 2003).

Opposing the socio-economic inequalities which rely upon racialized discourses of blackness requires a full psychological restructuring of what is known about blackness for both dominant and subordinate groups (Asante, 1993; Dei, 1994). Thus, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aime Cesaire, two black French scholars and writers living in Paris during the 1930s, believed that embracing African cultural and spiritual traditions would have a significant impact on resisting racist colonial constructs of blackness and the socio-economic inequalities that had been established from such racialized discourses.

This appeal to African culture was about finding and claiming the true historical and ideological meaning of blackness (Senghor, 1994).

For both Leopold Senghor and fellow writer Aime Cesaire, blackness, or negritude as it came to be understood from an African standpoint, differed from how it was known by European colonizers (Senghor, 1994). African culture, which is the “image of the behaviors, beliefs, values and norms...that characterize one’s group” (Barkhuizen & Klerk, 2006, p.285) as being from the African continent, was, from their standpoint, a more liberatory conception of the world, and one which allowed blacks to find pride in their own histories and identities. Thus, blacks were indeed understood to be different from whites, in their characters, world views and the manner in which they lived and related to one another. But, for negritude scholars, this difference did not legitimate their subordinate position, as a primitive, culturally and scientifically static society that was incapable of exercising European faculties of reason. The black reinterpretation of the discourse of blackness actually contradicted such claims. It asserts that Africans had their own way of perceiving and living in this world, a way of life that was centered on a sense of community, which has also contributed to human history, thus making blacks not inferior but equal in thought and accomplishments to their white counterparts (Asante, 1998; Foster, 2007; Senghor, 1994).

Claiming a black identity which subverts socially constructed notions of blackness is also reflected in Afrocentric literature, which recognizes that black students ought to immerse themselves in an anti-colonial discourse of “africaness” in which “the self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a

blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny”(Dei, 1994, p.4).

From this quote it can be assumed that once the dominant, racialized discourse of blackness is no longer accepted, or legitimated, but is replaced, within the minority and majority groups’ consciousness, with a different way of knowing the world and those within it, then the material realities that affect those who are assumed to have an inferior black essence would be eliminated (Asante, 1998; Dei, 1994; Senghor, 1994).

Social spatial theory:

Social spatial theory engages with the manner in which spaces reproduce social discourses and how such discourses are also implicated in the formation of spaces (Razack, 2007). It is about the “spatial expression” (Delaney, 2002, p.7) of how our society has come to understand and represent the world around us, through discourse. This means that what occurs within the various spaces that we occupy generally reflects what certain groups know about the bodies occupying that space and the function of a specific environment.

However, what spatially occurs within particular institutions is not merely a reproduction of societal relations as they are constructed through discourse, although this can arguably take place. Sundstrom (2003) and Delaney (2002) also argue that there is a far more dialectical relationship between discourse and space, which makes the social and the spatial dependent upon each other for articulation. Thus, discourse, and what it represents, is not just recreated within a given space; the significance of such representations is derived from how they are interpreted and attributed with meaning through space. Delaney (2002) therefore contends that: “race—in all of its complexity and ambiguity, as ideology and identity—is what it is and does what it does precisely

because of *how* it is given spatial expression. (p.7)” This assertion could be expanded to include the notion that, socially constructed discourses about race, class, gender or sexuality, and their material consequences, come to mean what they do through space. Space is therefore necessary in the perpetuation of social discourses. And it can also be argued that social discourses are essential in the construction of space (Delaney, 2002; Razack, 2007; Sundstrom, 2003).

This description recognizes that spaces are not just unoccupied sites, which are unaffected by their occupants, urban planners or culture. Even when space is seemingly devoid of external social influences, this should be interpreted as an attempt to naturalize particular effects of space and the discourses they embody (Razack, 2007; Soja, 1980). All spaces are to be instead understood as being saturated with cultural and social connotations about race, class, gender and sexuality, which inform us about ourselves, or others and how various groups will occupy space (Sundstrom, 2003) Thus, when dominant discourses are constitutive of space and space is also constructed to perpetuate and support widely accepted ways of being and acting, there is an added interaction, between space and those who engage within and inhabit a particular environment, which needs to be acknowledged. Razack (2007) therefore identifies three important characteristics of space which, when taken as a whole, can determine how individuals consciously or unconsciously construct their identities within a given environment. These are perceived, conceived and lived space.

“Perceived space” (Razack, 2007, p.77) reflects the every day occurrences or behavioral roles which are performed within a specific physical setting. By being attentive to these “spatial practices” (Razack, 2007, p.77) such observable activities, or

conduct, can inform others about the function of a particular environment. This allows the occupants of a given space, or even spectators, to develop an understanding of what is acceptable or sanctioned behavior. Knowledge of how one should, or should not, conduct themselves additionally assists individuals in the construction of their identities. Thus, who we are and who we are not can be discerned from the manner in which space forces us to behave and from how we are viewed by others in space (Razack, 2007).

The formation of these spatially constituted and influenced identities, results from how urban planners, city officials and engineers visualize and construct a space so that it reflects what they have envisioned. These imaginings refer to what Razack (2007) identifies as “conceived space” (p.77).

The conceptualization of a physical environment is therefore closely related to “lived space” (Razack, 2007, p.77), which describes how the occupants of a particular locality actually experience it or even work to re-conceptualize how it was conceived, especially if they find that it imposes and naturalizes oppressive forms of “spatial expression” (Delaney, 2002, p.7), which is often the case with racialized, gendered, classist or heterosexist spaces. In other words, lived space represents how individuals choose to engage, negotiate and ultimately resist the effects of their physical environment based on how it is symbolically conceived and materially experienced (McKittrick & Peake, 2005; Razack, 2007; Teelucksingh, 2006).

Thus, Cheryl Teelucksingh (2006) adopts the term “claiming space” (p.12) to refer to how socially constructed discourses pertaining to one’s race, gender, sexuality and class, which are spatially legitimated, can be resisted, eventually producing what McKittrick & Peake (2005) refer to as “alternative geographies” (pp 49) : Both of these

terms acknowledge that any attempt to produce significant changes in socio-economic relations should have a spatial focus (Sundstorm, 2003). It is not enough for society to adopt counter discourses which subvert dominant ways of knowing. Such an approach neglects to consider how intertwined the relationship is between social discourses and space. Each of these concepts is “known” through how it makes use of the other. The meaning attributed to race, gender, sexuality and class requires space in order to express socially constructed distinctions. And space is in turn dependent on social discourses in order to structure and produce its intended purpose (Delaney, 2002). Any attempt to resist the effects of how a space has been conceived and exacts spatial relations of dominance (Natter & Jones, 1997) must be both geographically and socially oriented (Sundstrom, 2003). This is how other subversive spaces which create more inclusive social and spatial relations can be created (Mckittrick & Peake, 2005; Natter & Jones, 1997; Razack, 2007 Teelucksingh, 2006).

Methodology:

The above theories on blackness, postcolonialism, and social spatialization present a historical, social and spatial analysis of racialized relations which can critically engage with how present racist institutional practices within Toronto public schools are to be resisted. They indicate that historical colonial relations are crucial to investigating how students presently embody identities of blackness which reproduce or disrupt “colonial geographies” (Mckittrick & Peake, 2005, p 40). Thus, blackness as it was constructed by European groups and as it has been reconstituted by blacks provides an in depth analysis of how alternative spaces of resistance can be created (Mckittrick & Peake, 2005; Teelucksingh, 2006).

Blackness refers to the constructed racial identity which Europeans adopted in order to racially differentiate themselves from black Africans (Miles, 2003). It describes the negative fixed characteristics which were attributed to blacks. The association made between the color of one's skin and their inferiority was assumed to be empirically validated because of the technological, scientific, economic and political differences which set Europe apart from Africa. This resulted in the devaluation of Africans and the assumption that blacks were all inferior to whites (Foster, 2007; Miles, 2003).

Applying this European construction of blackness to postcolonial theory will allow me to demonstrate how European colonial representations of an essentialized black identity are reproduced within Toronto public schools. Thus, many of the colonial stereotypes and beliefs which construct an image of black inferiority are still in force today and are continually imprinted onto the identities of black students (Gandhi, 1998). These stereotypes, as with colonial discourses, are assumed to be valid representations of racialized groups.

Therefore, blackness, as interpreted by Toronto public schools, has had a negative impact on the academic performance of black students. One of the main issues of concern is that teachers have internalized social discourses which assume that blacks have lesser intellectual capacities than whites. These stereotypical and racist representations have lowered the academic expectations of teachers. Indeed, the personal narratives of black students reveal that they are less encouraged by their teachers to pursue higher academic studies. But they are often advised to immerse themselves in athletic or musical pursuits (Codjoe, 2003; Dei, 1994; Dei, 2008).

Since blacks inhabit an inferior racial identity this could also be assumed to explain the cultural, scientific, literary and historical exclusion of Africa and contributions of Africans within the school curriculum (Swartz, 1992). The consequences of adopting and imposing this Eurocentric world view upon racialized groups is evidenced in the poor academic performance and alarming drop out rates of black students.

However, race while organizing the social, educational and economic relations between subordinate and dominate groups, is not the only social marker which has contributed to the unequal treatment of minorities. Delaney (2002) also argues that race as a category gains its significance from how it is spatially communicated. Thus, race “is what it is and does what it does precisely because of *how* it is given spatial expression. (p7)”. As implied by this quote, colonization was partly justified by the socially constructed discourse of race and what it implied about certain groups (Foster, 2007). But race was able to structure unequal social, economic and political relations because of how its meaning was interpreted within space (Teelucksingh, 2006).

Thus, Geography, as a discipline was, and still remains, essential to the construction and perpetuation of colonial discourses of blackness. Granted, both whites and blacks were known to be different because of what race came to signify to Europeans. But these racial distinctions had to be articulated through space in order for them to be adopted, internalized and imposed upon blacks. As stated by Mckittrick & Peake (2005): “who is different implies some sort of spatial difference” (p 44). Given the above analysis of how blackness and space interact, “Colonial geographies” (Mckittrick & Peake, 2005, p. 40) is to be understood as a term which describes both the

spatial and colonial construction of racial difference. It refers to how colonial practices relied upon the construction of spaces which communicated and imposed discourses of blackness upon black bodies. In fact, the colonization of the African continent and the segregation of blacks within colonial settlements both point to how spatial inequalities were constructed from racialized discourses of blackness. What was known about race came to be reflected in how certain groups were made to occupy space as colonial subjects. Thus, Africans and Europeans constructed an understanding of their identities through spatial practices which relied upon the geographic separation of Africa and Europe and the attribution of negative characteristics to the African continent and its inhabitants (Mckittrick & Peake, 2005; Razack, 2007).

Colonial geographies were mainly constructed and imposed through the internalization of an inferior black identity (Mckittrick & Peake, 2005). But it can also be argued that they were actualized through the dominant groups' ability to construct and produce space. Power is therefore an important factor in the analysis of spatial inequalities. Since certain groups are able to create space, they can also determine how space will be used, who will be included and excluded within space, and how the inhabitants of space will be expected to conduct themselves (Mckittrick, 2000; Razack, 2007).

Thus "colonial geographies" are essential to understanding how black students are affected by the construction of racialized spaces. This spatial analysis recognizes that schools impose socially constructed discourses of blackness onto black bodies (Teelucksingh, 2006). But within the school, it is teachers who are implicated in spatially reinforcing racist discourses. This is made possible because of the power differences

between teachers who are positioned as authoritative figures and students who are knowledge recipients. Both of these roles reflect how schools have been conceived as spaces of learning. Knowledge of one's identity is therefore identified and expressed from how the students and teachers are made to conduct themselves within space (Razack, 2007). The internalization of an inferior black identity is what results from these spatial relations of dominance. Therefore, compounding the problem with how differences in power, between teachers and students, influences how and what student's learn, is the manner in which social discourses on blackness are used to structure the relationships between black students and their teachers (Codjoe, 2003; Foster, 2007).

Unlike their white counterparts, black students are "placed" within an inferior racial category within the classroom, one which reinforces colonial attitudes of difference and intellectual inferiority (Mckittrick, 2000). It can, however, be argued that schools are not conceived of as spaces which are meant to intentionally reproduce and impose racist discourses on minority groups. But despite the lack of intentionality, the classroom does become a racialized space when social discourses of blackness are used to inform upon how black students will be treated by teachers within the classroom (Miles, 2003; Teelucksingh, 2006).

What is included or excluded within the school curriculum also reflects the worldviews and perspectives of instructors and school administrators who have internalized the marginal status of African knowledge and experiences (Dei, 2008). This is what allows for the subjugation of Afrocentric knowledge. It additionally explains how Eurocentric discourses which emphasize the existence of a racialized black identity are transmitted and inscribed into space (Teelucksingh, 2006).

While dominate groups may assume that what is known about blackness is fixed and predetermined, it should be acknowledged that racial or cultural identities are in fact subject to change. This means that the stereotypical and racist beliefs which have been internalized by teachers are not permanent, nor are they valid representations of blackness. Dominant discourses on race have instead emerged from a specific history, culture and place (Hall, 1990).

The historical and spatially situated social construction of blackness is important to understanding how we can displace or disrupt what is presently known about black students (Teelucksingh, 2006). It is what makes postcolonial theory a critical deconstructive and analytical concept. This theoretical approach allows for a historical engagement with colonial processes for the purpose of identifying the emergence of a racialized black identity which is now used to stereotype and racially categorize black students. Postcolonial theory essentially recognizes that racial ideologies persist because of how colonial discourses have become institutionally entrenched within our society (Gandhi, 1998; Healy, 2005; Mcleod, 2000).

Once the historical and subjective construction of blackness is acknowledged, the re-articulation of an anti-essentialist black identity which subverts colonial discourses of race can be adopted and put into practice within our classrooms (Hall, 1990). This reclamation of how blackness has been discursively constructed relies upon the critical deconstruction of colonial representations of blacks. The backwardness, barbarity, intellectual inferiority, and lack of scientific or cultural advancement, of black Africans, need to be critiqued (Gandhi, 1998; Said, 1995). These markers of blackness which have become internalized by dominant groups and black students have effectively concealed

the histories, cultures and human contributions of Africans. Blacks should be given the opportunity to reclaim what it means to be African and to restore a history and culture which has been misrepresented through a European colonial gaze (Bonnett, 2000; Dei, 2008). This would result in the “historical and psychological recovery” (Gandhi, 1998, p.8) of a black identity which has been excluded from a predominately Eurocentric worldview. What would instead be embraced is an African cultural standpoint.

Afrocentricity, the privileging of African culture, history, spirituality and traditional values of community, offers an oppositional standpoint to Eurocentricism (Asante, 1998; Dei, 2000). Afrocentric theory challenges the racist and stereotypical discourses which place black students within an intellectually inferior category. It provides an alternative conceptual and material space, which reconstructs black identities by emphasizing the importance of African knowledge, experiences, contributions and histories. Instead of inhabiting spaces which continue to impose colonial geographies upon racialized groups, blacks create their own decolonized Afrocentric spaces where they can begin to embody identities that transform the meaning of blackness (Foster, 2007; Mckittrick & Peake, 2005; Razack, 2007). This “claiming of space” offers a culturally supportive environment where black students can resist and escape oppressive spaces (Teelucksingh, 2006; Train, 2006).

The Limitations of Theory:

Postcolonialism:

While postcolonialism strives to be inclusive of indigenous knowledge which has been generated by historically discriminated against groups, there are some limitations to this approach. The attempt to expand what has been produced and accepted as knowledge

may unintentionally reinforce the marginality of racialized or non European groups. Leela Gandhi (1998) claims that the roots of postcolonial theory helps to provide an explanation. Since postcolonialism emerged from western critiques of how previously colonized groups have been represented, the attempt to be more academically inclusive of non European perspectives continues to position these alternative discourses as emanating from a place which is inhabited by the "other". The west continues to act as the referential norm which determines what is marginal. Inclusiveness is, in this case, dependent upon the attribution of marginality to cultural knowledge (McLeod, 2000). Since the organization of social, economic and political inequalities have historically, and presently, relied upon the differentiation of "normal" groups from those who are abnormal or who can be classified as "others", we need to constantly interrogate this process which categorizes and reinforces the marginality of other forms of cultural knowledge (Rutherford, 1990; Said, 1995).

Rethinking Blackness:

Similar concerns have also been raised about how racialized groups, in their attempt to subvert dominant discourses on blackness, actually reinforce the existence of race, even though they contest the negative connotations which have been attributed to this category (Miles, 2003). This results from how blacks, and anti-racist practitioners, have rearticulated the discourse of blackness. It is believed that in order to subvert what is known about blacks, racialized groups should reconstruct their own cultural histories and identities (Bonnett, 2000). This involves the reclamation of an African cultural essence which is commonly shared by blacks, an essence which ascribes positive, rather than negative attributes to Africans. If this African centered representation of blackness, which

unsettles discourses that have associated blackness with criminality and a lack of intellect, can be adopted, this might transform what black students have internalized about their intellectual capacities. It might also change how they are perceived by dominant groups, thus transforming discriminatory social practices (Bonnett, 2000; Dei, 2008).

The concern, however, is that an Afrocentric reconstruction of blackness substantiates the European discourse on race. Blacks must first affirm their existence as a } separate biologically defined racial group before they can articulate their own interpretation of blackness. This unfortunately reinforces the idea that races do exist and it also asserts the notion that different "races" can be attributed with a single group identity (Bonnett, 2000; Miles, 2003). The new discourse on blackness remains an essentialized representation of race. Jamaicans, Somalians, or even black Canadians, are all assumed to have a single cultural essence regardless of their country of origin. This universalized notion of blackness ignores the fact that cultural identities are not fixed but are instead contextually shaped by social, historical and geographic circumstances (Hall, 1990). *Allege*

Findings:

Afrocentricism: a strategic essentialism

Cecil Foster and Robert Miles raise valid points when they argue that counter hegemonic perspectives, which contradict and subvert the dominant conceptualization of blackness, adopt the very same processes of exclusion which contribute to the social and economic marginalization of black Canadians. Thus, by ascribing positive as opposed to negative attributes to blackness, Afrocentricism continues to assert the validity of the

discourse on race, which has been scientifically disproven. This is evidenced in anti-racist political movements that have made, and continue to make, reference to the experiences of blacks as a subjugated race (Foster, 2005; Miles, 2004). Afrocentricism also essentializes group identities when it rearticulates and contradicts the meaning that has been attributed to blackness (Asante, 1998; Dei, 2000).

The main concern raised by the above critiques is that the process whereby individuals become racialized and are assumed to have an inalterable essence that can determine their behaviors, intellectual capacities and moral or immoral inclinations remains unchallenged. Given the fact that the racialization of blacks is what contributes to their categorization as an unintelligent, idle and criminally deviant racial group, it can be argued that this whole system of classification needs to be critiqued because of how it rationalizes the differential treatment of those who are ascribed with an inferior group identity (Miles, 2004). In fact, some authors propose that anti-colonial and anti-racist practices should attempt to unsettle racialized discourses by rejecting all attempts to assert an essentialized black group identity, even one which positively racializes blacks (Shelby, 2005).

Therefore, Alastair Bonnett and Tommie Shelby both argue that the de-essentialization of race can be better addressed by acknowledging the relevance of hybrid identities (Bonnett, 2000; Shelby, 2005). They believe that if anti-colonialism is about implementing policies and practices which can eliminate the effects of colonial discourses and their construction of the racialized black subject, then changing what is known about blacks becomes an effective anti racist strategy. And the best way to affect the critique and transformation of what is racially known about the negatively ascribed

black essence is to assert the claim that individuals actually embody hybrid rather than single fixed identities (Hall, 1990).

As a concept, hybridity suggests that identities are a mixture of two or more subjectivities, one of these being the “original” cultural identity that Stuart Hall (1990) regards as the “one true self” (p. 223) which is reshaped through encounters with other cultures. The interaction of two or more cultures allows for the emergence of different cultural expressions or identifications. Thus, what may have been known, historically, as an African essence has now been added to or transformed by the various cultural, religious and national identities that are represented in our globalized society (Hall, 1990).

Bhabha further argues that hybridity is a “third space” (Bhabha, 1990, p.221) which establishes new and different “conditions of possibility” (personal communication, March 22, 2010). It can lead Eurocentricists and ethnocentricists to reexamine and question what has been historically established as truth and knowledge about essentialized identities. Dominant representations of blackness can therefore be unsettled by the realization that cultural identities are hybridized and discursively produced through interaction and negotiation (Hall, 1990).

The conclusion that can be arrived at is that the identities which we affirm or lay claim to are not predetermined or unalterable. Nor can dominant groups continue to rely upon a socially constructed black essence to justify the economic subjugation of blacks (Hall, 1990; Miles, 2004). It would instead be more accurate to claim that there are multiple expressions of blackness (Foster, 2005; Shelby, 2005). Assertions about the fixed cultural essence of blacks therefore become indefensible regardless of the negative

or positive attributes that have been ascribed to the black subject. Thus, we should not be so quick to dismiss Shelby's (2005) assertion that Afrocentricism and its attempts to affirm a positively racialized black identity, as a psychologically anti-racist strategy, actually reinforces dominant discourses on blackness. But while the reclamation of an African cultural essence, which reconstructs Eurocentric interpretations of blackness, does arguably promote a fixed and essentialized perception of race and culture, this should not necessarily result in the outright rejection of an Afrocentric standpoint. The Afrocentric discourse on blackness can instead be reexamined through Stuart Hall's article "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". This will allow us to identify how Afrocentricism's essentialization of race can be reconciled with the hybrid identities that are embodied by blacks within the African Diaspora (Hall, 1990).

Stuart Hall understands the assertion of a black cultural essence to be necessary when attempting to unify a particular racial group whose identity, culture and history have been misrepresented and discounted within a white dominated society. The African continent and its traditions, worldviews, history and contributions therefore provide an "imaginary coherence" (Hall, 1990, p.224) that reinforces black solidarity. Africa thus becomes the historical point of reference where the cultural identities of blacks can be reclaimed from the Eurocentric and racist discourses that have contributed to the subjugation of this negatively racialized group (Hall, 1990).

However, the "historical and psychological recovery" (Healy, 2005, p.198) of blackness is not to be confused with the reclamation of a harmonious pre-colonial African culture that was displaced by European colonizers. What is being brought forth, with Afrocentricism, is a collective identity which, while necessary in the disruption of

racist discourses, is not to be interpreted as promoting a return to a specific historical condition before colonization. It is rather, as stated by Hall (1990) an "imaginative rediscovery" (p.224) which helps blacks to repair the psychological effects of colonization and slavery.

Thus, Afrocentricism is not, nor should it be, concerned with the valorization of ancient African civilization; it is instead about the critical engagement and rewriting of what was known, excluded and (mis)represented about African culture and history (Hall, 1990). An Afrocentric standpoint could therefore be described as an oppositional gaze, which situates the black subject and his or her worldviews and historical or cultural perspectives as a subversive critique of Eurocentricism. In doing so, it affirms the validity of an African lens which destabilizes the colonial gaze (Hooks, 1992).

Tommie Shelby, however, recognizes that the assertion of a black African essence, as an emancipatory discourse, raises some concerns. In order to advance his thesis, which is that black solidarity should be focused on the shared experience of racial discrimination and social exclusion, he argues that any attempt to create group cohesiveness by mobilizing around a common black cultural identity would be more likely to reinforce the inherent socio-economic differences that are reflected within the black community. The main issue which he raises is that an appeal to a common black essence will exacerbate intra-racial tensions regarding what constitutes an African culture. The black community will therefore become so overwhelmed with the task of identifying common black values, cultural practices, traditional religions, and artistic or musical expressions, that they would lose sight of what prompted the identification of a unifying concept, which is the elimination of black racial inequality.

These concerns are reflected in how parents have responded to the Toronto based Afrocentric School that was opened in September of 2010. Members of the black community have expressed their opinions and disagreements about what exactly constitutes an Afrocentric curriculum. Some feel that the curriculum is not African enough and does not comprehensively reflect an Afrocentric standpoint. They would prefer more emphasis on African traditions. Others, however, believe that the curriculum is adequate and their children are learning about black African culture and knowledge which they would otherwise have not been exposed to. These diverging opinions about the Afrocentric curriculum reflect the reality that African culture as interpreted by blacks is diverse. Thus, most attempts to develop and implement an Afrocentric curriculum can potentially undermine black solidarity (Brown, 2010; Shelby, 2005).

Shelby (2005) also recognizes that not every black individual will accept that embracing a collective black identity is necessary in order to contest the stereotypical and racist representations which contribute to their social exclusion. Some may not even have any familiarity with a black culture because of how they were socialized. And while committed to black equality and the elimination of racism, they might not feel comfortable about an Afrocentric appeal to a common black identity because it doesn't represent how they identify with blackness.

Stuart Hall does, however, acknowledge the error in embracing a shared African cultural identity when there are in fact various expressions of blackness. He argues that while a strategic essentialization of race is necessitated by the negative representations of blacks, we should not lose sight of the multiple cultural identifications which can be embodied by this racial group. He therefore claims that: "Identities are the names we

give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall, 1990, p.225). This quote recognizes that individuals negotiate how they identify with their histories and the various cultures that they have encountered. It does so by asserting that all identities are contextually produced and informed by a specific historical and geographic social location. This makes an African cultural essence practical for those who are committed to the psychological reconstruction of blackness (Asante, 1998; Foster, 2007; Senghor, 1994). But the cultural differences which are inherent within the black community also indicate that there are multiple articulations of blackness (Shelby, 2005).

Thus, Afrocentricism needs to be attentive to how it can provide an oppositional gaze that is temporarily rooted in a black cultural essence which also acknowledges that there are diverse cultural identities that have emerged from the African Diaspora. This would allow for an Afrocentric blackness which is strategically essentialist but also anti-essentialist and representative of diverse representations of blackness (Hall, 1990).

However, even if Afrocentricism’s preoccupation with supporting the reclamation of an African cultural essence can be reconciled with the notion that cultural identities are hybrid, never fixed and are constantly being redefined (Hall, 1990), we must still question whether this ideological perspective can have a significant impact on the academic performance of blacks. Hence, the claim that the positive effect of an Afrocentric curriculum will be negligible if it is not accompanied with anti-racist strategies which also address wider socio-economic inequalities within the community (Paperny, 2008).

Communities of Practice and black solidarity:

Despite the above concerns, Afrocentric schools can provide an anti-racist and oppositional cultural space that disrupts Eurocentric representations of blackness. This would, as reflected in African epistemologies, be accomplished by emphasizing the importance of community. Such African cultural customs which focus on the responsibility that individuals have to each another can also reinforce black solidarity (Dei, 1994; Dei, et al 2000; Dei, 2008; Senghor, 1994). There are however two concerns that are often raised about reclaiming non-individualistic African cultural traditions. First, the manner in which African culture is expressed has arguably changed over time. This complicates the attempt by Afrocentricists to historically define African culture. And secondly, the diversity in African ethnic groups also makes it difficult to definitively claim that there is a single unified African culture (Shelby, 2005).

However, as with most cultural traditions and customs that evolve, there are some elements which often remain the same regardless of time or place (Asante, 1993; Dei, 1994). What's more, Dei (1994) contends, that despite the differences in religion, ethnicity, language and cultural values, which are reflected in the African Diaspora and on the African continent, there are some similarities in the cultural practices of all blacks of African descent. These African traditions and epistemologies that can assist in the internalization of anti-racist and decolonized representations of blackness identify the importance of community and group solidarity. Thus, African culture historically socialized individuals to construct their sense of identity and fulfillment from their inclusion within the community and their responsibility to one another and their environment. This meant that individuals thrived when communities prospered.

However, African epistemologies which highlight the importance of strengthening communal bonds are contemporarily opposed by a Canadian value system that places an emphasis on individuals rather than communities. In fact, the racist treatment that racialized groups experience in the school, criminal justice system, media and labor market is rarely acknowledged by dominant groups because the appearance of differential treatment is interpreted as being reflective of the cultural deficiencies inherent within the individual and their socialization (Dei, 2008; Henry & Tator, 2006). This has contributed to an individualistic interpretation and understanding of social problems.

Thus, Henry and Tator's analysis of how racist discourses have become entrenched within liberal democratic principles of individualism, equality, and justice provides an important critique of Canadian society. It recognizes that the values and beliefs which are supposed to be demonstrative of Canada's commitment to the anti-discriminatory and anti-racist treatment of diverse groups actually contribute to racism. Henry and Tator have therefore adopted the term democratic racism to refer to the stereotypical and prejudiced attitudes which sustain a racist, gendered, classed and heterosexually stratified society, while simultaneously emphasizing that Canada remains an egalitarian democratic state (Dei, 2008; Henry & Tator, 2006).

The implications of living in a democratically racist society are reflected in how our society shapes and responds to the material realities of race and racism. Dominant groups are inclined to respond to anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory initiatives which are committed to addressing socio-economic inequalities, by arguing that racism cannot exist in a society that adheres to the values and principles of a liberal democracy. This means that when racism does occur, it is often blamed on a few misguided individuals

who are assumed to be unrepresentative of the general population's treatment of racial minorities. What is therefore emphasized is the belief that we, as Canadians, live in a democratic society which treats all of its members equally regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, age or ability. This "discourse of equal opportunity" (Henry & Tator, 2006, p.25) contends that the state is only responsible for ensuring that its members are not obstructed or hindered when engaging in the activities that they find individually fulfilling, as long as they are not inhibiting others from doing the same (Mullaly, 1997). When provided with such an environment individuals either succeed, in their education, employment, athletic and artistic pursuits, or they fail based on their intellect, work ethic and ability. In short, the individual is solely responsible for their successes or failures (Dei, 2008; Henry & Tator, 2006).

The denial of racism and appeal to liberal principles of equality is often coupled with a discourse which claims that we live in a color blind and therefore de-racialized society. This color blind discourse assumes that white dominant groups do not notice the color of one's skin. For them, races do not exist. Thus, the process of racialization which assigns negative cultural attributes to minority groups is also rejected. The existence of racism is therefore denied because the very basis of racist treatment, race and the socially constructed meanings which are associated with minorities, are assumed to be nonexistent (Henry & Tator, 2006). This, however, begs the question: how can dominant groups account for the differential outcomes in education attainment, labor market opportunities, and disproportionate criminal persecution of racialized minorities? Since, dominant groups assume that we live in an equal opportunity, color blind, and de-racialized society where racist treatment is not tolerated, the reason why certain

groups appear to be differentially affected by institutions presumably indicates that they have inherent individual deficiencies. Such marginalized groups have simply not been well socialized into the cultural values of the mainstream society. This is believed to be confirmed by the poor educational outcomes of minorities, their inability to acquire the education and skills required to obtain gainful employment, and their predisposition to criminality and violence (Dei, 2008; Henry & Tator, 2006; Mullaly, 1997).

This individualistic analysis and interpretation of society tends to limit how policy makers understand and respond to the poor educational achievement of black students. It also negates the adoption of anti racist practices that can address the institutional racism that this racial group is subjected to in all social, economic and political spheres. This is due to the fact that Canada is not only perceived as an equal democratic society that is unwilling to tolerate racism but it also interprets the differential treatment of minority groups as an individual problem. Society is therefore viewed as being composed of individuals who are solely responsible for themselves, thus making them unaccountable to one another. This perspective ignores the raced, classed, gendered and heterosexualized experiences of minorities, the privilege that dominant groups exercise when defining social problems and the value in adopting a less individualized and more collective interpretation of social problems (Dei, 2008; Henry & Tator, 2006).

Thus, Dei (2008) contends that eliminating colonial practices of subjugation that are being reproduced in the classrooms, and which also contribute to the economic marginalization of racialized groups, necessitates the conceptualization of "schooling as a community" (p.359). But community as articulated by Dei is not referring to the cultural, linguistic, racial or nationalistic identifications that members of a specific group have in

common. He is instead commenting on that sense of community that is derived from the similarities that can be identified between individuals and groups despite the diversity and differences that are inherent within a given community. This interpretation does not rely upon phenotypical attributes or essentialized cultural identities. Dei instead argues that community should be about "the unity of being and the search for mutual interdependence and common existence. It is a communal search for a humanistic and more humane existence" (Dei, 2008, p.359). Community is thus expressed as a sense of human interconnectedness.

This is an important distinction that can perhaps respond to critiques of Afrocentricism which pose the argument that this ideological perspective culturally essentializes blacks and is therefore not representative of the diverse expressions of blackness that can be found within this community (Shelby, 2005). It can be assumed that the adoption of an African cultural standpoint that defines community as a sense of belonging which strengthens relations between different groups be they ethnically, culturally and racially diverse or socially and economically stratified does not necessarily result in the essentialization of blackness. It rather asserts that there is value in recognizing that the manner in which Africans have historically engaged with their environment from a holistic, as opposed to an individualistic, perspective can be of relevance in addressing the social and economic marginalization of blacks (Dei, 1994; Dei, et al., 2000; Dei, 2008; Henry & Tator, 2006; Senghor, 1994).

This does not limit how blacks would be expected to culturally express themselves. In fact, cultural differences are accommodated, if not encouraged, within a definition of community that seeks to emphasize collaboration, mutuality and harmony.

What is of importance is that individuals implement anti-racist practices that seek to dismantle the social, economic and political barriers that alienate individuals from one another and contribute to the breakdown of communities (Dei, 1994; Dei, 2008). And while this appeal to communal values may be identified by Afrocentricists as being rooted in African epistemologies, it is important to also acknowledge that such cultural practices are not inherently specific to blacks or Africans. In fact, some comparisons can be drawn between the cultural values of an Afrocentric standpoint and what is generally understood as “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1999, p.5).

Communities of practice describes a community or network which acts as a source of information and knowledge that individuals can access in order to improve some aspect of their lives. An essential feature of communities of practice is the fact that they identify one's involvement and interest in their social environment as integral in the development and adoption of practices that can address a particular problem. This is due to the fact that the knowledge which is used to make sense of, and attend to, the concerns of an identified community are best interpreted and understood when they are arrived at from the contextual experiences of its members (Wenger, 1999). As argued by Wenger, (1999) we make sense of the world around us by drawing from familiar reference points which assist in the interpretation and internalization of what we understand to be knowledge. And since what is learned will ultimately shape how we act or conduct ourselves as we seek to demonstrate our competencies, knowledge can therefore be perceived as being constitutive of our identities. But if individuals cannot find any relevance between their experiences and what they are attempting to learn, this will likely result in their disengagement and disinterest in the whole learning process. Therefore, the

ability to draw from the contextualized and collective learning experiences, knowledge and competencies of a community is what allows its members to learn from one another thus allowing them to develop practices that best address and respond to the concerns of the community (Dei, 2008; Wenger, 1999).

Communities of practice that are constructed around the schooling experiences of racialized students would therefore look to integrate the learning that takes place in communities, homes and the cultural practices of students. Schools are not to be perceived as isolated sites of learning that can be separated from a students' social environment. Nor can they exclusively determine what settings are best suited to support the learning process of students. Communities of practice instead look to include all aspects of a students' identity, their cultural or linguistic competencies and involvement in their community, as sites which strategically assist in their learning and success (Dei, et al., 2000; Dei, 2008; Wenger, 1999).

The value of investing in communities of practice lies in their ability to critique and reconstitute the individualized, meritocratic interpretations of success. These dominant discourses have contributed to the construction of racialized spaces where minorities are assumed to be intellectually inferior. But such dominant discourses on success fail to consider or address institutionalized racism, as well as the social practices which contribute to the educational and economic marginalization of racialized groups. Therefore, communities of practice can reconceptualize racialized spaces and the manner in which the bodies which occupy a particular physical environment are perceived (Razack, 2007; Teelucksingh, 2006). Instead of assuming that the poor academic performance or aggressive and disruptive behaviors of black students are indicative of

their cultural and intellectual inferiority, communities of practice dismiss such individualistic and racist assessments and adopt a more participatory, collective and socially contextual analysis of how learning and education ought to take place (Dei, 1994; Dei, et al., 2000; Dei, 2008; Wenger, 1999).

While communities of practice, that emphasize the importance of integrating one's social and cultural contexts in the learning process, can significantly contribute to the adoption of more inclusive educational practices, their effectiveness would arguably be hindered by structural inequalities that have negatively affected members of the black community (Dei, 2008; Galabuzi, 2006; Wenger, 1999). Therefore, equitable schooling strategies that seek to incorporate black students' social and cultural environment in their learning would be largely ineffective since minority students continue to live in low-income disadvantaged neighborhoods (Galabuzi, 2006; Hummer, 1996; Wenger, 1999).

Thus, the social reality of black racialized minorities is one in which black unemployment, black on black crime, and high school drop out rates among black students remain disproportionately high when compared to other racial groups (Russel et al., 1993). This has had a devastating impact on the health and quality of life of blacks. Compared to whites, blacks have been reported as having lower life expectancy rates and higher incidences of obesity, heart disease and chronic diseases (Hummer, 1996; Adelman et al., 2001).

Some have argued that the problems affecting the black community are produced and perpetuated by racist and discriminatory labor market practices (Russel et al., 1993). However, it is necessary to acknowledge that socio-economic inequalities, which exclude blacks from equal participation in the labor market, do not, in of themselves, account for

the continued existence of disadvantaged black communities. Such low income black neighborhoods have low educational attainment, a high incidence of black on black crime, poor health outcomes and disproportionate representations of blacks in criminal justice system because of the institutional racism that blacks experience in all aspects of society. Neglecting to address such structured inequalities is what perpetuates the cycle of poverty experienced by these black communities (Galabuzi, 2006; Hummer, 1996).

Addressing socio-economic marginalization:

Thus, creating anti-racist and culturally inclusive educational practices which incorporate black students' participation in their communities and social environment should be accompanied with structural changes that address the socio-economic practices that disadvantage black neighborhoods. This involves an understanding of how marginalized groups have been socially, economically, culturally and politically excluded from Canadian society. Therefore, regardless of whether marginalization is manifested in racist education practices (Dei, 2008), labor market outcomes (Galabuzi, 2006), or through the overrepresentation of minorities in the criminal justice system (Phillips & Bowling, 2007), such racist practices are broadly defined by Saloojee (2005) and Galabuzi, (2006) as processes of social exclusion. This term is not only attentive to the racist practices that racialized groups experience, but it also acknowledges the systemic discrimination that sexual minorities, women and persons with disabilities are subjected to as well as the overlapping experiences of oppression that arise from membership in more than one of these categories.

Systemic Discrimination: Labor market practices

Systemic discrimination is defined as the institutionalized practices and policies which intentionally or unintentionally result in the unequal treatment of racialized minorities (Agocs, 2002; Galabuzi, 2006; Henry & Tator, 2006). Racist processes of exclusion as evidenced within Canadian labor market practices are reflected in the hiring and promotion practices of employers within certain occupations and industries. Galabuzi (2006) argues in his book: "Canada's Economic Apartheid" that racial minorities tend to be concentrated in low-paying, less skilled, occupations such as retail and clothing and textile industries, which offer few if any work benefits. His data also reveals that racial minorities are inadequately represented in the executive or top administrative levels of banking, auto, steel, and skilled trades industries. These tend to be better paying occupations with good job security and benefits.

Evidence of the economic marginalization of racialized populations is also reflected in income levels. As revealed in Galabuzi and Teelucksingh's report on labor market participation from 1996 to 2001, there exists a 12.2% average gap between the incomes of racialized and non racialized groups. Also included within their findings was the fact that, at 42.3 %, young males averaged the largest gap in income. University educated racialized and non racialized groups were also differentiated by a median income gap of 14.6% while those who did not attend any postsecondary institution were recorded as having a 20.6 % income gap (Galabuzi & Teelucksingh, 2005).

The labor market participation of racialized groups also provides evidence of systemic discrimination. While the employment rate of the Canadian population was recorded at 83% with an unemployment rate of 6.7%, racialized groups had a 66% employment rate and a 12.2% unemployment rate (Galabuzi & Teelucksingh, 2005).

It is important to acknowledge that differences in the labor market participation and income levels of minorities are also influenced by their social capital (Kumlin & Rothstein, 2005). Thus, the social networks that dominant groups can access because of their privileged positions in society and their knowledge of employment opportunities can act as a barrier for visible minorities. Since women, racialized groups, persons with disabilities and aboriginal populations have been historically discriminated against and excluded from participating in the labor market, this has arguably left them with what Parks-Yancy (2006) defines as “capital deficits” (Parks-Yancy, 2006 p. 516). They have not had the opportunity to accumulate the social contacts and networks which their white, male counterparts have been able to take advantage of. This can therefore be interpreted as a form of systemic or institutional discrimination that limits the employment opportunities of minority groups (Galabuzi, 2006; Henry & Tator, 2006).

Insecure employment and low income jobs have forced minorities to form poor segregated communities that reflect the structural barriers constructed around the intersections of race and employment opportunities (Qadeer, 2003). Such poverty stricken neighborhoods are often populated with single parent families, newcomers and racialized groups who are most susceptible to the effects of a racially stratified labor market. In fact, a United Way of Greater Toronto (2002) study on poverty reported that despite the favorable economic conditions experienced between 1995 and 1999, Toronto's poverty rate actually increased from 22.6% to 23.3%. What's more, the poverty rate in 1996 for racialized minorities was recorded at 35.9%, while non racialized Canadians had a poverty rate that was at 17.6%. Newcomers were the most severely affected group in 1996 with more than 50% living under the poverty line.

Employment Equity:

A Federal Employment equity policy was first introduced by Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservatives in 1986 and was implemented in 1987 to address the systemic discrimination that marginalized groups experienced in the workplace (Agocs, 2002). The adoption of this policy was prompted by Justice Rosalie Abella's report on the Royal Commission on Equality of Employment Opportunity, which was authorized by the previous liberal government. The employment equity policy that was adopted sought to eliminate all discriminatory organizational practices that negatively affected the hiring and advancement of visible minorities in the workplace (Falkenberg & Boland, 1997).

Amendments to the Act in 1995 expanded the number of Employers that were subject to the Act and therefore included the federal public service, commissions and agencies, RCMP, Canadian Forces and Canadian Security Intelligence Services along with other federally regulated businesses. These employers were required to outline a plan and identify projected goals and timelines for the implementation of organizational practices which would ensure that their employees were representative of Canada's visible minority groups, women, Aboriginal populations and persons with disabilities. Thus, an employment systems review was to be conducted to determine what organizational practices resulted in the intentional or unintentional exclusion of the identified marginalized populations. Periodic consultation with employees who represent the identified groups was required. Employers also had to collect data to determine whether they were meeting their goals in implementing anti-discriminatory hiring and promotion organizational policies that ensured representativeness. The Canada human Rights Commission was charged with conducting compliance audits and an employment

equity review tribunal was created to ensure that organizations were in compliance with the Act (Agocs, 2002; Falkenberg & Boland, 1997).

However there are some limitations to the enforcement of the Employment Equity Act which significantly affects its ability to eliminate the economic marginalization of vulnerable groups. For instance, there are no serious penalties leveled at organizations that fail to introduce an equity plan which reduces employment barriers, so long as the necessary reports are presented and sufficient reasons provided for failing to meet one's projected goals. There are also no penalties for organizations that fail to replace or eliminate employment barriers that are discovered during the Employment systems review. Thus, while organizations can be fined \$10,000 for violating the Employment Equity Act and \$50,000 for persistent violations, such monetary penalties are only imposed when an employer neglects to submit an employment equity report and they are unable to provide an adequate explanation; they exclude necessary information from a report without good reason; or they deliberately submit a false report. But even more important is the finding that the Canadian Human Rights Commission is severely underfunded and therefore unable to carry out its compliance audits as scheduled. The above limitations and lack of adequate enforcement of the Act sends the wrong message to employers, of which the majority of whom fail to implement employment equity policies (Agocs, 2002; Falkenberg & Boland, 1997).

Thus, improving the implementation and enforcement of employment equity would require the collaboration and involvement of federal, provincial and municipal levels of government and the private and public sectors of employment (Saloojee, 2005). Employment Equity policies would have to stipulate that failing to eliminate the

discriminatory organizational practices, which have been identified by an employment systems review, will be met with monetary sanctions. And while organizations are responsible for developing their own strategies, plans and timelines for addressing identified concerns there ought to be standardized assessments of equitable employment practices. Falkenberg & Boland (1997) identify pay equity, the hiring and promotion of employees based on education and experience, accessibility of professional development programs, and the availability of personal leaves of absences as necessary components in the implementation of Employment Equity policy. Increased financial resources also need to be committed to the Canada Human Rights Commission for there to be an adequate enforcement of these policies. And lastly, if we are to succeed in the elimination of racial and gendered discriminatory practices in the labor market, Employment Equity policies should be expanded to include all sectors of employment, in the private as well as public sectors (Agocs, 2002; Saloojee, 2005).

Despite the apparent need to implement public policy initiatives which address employment discrimination, income disparities and poverty, social policy has instead served to perpetuate social inequalities. This is reflected in the neo-liberal budget cuts that have been made to social assistance programs in the mid 1990s. These cuts in social spending, specifically welfare, housing and child care, have significantly weakened Canada's social safety net which low income racialized and marginalized groups are dependent upon (Baker, 1997).

Social Assistance:

Prior to the year of 1996, there existed a joint 50/50 cost sharing program, the Canada Assistance Plan (CAP), which compelled the federal government to assist in

funding social assistance and other social service costs for Canadian provinces. As with most federal cost sharing programs, there were some provisions that provinces were obligated to adhere to in order to continue to receive funding for social assistance. The federal government specified that welfare entitlements were to be based on individual's need and be means tested; social assistance was to be granted to all provincial residents regardless of their length of stay; an appeals board was to be instituted; and there were to be no conditions attached to the receipt of welfare benefits (Hulchanski, 2002; Baker, 1997).

However, because the federal government was expected to match the provincial costs of welfare it soon became evident that they could not predict the amount of funds which would have to be allocated for social spending. Given the rising cost of living and increased unemployment levels the federal government was very much aware that social spending by provincial governments would continue to increase. Thus the CAP was replaced by the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) in an attempt to control and fix social spending. Funding was now provided through block grants which the provinces could dispense with as they chose since the CAP was dissolved. This resulted in a \$4 billion cut in social spending between the years of 1996 and 1998. But more importantly, the conditions stipulated in the cost sharing program were no longer applicable with the introduction of the CHST. Provinces now had full control over budget allocation decisions and this consequently resulted in the 21% reduction of social assistance benefits in Ontario and the introduction of workfare policies (Baker, 1997; Klassen, 2003).

Work fare policies reflected what Mike Harris's Progressive Conservatives heralded as the "Common Sense Revolution" (Klassen, 2003, p200), in their 1995

election. This policy mandated individuals receiving welfare benefits to be employed or actively engaged in obtaining gainful employment through their participation in job training programs or other educational pursuits. Restrictions to eligibility criteria were also introduced and the advisory committee that was developed to inform the government on social assistance legislation was dissolved. Those who were most adversely affected by the political restructuring of the welfare state were, as mentioned above, visible minorities (Baker, 1997).

Housing Policy:

The 1995 cuts in welfare benefits were implemented two years after the Federal government significantly reduced its role in funding the building of affordable non-privatized housing for low income families. Thus, while the Canadian Government had committed itself to building an average of 25,000 subsidized units from 1964 to 1984, there were no funds allocated to the construction of subsidized housing in the 1993 federal budget. The federal government's role in providing housing has been all but non-existent in the 1990s (Hulchanski, 2002; Vaidyanathan & Wismer, 2005).

However, in 2001, \$680 million dollars were allocated for building affordable housing in Canada within a five year period. But these funds could only assist in the construction of about 5,400 affordable housing units per year averaging out to 500 units per province. These numbers would not be capable of providing housing to the most vulnerable populations who are living in poverty or the working poor (Hulchanski, 2002; Vaidyanathan & Wismer, 2005).

In 2005 the Canadian government allocated \$1.6 billion to building more affordable housing. This led to the commitment of \$734 million for the Canada-Ontario

Affordable Housing program which allocates \$80 million to rent supplements, \$302.40 million to rental and supportive housing which is particularly geared towards individuals who were previously homeless, \$20 million for the maintenance and restoration of affordable housing units in Northern Ontario and \$36 million to financially assist low income families, who are currently living in rental units, in purchasing a home (Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, 2008).

Income Security and National Housing Policy:

While the Federal government has been recently committed to providing affordable housing units, the funding that is provided may not be enough to assist low income families. Since these housing initiatives are not coupled with income security policies that can assist the most vulnerable groups in our society, they might not be completely effective. Thus, in order to reduce the high levels of poverty and homelessness in Ontario, the provincial government should restore the 21% budget cuts that were made to social assistance during the mid 1990s. Income supplements should also be provided to low income households that fall under the working poor categories. And Social Assistance Advisory Boards which were consulted for administration and policy purposes before the restructuring of the welfare system should also be reintroduced (Baker, 1997; Klassen, 2003)

It is also important that Federal, provincial and municipal governments work in conjunction with private and non-profit housing agencies and community agencies that provide services to homeless or marginally housed individuals to create a national housing program which guarantees Canadian residents access to affordable housing. A national housing program should be committed to providing construction subsidies that

would assist in building 20,000 to 25,000 subsidized units every year. These subsidies will reduce rental fees thus making it affordable for low or moderate income earners to access housing. However, rent supplements, which are payments made to landlords by a government funded agency, will have to be provided to cover the portion of the market rent which families living below the poverty line are unable to afford (Hulchanski, 2002). The amount of funding provided for rent supplements should reflect the estimates which are to be determined by policy researchers affiliated with the National Housing and Homelessness Network and municipal government agencies responsible for the administration of social assistance. This would ensure that funding adequately covers the most vulnerable populations.

Emergency relief funds should be allocated for the maintenance, staffing and provision of services in shelters. This will ensure that homeless persons can access housing assistance within the shelter system. Additional resources should also be directed towards the construction of supportive housing which provides long term homeless individuals with life skills, job training, education and other necessary and on going social services after they are housed. And lastly, a national housing policy should strengthen the federal government's commitment to the renovation of existing subsidized rental units (Hulchanski, 2002).

Universal Child Care:

The elimination of the CAP also affected child care subsidies that were provided to low income households and the operation grants that had been made available for maintaining government regulated child care centers (Baker, 1997; Klassen, 2003). And while only 4% of the Federal budget for the CAP was allocated to child care subsidies, it

is important to acknowledge that such spending encouraged provinces to allocate funds for subsidized child care centers, since they didn't have to bear the full burden of the cost. However, there are no funds currently allocated for affordable day care under the CHST (White, 2001). Thus, provinces have no incentive to continue to subsidize child care. In fact, the subsidies that have been provided are often made available to individuals on workfare policies because it would benefit provinces to assist welfare recipients to attend job training, or adult education classes that would contribute to their integration into the labor market. Therefore, female single parent households or poor families, that may not qualify for welfare, but who would undoubtedly benefit from child care subsidies, are not prioritized (White, 2001).

It has been argued that introducing an affordable publicly funded child care system would significantly alleviate the burden of paying for expensive child care, especially among single parent female households. This does seem to be substantiated by the fact that 54% of single mothers with infants were absent from the labor market in 2006 while mothers with children under 3 years of age also had a lesser rate of employment than married or attached women (Kitchen, 2007). This is due to the fact that single mothers often choose to reduce their labor market participation to part time hours or forgo working altogether so that they can care for their children (White, 2001).

Thus, the Canadian and Ontario government need to take note of Quebec's commitment to alleviating the cost of child care with their \$7 dollar a day child care program. The main reason being that Canada's present subsidized Child care system was identified in an OECD study as the most expensive among the 14 industrialized countries surveyed (Kitchen, 2007). Both the federal and provincial governments therefore need to

commit more funds to building affordable and accessible child care spaces, while also subsidizing child development programs and care services for children aged 1 to 3. Introducing full day kindergarten for 4 and 5 year olds and after school programs for this age groups and older children will definitely assist parents with child care costs while they are employed (Kitchen, 2007; White, 2001).

Conclusion:

I have argued that theories of postcolonialism, blackness and social spatiality provide a critical analysis of societal relations between racialized and non racialized groups. These theoretical perspectives are committed to exploring and understanding how colonial discourses continue to produce racialized spaces within an educational context (Razack, 2007; Teelucksingh, 2006). This is achieved through the imposition of colonial representations and images upon black students. Thus, what was known, or socially constructed about Africa, and its inhabitants, from a Eurocentric colonial perspective, has become embedded within our contemporary institutional and societal practices (Asante, 1998; Bonnett, 2000; Foster, 2007). Black students therefore continue to be perceived through colonial discourses which emphasize their cultural inferiority, backwardness and predisposition to violence and criminality (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1996/1997; Dei, 2008 Miles, 2003).

The consequences of adopting such racist representations of minority students are evident in how school practices and policies have affected the academic performance of blacks (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1994; Dei, 1996/1997; Dei, 2008; King, 1993). Compared to their racial counterparts, black students continue to underperform in their academic studies. The school curriculum's failure to accurately represent black identities and

histories and their disregard of the literary, scientific or cultural contributions that Africans have made to human civilization have contributed to black students' lack of interest in academic study and their underperformance. What the school curriculum portrays is a Eurocentric interpretation of history and society, which perpetuates racist perceptions of blacks and their history.

Racism has thus affected how students of color are treated by teachers in the classroom and by education policy makers. This is due to the fact that white, male dominant groups have a conception of blackness which supports the notion that black students are intellectually deficient and culturally aggressive (Foster, 2007; Peiters, 2003). The first stereotype has resulted in an attempt to push black students into athletics or artistic pursuits because they are presumably unable to excel in the maths, sciences or social sciences. Black students have consequently internalized such attitudes regarding their lack of intellect which has contributed to their low self-esteem and poor academic school performance (Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 2008). The second assumption regarding the cultural aggressiveness of blacks has influenced the introduction and implementation of the Safe Schools Act and a zero tolerance policy which singles out black males as violent, disruptive and a threat to school safety (Dei, 2008; Henry & Tator, 2006; Peiters, 2003; Jull, 2000).

This necessitates the construction of alternative spaces where new articulations of race can be adopted to resist discriminatory and racist educational practices (McKittrick & Peake, 2005). Black students therefore claim such alternative and de-racialized spaces by reconstructing dominant discourses of blackness which reject Eurocentric epistemologies in favor of Afrocentric world views and perspectives (Teelucksingh,

2006; Razack, 2007; Train, 2006). Thus, Afrocentricism, which emphasizes community and solidarity, strategically asserts an essentialized interpretation of blackness that positively redefines what it means to be culturally black (Dei, 1994; Dei, et al., 2000; Dei, 2008). Its aim is to provide racialized students with a “historical and psychological” (Gandhi, 1998, p.8) recovery of an African cultural identity which is essential in resisting the dominant discourse on race. In addition to the reclamation of an African cultural perspective, Afrocentricism also seeks to introduce anti-racist educational practices within black focused schools (Dei, 1994; Dei, 1996; Dei, et al., 2000; Dei, 2008).

However, an Afrocentric cultural identity should also allow for the expression of multiple and varied interpretations of black culture. Failure to do so will only contribute to intra-racial group tension. Thus, acknowledging that members of the black community may identify with African or black culture differently, is crucial to strengthening black solidarity. The fact that this racial group is also differentiated by gender, class, sexuality, age and generational differences also emphasizes the necessity of adopting African cultural perspectives that reflect the diversity of the black community. And while an Afrocentric and anti-racist curriculum attempts to address the internalized oppression, which has negatively affected the academic performance of black students, such efforts need to also be coupled with policies and practices that also address structural inequalities.

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