



# Research Report

**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AFRICENTRIC  
(BLACK-FOCUSED) SCHOOLS IN CLOSING  
STUDENT SUCCESS AND ACHIEVEMENT  
GAPS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>PURPOSE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>Pg. 1</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>Pg. 1</b>
<b>BACKGROUND.....</b>	<b>Pg. 2</b>
Africentricity as a Potential Solution to Addressing the Achievement Gap...	Pg. 3
Africentricity in Practice: How Effective are Africentric Schools? .....	Pg. 7
Where have Black-focused schools or programs been implemented and why? .....	Pg. 7
What strategies, structures, and approaches were used in these schools? .....	Pg. 8
What data-based evidence has been collected to assess the effectiveness and success of these programs? .....	Pg. 9
Limitations to the Africentric School Literature .....	Pg. 11
<b>CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS.....</b>	<b>Pg. 12</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>Pg. 17</b>
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
Appendix A – Definitions of Terminology .....	Pg. 15



# **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AFRICENTRIC (BLACK-FOCUSED) SCHOOLS IN CLOSING STUDENT SUCCESS AND ACHIEVEMENT GAPS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

## **Purpose of the Literature Review**

In response to the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) consideration of the possible establishment of an Africentric Alternative School to address the needs of our Black student population, the request was made to conduct a literature review on the effectiveness of such schools. Rather than focusing on the broader view of the factors contributing to educational gaps and/or individual strategies to address them, the particular focus of this review is to search for examples of Africentric schools and/or comprehensive Africentric programs (see Appendix A for definitions of terminology) that have been implemented within schools and/or districts and to discuss the extent to which they have been effective in narrowing gaps in student success for Black students.

The structure of this review consists of sections including methodology, background information, a general discussion of Africentricity as a potential solution for reducing achievement gaps, examples of Africentric schools and programs, limitations of the current literature, and conclusions and next steps. The discussion surrounding the examples of Africentric schools or programs found in the literature is framed around the following three key questions:

- Where have black-focused schools or programs been implemented and why?
- What strategies, structures, and approaches are used in these schools?
- What data-based evidence has been collected to assess the effectiveness and success of these programs?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The search of the literature was conducted using the following databases: ERIC, ProQuest Education, and EBSCOhost Professional Development Collection, and the Internet. The selection of the articles used in this literature review was limited to professional educational journals and organizations, dating primarily from the late 1980's and onwards. There is no subject heading in any of the databases for "Black-focused schools". The search words used were: Black schools, Black students and schools, Black-focused, African American students, Afrocentric / Afrocentrism and schools,

Africentric / Africentrism and schools, School achievement, School effectiveness, Achievement gap and combinations of those. Because there is no one subject heading to capture “black-focused schools”, the search required trying many different combinations of search strategies.

The article collection largely reflects the US perspective given the US’s history of dealing with race issues. Limited references to Canadian resources regarding the effectiveness of Black-focused education were found.

## BACKGROUND

Current education discussions have focused on the low academic achievement of minority students. Scholars and researchers commonly agree that environmental and cultural factors have a profound influence upon human behavior, including academic performance. There are two overall reasons why the achievement gap persists between White students and minority students: factors outside the classroom and school related factors.

First, research has found that **factors outside the classroom**, such as economic, family, and personal characteristics have a strong influence on achievement (Slavin, 2006; Rothstein, 2004). Students of colour often come from lower-income families, and some of those students may also be second language learners. Student habits and aspirations can influence achievement as well. Survey data collected from the 2002 Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) demonstrated that Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students watch more television, study fewer hours, and aspire to lower educational goals than white and Asian students. Psychological factors, such as “acting white” or the internalization of inferior status, can also play a role in academic achievement (Shannon, & Bylsma, 2002; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Second, research has identified various **school related factors** that can perpetuate the gap. Recent studies have found that low-income and minority students encounter less opportunity to learn, inadequate instruction and support, and lower expectations from their schools and teachers. (Thompson & O’Quinn, 2001; Mubenga, 2006; Haycock, 2002). Research has also pointed out that schools are more reflective of white, middle-class society. This can lead to a disconnect between students who come from different cultures and family conditions and the traditional school structure and expectations (Shannon & Bylsma, 2002).

Given the current focus on educational performance, high stakes testing and improved accountability and equity of outcomes for all students, legislators, educators and community have turned their efforts towards narrowing the achievement gap for all students.

### **Africentricity as a Potential Solution to Addressing the Achievement Gap**

**Africentricity:** The idea of Africentric or African-centered schools has grown rapidly in popularity since 1990. Some members of the African American community have called for the delivery of educational services within a cultural context. Africentrism, as an educational philosophy is gaining increased support in public and private schools and academies across the United States (Gordon, 2004).

According to Marks and Tonso (2006), offering African-American students an African-centered education is one way to provide adequate education to the large numbers of African American children who may be at risk. African-centered education is committed to cultural as well as academic and social goals. Inside African-centered schools, teachers teach Black students about their culture, about life, and about their role in society and the world while maintaining high expectations and demanding excellence. Durden (2007) supports an African-centered education for its specific instructional practices that address the unique learning styles of Black students. She advocates for a curriculum rooted in the reality and history of African people. In addition, other researchers have indicated that the tradition of schooling experience for many Black students is not culturally sensitive or affirming (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003).

Shockley (2007) from George Mason University cites a number of scholars that agree for the need of Africentric education (Asante, 1999; Hilliard, 1997; Murrell, 2002). Citing similarities to Catholic, Asian and Jewish-centered education (Noguera, 2002; Shockley, 2007) where children are engaged by specific religious and cultural instruction, Africentric education also would instill a sense of African culture and allegiance.

Africentric educators argue that cultural mismatch is the significant problem for Black students (Hilliard, 1997; Murrell, 2002). Moreover the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2004) suggests that as a result of cultural mismatch Black students continue to remain behind their White counterparts.

Many research studies support that minority students experience a cultural dissonance between their home culture and their school culture (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Heath, 1999). The inability of the American educational system to properly address the cultural and educational needs of Blacks is one of the most perplexing problems in U.S. society (Hilliard, 1997; Hopkins, 1997 in Shockley, 2007, p. 103). Some scholars suggest that the educational system remains in favor of White-education (Kunjufu, 2001). Furthermore Anderson (2001) argued that the education that Blacks receive is not engaging them.

***Segregation and the North Carolina Perspective:*** Regarding the notion of “segregated” schools, the North Carolina Education Research Council (Thompson & O’Quinn, 2001) offers a slightly different perspective. In their summary of relevant data, NCERC reports that North Carolina’s schools are re-segregating at a rapid pace - particularly in certain districts.

In comparing desegregated and segregated school models, research on national samples generally showed that desegregation made a much smaller difference in student learning than its advocates had hoped. Although there were some achievement effects related to desegregation at the national level, the NCERC study implied that there may be other factors contributing to these modest results. One of those factors might be ongoing patterns of segregation within nominally desegregated schools. Darity, Castellino, and Tyson (2001) found that the percentage of Black students in challenging programs in such schools was generally quite low. In some high schools with a large African-American presence, virtually no black students were assigned to Advanced Placement courses. So in essence, the “desegregated” schools often harboured re-segregation within the school, and this masked the contribution of genuine desegregation to improve student learning.

Even with re-segregation gaining in popularity in North Carolina, the state test scores in North Carolina nevertheless showed that the number of Black students in segregated schools performing at or above grade level on state tests was in fact 7.5% lower than for Black students in substantially desegregated North Carolina schools. Simmons and Ebbs (2001) point out that middle class Black students in particular suffered from segregation. “In district after district, these students score significantly worse in segregated schools than in an integrated setting” (in Thompson & O’Quinn, 2001, p.14).



In conclusion, the NCERC recommended that reducing the Black-White achievement gap should occur within desegregated schools, but acknowledged that it needs to be a “true” desegregation in order to effectively eliminate the gaps. To respond to this, the Council notes that there is no one single breakthrough intervention and instead points to a series of changes based on research that schools could make in order to close Black-White achievement gaps (see NCERC Policy Brief, June 2001).

**Organizations to Support African-centered Education:** It should be noted that there are also organizations in the U.S. whose mission is to support and sustain teachers and schools committed to providing African-centered education. These organizations could also be important sources of information for districts considering the establishment of Africentric education programs.

In San Francisco, the Center for Applied Cultural Studies and Educational Achievement (CACSEA) provides resources and encourages public school teachers who want to teach African American students in an African-centered framework, built on interdependence, egalitarianism, collectivism, transformation, cooperation, humanness, and synergism (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

Likewise, the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI) founded in 1972 is an umbrella organization for independent African-centered schools and individuals who are advocates for African-centered education. CIBI schools are collectively engaged in producing instructional resources for classrooms and home use. Their central resources include comprehensive *Standards for Evaluating Afrikan-Centred Educational Institutions* that are used for school accreditation. The Council identifies detailed standards for each of the 10 essential components of an independent African-centered education institution (e.g. including cultural ideological context, curriculum, staff, services and community programs, parent involvement, etc). Unfortunately, their site does not include data-based research studies about the effectiveness of the schools.

**Canadian Experience:** Canadian studies indicate that the realities and experiences of Black students are absent from the curriculum in Ontario and Canada in general. This absence contributes to their subsequent disengagement from their schooling experience (Williams-Taylor, 2006). Preliminary research indicates the school curriculum needs to better reflect the positive contributions of the Black community. This will allow for a more inclusive educational experience for the Black learner.

In Canada, African-centered schooling is seen by Dei (1995) as a reflection of the complex world we live in. Dei advocates that “segregation by choice” is different from “forced segregation”. He considers Black-centered schooling a viable alternative for those parents who wish an Africentric education for their children.

In Ontario, discussions about the establishment of Africentric schools or programs as a possible solution or structure for addressing these interdependent needs were taking place in the early to mid 1990's as part of the Royal Commission on Learning (RCL) report, *For the Love of Learning*. In the RCL hearings, serious concerns were being expressed by members of the Black community about the achievement levels of their young people. Some of the RCL submissions and presentations from the Black community called for the establishment of Black-focused Schools, African-centered Schools or Inclusive Schools, which generated extensive and divisive debate about societal values, inclusiveness, segregation, and the need for systemic change.

In response, the Commission expressed a strong conviction that the school system “must better accommodate the needs of Black children and young Black men and women. Schools must become more inclusive, staff must become more representative of our society as a whole, courses must reflect the perspectives and contributions of minority groups”. ...and “we must mobilize the best talent available to develop innovative strategies for improving the academic performance of Black students” (Royal Commission on Learning, 1994). Their formal recommendation at that time was to establish “demonstration schools” in which interventions and innovative programs based on best practices for attaining success for Black students would be implemented, and then the most successful models and strategies and lessons learned could then be replicated in other schools.

There does not appear to have been any direct action as a result of these recommendations, however, in 2007, the issues of equity and equity of educational outcomes for certain sub-populations continue to be a concern in Toronto and Ontario. As one strategy for facilitating student success, the Government of Ontario through the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) is looking to identify the challenges that Black students face which impede their progress at school and to acquire and apply successful practices that work to facilitate success for this group of students. Specifically, they intend to generate discussion and action in the following areas:

- The specific strategies that work well to foster success among Black students.

- Why these strategies work and how they look in a real classroom and school setting.
- The experiences that Black students have that cause disengagement and those experiences that foster success.
- The realities that exist in a school setting for Black children, as well as the teacher's own powerful role in influencing that reality.

The outcomes of this current LNS strategy are still pending.

### **Africentricity in Practice: How Effective are Africentric Schools?**

For the purpose of this literature review we looked at the research studies done on Africentric schools that measure the effectiveness of such schools and/or programs. Typically, effectiveness in school is measured by several outcome indicators: standardized test scores, dropout rates, graduation rates, behavior, admission to College and Universities etc. According to NCES, "...the academic achievement of a large number of Black children across the country – as measured by such indicators - has deteriorated considerably over the last twenty years." (NCES, 2004, p. 455).

Unfortunately, the relationship between Africentric schools and/or programs and effectiveness is not well addressed in the research literature. There are very few studies that provide robust measures that clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of Africentric or Black-focused school and/or programs. However, some examples of success were cited below.

### **Where have Black-focused schools or programs been implemented and why?**

There were only limited examples in the literature of specific Black-focused or Africentric schools that provided descriptions of both the programs and strategies that were implemented and, more importantly, evidence-based discussions about the effectiveness of these initiatives.

The examples referenced in the following sections included two public schools in Missouri, three independent Africentric schools, two African American Immersion schools in Milwaukee, a charter school in Connecticut, an alternative school, a district wide initiative, and a local summer institute program.

Although closing the achievement gap was a primary motivation in most cases, the rationale for creating some of these schools also included creating culturally relevant and enabling learning environments and/or combating other social risk factors for

specific sub-groups (i.e. Black males). Specifically, the reasons cited in these resources included:

- to address the achievement gap between Black and White students (Sadowski, 2001)
- to address the academic underachievement of African American children (Span, 2002; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000)
- to effectively combat the statistics associated with African American students (Sanders, 1992)
- to target problems such as school success, substance abuse, delinquency and violence with a school-based prevention program for 100 Black male students (Potts, 2003)
- to combat a “Black male crisis” based on their risk factors for academic performance and violence (Watson & Smitherman, 1996)
- to embrace the concepts of community and family (Span, 2002; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000)
- to offer a comprehensive, culturally affirming and developmentally based Arts, Sciences, Humanities and Technology program (Lee, 2005)
- to provide an enabling learning environment for African-Canadian students in grades 1-5 who were performing at Level 2 or below in literacy and/or numeracy (O'Reilly & Gregory, 2006).

### **What strategies, structures, and approaches were used in these schools?**

This section refers only to those educational strategies or initiatives that were described in the literature about these particular schools. It should be noted that there is a much larger body of literature describing other specific strategies and practices that are considered to be effective with minority populations; however, a full discussion of those was beyond the scope of this targeted review.

The notion of African-centered education in these examples encompassed a broader, more culturally-relevant approach to many aspects of school life, and did not revolve around only one or two isolated practices or instructional strategies that are known to be effective with this population.

In terms of curriculum, for example, public schools may use the state curriculum, but supplement it with an African cultural component so that the contributions of people

of color is better represented (Sadowski, 2001). Specific instructional techniques (e.g., ancient mathematical methods, indigenous languages) may be embedded into the lessons (Durden, 2007).

Beyond a strictly curricular focus, most of these schools also embraced principles and practices that nurtured and supported the holistic development of Black students (e.g. Nguzo Saba principles as defined in Appendix A) or that reflected Africentricity, linguistic, civic, holistic and pragmatic principles as well (Watson & Smitherman, 1996).

Two specific examples are cited here to illustrate the broader Africentric perspective that is typically found in such schools. In one school, the academy operates under an African-American philosophy that promotes: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith. As an African-centered school, it incorporates Nguzo Saba into the routine practices of classroom life (Lee, 2005).

The key elements of another program that focuses primarily on the performance of Black males, includes the following range of initiatives: male mentoring; an emphasis on African traditions and customs; a tutorial assistance program; an Africentric curriculum (that includes the significant contributions that African-American people have made in all academic areas), a “families” concept (consisting of family time when students are taught African art, music, etc.), and procedures and processes for student management and family intervention (Sanders, 1992).

### **What data-based evidence has been collected to assess the effectiveness and success of these programs?**

The following points synthesize some of the general research findings about the effectiveness of the Black-focused programs referenced above based on the collection of data:

- In the two public school programs, the academic success of students on state-wide measures was reported. Forty-eight percent (48%) of Chick Elementary students scored at the proficient or advanced level on Missouri Assessment Program’s four grade math test in 2005, compared to 24% of Black students and 36% of White students state-wide,” (as cited in Teicher, 2006, in Durden, 2007, p. 29). Sanford B. Ladd was the lowest performing school in the state of Missouri at its inception in 1995. By 2005 it was among the top ten highest performing schools in the state.

- The students attending the three independent school programs improved test scores demonstrated their ability to be well-rounded creative thinkers and achieved higher enrolment rates in universities (Durden, 2007).
- A small nonrandomized pretest-posttest control group study with 90 students from one of the African immersion programs and 63 students from a traditional school looked at the parameters of intellectual achievement, responsibility, attitudes toward school, and self-esteem. The results showed little evidence that students in the immersion school differed significantly from their counterparts in the traditional school, although there were some positive changes for grade 5 students in terms of their taking more responsibility for their own achievement. (Sanders, 1992).
- School success in one Michigan school focusing on at-risk Black males was measured by academic performance in reading and math (California Achievement Test), student discipline, and attendance. Results were positive for improvement across grade levels within one year of opening. For example: reading and math scores were between 13-36% higher than the district average; violations of the student code were 3% versus 5% for the district; and the overall attendance rate was at 95%, exceeding the district and control groups by 4-5%. (Watson & Smitherman, 1996).
- In the 5-year history of the charter school in Connecticut, the Black male students participating in its targeted prevention program have outscored all other students in the middle school on the Connecticut Mastery Tests (CMT). Data from Hartford Public Schools on 1999 CMT show that the percentage of students in Benjamin E. Mays Institute (BEMI) meeting or surpassing the state performance goal for middle schools in Math exceeded the Hartford school district by 20% (27% compared with 47%), while in Writing the scores were almost double (32% compared with 60%). Using Racial Identity Attitude Scale (Parham & Helms, 1985) and the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992), Gordon (2000) found higher scores in racial and ethnic identity among BEMI students (Potts, 2003).
- At an Africentric alternative school, a group of 8- to 11-year-old students worked cooperatively in groups without explicit prompting as they constructed problems, (Hooper, 1996). Hooper's observation is consistent with Boykin's (1994) findings across repeated controlled experiments that African American children prefer to work in groups cooperatively for the value of social interaction with their peers. The

animated stories they created were consistent with Nguzo Saba themes and inspired by African American heritage.

- Using a research-based approach to investigate the achievement gap between white and Black students, quantitative data in one school district showed that the dropout rate decreased by about 8%. State-wide test results at the grade 8 level narrowed between Black and White students by 1.5%. In addition, perceptions between Black and White students with regards to school climate lessened by 60% (Sadowski, 2001).
- Student, parent, and teacher perceptions about the TDSB summer institute program were very positive and report card data indicated that three quarters of the students had positive outcomes, although the program was more successful for the most at-risk students (O'Reilly & Gregory, 2006).

### **Limitations to the Africentric School Literature**

Literature regarding the effectiveness of Africentric schools is not well represented. Much of the discussion about the effectiveness of Black-centered schools is based on perceptions or anecdotal evidence. For the purposes of this particular literature review we did not find extensive empirical or statistical evidence definitely confirming the effectiveness of Black-focused schools in narrowing gaps in student success/achievement. "Without being able to demonstrate "empirical" achievement gains, forces outside (and perhaps some within) the community work against this work" (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 196).

Furthermore, while strategies to close the achievement gap between Black and White students have been frequently reported, these initiatives are mostly designed for and applied within traditional settings in regular schools. Examples include Ten School Program (TSP) in California (Maddahian, 1999); Success for All (SFA) in Tennessee, Texas, Indiana, Maryland, Pennsylvania (Slavin, 2006); First America Initiative in North Carolina (NCERC, 2001). Few of these existing programs had been systematically assessed for their effectiveness or they are currently in the process of being evaluated.

## CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

As indicated in this review, the effectiveness research regarding African-centered schools is limited, and so there is no definitive or conclusive evidence about what is the best organizational structure or framework for implementing effective practices or for closing the achievement gap between Black and White students. Generally, the existing evidence has not generated consistent results and, for the most part, the American achievement gap between Black and White students persists.

Given that Ontario Ministry of Education Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat's goal is that 75 per cent of all students will achieve or exceed the level three in literacy and numeracy by 2008, the need to focus on specific groups of students who continue to face challenges in meeting this goal must be addressed. Black children represent one such group.

Successful models, interventions and innovative programs based on best practices for attaining success for Black students need to be implemented to address the inequities. In the process, it will be necessary to address the three major influences impacting academic achievement of Black students: societal and cultural, school-based and extra-curricular and community support. In doing so, schools may need to re-conceptualize school norms and school culture must be reformed (Fashola, 2005).

The unique characteristic of school cultures and student populations in different contexts suggests that the most meaningful changes may depend on research that is locally driven. Pedro Noguera, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a member of the MSAN's Research Advisory Board indicates that researchers have only done research that tells them what they already know: that there is a gap. However, educators need research on how to change their practices so that they can create the conditions that foster high minority achievement (in Sadowski, 2001).

In the Canadian setting, the African population must deal with their own unique issues related to language, religion, culture, social labeling, cultural identity, etc. (Dei, 1995). The Canadian approach to setting up viable educational alternatives for Black youth requires more research, in-depth comparisons between Canadian context and their "US and international counterparts and further analysis of private, charter, independent and public African-centered schools in order to learn from their successes and failures" (Dei, 2006, p. 30).

Future research should closely examine our Black communities and consider the contextual and socio-political aspects of their experience when considering the



implementation of alternative school models. The most appropriate education model will depend on the context in which it is being proposed.

A wide range of indicators related to Black students' success should be discussed based on reliable, data driven and contextual research studies. In fact, the Ontario Human Rights Commission has expressly recommended that data collection based on grounds of race and disability, be undertaken in key public services, including the education system, in order to monitor, prevent and ameliorate alleged systemic and adverse discrimination.

Sadowski (2001) perhaps best summarized the most appropriate "next steps" when he suggested that "creating these conditions may involve a lot more than just raising standards. Districts may need to conduct home-grown research on student attitudes, teacher satisfaction, class size, tracking, and a myriad of other factors before they understand what goes into - and what can change - student learning."



## DEFINITIONS OF TERMINOLOGY

*Africentric schools* are based on the principles of Afrocentricity. The concept of Afrocentricity was introduced by Molefi Kete Asante, a professor of African-American studies at Temple University.

*Afrocentricity* is a theory that emerged in the early 1980s in the United States within the academic context of African-American studies. In essence, Afrocentricity represents the fact that as human beings, people of African ancestry have the right and responsibility to "center" themselves in their own subjective possibilities and potential and through the re-centering process reproduce and refine the best of themselves. The ultimate goal of Afrocentricity is the liberation of African people from the grips of Eurocentrism. The primary and indispensable mechanism to achieve this goal is the fostering of African intellectual agency.

*Afrocentrism*, *Africentric*, or *African Centered* are interchangeable terms representing the concept which categorizes a quality of thought and practice which is rooted in the cultural image and interest of people of African ancestry and which represents and reflects the life experiences, history and traditions of people of African ancestry as the center of analyses (Marks & Tonso, 2006). As a cultural configuration, the Afrocentric idea is distinguished by five characteristics: (1) an intense interest in psychological location as determined by symbols, motifs, rituals, and signs; (2) a commitment to finding the subject-place of Africans in any social, political, economic, architectural, literary, or religious phenomenon with implications for questions of sex, gender, and class; (3) a defense of African cultural elements as historically valid in the context of art, music, education, science and literature; (4) a celebration of centeredness and agency and a commitment to lexical refinement that eliminates pejoratives about Africans or other people; (5) a powerful imperative from historical sources to revise the collective text of African people. Essentially, these have remained the principal features of the Afrocentric theory since its inception in the late 1970s.

*Nguzo Saba* incorporates the following seven principles of the Africentricity: faith, cooperative economics, collective work and responsibility, self-determination, creativity, unity and purpose (Karenga in Oliver, 1989).

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