

Sankofa Healing and Restoration: A Case Study of African American Excellence and Achievement in an Urban School

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Abstract

Research on African Americans in education has generally focused on issues of school failure and an “achievement gap” discourse, which presumes that White students’ performance is the standard-bearer. However, the research on Black excellence in education is sparse, and the existing literature is often overlooked. Thus, harnessing the Akan principle of Sankofa healing and restoration, this study investigates the effects that contribute to the high-achievement of African American students in a high-performing urban school. Using a qualitative case study design, the findings of the study reveal that when students receive a high quality education they perform at high levels, and in some cases, even outperforming their peers elsewhere. The students in this study cited high quality instruction, a nurturing learning environment, and a multicultural African-centered curriculum as contributing to their success. The findings of the study and the student recommendations have great implications for research on African-centered schools, teacher education programs, and literature and research relevant to urban schools.

Key Words: African American education, Afrocentricity, student achievement, urban education reform, urban education, high performing schools, case study research

Introduction

African American student achievement is generally falsely propagated in educational research (King, 2005; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Most research on African American education focuses on the “achievement gap,” which erringly compares Black and White students’ test scores, without accounting for school inequalities and structural barriers to achievement. Additionally, the “achievement gap” narrative purports that minority students should aspire to perform like their White counterparts, who unwittingly are also underachieving. “Achievement gap” studies falsely suggest that there are measurable differences between Black and White student intelligence. The history of this pseudo-research dates back to nineteenth century propaganda, which was submersed in racism (Ferber, 1998; Gutherie, 1998; Hartigan, 2010; Sanders, 1969; Wiggan, 2007). Results from these studies are irreversibly damaging and spurious. Instead, the “achievement gap” should be more properly titled “opportunity” or “resource” gap. There are undeniable structural differences in the treatment of students across schools (Kozol, 2005). Additionally, there are observable practices that work to reverse student underachievement, including having a certified teacher in the content area, reducing class sizes, developing multicultural curricula, and utilizing culturally responsive pedagogy (Bloom & Owens, 2013; Chenoweth, 2007, 2009). This present research debunks preconceived beliefs about the “achievement gap” and high performing schools (Bloom & Owens, 2013; Chenoweth, 2007, 2009).

The erroneous claims regarding the “achievement gap” ignore the fact that *all* racial groups in the United States are underperforming (NCES, 2013a, 2013b; PISA, 2012). Results from both national and international assessments support this finding. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which is a national research organization sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, confirms that no racial group is at or above 60% proficiency in mathematics or reading (NCES, 2013a, 2013b). Additionally, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is an international comparative test, reports that *all* U.S. students fair below other industrialized Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations in critical subjects like mathematics and science (PISA, 2012). These startling statistics have led educational researchers and policymakers to create reform initiatives in U.S. schools. Yet, in recent years, educational reform has become synonymous with testing and assessment. Recent assessment efforts, such as No Child Left Behind and Common Core State Standards, focus on *testing* African American students without preemptively *redressing* systemic inequalities in schools. Some of the disparities include racial bias in discipline policies, unqualified teachers, disproportionate funding, and inequalities in course offerings (Delpit, 2006; King, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Kunjufu, 2002; Mickelson, 2001; Milner & Hoy, 2003). Another glaring disparity is the lack of non-hegemonic perspectives provided in school curricula.

As a result, most students seldom learn any Black history beyond slavery and the Civil Rights Movement in schools. With few opportunities to learn about African and African American contributions, the curriculum lacks relevancy for Black students in particular. More importantly, the strategic removal of African contributions in school curricula reifies cultural hegemony. It is important to acknowledge these educational conditions in order to better comprehend African American student achievement with greater accuracy.

Despite the educational disparities mentioned, there are several high-performing urban schools such as Centennial Place Elementary in Atlanta, Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School in St. Paul [Minnesota], M. Hall Stanton Elementary in Philadelphia [Pennsylvania], and Osmond A. Church School in The Bronx [New York], which operate as anomalies within their respective districts (Chenoweth, 2007, 2009). Additionally, in the Harlem Children's Zone in New York and Animo Leadership School in Boston, Massachusetts, more than 90% of these low-income minority students graduate high school and are admitted into a college or university. Each of these schools promotes academic excellence for *all* students (Ali & Jerald, 2001; Ancess, 2003; Bell, 2001; Chenoweth, 2007, 2009; Dantley, 2010; Elias & Haynes, 2008; Haberman, 2000; Reeves, 2003). In terms of high performing schools that primarily serve African American students, there is developing research on Afrocentric education (Hopkins, 1997; King, Swartz, Campbell, Lemons-Smith & López, 2014; Murrell, 2002; Webb, 1996). High performing Afrocentric schools encourage the use of effective teaching practices and non-hegemonic course materials. It is important to better understand these school practices and investigate the ways in which the curriculum improves student achievement. To accomplish this task, this paper uses a qualitative case study method to explore perceptions and experiences of teachers and students at a high-performing Afrocentric school in the Southeast. Additionally, this paper examines the utility of non-hegemonic curricula for African American students.

The Mis-education of 21st Century Students

As mentioned, one of the most critical areas of educational reform is the curriculum, which remains fundamentally unchanged in U.S. schools (Dei, 1994, 1996, 2012). In public schools, textbooks and pedagogical practices have reinforced the same White, European narrative for centuries. This undeniably reifies cultural hegemony and damages African American student ethos through curriculum violence (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2011). Curriculum violence is a term which describes the emotional and psychological damages of hegemony as transmitted through the curriculum. Curricular hegemony is not a new phenomenon. Over eighty years ago, Carter G. Woodson identified the dangerous effects of ideological domination in his seminal work, *Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933). Eighty three years later, U.S. students still suffer from mis-education. Today's 21st century schools lack multiculturalism, diversity, and non-hegemonic perspectives in subjects like reading, language arts, social studies, history, and science (Akbar, 1998; Loewen, 1995). African American students in particular, often only learn about their culture through lessons on slavery and the Civil Rights Movement.

This ignores critical information regarding African contributions to the world and produces curriculum violence (Akbar, 1998; Asante, 1990; Clarke, 1977; Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2011; Karenga, 2002; Kunjufu, 2002; Obenga, 2004). As a result, the school curriculum is completely irrelevant for many African American students (Dei, 2012; Gay, 2000; King, 2005; King, Swartz, Campbell, Lemons-Smith & López, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The systemic removal of African contributions from the curriculum is a strategy that pervasively pontificates hegemony and white supremacy ideology. This psychological and institutional attack and violence on Black children requires healing and restoration (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2011). The concept of “Sankofa” for students is an Akan principle that means to “go back and fetch” (King, Swartz, Campbell, Lemons-Smith, & López, 2014). In terms of education, Sankofa encourages restoration and healing. Sankofa is crucial in the process of reversing mis-education and cultural hegemony.

As noted, U.S. students who are not of European descent have little opportunity to learn from a curriculum that reflects their own cultural identity. It is important to expose students to this form of corrective history. History demonstrates that African American students have a lineage of excellence in education (Ani, 1994; Asante, 1990; Clarke, 1993; Jackson, 1970; Karenga, 2002; Williams, 1987). Africans were producers of science, mathematics, philosophy, religion, and literature long before the Western world came in contact with the Kemetian/Egyptian region (Asante, 1990; Clarke, 1977; Diop, 1974, 1981, 1987; Kunjufu, 2002; Obenga, 2004). Yet, in many U.S. schools, African American students have lost connection to this rich academic heritage. Thus, it is important for U.S. teachers to reignite the genius within every Black child (Wilson, 1992). One approach to awakening Black genius is to implement an Afrocentric/African-centered approach to education.

Formation of Afrocentric Schools

Afrocentric/African-centered schooling is based on the theoretical framework of Afrocentricity. For the purpose of this paper, Afrocentricity and African-centeredness are used interchangeably. Molefi Asante (1991) describes Afrocentricity as the re-centering of African perspectives at the core of analysis. Additionally, Afrocentricity removes African people from the margins of history and society and makes them *participants*, not *objects*, in the creation of their own narratives. Molefi Asante is most known for the contemporary definition of Afrocentricity. However, it is important to note that key Pan-African and Black Nationalist figures such as Marcus Garvey, Theophilus Albert Marryshow, W.E.B. DuBois, and Kwame Nkrumah, for example, helped to lay the foundation for today’s Afrocentric work. Additionally, before these Pan-African and Black Nationalist scholars emerged, Martin Delany, Alexander Crummell, and Robert Campbell were also important in the formation of African centered thought.

Pan Africanism and Black Nationalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries provided the foundation for Afrocentricity, a term which was coined years later. In the 1960s and 70s, Afrocentric schools were formed to provide alternative education (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000). One of the first examples, the Nairobi Day School, opened its doors in 1966 in East Palo Alto, California as a supplementary Saturday school. Its primary mission was to teach "...African and African American history, culture, and language as the basis of its curriculum and [the school] made use of pedagogical techniques that responded to African American children's learning styles" (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000, p. 17). In addition to the Nairobi Day School, other Afrocentric schools opened in the 1960s and 70s, including the Afro-American School of Culture in Los Angeles, Omowale Ujamaa in Pasadena, The Winnie Mandela Children's Learning Village in Compton, and The Marcus Garvey School of Los Angeles (Kifano, 1996, p. 210). These schools were created to provide relevant curricula for African American students.

The 1980s and 90s witnessed a surge in Afrocentric schools, through the implementation of district immersion programs (Dei, 1994; Hopkins, 1997; Hopson, Hotep, Schneider, & Turrene, 2010; Kifano, 1996; Leake & Leake, 1992; Manley, 1997; Murrell, 1993; Sanders & Reed, 1995; Webb, 1996). This widespread emergence led educational researchers to document student achievement at Afrocentric schools. Most of the research in the 1990s comparatively assessed traditional and Afrocentric schools. Researchers found that students attending Afrocentric schools fared better cognitively, socially, emotionally and academically than students in traditional schools (Dei, 1994; Hopkins, 1997; Hopson, Hotep, Schneider, & Turrene, 2010; Kifano, 1996; Leake & Leake, 1992; Manley, 1997; Murrell, 1993; Sanders & Reed, 1995; Webb, 1996). Similarly, Sanders and Reed (1995), Anselmi and Peters (1995), and Webb (1996) studied Afrocentric schools and observed increased academic and cognitive achievement among students. These high achieving outcomes resulted from cultural veneration, mentoring, student-centered learning, positive affirmation, familial classroom environment, high quality instruction, and community engagement (Dei, 1994; Hopkins, 1997; Kifano, 1996; Leake & Leake, 1992; Manley, 1997; Murrell, 1993; Sanders & Reed, 1995; Webb, 1996).

Aside from the aforementioned strategies mentioned, the curriculum is another key difference in Afrocentric and traditional schools. Pilot cities such as Milwaukee, Portland, Detroit, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Atlanta implemented the 1987 *Portland Baseline Essays* to teach non-traditional curricula. The *Portland Baseline Essays* (1987), spearheaded by Dr. Asa Hilliard III, was a geocultural project aimed to provide diverse curricula to students. These essays spanned across seven academic subjects including: art, language arts, music, social science, physical education and health, mathematics, and science and technology. Course materials were written from four cultural perspectives to include the contributions of African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latino/Latina American cultures. The African American essays featured contributions from John Henrik Clark, Michael Harris, Joyce Braden Harris, Beatrice Lumpkin, Hunter Havelin Adams, and John Charshee Lawrence-McIntyre.

The *Baseline Essays* were especially unique because they comprehensively provided a historically accurate version of school curricula. Although the essays featured the contributions of four cultural groups, the curriculum was written acknowledging Africa as the dawn of the human family tree. Because of this, the *Baseline Essays* were Afrocentric by design.

Afrocentricity and Inclusion

The idea of Afrocentric schooling is often misunderstood as simply adding African facts and history into the existing curriculum (Dei, 2012; Joyce, 2005; King, Swartz, Campbell, Lemons-Smith & López, 2014; Murrell, 2002). This is an indecorous claim. Today, most Afrocentric schools teach traditional state curriculum standards. Yet, instead of teaching curriculum standards from a Eurocentric perspective, Afrocentric schools use an African-centered lens. This still allows Afrocentric schools to provide all necessary course subjects. To teach Afrocentric lessons, teachers often re-center traditional course materials and lessons to showcase African perspectives. These lessons acknowledge Africa as the motherland of humanity and human civilization. This provides students with corrective history and a more diverse approach to learning. As a result, Afrocentric education is more *inclusive* than traditional schools.

As mentioned, Afrocentric schools re-frame history with Africa at the beginning of the human timeline, not centuries later after the arrival of European invaders. This exonerates ideological oppression found in Eurocentric narratives. Whereas European history marginalizes every other cultural group (Asante, 1998; Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2011; King, 2005; Loewen, 1995; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003), Afrocentricity does not. Afrocentric curriculum teaches world history, which includes diverse cultural perspectives, including European. Brown (1996) contends:

Afrocentrism is not intended to be, nor is it in fact, a racist orientation. Children of dominant group members will benefit as well as with the inclusion of the Afrocentric perspective in the curriculum. Nor is Afrocentrism a replacement for anything currently being taught beyond correcting certain myths, stereotypes, and presenting a factually documentable version of human history. Afrocentrism is a fundamental, integral and essential element of curriculum which will result in improved performance for all students. (p. 111)

This distinguishes Afrocentricity from other educational perspectives. Acknowledging Africa's rightful place in history and human discourse, which is the beginning of the human family tree, is *inclusive* of all cultural groups and students. As a result, Afrocentricity is useful for all students, regardless of their race; for indeed, the concept of race was not created until the 15th century.

Additionally, Afrocentricity also embraces diversity by removing racism from the curriculum. Dei (1996) found Afrocentricity to be an effective way of implementing anti-racism curricula in the classroom. Dei (1996) notes:

Although Afrocentricity is a world-view embraced in opposition to the subjugation of non-White peoples by Eurocentrism, it is not an attempt to replace one form of hegemony with another. Knowledge of indigenous African cultural values is important for the personal development and schooling of all students. A critical reading of the history of colonialism and neo-colonialism in Africa, and an acknowledgement of the achievements of peoples of African descent, both in their own right and in broader human development, will be helpful to the progressive politics of educational and social change. (Dei, 1996, p. 181)

Dei (1996, 2012) asserts that a focus on Afrocentricity is not oppositional to other forms of knowledge. In fact, it welcomes a plurality of varying perspectives and cultural experiences. This positions Afrocentricity as a non-hegemonic framework. Additionally, Afrocentricity removes racial oppression by disseminating *factual* information and presenting truth. This is the bedrock for critical and anti-racist education (ibid).

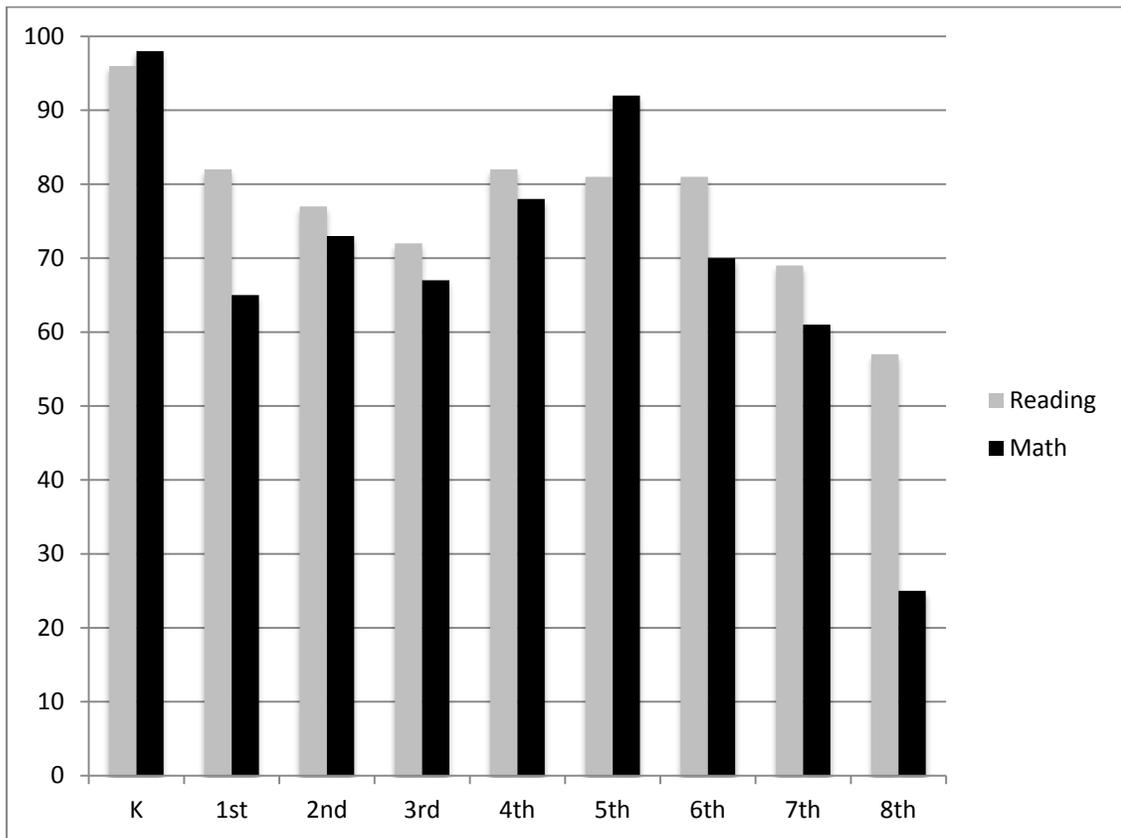
Method and Analysis

The research on Afrocentric schools is growing gradually. Yet still in the 21st century there is little research documenting these schools and the utility of non-hegemonic, anti-racist curricula from the perspective of students and teachers. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore Afrocentric schools in the 21st century. More specifically, this study aims to answer the following research question: *What are the experiences and perceptions of students and teachers at a high performing Afrocentric school?*

Since the study intended to capture the experiences at one specific school, a single case study method was the most suitable qualitative approach. In this study, the single school site – Carter G. Woodson Academy or CGWA (pseudonym) – was the case. The school is located in the Southeast region of Atlanta, Georgia where the dropout rate is more than 50% for African Americans and the schools score below the state average on state assessments, and the unemployment rate is 2.5 times higher for African Americans than for other demographic groups in the region.

The study was conducted during the 2014-2015 academic year, and was primarily concerned with the perspectives and experiences of students and teachers at CGWA (Yin, 2003). The real-life context for this study was the overall learning environment at CGWA, which is observably different than traditional public schools. Students and teachers proved to be the most crucial participants. To obtain data, students and teachers were interviewed and observed in class. Since this study has a single case, the CGWA school site, it was imperative to obtain multiple sources of data, which included interviews, observations, and school records (Creswell, 2013). CGWA is a high-performing K-8th grade Afrocentric private school in a metropolitan urban city in the southeast United States. CGWA was selected because of its record on student achievement and its unique curriculum. It is important to note that CGWA is comprised 100% of African American students and teachers. To better understand its unique learning environment, it is important to first recognize the school's academic achievement ratings. The 2014 student achievement scores reflect the most recent school data. Below are the results from the *Stanford Achievement Test* and the *Otis-Lennon School Ability Tests*.

Figure 1: 2014 CGWA student achievement scores (K-8th grade)



Students' scores were compiled by grade and averaged (see Figure 1). Overall, in 2014, the average achievement percentages for CGWA were 77% in reading and 70% in mathematics. In comparison to the local public school district, CGWA scored at least 15% higher in both reading and mathematics (NCES, 2013c, 2013d). This is also important to note when considering Afrocentric schools' record of high student achievement.

Participant Selection

In this study, the participants were selected using purposive sampling. Since the case study design requires as many data sources as possible (Yin, 2003), 15 students and 4 teachers were selected using purposive sampling. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were used for all of the participants. The sampling procedures aimed to select CGWA students and teachers with the longest tenure. Since the nature of this study required students to critically reflect on issues of race, older students in 7th and 8th grade were recruited, but students in the earlier grades were also interviewed. Additionally, since the study required students to reflect on their Afrocentric schooling experiences, it was best to select participants who had been at CGWA the longest. Table one and two display demographic data on the teachers and students in this study.

Table 1: CGWA student participant demographic data

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Grade	Years at CGWA
Andre	Male	12	7 th	7
Bobby	Male	13	8 th	9
Chase	Male	12	7 th	7
Deseree	Female	12	7 th	9
Edward	Male	13	8 th	1
Faith	Female	12	7 th	7
Grayshwan	Male	14	8 th	7
Heather	Female	12	7 th	9
Ike	Male	14	8 th	5
Jeremy	Male	13	7 th	1
Kenya	Female	13	8 th	3
Lydia	Female	12	7 th	1
Madison	Female	13	7 th	1
Nathan	Male	14	8 th	2
Octavia	Female	12	7 th	2

Table 2: CGWA teacher participant demographic data

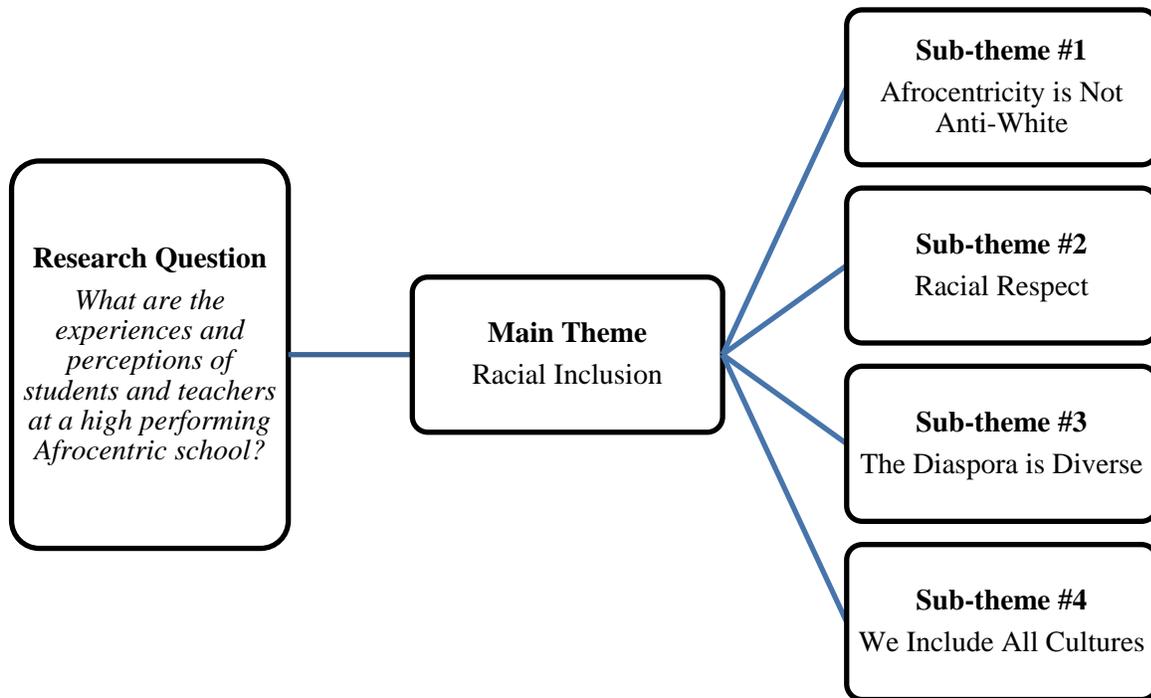
Pseudonym	Sex	Age
Ms. Harrison	F	50s
Ms. Samuels	F	40s
Mr. Grey	M	30s
Mr. Lancaster	M	30s

Data Analysis

Teachers conducted two 45-minute interviews, totaling 1.5 hours per teacher. And students conducted one 30-minute interview. To capture the participants' authentic experiences, teachers and students were asked different interview questions [See Appendix A-B]. Once data were collected, the analysis process included open and axial coding (Creswell, 2013; Glense, 2011). Open coding was used first in order to glean from the participants' experiences. From there, patterns and connections were made using axial coding (Creswell, 2013). Themes and sub-themes were determined by frequency. In order to be considered a theme, at least one-half of the participants had to respond similarly. For subthemes, one-fourth of the participants had to respond similarly. It is important to note that students and teachers were analyzed using the same codes. Using the aforementioned data methods and analysis procedures, the next section presents the study's findings.

Findings

Teachers and students were asked about their perspectives on African-centered education. Teachers were also asked: What is the role of Afrocentricity in teaching African American student? How would you describe an African-centered education? And, what are the benefits of African-centered curriculum models for students of color? Students, on the other hand, were asked: Do you believe anyone could attend this school? Why or why not? How has this school shaped your knowledge about Africa, African history, and/or African American events? And, how have African traditions helped you view yourself (See Appendix A and B)? The primary theme that emerged from the student and teacher responses was a description of *Racial Inclusion* within Afrocentric education. Inclusion, in this sense, describes the cultural *inclusiveness* of CGWA's curriculum, pedagogy, and school practices. Since many of the students had attended other schools before attending CGWA, their first-hand experiences were critical when comparing Afrocentric and traditional public education. Within the primary theme, four subthemes emerged including: *Afrocentricity is Not Anti-White*, *Racial Respect*, *The Diaspora is Diverse*, and *We Include all Cultures* (See Figure 2).



Each of these subthemes came directly from the participants’ responses. The remainder of this section will outline the key responses related to the aforementioned themes and subthemes.

To begin this discussion, it is important to note the following observation of Ms. Harrison’s social studies lesson. Here, kindergarten and 1st grade students were participating in a lesson on colonialism in the United States. The field notes from this observation are as follows:

Thursday, November 20th
10:20 am

Ms. Harrison led K-1st grade students in a discussion about the Wampanoag Native American Tribe. One of the students said that the English settlers helped the Native Americans – but before Ms. Harrison could say anything – children interrupted and said “NO! The Native Americans helped the settlers! They were there first!” Later in the lesson, Ms. Harrison asked, “What kinds of foods do you think the Native Americans ate who lived along the coast?” One of the students said corn. Another said fish. Ms. Harrison said, “Very good... why do you think they ate fish?” she asked? After about three tries, one of the students said, “Because they were near water and rivers and that means they were fishermen!” Ms. Harrison then proceeded in a lesson on how the Native Americans were resourceful and kind.

The above narrative depicts a non-hegemonic approach to familiar lessons in social studies. Instead of perpetuating the falsities taught in traditional public schools, Ms. Harrison engaged her kindergarten and 1st grade class in a lesson essentially on race. In this lesson, the class explored non-European culture in-depth. Even at 1st grade, students were allowed to critique and probe erroneous claims regarding Christopher Columbus and the European arrival in the Americas. Ms. Harrison moved beyond the proverbial and trivial “First Thanksgiving” story, and allowed students to critically explore a local Native American tribe’s lifestyle. This adds a counter-narrative to the “traditional” American history story.

Interviews with teachers confirmed the widespread applicability of lessons like the one observed in Ms. Harrison’s class. Mr. Lancaster, for example, notes that Afrocentric curriculum can be used in interdisciplinary contexts, meaning across academic subjects. He states, “Of course we teach other cultures. That’s the cool thing about us. For example, we have war history and Georgia history, and so on.” He adds, “Afrocentricity can be used across-disciplines... For example, if we talk about Harriet Tubman, she understood how maps worked, you know. She was a mathematician as well. She was also an astronomer. Topics can go so many different ways.” Similarly, students provided their perspectives on Afrocentric schooling. They particularly note that Africa, by default, includes a myriad of other cultures and subjects. This surfaced as a positive school attribute. One student, Deseree states:

All [of our] roots really relate back to Africa. Everyone is connected when you think about it. Everyone has branched out. The identifications may have changed but eventually we’re all centered around one thing, just in different ways... We’re all connected because of the motherland.

Similar to Deseree, Faith notes, “You were brought here... life didn’t start here, you weren’t born here... your life and your culture wasn’t originally born here. So it kind of changed my outlook on Africa, that maybe actually it is a motherland instead of just another continent.” Bobby adds, “Africa is the motherland, because that’s where our, our original home and our original um, cultures came from. They came from Africa. Like [many] instruments came from Africa, the first government came from Africa, the first civilization, the um, Black people came from Africa.” Heather also mentions Africa as the motherland. She notes:

I would say Africa is the motherland because... I think of the Black people of course. I think of developing businesses, doctors, architects, and all these phenomenal people. They paved the way and made it possible, so they remind me this is where I come from too.

Similarly, teachers provided their perspective. Mr. Grey notes, “Well if you tell the truth, you know, everybody came from Africa. Every human being, the oldest human fossils... prove that all human development, at least modern human development came from or can be traced back to East Africa.” Each of these participants mention Africa’s preeminent role in history and consider it as the starting place for subsequent civilizations. The above narratives frame Africa as the beginning and Afrocentric education as a culturally inclusive framework, through its multicultural and interdisciplinary perspective. This is important to consider when discussing Afrocentricity and widespread racial inclusion within current school curricula.

Afrocentricity is not Anti-White

The first subtheme under the overall theme of *Racial Inclusion* addresses a key point: *Afrocentricity is not Anti-White*. This subtheme surfaced when asking students and teachers to reflect on their experiences at CGWA. Mr. Lancaster admits:

I think a lot of people think being pro-Black or Afrocentric is being anti-White... and that doesn’t, it’s absolutely not what it means. It just means being proud of who you are, and being proud of who you are will take you so far. I think it’s so important for children to really understand their self-worth and if you give them that and they will be better human beings, you know. I just think they’ll be better citizens, I mean it just goes across the board. They will be able to navigate um, a lot more assertively in the society that they live in, because they know who they are and where they come from.

Mr. Grey also explains what Afrocentricity means from his perspective. He mentions, “Afrocentricity means that you take your cosmology and the way you look at the world out of a European contexts and instead, you’re placing the African person and the African experience at the center of that understanding.” Additionally, he mentions that this “centeredness” helps shape Afrocentric education. He adds:

I think an African centered or Afrocentric education isn’t just necessarily the facts that you learn, that you’re just learning all these Black history facts, but that the Black student becomes the center of his or her own education. And they have a sense of self, first, before they begin to start understanding all these things around them. And then that way, that’s established and then everything that they learn, that they can learn, they’re able to say whether it’s true or false, whether it applies to them or not. Whether they take it, they learn it for a test and then they leave it, because they’re understanding things from their own Black perspective, their own Black centeredness.

Mr. Grey provides additional insights into the role of Afrocentric education in restructuring curriculum. He states:

With Afrocentricity you, you reverse all of the things that was taken away from us during segregation and during colonialism and during slavery and during the Middle Passage, and you give all that back and bring all that out of our students when you give them an Afrocentric education. So that they can have that connection to greatness, and once they have that connection to greatness and they can walk in greatness, and then that makes for a much, much better future for our communities.

In regards to teaching Black students, Mr. Grey emphasizes how important culturally centered pedagogy is for effective teaching. He adds:

I always believe that if you can see yourself inside of what you're learning, then it's more applicable to you. You know what I mean, if you're, if you're looking in a book and you don't see nobody that looks like you or you're learning about all these things, you learn about math formulas and all this stuff, and none of it traces back to you, you might know it but it doesn't really stick with you. Because you can't, you can't relate to it, you know what I mean. But if you're learning math, when I was teaching math I would start off every year by saying that the Pythagorean Theorem was not created by Pythagoras, it was created by ancient Egyptians and all this other kind of stuff, so that they see that people that look like me came up with this stuff. So this whole notion that Black people can't or they just don't understand math, is preposterous because the first mathematicians in the world was Black and so this is in me, I can do this. All I have to do is just go inside myself and pull it out, but I can do this because all the people that came before me did this, you know what I mean. And when we talk about engineering, you know that the laying out the foundation of Washington D.C. was designed by Benjamin Banneker, so they understand that they are completely capable.

In addition to providing students with a culturally centered outlook, Mr. Grey explains the importance of Afrocentric education. However, he argues that this perspective is missing from "traditional" school context. He shares:

I think Afrocentricity is necessary. I believe having an understanding of who you are first before you come to the table of diversity, it's absolutely necessary for education, it's absolutely necessary for disseminating knowledge and receiving an education. Um, and I tell my students all the time, yeah you're in a predominately Black school where you understand who you are and your history and that sort of thing, but how silly would you look if you went, you know, you're at a table with some Asian guys and White guys, Latino/Latina people, all these different people from all these different walks of life and they're all talking about who they are and where they come from and what they eat and important people in their history and all you can say is Dr. King. You know what I mean?

Like, you, you have nothing to contribute to overall knowledge, you have nothing to contribute to human understanding if you don't know who you are, so you've got to know... You've got to have an understanding of yourself and your history so that when people come to you, they don't just see you based on what they see on television, they don't see you based on what someone else thinks you are, but they see who you are based on what you know about who you are. This is why Afrocentricity is absolutely necessary for these students.

Mr. Lancaster's and Mr. Grey's comments dispel many misconceived beliefs regarding Afrocentricity and its role for students. Their narratives affirm Afrocentricity as a humanistic approach, not an anti-White approach.

Racial Respect

Racial respect was also included in the theme of *Racial Inclusion*. Students and teachers demonstrated knowledge of African history and a desire for other racial groups to understand the importance of their heritage. Whereas teachers provided commentary about their perspectives on Afrocentricity and Afrocentric education, students also commented on whether other racial groups can benefit from CGWA's teaching styles. One-fourth of the participants expressed their desire to have increased racial "respect" from non-Black students. One particular student, Grayshawn, states, "Considering that [CGWA] is predominately Black, of course we're going to learn about our history. I feel that it would be great for a non-Black person to attend this school because they can get an insight on the Black world. How we live everyday life, it may be different from how they're living." Nathan adds, "I believe that all people, like Caucasian, Mexican, Latino/Latina, they should come here 'cause they get to learn our history more and to see what um, what African Americans and their race did together." Jeremy also adds, "I feel like... [non-Black students] could definitely learn to be more respectful to other cultures and to just, make sure you think before you say certain things and be mindful of your actions." Like Nathan and Jeremy, other CGWA students provided their rationale for wanting other non-Black students to attend Afrocentric schools. Andre shares:

The education here is good even if you're like of a different racial background, the education is still good... It'd be cool if everyone learned Black history because not everybody thinks of Black people as, as a great people... I think [non-Black students] would have a higher level of respect for um, for others. 'Cause, not everybody knows where you came from. What you've been through.

This demonstrated need for racial respect can be attributed to many CGWA students who have peers outside of school who are of diverse racial backgrounds. Instead of learning more hegemony, like their peers at traditional public and private schools, CGWA students saw Afrocentric schooling as a better alternative. In their words, it demands respect. Chase, a seventh grade student, provides insight regarding the benefits of all students learning from an Afrocentric perspective. He states:

I feel like there's a reason why people turn out these ways... So I feel like, every race should be taught about our history... Actually I feel like White students should know, I mean not to single them out or anything cause not all White kids are racist or anything like that... I feel like they should know what their ancestors did to us and how cruel, and rude and cruel they were to our people so they should know what we went through and know to not let it ever happen again.

For Chase, Nathan, Grayshawn, and Andre, having other students learn Black History was necessary in order to achieve increased racial understanding. The students' knowledge of Africa's rightful place in history allows each of them to have a more factual worldview. Many of them, in turn, wanted this same knowledge to be disseminated amongst peers of other racial groups. Acknowledging Africa as the motherland is a perspective that *includes* all subsequent cultures and social groups. One particular teacher, Ms. Samuels, expresses how non-Blacks could also benefit from learning about Black history. Ms. Samuels notes:

I believe that all cultures need to know about the beauty of the African American culture and the truth behind it... I think the truth sets you free. You know, if people had a more well-rounded curriculum and more culturally sensitive curriculum in all situations, I believe we might have a better world, personally. I mean, I am an optimist, but if we could understand each other a little bit better... and then maybe we're able to work some things out and change some point of views about other groups of people. You know, all Black people *can't* dance, you know, all White people are not against Black America. You know, and just to have those truths out there because we're not always teaching our kids the truth. And that's where hatred comes, and that's where racism and isolation and all that comes.

In Ms. Samuels' view, all students should learn Black History in order to help improve race relations in the U.S. This highlights another important subtheme that also emerged from the data – the diversity of the African Diaspora.

The Diaspora is Diverse

Many participants expressed racial respect based on their observations of Afrocentric education's diverse qualities. Teachers and students explained the interconnectivity of people across the African Diaspora, which allows students to better understand world history. As noted, this is connected to the larger theme of *Racial Inclusion* because of the participants' acknowledgement of Africa's role in the human family tree. The subtheme *The Diaspora is Diverse* emerged from the participants' interviews, and specifically surfaced when students and teachers noted their opinions about Black history. One student, Deseree, noted her appreciation for all of Black history and explained how cultural appropriation expanded African diversity. She notes:

When you think about it, every culture came to Africa to either capture or overcome. The Europeans came and they tried to take us to America. And I think that we may have influenced the world spiritually because... no matter what we always overcame. When we were whipped, we still had joy, we got married, we went to church, we were determined to do whatever we can, and I think that's in so many cultures that have come into Africa. Like overall, they have learned lessons and they may have taken it back to their countries and talked about it.

Deseree acknowledges Africa's influence on world history. Similarly, Kenya also adds that an African view of world history is "multicultural," which is essential for understanding the Diaspora. She adds:

I've gone on field trips and learned about the different people in the Diaspora. It's more multicultural, so I've become more of a multicultural person. I have learned about so many cultures in my classes because, like they say there are African people on every continent. That's really cool... When they told me that, I didn't believe it. But now I do, because African people all look different and you can't really tell what's African or Black anymore.

Teachers also recognized the historical influence of Africa in other cultures. Mr. Grey states:

[We] are just so connected in so many different ways we don't even realize it. So when you talk about the African Diaspora, it's world history. I went to Paris recently, I never seen so many Black people! I didn't know there were that many Black people in Paris. It was crazy! Man, the Diaspora is just, so diverse. I had no idea but when you don't talk about the African presence in France and in all these different places, then we don't know how much we're all connected.

These narratives provide insight into the participants' perspectives on Afrocentric education, as well as whether they identify the curriculum as inclusive of other cultures. The participants noted the diversity of the African Diaspora. This confirms that the curriculum at CGWA underscore African diversity. Additionally, most of the interviewees acknowledged Africa's influence around the globe.

We Include all Cultures

The last subtheme that emerged from the data concludes the findings in an appropriate way. In addition to the diversity of the Diaspora, culture is another important aspect of the students' and teachers' experiences at CGWA. The last subtheme, *We Include all Cultures*, relates to the overarching theme of racial inclusion. This subtheme surfaced throughout interview narratives.

As noted, cultural inclusion is premised on historical facts that position Africa as the starting place of humanity. When teachers were asked about the benefits of CGWA's curriculum design, they commented on the importance of using an African lens when teaching students. Ms. Samuels explains that she covers all disciplines in her class, but mentions that introducing a non-European perspective is important. She describes:

We teach about European settlers, but we tell them the truth. The kids here will tell you that they know what they know. That Christopher Columbus a person who must've been 'intoxicated' to think that he discovered something when people were clearly already living there... He wasn't really stable in his mind and how could he really find a place where the Native Americans lived. They talk about their African American history and they talk about Native American history, because you know, it's comparable history.

Similarly, Mr. Grey also shares:

Before I got here, I thought that an Afrocentric education was where you just learn Black history... nothing White, nothing or anything else. Now I see it as very different. Um, I think an African centered education does not necessarily mean that you don't know anything else, that you don't understand anybody else's history or understand British literature or Spanish literature. All it means is that you're putting the education and the African student in the center and you're showing them that all of these things come from you.

He continues:

So when I teach history, I teach history from all over. Like right now, we're learning Russian history and you know, and European history and all this other kind of stuff but I start off every year with Africa so that they understand that was the beginning of civilization. [African] civilization was the first, you know what I'm saying, human civilization and so, they understand that all these things that happen, come out of them.

Teachers noted that Afrocentric curriculum is both interdisciplinary and intercultural. Students also mention the cultural inclusion of Afrocentric education. Heather notes, "I mean I know it is like focused around Afro, Afrocentric, but we also know a lot about other people so first, but first you have to know about yourself. But then once you know about yourself, you can learn about everybody else." This highlights the cultural fluidity and flexibility of Afrocentric school designs. The introduction of non-African cultural groups in Mr. Grey's and Mr. Lancaster's classes, for example, provides evidence of Afrocentricity's non-exclusive nature. Heather's narrative also demonstrates a recognition and appreciation for other cultures. As displayed in the interview data and classroom observations, Afrocentric schools teach more than Black history.

Discussion

The above teacher and student narratives are particularly relevant when considering many of today's civil rights issues and news stories surrounding race relations. Immersing students in conversations on race and identity is especially timely in light of recent events in counties and cities like Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore, Maryland; Charleston, South Carolina; and Waller County, Texas. As the U.S. grapples with ways to respond to racism, which is now being visually documented on camera, students at CGWA see utility in Afrocentricity as a way to educate and raise awareness across the nation. Many participants noted how the Afrocentric perspective, not European, is inclusive of other groups. In addition to the social benefits of CGWA, in terms of racial inclusion, there were academic benefits as well. As mentioned, CGWA students performed at least fifteen percent above students in the surrounding public school district (see Figure 1). The frivolous claim that suggest Afrocentric schools teach nothing more than Black history is demystified when considering CGWA students excelled in every academic subject. These key observations are important to consider when further analyzing the data.

At CGWA, the teachers and students found Afrocentricity to be an *inclusive* educational framework. CGWA students described how their education was meaningful and relevant to all students. This finding is based on the fact that Afrocentricity is not racially oppositional (Asante, 1991, 2003, 2009; Dei, 2006, 2012; King, Swartz, Campbell, Lemons-Smith & López, 2014; Murrell, 2002).

Instead, CGWA promotes the understanding of Africa's role in human civilization. Erroneous claims regarding Afrocentricity propagating essentialist views (Gates, 1991; Lefkowitz, 1997; Ravitch, 1990), disregard the fact that Afrocentric schools still teach core subjects. As demonstrated in the data, these schools simply use Africa as the starting place for discussion. Additionally, Afrocentricity provides the lens for Black students to see themselves.

Starting with Africa as the dawn of humanity is key when realigning students with accurate history and anthropological facts. To illustrate the importance of this paradigm shift, Mr. Grey compares CGWA to traditional schools that use hegemonic, Eurocentric curricula. Mr. Grey explains:

If you have a Latino/Latina person who is only understanding things from a Eurocentric perspective, that's problematic, as well as an Asian person or whoever. It's problematic because number one, it's false. Europe doesn't really come on the scene and contribute to world knowledge until thousands and thousands of years later. So you're not accounting for all of this knowledge and all of this understanding that other people are bringing to the world. So it's false, it's not real.

Mr. Grey argued that *only* an Afrocentric curriculum, which situates Africa at the beginning of human history, could include *all* students. Because of this historical realignment, CGWA student and teacher participants considered their Afrocentric education to be important.

Similar to Mr. Grey's remarks, Asante (2003) describes the usefulness of Afrocentricity as a response to hegemonic oppression. He notes:

[Afrocentricity is] a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interest, values and perspectives predominate. In regards to theory, it is the placing of African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena. Thus it is possible for anyone to master the discipline of seeking the location of Africans in a given phenomena. In terms of action and behavior, it is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behavior. Finally, Afrocentricity seeks to enshrine the idea that blackness itself is a trope of ethics. Thus to be [Black] is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia and white racial domination. (Asante, 2003, p. 2)

Asante's analysis suggests that Afrocentricity responds to various forms of oppression. By design, the theory is inclusive. This is important when examining its utility in schools. Unlike the Eurocentric framework, Afrocentric schools like CGWA use non-hegemonic, anti-oppressive narratives (Dei, 2006, 2012; King, Swartz, Campbell, Lemons-Smith & López, 2014; Murrell, 2002). Thus, Afrocentricity should be explored as a *human* project, not just a race-specific one.

The realignment of propaganda with historical fact is a pedagogical technique that could benefit all students, not just African Americans (Akbar, 1998; King, Swartz, Campbell, Lemons-Smith & López, 2014; Nieto, 1992). Additionally, repositioning Africa to a well-respected place of importance is crucial for all racial groups.

Conclusion

Today, most mainstream research that masquerades as having a focus on Black education is really defamation. Aforementioned “achievement gap” studies ignore research on high-performing African American schools. Additionally, “achievement gap” research fails to address school-level inequalities that prevent African American students from gaining equal access to quality education (Irvine, 1990; Kozol, 2005; Kunjufu, 2002; Mickelson, 2001). As captured in this study, one critical area of education reform is the curriculum. It is an extreme disservice when schools fail to offer *all* students, African Americans in particular, cultural history that is factual and venerating. As Na'im Akbar (1998) suggests, education has a sort of self-healing power when it is relevant and self-reflecting. Under the traditional public school model, this opportunity is often not available.

The findings reveal that implementing non-hegemonic curricula is socially and culturally beneficial for students, especially in the area of racial identity and awareness. The results of this study are especially important when considering the lack of multiculturalism found in traditional public schools. Research on high performing schools demonstrates that students benefit from affirmation, smaller classroom sizes, mentoring, academic rigor, and adult advocacy (Chenoweth, 2007; Delpit, 2006; Evans-Winters, 2011; Irvine, 1990; King, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Kunjufu, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Milner & Hoy, 2003; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). These educational practices have been researched for decades. However, there has been a lack of focus on implementing real reform. Most public schools teach Eurocentric, hegemonic perspectives which undermine non-White accomplishments. The students and teachers at CGWA suggest that Afrocentricity is an appropriate response to cultural hegemony generally found in public schools. In order to address the systemic and pervasive damages caused by centuries of racist and irrelevant curricula, schools must aim to reverse mis-education. In the spirit of Sankofa, it is important to “go back and fetch” lost information that students do not receive in traditional school settings. Also in the spirit of Sankofa, it is important to acknowledge the natural genius in every Black child (King, 2005; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Wilson, 1992). This research confirms the benefit of restructuring school curricula to better relate to 21st century students. Additionally, the research supports the utility of Afrocentricity as a response to racial and cultural *inclusion*. Based on these findings, it is important to explore widespread curriculum reform in U.S. schools that focus on equity and high quality education for all.

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Appendix A: Student Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself. How long have you been at CGWA?
2. What do you like about this school? What do you dislike about this school?
3. How do you view your teachers here at this school?
4. What are some things you've learned at this school that remind you of Africa?
5. Do you feel your education here at CGWA has helped you?
6. What African traditions do you see at this school?
7. How would you describe Africa?
8. How have African traditions helped you view yourself?

9. How has this school shaped your knowledge about Africa, African history, or African American events?
10. What is your favorite moment in Black history? Do you have a favorite historical figure or role model? Who, and why are they your favorite?
11. Do you believe anyone could attend this school? Why or why not?
12. How is this school different from any previous schools you've attended?
13. How would you describe the friendships you've made with teachers and students at this school? Have they been helpful?
14. What are ways that this school could help other students?
15. What improvements would you suggest to make the school better?
16. What would you like to see in a high school here?

Appendix B: Teacher Interview Questions

First Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself. How long have you been at CGWA?
2. What do you like about the learning environment at this school? What do you dislike about the learning environment at this school?
3. Do you feel that the teaching environment at this school is helpful for students? Why or why not?
4. How do you observe African values and traditions displayed at this school?
5. What is your favorite moment in Black history? Do you have a favorite historical figure or role model?
6. What does the word "Afrocentricity" mean to you?
7. What are your perceptions about Africa? What are some words that immediately come to mind?
8. How would you describe an African-centered education?
9. What are the benefits of African-centered curriculum models for students of color?
10. How do you believe these curriculum designs could benefit all students?
11. What improvements would you suggest for the curriculum at this school?
12. What are some things you would like to see implemented at a high school here?

Second Interview Questions

1. How does teaching at CGWA compare to other teaching positions or jobs you've had?
2. Describe a moment when you expanded your knowledge about African or African American history?
3. Describe a moment when you witnessed a student expand their knowledge about African or African American history?
4. What is the role of Afrocentricity in teaching African American students?
5. Do you believe any child could attend this school? Why or why not?
6. In your opinion, what makes this school unique?
7. How can environment and school practices at CGWA help other students in the community?
8. What do you think are people's misconceptions about this school? Why do you think more families don't explore CGWA as a viable option for their children?
9. What are ways African-centered education practices could be implemented in a public school?
10. How can Afrocentricity be used as a tool of inclusion?
11. Why is Afrocentricity/African-centered education helpful in shaping student identities?
12. If you could change anything about the school to make it better, what would it be? What would you keep the same?