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Article abstract

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Abstract

In Canada, the Black population is the third-largest racially visible group, yet students of African descent continue to face inequities in Canadian school systems. Students of African descent can benefit from learning from an Africentric perspective that cultivates their well-being and achievement while centring their lived experience as a person of African descent. As research demonstrates the significance of parental involvement in Africentric education, the purpose of this study was to explore an Africentric High School Cohort from the perspective of parents of the students of African descent in this Cohort. Based on the conceptual framework of Nguzo Saba, the theoretical framework of Africentric education, and critical race theory, a thematic analysis of the findings was conducted. The findings are discussed under the themes of parental engagement, positive youth development, and addressing challenges. Recommendations are suggested for future Africentric cohorts.

Keywords: Africentric cohort, Africentric education, Nguzo Saba, critical race theory, people of African descent, Black people, African Nova Scotians, parents' perspectives

Résumé

Au Canada, la population noire constitue le troisième groupe de minorités visibles. Cependant, les étudiants d'ascendance africaine continuent de faire face à des inégalités dans le système scolaire canadien. Les étudiants d'ascendance africaine peuvent tirer profit d'un apprentissage fondé sur une perspective africaine qui favorise leur bien-être et leur réussite tout en mettant l'accent sur leur expérience vécue en tant qu'individu d'ascendance africaine. La recherche ayant démontré l'importance de la participation des parents dans l'éducation afrocentrique, l'objectif de cette étude est d'explorer, du point de vue de leurs parents, une cohorte d'étudiants d'une école secondaire afrocentrique. Sur la base du cadre conceptuel de Nguzo Saba, du cadre théorique de l'éducation afrocentrique et de la théorie critique de la race, une analyse thématique des résultats a été effectuée. Les thèmes suivants ont servi de base à l'analyse : l'engagement parental, le développement positif des jeunes et les défis à relever. Enfin, l'article propose quelques suggestions pour les cohortes afrocentriques futures.

Mots-clés : cohorte afrocentrique, éducation afrocentrique, Nguzo Saba, théorie critique de la race, personnes d'ascendance africaine, Noires, Néo-Écossais d'origine africaine, perception des parents

Introduction

Our children need to know their ancestors were more than just survivors,

They need to know their ancestors were amazing, smart, wise and great.

They were educators, educated, cool and true, full of ideas.

They created a generation of dreamers and achievers too.

– Shanelle Howe-Tynes (2023)
Mother, poet, and preservice teacher
Mount Saint Vincent University

There is a great need for an increased awareness of what students of African descent are facing in Canadian school systems. Segregated schools existed in Nova Scotia until 1983 (Hamilton, 2012), with African Nova Scotian students receiving a substandard education. Researchers have described this as "one of the most troublesome and contentious issues in North American education" (Codjoe, 2006, p. 34) where there is a lack of representation of Black peoples' perspectives, histories, and experiences, few Black teachers, and a Eurocentric culture that persists within the mainstream school systems in Canada (Dei, 1996b; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Shizha, 2016). This has been recognized by the United Nations (UN; 2014) in their declaration of the International Decade for People of African Descent and by the Ministry of African Nova Scotia Affairs (2017). The UN Human Rights Council (2017) also stated that this distinct group's human rights must be promoted and protected.

African Nova Scotians (ANS) are the longest line of multigenerational people of African descent in Canada. ANS arrived in Nova Scotia in 1604 and established more than 52 African Nova Scotian communities. Migrations included Planters (1763), Black Loyalist (1783), Jamaican Maroons (1796), Black refugees (1812), and domestic workers (1960s).

Research has demonstrated the importance of parental involvement in the education of their children. Parental engagement is important for building students' self-esteem, self-confidence, and in supporting their educational expectations (Cherng, 2016; Hamil-

ton-Hinch et al., 2017, Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Yull et al., 2014). It is estimated that the Black population, which is Canada's third-largest racially visible group, could double in size by 2031 (Statistics Canada, 2019); however, there is limited research in Canada involving the first voices of parents of students of African descent. This study explores an Africentric Cohort of high school students of African descent from the perspective of the students' parents.[1] The Cohort was developed in a high school in Nova Scotia to address the needs of students of African descent.

Literature Review

The UN Human Rights Council (2017) found anti-Black structural racism existing in many Canadian institutions, such as schools, and thus needs to be a primary focus of future research in the education of students of African descent (Carter, 2008; Cherng, 2016; Dei, 2008; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2017, 2021; James, 2012; Livingstone et al., 2014; Rummens & Dei, 2010; Yull et al., 2014). Meaningful interventions are needed to combat the academic underperformance of students (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2017; Howard & Terry, 2011). Research on positive student learning, academic achievement, and cultural competence has found that students will take responsibility for and interest in their own education (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Students can thrive in a supportive educational environment that fosters and reinforces cultural pride and values their differences (Bean-Folkes & Ellison, 2018; Del Toro & Wang, 2021; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Howard & Terry, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Pedagogical practices, therefore, that celebrate and validate students' diverse cultures can begin to break down and destabilize oppressive structures of schooling (Dei, 1996b; Ko et al., 2021). This inclusive pedagogical practice, however, needs to be incorporated into the whole school year curriculum, and classroom resources are needed that are diversified and representative of the students and of their everyday lives (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Shillingford et al., 2020; Wiggan & Watson, 2016).

There is limited research on how students of African descent face challenges of inequalities through persistence, sustenance, and resilience (McGee & Spencer, 2015). One approach to creating a supportive, inclusive environment is to establish educational

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1 For this article, the term *parents* indicates the parents and/or guardians of the students enrolled in the Africentric High School Education Cohort explored in this study.

cohorts. Unfortunately, there is a gap within the literature on the value of educational cohorts at the high school level, and yet, educational studies have indicated that students succeed better if they find support with others with whom they identify (Cherng, 2016; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2017, 2021; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Rall & Holman, 2021; Parke & Keener, 2011; Yull et al., 2014). One study conducted in an urban district high school compared the impact of student mobility on math performance of students in cohorts with those in non-cohorts (Parke & Keener, 2011). They found that students within cohorts had higher averaged grades in math than the non-cohort students and were more likely to take advanced math courses in Grades 11 and 12 (Parke & Keener, 2011). In a longitudinal study of White, African American, and Hispanic/Latino adolescents, Day and Dotterer (2018) found that "the combination of greater academic socialization and school-based involvement was beneficial for all adolescents' grade point average" (p. 1332) and that adolescents were more likely to perceive school as a priority if the students observed their parents participating at the school. This finding is supported by Hayes (2011), who suggested that if parents are regarded as key partners in helping their child overcome academic difficulties, this can motivate them to stay involved in their adolescent's education and influence the student's own educational expectations. However, despite researchers agreeing that involving parents in their child's education is key to enhancing the self-confidence and self-esteem needed for academic success and achievement (Cherng, 2016; Yull et al., 2014), there remains challenges to parental involvement. Parents, and in particular parents of children of African descent, value "the importance of staying engaged in their children's education and making teachers more accountable for the learning outcomes and academic achievement of their children" (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2017, p. 111). This is also echoed in research conducted by Rall and Holman (2021). Similarly, Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) state that:

> If schools made families feel welcome in the classroom, both Black families and schools would benefit. Schools would benefit from teachers who communicate both the successes and challenges of students and invite families to have a constructive conversation about problem-solving. (p. 78)

Overall, schools need to do a better job in creating culturally responsive classrooms, particularly, an Africentric educational environment that supports parental involvement (Gale et al., 2022; Hayes, 2011; Huguley et al., 2021; Love et al., 2021). The fact remains

that communication problems with schools are cited as a major barrier for parental involvement for many families of African descent (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Love et al., 2021; Posey-Maddox, 2017). There is a need to "encourage more congruence between parent and teacher perspectives on the level of interaction between home and school" (McKay et al., 2003, p. 112) and support for parental sociocultural situations (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Jean-Pierre, 2021). For example, Marschall and Shah (2020) found that parents were encouraged to become involved when the schools aided them with childcare and transportation.

While research on parental involvement is evident, there is a lack of sufficient research from the perspective of parents of students of African descent and their involvement with schooling, particularly at the secondary school level. Given this, the current study explores the following overarching research questions: What are the perceptions of parents of students of African descent of an Africentric High School Cohort in Nova Scotia? From the perception of the parents, what are the benefits and challenges of their involvement in their child's education?

Methodology

This article is based on a qualitative study developed to explore the perspectives of parents of students of African descent enrolled in an Africentric Cohort at a local high school to provide a thorough and accurate account of the participants' perspectives of their child's lived experiences (Neergaard et al., 2009; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). The research takes place within a tradition of social research that states that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1972; McGregor & Murnane, 2010; Phillips, 2023; Taylor, 2021), and that the processes and dynamics in that construction and reconstruction of meaning are open to inquiry. As researchers, we adhere to the view that reality is socially constructed via the professional experiences of people (Taylor, 2021; Wiersma & Jurs, 2009) as well as through the interaction of individuals (Grix, 2004) and may result in "new possibilities for social change in the future" (Phillips, 2023, p. 3). This study is concerned with meanings and understandings given to the world in which the participants of the study live, and emphasizes the role language plays in constructing reality. The research is based on inductive logic aimed at creating contextualized findings and at credible representation of the interpretations of those experiencing the phenomenon under study.

Conceptual Framework

Nguzo Saba: The Seven Principles. Karenga (2008) synthesized a set of African-derived guiding principles known as *Nguzo Saba*, meaning "Seven Principles" in the Kiswahili language, which will serve as an operational, conceptual reference point for our analysis of the Africentric Cohort. These principles allow students to centre their lived reality through an African Nova Scotian perspective by focusing on their collective understanding. Lateef and Anthony (2020) suggest that developing a conceptual framework of Nguzo Saba as an Africentric approach would address the gap between theoretical frameworks and culturally sensitive practices for youth of African descent. Based on the work of Karenga (1989) and Lateef and Anthony (2020), each of these principles and its relevance to youth development is briefly described below:

1. *Umoja* (Unity) is the principle of committing to and practicing of harmonious togetherness within one's family and community.
2. *Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination) is the understanding and self-expression of one's identity and culture in positive and socially responsible ways as an equitable member of society and engages youth in learning about their culture in ways that emphasize strengths, resilience, and cultural adaptations and development.
3. *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility) is the commitment to maintaining one's community by sharing in community members' problems and helping to solve them together with their community. Ujima fosters youth development in appreciating their potential as contributors of positive change in their community.
4. *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics) fosters the understanding and appreciation that economics plays in community development, and the importance of utilizing one's future privileges to support initiatives that promote community sustainability and well-being.
5. *Nia* (Purpose) is the principle that prioritizes the collective pursuit of developing one's full capacity for positive achievement in their community and promotes the goal of education as not only a means to a career but also as an opportunity to promote social welfare in their communities and in the lives of groups that have been marginalized.
6. *Kuumba* (Creativity) is the principle of practicing and committing to the effort to make our communities more beautiful and healthier and is done by acknowledging

the individual's interests in personal self-fulfillment and in improving one's community.

7. 7. *Imani* (Faith) is the principle of holding firmly to one's faith and spirituality and in their belief in others, and values the struggle for freedom and for well-being of one's community and the efforts of those who come before us. In youth development, Imani supports the development of self-respect, respect of others in one's ethnic community, self-worth of others, and the belief in self as an agent of change.

Theoretical Frameworks

Asante's Conception of Africentricity[2]**.** Asante (1991, 2007)'s analysis of Africentric education is premised on the concept of centricity that holds that children ought to be located within the context of their culture and histories. Asante (1991) uses the term *Afrocentricity*, and in this article the term Africentricity aligns with his original concept, however, it is spelt with Afri to centre people of African descent in Nova Scotia. Given that self-identity is a critical factor in motivating children to learn (Bracher, 2006), responsible education takes heed of the linguistic, social, and cultural diversity in the classroom (Asante, 2007). Pan Africanism emerged as an agency of restoration of African subjectivity, Black identity, and is universal because it speaks to Black pride. It recognizes Black people as human and affirms the presence of Black people from an Afrocentric consciousness (Eze, 2013). A centric framework further espouses that education for children will only be successful when there is mutual "trust, accountability, and responsibility shared between families, communities and schools" (Stinemetz, 1995, p. 4). When applied in educational settings, Africentricity serves as a bridge to "an inexhaustible source of power, art, motifs, ideas, signs, ethical values, and dignity" (Asante, 2007, p. 73) related to African traditions, thereby cultivating a critical understanding of African history and culture. By using the past as a tool, Africentricity has the potential to imbue children with the self-affirming knowledge that an African identity is not in contradiction to, but rather complementary with, intellectual traditions that span all disciplines of knowledge (Asante, 2007).

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2   · Asante (1991) uses the term *Afrocentricity*; however, throughout this article the term Africentricity aligns with his original concept of Afrocentricity and does not take away from the centring of people of African descent.

Critical Race Theory. Key tenets of critical race theory (CRT) foreground our study in meaningful conceptions of race, racism, and theories of social oppression. While originally developed to buttress legal movements against racial inequality, CRT draws attention to an oft-neglected discourse within education research—focusing on distinct racial group identities as a necessary point of entry to redressing inequality (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Taylor, 2009). These key understandings of race as socially constructed and racism as institutionalized are critical precursors toward recognizing the subtle yet pervasive nature of racial inequity (Dei, 1996a; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). Black students are often characterized as underachieving and their home experiences characterized as problematic, thus creating academic deficits (Dei, 1996a). This is demonstrated in the fact that Black students in racially integrated schools are over-represented in remedial, non-academic programs (Lee et al., 2009) such as the Individual Program Plans (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2016). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) position CRT as aptly relevant within the recent push for culturally relevant teaching. Hence, in using CRT as an analytical framework for examining educational issues related to racial groups, this article focuses on parental perceptions of a school-based Africentric Cohort as a step toward elucidating the importance of this type of cohort in addressing the needs of Nova Scotian youth of African descent.

Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore an Africentric High School Cohort from the perspective of the parents of the students of African descent who were enrolled in the Cohort described below.

The Africentric High School Cohort

The Africentric Cohort was intentionally designed around the spirit of the Sankofa bird to address the inequities and underrepresentation of African Nova Scotian high school students not in academic and high-level math courses such as Pre-calculus, Calculus, and Advanced Placement. The Sankofa bird is the overarching principle for the Cohort. A Ghanaian symbol of a bird, it encourages Black students to understand the history of their ancestors and their contributions to science, math, literacy, and all aspects of learning, in

order to use this information to propel them forward. In 2017–2018 the provincial assessment for students of African descent scored 75.7% compared with the average of all students. There was no data for 2019–2020 due to the pandemic. In 2021–2022 students in the math Africentric Cohort scored 57%, and in 2022–2023 students scored 60%, demonstrating improvement in their math literacy. The development of the Cohort within the school was an opportunity to centre the learning of students of African descent within their unique and cultural experience. The Cohort was developed and implemented by the principal of the school. It was started in 2018 with the support of the school system. All students of African descent are eligible for the Cohort. Students, staff, and parents are informed about the Cohort during curriculum night and during the registration process for incoming Grade 9 students.

The approach was developed to address differences between formal and informal curriculum methods, to identify what changes needed to be made and why it was important to have students understand their identity and culture in positive ways. Staff and students were able to give student voice to systemic and social issues that helped students define their identity and link their learning to real life application.

The Cohort uses the principle of Umoja as the collective responsibility of the parents to be involved in their child's education. Their involvement is encouraged from the time students come to the school in the summer to learn about the Cohort up until the students graduate. Parents are kept informed and encouraged to participate through regular meetings, updates, emails, and/or phone calls. Parents can help their child believe in their abilities and their possibilities by informing teachers of their child's strengths, interests, challenges, and cultural assets. The school also aligned with outside partners, including a local university, to provide many outings and hands-on experiences that students need in the science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) fields, helping them further engage in the curriculum, broaden their horizons, and introduce them to post-secondary education and career pathways.

Recruitment, Data Collection, and Analysis

Invitations to participate in a focus group were distributed through posters in the local community, and 11 parents—10 of whom identified as African Nova Scotians and one as White, 10 were female and one male—responded to the invitation and gave their consent to participate in the study. Three focus group discussions (1–1.5 hours in duration) were held online during the Covid-19 pandemic in accordance with government and university research ethics protocols. The semi-structured interviews in the focus groups contained open-ended questions[3] to examine parents' perspectives of their child's education, as well as their own lived experience of the public school system. The sessions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded (Robinson, 2020). The coding followed an inductive approach to the interviews, based in context analysis to identify shared experiences, commonalities, differences, and repetitive responses (Adler et al., 2019; Reinharz, 1992; Ristock & Pennell, 1996; Robinson, 2020). All data was coded, and emerging patterns were formed into categories which were then developed into themes through thematic analysis (Scott et al., 2023). The themes are outlined in the findings section.

Participants of African descent are a small portion of the school population and the majority live in a small geographical area. The participants expressed concerns about being identified. To protect anonymity and confidentiality, we share quoted material from the focus group interviews without reference to pseudonyms or any tracking to individual participants. Quotes from participants shared in the findings are attributed to as generic "Participant."

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3   To obtain the access to the focus group guiding questions please contact the authors.

Findings

The sections below discuss the findings through the following themes: (1) parental engagement, (2) positive youth development, and (3) addressing challenges.

Parental Engagement

To support the decision-making process of whether to enrol in the Cohort, parents and students were invited to attend an information meeting at the school. Parents said that having this meeting helped in the discussions with their child about the Cohort and possible enrolment, or, as a parent in one of the focus groups said, "I discussed it with her before I even went to the meetings that we were invited to at the school, and she said that she would enjoy it, or she might like to try it" (Participant). Parents said their conversations with their child led to questions about the standards and rigor of the Cohort being maintained with other school courses. Many parents expressed their concern and fears about a cohort that would not be of high academic standing. As one parent asked:

> Was it keeping up to the same [academic] standards of the other courses? I anticipated it was, but I wanted to see what their lenses were, and my son said, yes, and he felt comfortable because he was able to work at the same level as everyone else, like in Academic Math. (Participant)

Others had concerns centred on the uncertainty about its curriculum:

> Some of the discussions I've had with my daughter, I was just questioning her on what's the curriculum like, because I wasn't sure. Is this a special course, is it harder math, or is it easier math, or is it just different? (Participant)

Once their child was enrolled in the Cohort, parents said that their child expressed excitement about learning: "She's learned more about Black culture and heritage, and [she's] excited, like coming home and [saying], Mom, did you know this, or I learned this today" (Participant). One parent said it opened discussions on culture and in gaining a positive sense of identity as a Black person. Another parent said,

For her and me to have follow-up conversations about what she had learned and how she felt about all of that, it's made quite a huge impact on her in terms of who she is as a young person of African heritage. (Participant)

The data also revealed that parents had good communication with the school and that "the school's always there for support" (Participant) and "information was always readily available" (Participant). They spoke about the "good relationship with the teachers" (Participant) and that "They made me feel very comfortable that I can reach out and talk to them" (Paticipant). They found school communication was excellent and the staff were always available and attentive and willing to inform parents about the Cohort, and that "it was seamless and very informative" (Participant).

Many parents felt there was an open-door policy and they were kept well informed. This created a sense of connection, feeling like an extended family in their ability to "reach out to any of the teachers to get the information" (Participant). As one parent declared: "I like being supportive to my kids and the school and the staff, and when you have questions and stuff, they get right back to you, you know what I mean? They're very supportive. I actually enjoy their support" (Participant). The good rapport made parents feel respected and encouraged to become involved in the school. Many parents expressed how important it was for them to continue to be involved in their child's education:

> I'm as involved as I can be. Any kind of support that she needs, any kind of functions or gatherings that [the school] have, I'm always there for her to support her, and to show her that I'm there for her, in her corner for help. (Participant)

Positive Youth Development

You look like me, too.

To me, you look like them too.

We all look the same.

Being surrounded

By others who look like me

Is truly carefree.

– Shanelle Howe-Tynes (2023)

All the parents stressed that their child had grown in their self-confidence and competence, and that being in the Cohort has encouraged them in helping other students in the Cohort to succeed. Many parents discussed their child's previous lack of self-confidence and found that the Cohort helped their child develop a better sense of self and believing in themselves. One parent noted that their child was

> a little bit anxious going into the Academic Math because she didn't think that she was that strong to go into the Cohort. But now that she's in there, she's feeling really comfortable and confident, and she embraced the experience to be among people like herself. (Participant)

Many parents saw an increase in confidence in their child after entering the Cohort, saying things such as "he felt confident" (Participant), and "he began to speak out more. … where he's in a classroom amongst people that look like him, and amongst his friends, he didn't feel shy" (Participant). Parents have also indicated that their children were not afraid to ask questions and make mistakes, that "they're more open to discuss issues or tell how they feel, or put their hand up and ask questions, as opposed to being in a class with other students" (Participant). Another parent noted that their child, prior to being in the Cohort, did not realize the importance of being with others like themselves and the difference it would make:

> My daughter is extremely quiet and extremely shy, and so, the first thing she told me was she was very comfortable with the classroom, with just African learners in the classroom … she said, it makes her speak more. She didn't realize how much of a difference it would be, being in a full classroom with all Black kids. (Participant)

Parents revealed that their children felt they did not have to justify their experiences or what they believe to others who are not Black. They stated that this was liberating, and that "those kids are still able to speak their truth and their piece without looking around trying to justify or rationalize their own experiences and what they've come to know and understand" (Participant). As one parent explained, their child now "participated in all opportunities and activities brought on by the Cohort, and it was enlightening for him as a young Black male" (Participant).

There was an increase in self-confidence as they developed pride in their culture: Iit's been amazing for her, her confidence, it made her—she's proud to say that she's a Black woman, which is awesome" (Participant). One parent was very pleased to see their child's "growth in terms of her sense of herself and being a young woman of African descent" (Participant). They also stated the importance of seeing yourself reflected in others, and how this was a positive experience in that their child has "been able to cultivate positive experiences with students who look like her" (Participant). Another parent said:

> Even her going there and meeting new friends, even about her hair, she's learned so much more about her hair, like it's just amazing what I'm seeing her do, and all of this knowledge she's gaining. And I'm like, this is wonderful—yay! (Participant)

Addressing Challenges

Parents related the lack of diversity in the teacher population in the Cohort as being one of the concerns in the Cohort. Ultimately, parents said they thought "we would have more Black teachers" (Participant), and that even their child "was thinking, that she probably would see a lot more Black teachers" (Participant). One parent said their child asked:

> Is it okay if I just have an open discussion with my teacher although he's White and teaching a history class? An African history class? And I said, yeah, sure. I'm sure that's what he wants. And she tried it, and it worked out great. (Participant)

Although parents and students questioned why White teachers teach in the Cohort, they also trusted the principal's decision in staffing. One parent said that their child

> was questioning how come all of the teachers were White, even though it
> was an Africentric Cohort? And so, I had to talk to her about them being
> trained and them being really conscientious, and it being a safe place for her
> to talk among her own, because her older brother started into the Cohort,
> and he's already been with some of those teachers, and so, we appreciate
> their delivery of the Cohort, and that they're okay, because [the principal]
> had selected them. (Participant)

As the school year progressed, the parents stated that they were very pleased with the teachers and their dedication to supporting their children.

The parents also spoke about the systemic barriers to their own involvement in the school. They stated that "it's not that parents don't want to, it's that there are so many restrictions, [and] we can't" (Participant). Some of this was related to the restrictions and challenges of finding time and the money to do the required police and background checks needed if the parents were to volunteer in the school and work with the students:

> You have to go get the police record check and the child abuse registry …
> that type of budget to pay for it and yourself to go even, to get it done, these
> are things that might also be somewhat of a barrier for some people to parti-
> cipate. (Participant)

Another parent said

> in addition to trying to take a day off work to go to that activity … you've
> got to take time off to go get these other transactions done, just to show the
> paperwork that you're qualified to be able to attend any of these outings.
> (Participant)

Parents also cited negative stereotypes and racism in schools as challenges. One parent said that: "For us again, it's around awareness. My son is struggling with some of the realities around racial challenges, that he did not seem to consider or think about before" (Participant). Some parents felt that the effects of past experiences of racism and negative stereotypes would continue to challenge the success of their child. For example, they noted comments such as, "the first thing they [school staff] say is, do you play basketball?" (Participant) and "they think that basketball is the only thing that we know, and

we should be doing" (Participant). They also felt that these stereotypes would hinder their child from joining in other extracurricular activities. One parent stated that their child was "more [into] political and debate, but she doesn't feel like there're too many Black people doing it" (Participant). Overall, however, the parents felt that for the students in the Cohort, as this was their first time in a classroom of all Black students, it was a very positive experience.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, changes were made in the day-to-day school and classroom routines. Students needed to remain in one classroom "so that they're not moving all around throughout the day and getting higher risk of contracting the virus" (Participant). Parents noted that these changes also prevented their child from participating in extracurricular activities and school excursions: "Covid has put a stop to a lot of their cultural experiences and excursions, which is too bad" (Participant), and "not being able to experience some of those excursions where they get cultural experiences, and they can get some rich lived experiences" (Participant). The regulations due to the pandemic also meant missing out on "socialization with their peers" (Participant). As one parent explained, "Mainly, I find it's the socialization, being around her friends, and seeing how her other friends are learning, and the input and questions they ask in the class" (Participant). Another parent noted that their child

> actually thrives on human connection, so it's been extremely difficult. And he's a student athlete, and his high school sports have been cut, which I feel will leave long term impacts of the memories of his youth. He simply misses school life. (Participant)

Not all experiences due to Covid-19 were viewed as negative, however. Parents also mentioned benefits because of these restrictions. They said that during times of home-schooling due to school closures during Covid-19, their child could use the opportunity to turn off their camera on their laptops when they did not feel like socializing. One parent said that "he just liked it for the feel of the safety, and it seemed like he learned just as well that way, as he did in the classroom" (Participant).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the voices of parents of students of African descent enrolled in an Africentric Cohort in a high school in Nova Scotia, and to recognize them as knowers and valuable partners in the school system. African Nova Scotians are a distinct people—as declared in the 2017 United Nations Human Rights Council's Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent—and have developed a specific way of life (Williams et al., 2018). This research provided the opportunity to listen, hear, and learn, from the perspective of parents, about their children's lived experiences in an Africentric Cohort. In addition, it was important to learn about the culture of people of African descent in relation to their education. Huguley et al. (2021) state that "traditional conceptualizations of parental educational involvement tend to be normed around White, middle-class settings, a limitation that overlooks and undervalues contextual variation in how parents support their children's education" (p. 13).

As valuable sources of knowledge about the Cohort's members and as key partners in their education, it is important for family members to bear witness to what they have seen as the successes, challenges, and ways forward for members of the Cohort. The family members provided insights into the everyday lives and culture of their children and spoke to the parent-teacher and parent-administrator relationships of which the students themselves may not have been aware. As Stinemetz (1995) stated, "trust, accountability, and responsibility [must be] shared between families, communities, and schools" (p. 4) for students to succeed in education; as such, making space for the voices of the parents of the students is key in assuring their academic success. This is as true today as it was in 1995. Based on the principles of Kujichagulia and Umoja, time and time again, families stressed the tremendous importance of trusting relationships: between students within the Cohort, between individual students and their teachers, between parents and teachers, and between parents and the school's administrative team. The effects on students' self-confidence were also apparent to families, as was the increased connection to their culture. The augmentation and reinforcement of students' cultural pride and identity were also key components of the successful culturally responsive curriculum (Codjoe, 2006; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Ladson-Billings, 1994), and parents echoed that an increase in students' cultural connectedness and self-confidence went hand in hand with their increased scholastic engagement (Ujiima). Families also remarked on the

high expectations that both the school staff and the students set for themselves and their peers. Even at the first meeting of the students prior to the start of school, students spent time getting to know each other and bonding as a family of learners. This is a clear manifestation of the Nguzo Saba principles (Karenga, 1989; Lateef & Anthony, 2020).

Parental involvement has historically been hindered for Black families due to a lack of communication with schools (Lynch & Stein, 1987). Hayes (2011) maintains that an Africentric educational environment must support parental involvement. This is one area the Cohort families feel has been abundantly addressed. Parental involvement was sought out by the school when students were recruited for the Cohort and were invited to participate in information meetings alongside their children. Following this, lines of communication remained open between parents, teachers, and administrators alike. Information about the academic expectations and curriculum were readily available to families, and parents were able to have conversations as families at home about what their children were learning. Students were able to share their knowledge, enriching their family connections. It is important to note the critical role of the school's principal, a member of the local African Nova Scotian community, who was the leader in building a collective sense of community and fostered a culture of open communication between home and school. Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) stress this important role of the school leader in Africentric education. This open-door relationship, where parents and families are regarded as key partners in their child's education, must be continued in other cohorts and schools, as parental participation at school can lead to prioritization being given to academic success by students themselves (Day & Dotterer, 2018). In a 2022 study of parents' school climate perceptions, Gale et al. (2022) stated that, "Specifically, cohorts that seek to strengthen the relationship between parents, families and schools are needed" (p. 67). While Gale et al. (2022) focused on middle school, the sentiment remains true at any grade level—creating an environment in which parents can become partners in their children's education helps children to flourish. Latunde and Clark-Louque (2016) suggest that "teachers may need more training on interpersonal relationships and effective meetings" (p. 78) to facilitate constructive conversations with parents.

There was a marked increase in the self-confidence and cultural connectedness of Cohort students that was observed by the parents in this study. As students became more comfortable and confident, they began to openly take pride in their Black identity. Parents deemed this a type of liberation, wherein students could speak without needing

to justify themselves to others who are not Black, and said that it was the greatest benefit realized by students of the Cohort. Participation in the Cohort also allowed students to experience education free from other pressures of schooling, thus, creating opportunities for advancement both personally and as a group. In their study, Horvat and Lewis (2003) also concluded that

> the positive reinforcement that the participants received from their friends helped to mediate the affective dissonance that cultural-ecological theory associates with Black students' academic performance. … The support of Black friends helped them guard against the psychic stress that some Black students endure when they do not have the strength and backing of like-minded Black peers. (p. 275)

The students were able to experience Kujichagulia, whereby they could self-identify and speak for themselves rather than being defined or named by others (Karenga, 1989; Lateef & Anthony, 2020).

Students' cultural connectedness was facilitated by an intentional merging of pedagogy and culture to improve students' overall learning (Howard & Terry, 2011). The classroom resources were diversified to represent the students' lives (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021). The rootedness in their culture that Asante (1988) deemed intrinsic in an Africentric education was deeply established in the eyes of the families of the students in this Cohort.

While parents viewed the experience of the Cohort as a success for their children, they did identify challenges. Though parental involvement was encouraged and facilitated by staff, there remained systemic barriers. The process of applying for and collecting completed police checks to volunteer in the school was time-consuming and costly. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic also severely restricted the ability of parents to visit and be physically involved in the schools, even once their paperwork was in order. Extracurricular activities and academic excursions were likewise restricted during the pandemic, at the expense of the socialization that was found to be essential in building trusting relationships within the Cohort. These activities should not be seen as supplemental, but instead as a vital part of the Cohort and be continuously supported financially by the education system. The parents did note, however, that there were positive aspects to the pandemic. The students still maintained their close connections with their classmates and teachers. Some of the students enjoyed the online classes and began to participate more than usual in school classes.

In the future, if resources are increased or an Africentric School is formed, a wider selection of course offerings should be possible, and perhaps, as suggested by the parents, an earlier entry point into the Cohort. Parents also indicated that the next steps could include the recruitment of a greater number of Black teachers to the Cohort. This would require targeted recruitment efforts by the provincial educational structures and teacher education programs in universities.

Limitations

The findings of the study need to be interpreted within the following limitations. It was a difficult time to conduct research and, as other researchers (Poliandri et al., 2023), we had to shift from planned face-to-face group sessions to online sessions due to the global pandemic. This resulted in reduced numbers of parents/caregivers with a continued interest in being a participant in the study. The findings are based on the perceptions of the parents that were self-reported. It is important to note that our interpretations of the findings are influenced by our implicit biases, opinions, and beliefs. As a team however, we engaged in critical reflections as we discussed the findings to ensure that we were interpreting this in a way that best represents the parents' perceptions. The parents were also invited to a post-focus group session to discuss the findings and to make edits as necessary.

Final Thoughts

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy is relevant for every culture.

Culture can teach respect for the different ways people live their lives.

Life's journey goes hand and hand with education.

Education and tailored learning experiences should be for everyone.

Everyone and every child especially, deserves education that allows their different yet natural academic skills to flourish.

Our children only flourish in environments that are welcoming.

Welcoming places are culturally sensitive, aware, accepting and relevant.

– Shanelle Howe-Tynes (2023)

This article adds to the literature that informs culturally relevant Africentric education by drawing on the stories of the first voices of parents of students of African descent and their perceptions about their involvement in their child's education, specifically, in an Africentric High School Cohort in Nova Scotia. This inquiry is a critical component for inclusive, culturally sensitive, and equitable education as the findings help us gain an understanding of parents' understanding of and suggestions for supporting Africentric education. These findings demonstrate ways to promote and uplift parental/family involvement in their children's education and respects their voices and contributions to reach out and influence a new generation of students of African descent.

This form of inquiry is dynamic—it helps us gain knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of our students and their communities from the perspective of their parents and/or guardians. We learn about the dedication and commitment to support their child's education and ways to enhance meaningful relationships among the school staff, students, parents, and the community. The findings reveal how Africentric education plays a vital role in "race uplift" and can lead to new and informed teaching practices based on the principles of Nguzo Saba that value the sense of community among the school, the home, and the community. Partnering with parents in their child's Africentric education and valuing their contributions has the potential to influence a significant shift toward the limitless power of a new generation of students of African descent.

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