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## **ABSTRACT**

# **RECONCEPTUALIZING THE IMPLICATIONS OF EUROCENTRIC DISCOURSE VIS-À-VIS THE EDUCATIONAL REALITIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS WITH SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION**

**by Carl L. Robinson**

This is a conceptual study that uses Afrocentric, racial contract, racial formation, and social censure theories to perform a critical philosophical interrogation of certain historical and contemporary aspects of White supremacy and Eurocentrism. Collectively, the theories that inform this study bring into focus the marginalization of African American students as it pertains to their overrepresentation in special education. This study examines how White supremacy and Eurocentrism impacts the social and political realities of African Americans and people of African descent throughout the enterprise of American schooling and beyond. The aforementioned critical social and political analysis is used to explore the historical and contemporary implications of Eurocentric educational discourse regarding the educational realities of African American students, particularly their overrepresentation in special education.

An important component of this study is the delineation of some of the influential ideas and ideological perspectives of some of the major Western philosophers and the impact that these thinkers had on the construction of educational institutions and societal norms that marginalize certain groups of people, particularly African Americans. Concomitantly, the discourses of objectivity and scientism that emerged from the Renaissance and Enlightenment movements are critically interrogated regarding their respective roles in thrusting Eurocentrism into prominence. This study examines the phenomenon of marginalization, domination, otherization, colonization, and oppression that emerge out of Eurocentricity, which invariably, adversely impact the realities of African Americans throughout the enterprise of American schooling and beyond.

By conceptualizing a discourse via Afrocentric, racial contract, racial formation, and social censure theories that critically examines the overrepresentation of African Americans from an Afrocentric perspective, this study reveals that African American students are institutionally marginalized and oppressed via culturally insensitive institutional logic, which in turn, produces

culturally insensitive educators and educational policy. These realities are illuminated by re-theorizing the phenomenon of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. This is achieved via a critical analysis that deconstructs mainstream European norms, values, and customs as being, in many cases, antithetical to the academic and social development of African Americans in the educational setting.

This study introduces Afrocentric educational discourse as a viable alternative to Eurocentric educational discourse. Due to the fact that Afrocentric educational discourse rejects the negative attributes of Eurocentric educational discourse, it offers legitimate sociopolitical emancipatory implications for African Americans throughout the enterprise of schooling and beyond.

**RECONCEPTUALIZING THE IMPLICATIONS OF EUROCENTRIC DISCOURSE  
VIS-À-VIS THE EDUCATIONAL REALITIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS  
WITH SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION**

**A DISSERTATION**

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By

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## **Introduction**

Numerous educators have become alarmed about the mass involuntary migration of African Americans into the special education community and yet only a few scholarly studies examine the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. Unfortunately, only a few of these studies attempted to either investigate or make any reference to some of the sociocultural underpinnings that impact the relationship between the institution of education and African American students. In fact, over the years, minimal attention has been given to sociocultural phenomena. We are in need of a thoroughgoing scholarly investigation of the critical historical and contemporary sociocultural issues associated with this problem.

The purpose of this study is to critically investigate the overrepresentation of African Americans in both special education and educational environments for low-achievers from a critical sociocultural perspective. This perspective might reveal how the history of education of African American students has been negatively impacted by institutional racism that is manifested discursively. Racial formation theory, racial contract theory, social labeling deviance theory, and Afrocentricity will be used to illuminate the historical effects of institutional racism as well as its contemporary impact upon the African American student population. Collectively, these theories will be utilized to examine and bring into focus the marginalization of African American students, as it pertains to their being overrepresented in the special education community.

An important component of this study will be the delineation of some of the influential ideas and ideological perspectives of some of the major Western philosophers and the impact that these thinkers have had on the construction of educational institutions and societal norms that marginalize certain groups of people, particularly African Americans. Concomitantly, the discourses of objectivity and scientism that emerged from both the Renaissance and Enlightenment movements will also be problematized regarding their respective roles in thrusting Eurocentricity into prominence. As a whole, this study will speak to the phenomenon of marginalization, otherization, domination, and oppression that emerge out of Eurocentricity, thus manifesting considerable adverse influences on the educational realities of African Americans. This is where the discursive practices that Michel Foucault speaks of will help establish a relationship among the ideas of these Western thinkers and their influence on the sociocultural setting in education as well as the greater society.

To offer a critical examination of what is presented above, I will be engaging the work of Charles W. Mills the author of *The Racial Contract* (1997). Mills's work is grounded in social contract theory and it places significant emphasis on the following claims: 1) By and large, white supremacy has been a constant globally and locally for many years, and 2) Uncompromisingly, white supremacy should be viewed as a political system that can be legitimately theorized as an entity that is founded upon a "contract" exclusively among whites, thus becoming a "Racial Contract" (Mills, 1997).

The theoretical perspective of racial contract theory will help establish a conceptual connection between white supremacy and the institution of education as it pertains to the disenfranchisement of African American students. Furthermore, this theoretical discourse will assist me in explaining how American education primarily benefits certain ethnic groups while simultaneously minimizing the academic and social gains of other ethnic groups. Hence, this study is based upon the following premise: that institutional racism does adversely impact the educational and social development of African American students.

Throughout this study, an Afrocentric perspective that is rooted in the cultural distinctiveness of the African American experience will guide me in the examination of this phenomenon (Asante, 1988). This frame of reference will permit me to view phenomena via the ideological vantage point of the sociocultural experiences of African Americans as it pertains to their relationship with American culture. As well, Afrocentricity appropriately recognizes that there is a clear and distinct relationship between institutional oppression and racism in European American culture, which masquerades as a universal master narrative. Furthermore, it takes the position that the articulation of meaning of African Americans is best evaluated through African cultural retentions in place of Eurocentric discourses (Irvine, 1990). This is where Afrocentricity will be used to illustrate the flexibility and dynamism of people of African descent with respect to how members of this group have established new identities vis-à-vis their locales throughout the diaspora. Moreover, Afrocentricity will be reinterpreted in a way that conveys the following: 1) It is both a viable and much needed alternative to Eurocentric discourse, 2) It possesses diverse voices that represent Afrocentric discourse, and 3) The emancipatory implications for Africans Americans sociopolitically.

### **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this research is to conceptualize a discourse in the disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education from an Afrocentric perspective. This study will reveal that African American students are institutionally marginalized, disenfranchised, and oppressed via culturally insensitive educators and educational policy. These realities will be revealed by re-theorizing the phenomenon of African Americans via a critical analysis that deconstructs mainstream European norms, values, and customs as being, in many instances, antithetical to the academic and social development of African Americans in the educational setting.

### **Educational Importance**

The particular significance of this work lies in its attempt to look critically at some of the sociopolitical underpinnings of institutional racism in the educational system. Basically, numerous racialized sociopolitical dynamics are imbedded in both the behaviors and attitudes of many educators and administrators throughout the American educational system. Oftentimes, the sociopolitical issues that will be addressed in this study either routinely go unnoticed or are simply ignored by many in the educational community.

This study will take a progressive step toward a critical analysis of the phenomenon of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. The following theoretical discourses will be used to re-theorize the above sociopolitical realities of African Americans in the educational setting and beyond: 1) Social censure theory, 2) Racial contract theory, 3) Racial formation theory, and 4) Afrocentricity. Collectively, these theories will deconstruct some of the historical institutional and cultural barriers that adversely impact the academic and social development of large numbers of African Americans throughout the enterprise of American schooling.

This study does not claim to hold all the answers to the myriad of problems that afflict public education. However, it is an important move toward confronting the cultural politics in educational discourse that adversely impacts certain groups in the educational community. Another aim of this study is to encourage public discourse (i.e., mainstream discourse) to both take seriously and become responsive to the phenomenon of cultural insensitivity that permeates our society, thus, such action could lead to some much needed democratic transformation.

The premise of this work is to re-theorize the dilemma of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. This is one of several issues that are at the forefront of sociopolitical issues associated with the constructs of race and ethnicity throughout the enterprise of American schooling. However, I possess the conviction that if the ideas and suggestions that are espoused in this study are taken up, the phenomenon under critical analysis in this study can be improved.

Moreover, this study will clearly illuminate that African Americans are capable of appropriately addressing the educational needs of their children. As well, non-African American educators possess similar capabilities when they are both knowledgeable and respectful of the cultural norms, values, and customs that African American students bring to the educational community. This study possesses considerable transformative implications; in that, educators should be inclined to give more attention to the institutional and cultural barriers that exacerbate the academic and social problems of African Americans in the educational setting. Most importantly, this study will serve to empower all educators to develop educational settings that are conducive to the successful academic and social development of African American students, thus improving their chances of becoming adult citizens who are capable of making meaningful contributions to their respective communities and beyond.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study is primarily informed by a philosophical critical conceptual interrogation of the phenomenon under investigation. It is a research approach that relies on claims that follow from the theories chosen to inform this study in its attempt to deconstruct some of the unfortunate realities of African Americans throughout the enterprise of American schooling. Also, being a conceptual dissertation, this study does not make any empirical claims drawn from original quantitative or qualitative research, but instead builds an argument based on reason which draws from the wider literature.

Additional problematics of this study stem from the usage of multiple social theories that offer distinct analysis of the phenomenon under investigation. While each of these theories offers insightful analysis of the social conditions that exist in American society, none of them is adequate to explain the problems of this study by itself. While drawing on four different theories

creates its own potential problems of contradictory theories and differing projects, this dissertation attempts to avoid such problems in order to take advantage of their complementarity.

Clearly, the usage of the four theories could reasonably move the critical observer to question the use of so many theories by posing and pondering the following questions: What exactly is this study arguing? Are the theories that are being used for this study strong enough to stand on their own? Do the theories connect in a way that actually brings about a greater understanding of the phenomenon under investigation? In response to these questions and other potential criticisms, I am inclined to argue that the four theories used in this study enabled me to render a powerful analysis of the implications of White supremacy and Eurocentrism on the realities of African Americans and people of African descent throughout the enterprise of American schooling and beyond.

### **Reflections on the Condition of African Americans**

The present economic, educational, emotional, and psychological condition of many African Americans is a cause of great concern for some observers. Before I begin with this discussion, I would like to note that there are certain members of the African American community who have been able to benefit from the enactment of both Civil Rights and Affirmative Action laws. These laws permit them to compete and participate in the political, economic, and educational realms of American society in a way that allows them to become productive citizens who are capable of making significant contributions to society. However, in far too many instances, large numbers of African Americans are unable to receive an education that is capable of nurturing their educational, emotional, and psychological needs/development in a way that would empower them to become both informed and critical observers of their reality (social and economic condition/reality) and the world at-large.

Some African American scholars believe that the current sociocultural situation African Americans face is significantly impacted by the “racist” and “oppressive” social system of America (Hacker, 1995; Mills, 1997, Wilson, 1998). Asante (1991) postulates that African Americans receive an education that removes them from their respective culture and traditions and are forced to absorb Eurocentric customs and values. Also, as an oppressed they are placed at the margins of Western culture. This type of sociocultural proselytizing leads to African Americans becoming a more dislocated people. Unfortunately, African Americans, collectively, are unable to become proactive about their educational and social liberation due to their

ambiguous interpretation of their cultural identity. Many of them become either frustrated or disillusioned (systematically via institutional dogma) throughout their educational experiences. As a result, such experiences leave numerous African Americans ill-equipped to both understand their current situation as an oppressed people and to bring about the necessary changes that will improve their sociocultural condition.

From the very beginning of their educational experiences, African Americans have been ideologically conditioned via public education to view both their realities and the world from a Eurocentric perspective. The Eurocentric worldview (White Supremacy and the dogma of the Western way of knowing) that is imposed upon African Americans has historically served to disempower various segments of the African American community. As a result, African Americans have been duped into thinking that the best way to navigate the socioeconomic and political terrain of American society is to submit unquestioningly to the hegemony that embodies American culture.

Francis Cress Welsing (1991) postulates that mainstream Europeans are so intensely obsessed with their numerical minority position in the world that they distort the “minority” status of the actual numerical majority; thus presenting themselves as the majority of the world. Despite the numerical disparity, White superiority reins supreme throughout the Western Hemisphere that is manifested via inordinate sociopolitical power. Marimba Ani (2000) concurring with Welsing states that via the study of world history presented from an Eurocentric perspective, it is likely to presume that one would be inclined to believe that mainstream Europeans possess both the dominant culture and the only culture worthy of substantial study. Clearly, this demonstrates that Eurocentric ideology is both a potent and dominating force that dramatically impacts the character development of non-European peoples.

Amos Wilson (1998) suggests that the educational and economic destinies of African Americans are intricately associated with the biased institutions erected in a society that is engulfed with a racist attitude towards non-White people. In the following passage, Wilson (1998) provides a critical perspective regarding the American social system:

It is of utmost importance to keep in mind that an economic system is fundamentally a social system, a system of social relations. An economic system cannot exist prior to or apart from a system of social relations. The products, goods, and services which characterize a social system, their allocation, distribution, use, ownership, symbolic

value, and associations with social status power and privilege, are socially determined and ultimately derive from the nature of social relations which define that system. When the members of a society accept the social relations which characterize its economic system, they become subject to the power differentials and arrangements those relations create and sustain. These socially created and sustained power differentials and arrangements tend over time (and due to concerted propaganda and other efforts put forth by those who benefit most from the system) to appear to the members of that society to be autonomous and “natural.” (pp. 307-308)

The African American educational community must understand the relationship that exists between the social and economic structures in American society if they are to successfully contend with the hegemonic structures that continue to stunt their collective educational and economic growth. Such understanding will empower African Americans to become major stakeholders both sociopolitically and geopolitically on the national and global scene.

Throughout the African American community certain members of this group are beginning to realize that, in most instances, White institutions prepare people of African descent to protect White interests regardless of any particular individual's political ideology. This view is consistent with the theory of Neely Fuller, author of *The United Independent Compensatory Code/System/Concept*, as explained in *The Isis Papers* by Francis Cress Welsing (1991) who argues that there is a clear connection between White supremacy, which is manifested via various social systems and public institutions, and the oppression of African Americans and Africans throughout the world.

As I assess the current socioeconomic, political, and educational conditions of African Americans, it becomes apparent to me that our present “state-of-being” in America, is in a word, disheartening. It is mind-boggling to some that African Americans are so disproportionately represented in the prison population in America. Although African Americans comprise only 12-14% percent of the U.S. population, they represent a whopping 44% of the total population of the state and federal correctional institutions. By far, they are the largest ethnic group serving time in U.S. prisons (Tripp, 2001).

It should be noted as well; according to the article *Forum Looks at Black's Prison Statistics* that African American males between the ages of 20-29 are linked to the judicial system via one of the following areas: incarceration, probation, and parole. Another disturbing

reality is that African American women are the fastest growing population in the criminal justice system. Unfortunately, their numbers have skyrocketed by 78% during the early 1990's. Another phenomenon that strikes those concerned with the plight of the African American community with awesome force is the underrepresentation of African Americans in institutions of higher learning. Each year, approximately *a little over a million* African Americans come in contact with institutions of higher learning. Meanwhile, approximately two and a half million African Americans come in contact with the prison system. To say the least, these statistics are downright disturbing to those who are concerned about the current and future condition of the African American community.

I would also like to note that large numbers of African Americans are receiving second-rate public educational experiences that serve to perpetuate a vicious cycle of social reproduction (Carruthers, 1999; Kozol, 1991; Shujaa, 1994, 1996; Wilson, 1998). In the last two decades the population of Black male inmates grew three times faster than the number of Black males enrolled in higher education (Salim Muwakkil, 2002). The Justice Policy Institute which is a Washington D. C. based advocacy group revealed that in the year 2000 there 791, 610 African American males in jail or prison while there were only 603, 032 African American males enrolled in institutions of higher learning. While the African American community is besieged with numerous problems, however, given the information provided above, it is apparent that the young African American male is the most endangered member of this group.

Numerous members of the African American community are locked into a life where they are forced to wallow in misery that is supplemented with a self-hatred of themselves and a lack of human compassion for both members within their ethnicity and individuals of other ethnicities.

In fact, in many African American communities throughout the U.S. there are a number of destructive forces that wreak havoc on the daily living conditions of African American people. The problems that afflict these communities can be linked to the negative experiences African Americans encounter in the public school setting. Many individuals in our society view education as an opportunity to improve one's socioeconomic standing, thus improving one's quality of life. However, this is not the case for large numbers of African Americans.

Unfortunately, for the most part, African Americans for a number of reasons experience considerable difficulty utilizing American educational institutions for individual/group

advancement. For instance, when African Americans are unable to successfully acclimate to the public education setting, oftentimes it leads to their dropping out of school. Once they are removed from the public educational setting, it is not uncommon for them to become involved with either deviant subcultures (gangs of various types) or illicit drug use (in some instances, they become involved with both). Most notably, they destroy not only their respective lives, but they also begin to engage in nihilistic behavior that adversely impacts the overall quality of life in the African American community and beyond.

### **Research Question**

This study will attempt to perform a critical analysis of some of the sociopolitical realities that adversely impact African Americans in public education, hence leading to their disproportionate representation in special education. The following question will guide the critical analysis of this dilemma: How can we re-theorize the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education from an Afrocentric perspective via labeling deviance theory, racial formation, Afrocentricity and racial contract theories?

### **Methodology and Theoretical Approach**

This study will use a conceptual, critical approach that interrogates the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. A conceptual analysis drawing on social censure, racial formation, Afrocentric, and racial contract theories will be used to unravel some of the sociopolitical realities that perpetuate the disproportional representation of African Americans in special education. Collectively, these theories along with embracing the major tenets of critical discourse will allow me to re-theorize how and why African Americans are entering special education in disproportional numbers.

Each of the theories mentioned above will represent a chapter that critically examines the overrepresentation of African Americans. The argument put forth by these theories will be supplemented by a review of related literature that coincides with their theoretical stance (i.e., Afrocentricity, labeling deviance, racial formation, and racial contract theory) while simultaneously illuminating some of the sociopolitical underpinnings that lead to the phenomenon under investigation. By taking a critical theoretical approach, I will attempt to demystify and address distortions that offer biased interpretations of history and human relations as they pertain to people of European and African descent living here in America and throughout

the world. Also, the critical orientation of this study will offer some insight as to how African Americans can acquire and exercise agency to improve their educational and sociopolitical realities.

In the spirit of critical theory this research study will be examining praxis the nexus of theory and practice. Habermas (1971) argues that it is necessary to go through this process, if the objective is to transform existing social relations that are framed by disproportional power relations. If such transformation is to take place, it is imperative that the members of a given society are informed about the social injustices that permeate their respective society. Here is where the march toward emancipation begins to emerge as a possible reality. Quantz (1992) explicated that a major tenet of critical research is that it should be guided by conscious political intentions that is committed to bringing about emancipatory and legitimate democratic outcomes (p. 449).

Another important tenet of critical discourse is that it does not ascribe to the notion of there being a single truth; instead, it acknowledges the reality that multiple realities and “truths” exist (Fraser & Nicholson, 1990). As mentioned earlier, critical discourse is concerned with interrogating power relations that exist throughout the sociopolitical constructs of race, class, sex, and gender. Most importantly, critical discourse acknowledges how our sociopolitical and economic realities are impacted by institutional and social customs/practices that produce various types of social injustice here in America and throughout the world (Lather, 1994). Consequently, this study is geared toward addressing some of the unfortunate realities that African American students encounter throughout the enterprise of American schooling, particularly their disproportionate assignment to special education. As well, this study offers some suggestions as to how African Americans can improve their educational realities via emancipatory efforts.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **White Supremacy as a Racial Contract and Implications for the Education of African Americans**

#### **Introduction**

##### **Claim**

*The construct of Whiteness vis-à-vis Blackness serves as the impetus for White privilege that marginalizes African Americans. This sociopolitical reality leads to African Americans being disproportionately disenfranchised throughout the institution of education and beyond.*

This chapter will constitute a critical examination of racial contract discourse that led to White supremacy. I will utilize Charles Mills' (1997) racial contract theory throughout this chapter to both illuminate and substantiate the claims that undergird this chapter. This approach will synthesize some of the major moments of European history vis-à-vis other non- Europeans, particularly people of African descent. The discussion will illuminate how the sociocultural and economic conditions of the Dark Ages set the stage for the latter part of the Middle Ages. Also, this critical inquiry will reveal how the discourse of a God-centered world was replaced by the discourse of anthropocentrism. That is, the discourse of God being placed at the center of the universe that thrived during the Middle Ages was replaced by the discourse of human-beings existing at the center of the world (i.e., anthropocentric). The shifting of these two discourses is globally known as the transition that emerged from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.

In the midst of European development and advancement the institutional enslavement of Africans was introduced to the world. This crime of humanity encompassed the transshipment of Africans to the Western Hemisphere which represented an extremely important aspect of the history of white supremacy. This seminal event would serve to reinforce various notions of Western European superiority and dominance that would eventually prove to have major implications throughout the diaspora. Following this important period White Supremacy is further developed during the Enlightenment era. The former established both an intellectual and cultural worldview that uncompromisingly placed European norms, customs, and values at the center of the global stage. Out of this historical moment the discourse of scientific reductionism

emerged during the Enlightenment that led to the scientific denial of ideology. In essence, the field of science developed a rationale that sought to reduce the social to mathematical reductionism.

An examination of American education will yield that people of African descent have and continue to be embroiled with their European counterparts over a number of issues pertaining to education (e.g., segregated educational settings, Slave codes that banned Blacks from learning how to read, African Americans struggling to establish institutions of learning, Blacks waging vigilant battles to contest laws that violated their civil rights within the institution of education and beyond, etc.). The above analysis will be supplemented with a deconstruction of the social/racial contract vis-à-vis segregation in American schooling. It will be argued that no society in Western Civilization ever emerged from symmetrical social, economic, political, and historical conditions and relationships. Rather, there has always been a social reality of asymmetrical relationships due to the reality of White domination. Furthermore, it will be argued that the social contract is actually a racial contract that serves to maintain a social order.

The Chapter will culminate with the pivotal role that the Supreme Court's decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* 1954 played in enabling Blacks to contest physical and institutional barriers. Despite the significance of *Brown vs. Board* 1954, it did not deal with "knowledge" or curriculum issues and how school desegregation would actually be implemented. Hence, the contemporary struggle for Blacks is an epistemological one. At every level of education throughout the United States, Blacks are embroiled in sociopolitical contestation over knowledge, representation, and the sharing of public spaces.

### **Racial contract Theory and White Supremacy**

Charles Mills (1997) performs a critical juxtaposition between the racial contract and social contract. Throughout his development of racial contract theory, he does a masterful job of delineating how White supremacy manifests as being the unnamed political system that has constructed the contemporary sociocultural realities of the world. According to Mills (1997) White supremacy has a stranglehold on the academy, particularly in the field of philosophy. He argues that anyone entering institutions of higher learning in the Western Hemisphere can be assured of being inundated with at least two thousand years of political thought. Basically, a comprehensive philosophy program will introduce most students to most, if not, all of the political and philosophical thinkers of Western Civilization. Also, most students will be exposed

to discourses of aristocracy, democracy, absolutism, liberalism, representative government, socialism, welfare capitalism, and libertarianism.

Although most philosophy programs seem to do a good job of canvassing both the various political systems and history of Western thinkers, it is rather astonishing that there is little or no mention of the most recent 400-600 hundred years. According to Mills (1997), “this omission is not accidental” (p.1). It clearly demonstrates the reality that standard textbooks and the curriculum have been primarily created and developed by Whites. Most of these White professionals and educators are unable to appropriately conceive their racial privilege. Moreover, they fail to comprehend their privilege as being political and a form of domination.

Clearly, White supremacy has been the most powerful political construct in recent world history. It has been the instrument of domination through which White people have over the course of history used to govern and control non-White people. Interestingly, it is not viewed as being a political system at all by many observers. Mills (1997) suggests that the system of White domination is not taken seriously. As a result, it serves as the support system for various racist and unjust social, political, and economic enterprises.

In response to the sociocultural realities of White supremacy Mills suggests a global theoretical discourse that challenges the assumptions of White political philosophy. This type of response to White supremacy would coincide with feminist discourse that challenges patriarchy in philosophy. The chief objective of such a framework is to acknowledge racism as actually being a political system with a unique power structure. While Western liberal philosophy has long suggested a “social contract” as the basis for political organization, Mills (1997) argues that the *social* contract is really a *racial* contract, by stating:

If we think of human beings starting off in a “state of nature” it just suggests that they then decide to establish civil society and a government. What we have then is a theory that founds government on the popular consent of individuals taken as equals. But the peculiar contract that I am referring, thought based on the social contract tradition that has been central to Western political theory between everybody (“we the people”), but between just the people who count, the people who really are people (“we the white people”). So it is a Racial Contract. (p.3)

The social contract, either in its older form or in its latest version masks the unfortunate and horrible realities of group privilege and domination. It is a flagrantly misleading portrayal of

how the world actually is and how it has evolved into its current sociopolitical condition. Mills (1997) illustrates the influence of racist attitudes imbedded in the social contract:

The “Racial Contract,” then is intended as a conceptual bridge between two areas now largely segregated from each other: on the one hand, the world of mainstream (i.e., white) ethics and political philosophy, preoccupied with discussions of justice and rights in the abstract, on the other hand, the world of Native Americans, African American, and Third World and Fourth World political thought, historically focused on issues of conquest, imperialism, colonialism, white settlement and land rights, race and racism, slavery, jim crow, reparations, apartheid, cultural authenticity, national identity, indigenismo, Afrocentrism, etc. These issues hardly appear in mainstream political philosophy, but they have been central to the political struggles of the majority of the world’s population. Their absence from what is considered serious philosophy is a reflection not of their lack of seriousness but of the color of the vast majority of Western academic philosophers (and perhaps *their lack of seriousness*). (p.4)

One of the salient features of traditional social contract theory is that it possesses the capacity to present simplistic and routine responses to factual questions regarding the genesis and the day-to-day realities of society and government. It also offered solutions to government and normative problems regarding the justification of socioeconomic structures and political institutions. Another important aspect of traditional social contract theory is its versatility. Essentially, it allowed numerous theorists to delineate, postulate, and conceptualize via multiple perspectives on phenomena regarding “the state of nature, human motivation, rights and liberties people gave up or retained, the particular details of the agreement, and the resulting character of the government” (Mills, p. 4, 1997).

Conversely, Mills (1997) utilizes the “racial contract” in accordance with the ideals of classic contractarians such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. His usage is not solely for normative aims that seek to establish judgments about both social justice and injustice. Rather, he seeks to use it descriptively with the intent of explaining the initial beginnings of society and state along with how society is structured, the manifestations of government, and the populace’s moral psychology.

Mills (1997) points out that Rousseau's thesis of technological development in *Discourse on Inequality* (1775) fails to achieve legitimate democratic outcomes. By "naturalizing"

technological advantage Rousseau justifies the inequality between the wealthy and the indigent. Mills argues that a moral society would demand social and economic justice, not excuse injustice. By studying the naturalized social contract, Mills (1997) is able to show how “an unjust, exploitative society, ruled by an oppressive government and regulated by an immoral code, comes into existence” (p.5). Therefore, the point of evaluating the nonideal contract is not to reconstruct it, but to utilize it to critically demonstrate and magnify the inequities of the existing nonideal polity presented in their defense.

Mills (1997) suggests that this type of critical analysis allows for an in-depth and thorough-going look into the actual internal logic that drives the sociopolitical system so we can understand the overall impact it has had on the sociopolitical realities of both European and non-European peoples. In the following account he elaborates on the significance of the critical analysis, stating:

Thus it does normative work for us not through its own values, which are detestable, but by enabling us to understand the polity’s actual history and how these values and concepts have functioned to rationalize oppression, so as to reform them. (p.6)

In his attempt to acquire a deeper understanding of the seemingly elusive and at times, blurred logic of racial domination and how it structures the locales of the Western Hemisphere and beyond, Mills uses the nonideal "social" contract as both a rhetorical trope and theoretical method to facilitate the above mentioned objective. A racial contract could serve to appropriately address the historical shortcomings of its (i.e., social contract) normative theories and practices, thus replacing the current raceless perspectives that dominate political theory. Moreover, Mills (1997) argues that the conceptualization of the racial contract possesses the potential to influence mainstream Western political theory to engage the issue of race. Mills provide a purposive and practical rationale regarding the immense potential of racial contract theory in the following passage, stating:

Both at the primary level of an alternative conceptualization of the facts and at the secondary (reflexive) level of a critical analysis of the orthodox theories themselves, the “Racial Contract” enables us to engage with mainstream Western political theory to bring in race. Insofar as contractarianism is thought of as a useful way to do political philosophy, to theorize about how the polity was created and what values should guide our prescriptions for making it more just, it is obviously crucial to understand what the

original and continuing “contract” actually was and is, so that we can correct for it in constructing the ideal “contract.” The “Racial Contract” should therefore be enthusiastically welcomed by white contract theorists as well. (p.7)

In its totality, Mills’s racial contract theory stands on three claims, and they are as follows: 1) The existential claim---White supremacy both nationally and throughout the diaspora, is a sociopolitical reality and has been for centuries, 2) The conceptual claim– White supremacy needs to be understood as being a political system, 3) The methodological claim due to its political character, White supremacy can be critically theorized as a “contract” between Whites (i.e., racial contract). As well, it should be taken to be moral, epistemological, and political. With respect to material goods and resources, the racial contract determines how they are disseminated to the populace. Due to its arbitrary and calculated nature the racial contract is an exploitation contract.

The discussion above reinforces the reality that the racial contract viewed from a critical perspective, to some degree, emulates the classical model in that it is sociopolitical and moral. As a theory, it demonstrates how sociopolitical realities come to fruition and how societies undergo transformation, and it addresses how individuals and society is constructed along with delineating how states are established. Also, it takes into account how both moral codes and a given *psychology* become part of a populace's sociopolitical reality.

### **The Middle Ages as an Important Precursor to White Supremacy**

The Dark Ages (or the first part of the Middle Ages) was a period of hardships (e. g., famine, disintegration of social institutions such as government and schooling, economic stagnation). It can be argued that these hardships bred a hopelessness that would eventually compromise their commonly held faith in God. As a result, the events of the Dark Ages set the stage for the shift from an ethnocentric to an anthropocentric worldview, thus removing God from the center of the Western European worldview. During the Middle Ages, God was placed at the center of the Western European worldview. This anthropocentric orientation paved the way for religion to be interwoven into the fabric of these European’s socioeconomic and political realities. However, what separated them from other religious people around the world was that Western European religion possessed a “worldly” orientation. This worldly orientation would prove to have a profound impact on three aspects of Western Civilization: “1) Western conceptions of time, 2) Western attitudes toward education and learning, and 3) Western beliefs

about the value of manual labor” (Blackburn, 1991, p.142). In essence, they were the first in Western history to see work as both a practical and productive activity. This perspective on work and spirituality served to create the Western belief that work is both socially beneficial and spiritually essential.

During the Middle Ages, Western Europeans began to realize the potential benefits of education. While intellectual activity increased, intellectual work was kept separate from manual labor with the upper classes and religious orders engaging in intellectual work while manual labor was primarily reserved for slaves and the lower classes. This sociocultural phenomenon helped to reinforce the chasm that existed between the intellectual and manual labors while simultaneously introducing a newfound respect for learning in Western history that was both theoretical and practical. Most importantly, this new attitude toward learning and education set the foundation for modern science insofar as to promote in early scientists an interest in pure scientific thought and practical experimentation (Greer, 1977).

Much of the socioeconomic and political realities that took place during the Middle Ages laid the early foundations for the social/racial contract. A major socioeconomic development during this period was the advent of feudalism which represented an economic system where nobles possessed disproportionate amounts of power, land, and wealth who exploited the labor of the masses. In essence, this was an economic system based upon the ownership of land that established the foundation for a new political and legal system in Europe that created clear economic distinctions among the populace as it pertained to status and power. There was a consensus amongst many Europeans during this time that led them to believe that they were ordained by God as the “chosen” people. Those Europeans of the Middle Ages held their worldview, culture, customs, and values in higher regard than those of non-European peoples. The position that they took religiously would serve as a major thrust to the social/ racial contract. They viewed themselves as being God’s allies who were responsible for imposing the divine will on others both locally and globally. While this sociocultural and political phenomenon began to emerge during the Middle Ages, it would really begin to take shape during the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras. Basically, everything that they did to other non-Europeans whether good or bad had the blessings of their God.

### **Concretization of the Racial Contract**

The existential claim---white supremacy, both local and global, exists and has existed for many years; the conceptual claim---white supremacy should be thought of as itself a political system; the methodological claim-as a political system, white supremacy can illuminatingly be theorized as based on a “contract” between whites, a Racial Contract. (Mills, 1997, p.7)

Many Europeans argue that the fall of the Roman Empire and the "decline" into the Dark Ages represented the collapse of both Western Civilization and the entire world; however, at that same time civilization flourished in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The failure of European scholars to recognize that the so-called "Dark Ages" actually corresponds with a great "Illuminated Age" in non-European (particularly Islamic) cultures reveals the inherent racism of European thought.

Given the racial exclusivity of the European interpretation of the Middle Ages, it would not be unreasonable for a critical observer to pose the following questions: Why did the Europeans characterize the articulation of history in this manner? Whose view of history is it? Who makes history? Who contributes to the construction of history? What is the meaning of history? What does such a view of history mean with regard to non-European peoples? Whatever particular answers we may give to each of these questions, clearly European intellectuals see themselves as the sole architects of history along with routinely discrediting everything about other people and cultures. When you combine the ethnocentrism of European intellectual thought with the arrogance of a religious doctrine that placed their own god above that of all other world religions, you find revealed the core of racism built right into the most basic aspects of European thought. Such structuration establishes a powerful pretext to racially configuring the world. Ultimately, the quest to racialize the world was an attempt to control the world by using white supremacy as an instrument toward that end (Ani, 1994; Mills, 1997; Eze, 1997; Wilson, 1998; Carruthers, 1999).

### **The Social Contract Becomes the Racial Contract During the Renaissance**

The Renaissance, emerging in the late 1300's represented a rebirth or reinvigoration of Classical Antiquity in Western Europe. Fueled by the rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman writings, the Renaissance was an era where intellectual and artistic creativity moved across this region of Europe. Much of the writing that covered various types of literary works, intellectual activity, genesis of the separation of the church and state, among other cultural and social

changes seemed to, in varying degrees, facilitate the move to a more humanistic attitude. As a result, God was replaced at the center of the universe by humans. This represented a shift from a God-centered world to anthropocentrism. That is, the transition from the Middle Ages to The Renaissance saw the departure from a God-centered society and world to a human-centered society and world. As a result, the so-called "Renaissance Man" was supposed to excel at everything. He was, in fact, to be God on this earth. The sociocultural and political belief systems and the intellectual attitude that accompanied this new "God-Man" would prove to catapult white supremacy to almost unimaginable heights on the continent of Europe and beyond. The Europeans identified themselves as the gatekeepers to knowledge, civilization, and as the sovereign voice of the world. They proceeded to navigate throughout the diaspora as though they were ordained with the sovereign power to rename, oppress, dominate, monopolize, colonize, and enslave non-European peoples wherever they deemed necessary. Their ability to navigate the oceans enabled them to create an enormous highway for European commerce, exploration, and discovery. While Europeans characterize such expeditions as acts of enlightenment, Mills (1997) describes them as acts of domination.

Far from being lost in the mists of the ages, it is clearly historically locatable in the series of events making the creation of the modern world by European colonialism and the voyages of "discovery" now increasingly and more appropriately called expeditions of conquest. . . .

The Columbian quincentenary a few years ago, with its accompanying debates, polemics, controversies, counter-demonstrations and outpourings of revisionist literature, confronted many whites with the uncomfortable fact, hardly discussed in mainstream moral and political theory, that we live in a world which has been *foundationally* shaped for the past five-hundred years by the realities of European domination and the gradual consolidation of global white supremacy. (p. 20)

When we understand that the process of legitimation of the nation-state and the practice of codifying morality and law are philosophically justified through an appeal to the social contract and when we realize that the *social* contract is, in fact, a *racial* contract, then we understand that the very basis of our concepts of nations, morality, and law are built upon the foundation of racism. In addition, Mills (1997, p. 20) argues, "The Racial contract is global,

involving a tectonic shift of the ethico juridical basis of the planet as a whole, the division of the world, as Jean-Paul Sartre put it long ago, between “men” and “natives.”

Curtin (1971) identifies this European exceptionalism as based on a binary that defines the world in terms of us and them. Pierre van den Berghe (1978) shares a similar perspective of Enlightenment dichotomization arguing that race eventually supplanted religion as the mechanism used to distinguish Europeans from others. Van den Berghe argues that the religious divide could be resolved through proselytizing and conversion, thus it was unable to be utilized as an instrument to push the Enlightenment agenda to elevate Western Europe to the apex of humanity. Eventually, Enlightenment discourse divided humans into races by delineating groups as humanoid, but not fully human (savages and barbarians). Those groups falling into the aforementioned categories were deemed members of a general set of non-White races. This rationale was fueled by the ancient Roman distinction between those peoples residing within the empire as being civilized and peoples existing outside of the empire were identified as barbarians. Henceforth, Enlightenment discourse established a distinction between full and question-mark human beings which Europeans use to create a bi-level moral code with a particular set of rules for Whites and different set of rules for non-Whites (Mills, 1997). This activity was complicit in the creation of the Eurocentric engineered racial contract. It was this type of activity that facilitated the rise of humanism where Europeans sought to place themselves at the center of the world stage, thus reinforcing the sociopolitical and economic construct of white supremacy. This also signaled the reversal of the concept of what God and salvation meant to them during the Middle Ages.

An important figure of this era was that of Niccolo Machiavelli. As Italy became weakened by major developments throughout the world (e.g., European conquest of North America, Portugal and Spain developed sea routes in various regions of the Atlantic ocean that eventually undermined Mediterranean commerce which was at one time the reservoir of Italian prosperity, and Spain and France initiated international battles in Italy) Machiavelli wrote the *The Prince* which became one of the most influential political treaties of European history. In his legendary text, Machiavelli created a theory that separated the church (Christian ideology) from the state and he argued that a ruler ought not to be expected to adhere to traditional moral precepts. He also suggested that the ruler reserved the right to preserve the power and autonomy of the state. Ultimately, Machiavelli became renowned for putting forth the idea that rulers

should disregard moral standards and his theoretical perspective explicating a new form of politics that enabled European monarchs to focus their energies on expansion of state power. The Machiavellian notion of a social contract was founded upon the theoretical and philosophical premise of prosperity. The social contract theorists of this era acknowledged the availability of newly identified natural resources and they proceeded to construct a theory that endorsed an individual's quest of material goods and happiness. The coincidence of this new political theory based on the pragmatic pursuit of wealth with the European conquest of the Americas proved devastating to the indigenous peoples of the conquered lands.

The philosophical and theoretical perspective espoused by Machiavelli would serve as a major driving force behind the rise and dramatic impact that the economic system of capitalism would prove to have on the world, particularly the continent of Africa and African Americans. His argument for the expansion of state power and the pursuit of individual wealth served as the underpinning rationale of capitalism whereby the few wealthy people of the world along with mega corporations and big businesses were able to establish a market economy that enabled the aforementioned parties to have the opportunity to accumulate astonishing amounts of wealth while simultaneously exploiting the masses for their labor and patronage. The capitalist economic system is structured in a way that alleviates the above mentioned groups of any moral obligation related to fairness and equity with respect to the masses (e.g., staggering discrepancy of wealth between the rich elite and the masses, disturbingly high levels of poverty in so-called First World areas of the world, particularly in America) thus, exemplifying Machiavelli's belief that the ruling elites should be exempt from any existing moral standards. As such, the capitalist system represents the ruthlessness and lack of concern for the greater good of a given society which too is a major tenet of the Machiavellian perspective on self-preservation. Ironically, the concept of Western capitalism is incongruent with the ideals of a democracy that is founded upon the premise of a social contract. Thus, it is a system that is considered as being one of the most contradictory, racist, and oppressive sociopolitical and economic realities known to the contemporary world. In sum, the social contract being primarily a racial contract became an economic contract of capitalism which led to the oppression and disenfranchisement of non-Europeans.

This capitalist system which evolved out of the racial contract was jump started on the American continent with the slave transshipment of Africans who were forced into a brutal and

dehumanizing existence as sub-humans. For approximately 350-400 years African Americans were forced to work for free as slaves without any compensation, and endure sociocultural and political realities that rendered them to subhuman status (e.g., 3/5's Compromise, Jim Crow, Separate but Equal, etc.). This reality was dramatically exacerbated by the grotesque and inhumane treatment (e.g., families were fragmented via slave auctions, Black females were raped by White slave owners and citizens without impunity, Black slaves were mercilessly whipped and, in some instances, they died from such punishment, and there were many instances where Black slaves would lose their limbs and lives for contesting (attempts to escape slavery) the legally sanctioned institution of slavery that fell under the auspices of the social/racial contract the American government, White slave owners, and citizens rendered toward Blacks in America during slavery). The inhumane sociopolitical reality of slavery was rooted in a white supremacist rationale that ordained the Europeans of Western Europe as being imbued with God-like powers to rule, dominate, and oppress other non-Europeans throughout the world. As well, with such God-like delusions of grandeur they went about the world conquering non-Europeans who were deemed infidels (i.e., subhuman).

In sum, the social/racial contract gained momentum in the Middle Ages and continued through the Renaissance. It was redrawn to exclude non-Europeans (e.g., Muslims, China, India, Africa, and the Americas, etc.), thus making the racial element of the contract more apparent. As well, the shift from a God-centered world to a more human-centered world concretized the racial component of the narrative (i.e., Racial contract). This phenomena saw humans (i.e., Europeans) take center stage of the world (humanism) which established a universal dualism that pitted Europeans against non-Europeans. Furthermore, the concept of the social contract is to get members to buy into the logic that under-girds a society. That is, people blindly buy into the hegemony of the social/racial contract. The significance of God cannot be overstated here. If Europeans believed "their" God had endowed them with the power to rule the world, then, the God whom they created would have to be racist since other non-European peoples have had to be at the mercy of people of European origin.

## **The Enlightenment**

The racial element of the social contract becomes more apparent in the intellectual activity that took place during the Enlightenment era. The Enlightenment took a more realistic or scientific orientation toward the world. That is, God became even more distant throughout the Enlightenment than the distance developed during the Renaissance. Actually, Europeans saw themselves as being imbued with ‘their God’s power’ to act on his behalf so that God was subsumed in the act of scholarship and science itself. As a result, European intellectuals began to study different phenomena assuming that whatever they claimed as a result of their studies mimicked the knowledge of God. The birth of disciplines like psychology, sociology, analytic philosophy, the arts, and the sciences define the Enlightenment and eventually having a profound impact on schooling and education. While the study of the world became more disciplined, the disciplines themselves became hierarchically ordered. The hard sciences and mathematics (e.g., physics, astronomy, chemistry, & biology, etc), analytic philosophy, and the scientific method (positivism) were the most esteemed academic disciplines and modes of intellectual inquiry. One of the major premises of the scientific method was that it best represented the most bias-free (objective) approach to understanding observable human phenomena thus the more God-like in its nature. This bias toward science and cognitive rationality became central to advancing the racial contract. Eze (1997) argues that a comparison of the European Enlightenment to Greek antiquity would reveal that in both the realms of philosophy and politics, the preeminent thinkers (philosophers) of Greek antiquity explicated social and human geographical differences that pitted the “cultured” against the “barbaric.” For example, Aristotle described the human-being as being a rational animal, and suggested that the cultured citizens (i.e., Male aristocratic Greeks) possessed the capacity to live in a reasonable fashion and arranged their society democratically. In contrast, non-Greeks were identified as being “barbarians,” who were void of culture and did not possess the superior rational capacity required to co-exist in an Athenian type of democratic social arrangement, and therefore existed in a state of brutishness and despotism.

An examination of European Enlightenment thinkers reveal that they embraced the “Greek ideal of reason, as well as this reason’s categorical function of discriminating between the cultured (now called the “civilized”) and the “barbarian” (the “savage” or the “primitive”)” (Eze, 1997, p.4). In fact, some might argue that the Enlightenment’s declaration of itself as “the Age of Reason” was centered upon the precise notion that reason in a historical sense could only

reach maturity in modern Europe, while peoples residing in locales outside of Europe and who were not of European ethnicity were routinely identified and theorized as rationally inferior and savage (Eze, 1997; Mills, 1997).

Such reasoning is explicitly played out in the social/racial contract by way of the historical reality that European Enlightenment thinkers established boundaries between modern Europe and non-European areas of the world that continue to exist today. Their racist and culturally racist reasoning suggested that modern Europe was the only area of the world that possessed the capacity to reason and engage in intellectual activity that promoted both learning and ideas that were capable of influencing the geopolitical realities of the world. By anointing themselves the authority of human reasoning and a culture without rival they negated the reality that non-Europeans possessed the capacity to reason and engage various types of intellectually stimulating endeavors as well.

The ideas and notions that emerged during the Enlightenment era regarding non-European groups would play a significant role in developing a social/racial contract that distinguished those individuals (White people) who were accorded all of the benefits embedded in the social contract. On the other hand, those peoples (non-Whites) who were considered untamed, wild, uncivilized, and viewed as different were subjected to the racial contract that explicated their second-class citizenship and subpersonhood (Eze, 1997; Mills, 1997).

The social/racial contract throughout its history depicts the privileging of White cultural and racial superiority while simultaneously deeming non-White cultural ways-of-becoming as both different and deficient. An example of this reality is manifested throughout the enterprise of American schooling. In most instances, the opinions, perspectives, professional, and scholarly contributions of Blacks in the field of education are not given much credence in comparison to their White counterparts. Also, Black students who exhibit distinctively different ways-of-becoming are, oftentimes, considered to be navigating the sociopolitical terrain in a manner that is antithetical to the social contract (e.g., students are expected to project dispositions that endorse and coincide with mainstream Eurocentric customs). In fact, throughout the diaspora people of African descent experience similar situations to those of Blacks here in America. Mills (1997) argues that such sociopolitical and cultural conditions are representative of a racial contract that establishes a racial polity, a racial state, and a racial juridical system. It is a contract

that clearly delineates the privileged and superior status of Whites and the second-class inferior status of non-Whites which is sanctioned and reinforced by either law or custom.

Eze (1997) states that from a philosophical perspective, Hegel argued in his work *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History (1822-1828)* that non-European peoples (American Indians, Africans, and Asians) were less human than Europeans. For Hegel, to varying degrees, the aforementioned groups did not see themselves as conscious historical beings. He further argued that this state of a-history was manifested in the inferiority of what he thought to be African religion “(Africans worship themselves and objects of nature of God), and politics (Africans kill their kings, which is a failure to recognize that the king is a superior being)” (Eze, 1997, p.109). This account reveals how Eurocentric disposition fails to respectfully acknowledge the difference of African culture, customs, and values, thus, deeming their difference as being savage, deficient, and inferior. Eze (1997) states that in the titled work mentioned above, Hegel eventually goes into greater detail about how the identifiable differences (i.e., cultural, epistemological, ontological, values, and morals) of Africans and people of African descent render them either deficient or inferior, in the following section Hegel is quoted at length describing, in his opinion, the shortcomings of the aforementioned groups, thus stating:

The characteristic feature of the Negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity – for example, of God or the law – in which the will of man could participate and in which he could become aware of his own being. The African, in his undifferentiated and concentrated unity, has not yet succeeded in making this distinction between himself as an individual and his universality, so that he knows nothing of an absolute being which is other and higher than his ownself. Thus, man as we find him in Africa has not progressed beyond his immediate existence. As soon as man emerges as a human being, he stands in opposition to nature, and it is this alone which makes him a human being. But if he has merely made a distinction between himself and nature, he is still at the first stage of his development: he is dominated by passion, and is nothing more than a savage. All our observations of African man show him as living in a state of savagery and barbarism, and he remains in this state to the present day. The Negro is an example of animal man in all his savagery and lawlessness, and if we wish to understand him at all, we must put aside all our European attitudes. We must not think of a spiritual God or of moral laws; to comprehend him correctly, we must

abstract from all reverence and morality, and from everything which we call feeling.  
(p.128)

Clearly, it is apparent that Hegel, along with many of his contemporaries of the Enlightenment era, failed to understand the complexity of the African cosmology and those of people who were of African descent located in various areas throughout the diaspora. Also, major characteristics embedded in Eurocentrism can be ascertained from these comments. For example, Hegel is setting the European worldview as the standard by which both Africans and people of African descent ought to be measured. Therefore, any type of human activity that falls out of the European worldview is deemed deficient by virtue of identifiable differences. Above all, Hegel's comments in this passage and many of his other written works exemplified the racist dispositionality of the Enlightenment era which proved to play a major role throughout the history of numerous institutions located in the Western Hemisphere, particularly the institution of American education (e.g., African America culture is subsumed by Eurocentric culture in the educational setting that encompasses the following: history, learning styles, customs, values, and morals). Moreover, Hegel who is widely considered as a historicist denounced the possibility of Africa having any type of history. He also argued that Blacks were improved in a moral sense by the institution of slavery. It is this type of sentiment, be it philosophical or otherwise, which led to the color coded hierarchy of race that reduced Blacks to the status of subpersonhood.

The above mentioned racist rationale is but one example of how the racist contract could enter into the very "reasoning" of even the most respected European intellectuals. Mills (1997) argues that Hegel's idea proved to be the crucial conceptual distinction between Whites and non-Whites, person and sub-persons. Out of this distinction many other distinctions were made that established variations of sub-personhood ("savages" vs. "barbarians") that could be linked to different forms of the racial contract (colonialism, slavery, conquest, ethnic extermination, oppression, and genocide, disproportionate incarceration and school failure amongst African Americans, etc.). In essence, Hegel and his contemporaries held the perspective that non-Europeans were entities that functioned at a lower moral tier, to the extent, that they were incapable of exercising autonomy and self-governance.

Certainly Hegel was not alone among European theorists to build his philosophical justifications upon the racism of the racial contract. Herbert Spencer, Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and Adam Smith all suggested the greatness and superiority of Europeans over all other

non-European cultures. While Charles Darwin clearly does not belong in the aforementioned group, it is important to note that his ideas were used by numerous individuals to advance racist projects that portrayed many non-European groups as being inferior people. In more precise terms each of the individuals mentioned above put forth theories that have impacted the institution of American schooling in significant ways. For instance, Spencer argued that humanity develops successfully via either the best people or a society's ability to be triumphant in political and economic competitions. His famous phrase "survival of the fittest" captured the essence of such human and sociopolitical realities. This philosophical perspective of Spencer's has appeared in numerous political and educational discourses over the years (e.g., eugenics movement, bell curve, and tracking, etc.).

Darwin's thesis of natural selection elucidated that certain groups were biologically and/or physically predisposed to success or failure. This suggested that those who were most fit to compete for existing resources were to be deemed the most capable to survive. He explicated that natural selection embodied the reality that due to the disproportional existence of plants and animals, and the amount of food available to sustain their existence, that it was inevitable for there not to be competition amongst living things for survival. In effect, those possessing physical characteristics that enabled them to exploit the resources needed to sustain life were ordained by nature to survive (e.g., giraffes possessing long necks by virtue of their unique physical characteristics in comparison to short-necked giraffes were most fit for survival due to their physical ability to retrieve food from trees). The misuse of Darwin's theory of natural selection has led to numerous controversial debates in educational discourse that seeks to resolve the nature vs. nurture issue. Moreover, non-Europeans throughout the course of American education have been subject to intellectual accusations suggesting their inferior position to people of European descent regarding their ability to be competitive throughout the institution of education.

Another important European Enlightenment scholar who built his theory upon the foundation of the racial contract is Auguste Comte. In his essay *Cours de Philosophie Positive* Comte argued that there were three stages of human development: 1) the first stage was the theological period where an almost unconditional belief in God absorbed human thinking. 2) the second stage was the metaphysical when abstract concepts were central to human thinking, and 3) the third stage represented a shift from vague abstractions to scientific knowledge that was

both more accurate and factual. Comte held the perspective that positivism (a term he used that meant the scientific study of facts) would enable humanity to attain their highest levels of achievement, advancements, and understanding of the world (Brinton 1963; Blackburn, 1991; Eatwell & Wright 1999). Conversely, he argued that humans could do without spiritual values and there was no need for them to have faith in God. In taking such a position, Comte, perhaps by default, delineated one of the major issues that modern Western Civilization was struggling with: "Does a scientific civilization inevitably undermine human belief in God and spiritual values, and can such a civilization endure without some means of defining spiritual goals and beliefs?" (Blackburn, 1991, p. 387-388).

This move to empiricism served as the driving force behind the scientific rationale that establishes the epistemological pyramid. This led to the hierarchical ordering of disciplines that were aligned with the major tenets of positivism. Those disciplines that most adhered to the tenets of positivism were deemed the most pristine. Meanwhile, disciplines that fall out of the realm of the natural sciences were both viewed and defined as being the soft sciences (e.g., sociology, psychology, social sciences, the arts, etc.). The arts were deemed highly suspect because they brought in too much of the human condition and the social.

Moreover, many Europeans believed that knowledge did not come from humans and that knowledge existed independently of human-beings. They in explicit ways made the sciences an elitist discourse. By claiming that positivism is the principle means to construct concrete discourse dislocated humanity from understanding its social construction (condition). Therefore, this scientific (positivist) positioning is antithetical to the social contract, but ironically it informs the social/racial contract. The consequence of this reality is that people blindly partake in their own oppression and marginalization, in that most social phenomena cannot be reduced to scientific understanding.

For example, none of the academic disciplines come close to interrogating one of the most disturbing paradoxes known to the world. That is, the American notion of democracy which is founded upon the major tenets of fairness, justice, and the right to exercise civil dissent is supposed to successfully co-exist with the ruthless, humanly insensitive, and arguably racist economic system of capitalism. From its inception and beyond the aforementioned relationship has been an economical and sociopolitical mismatch. It is clear that the two are philosophically, socio-politically, and economically diametrically opposed. In a major way the emergence of

Eurocentric academic disciplines set the foundation for a human capital global perspective which is a major aspect of capitalism (i.e., worldview) that is rooted in Eurocentric notions of meaning. The academic disciplines that emerged out of the Enlightenment era in a seemingly subliminal fashion helped to both establish and disseminate Eurocentric ways of interpreting the world. Gittens (2002, p.20) states, “Eurocentric ways of understanding the world are grounded ideologically in empiricism, individualism, and objectivism with positivism as the “fairy godfather” of knowledge.”

### **Early Education**

Early American schooling perpetuated the racist and morally paternalistic aspects of the social/racial contract. White Europeans suggested, by their actions, that their narrative of the Christian God was the only and most appropriate way to instill morals into all persons whether of European descent or not. Moreover, the cultivation of Eurocentric Christian morals and values throughout American schooling supported the sociopolitical and economic aspects of the social/racial contract. While this education served well the interests of the Colonial elites eventually leading to the founding of the first nation-state legitimized by an appeal to democracy, the religious and ideological agenda of education also served to create mass numbers of docile, passive, and uncritical future citizens. I am speaking of all of those on the continent not of European descent who were exploited and victimized by a ruthless and racist brand of capitalism and a legal system that reinforced their status as second-class citizens. Mills (1997) elucidates that this sociopolitical arrangement creates a moral hierarchy that falls along the lines of race. He states, “The whole point of establishing a moral hierarchy and juridically partitioning the polity according to race is to secure and legitimate the privileging of those individuals designated as white/persons and the exploitation of those individuals designated as nonwhite/subpersons” (p.32-33). Given the sociopolitical stance of American schooling during its formative years, it is rather apparent that there was the unfolding of the social/racial contract binary that distinguished between the civilized and uncivilized (barbarian), Whites and non-Whites, persons and subpersons.

To suggest that it is a well known reality that Blacks educated themselves during the era of slavery might be an overstatement of sorts; that is, if this declaration was made beyond the borders of the Black community. Therefore, it is worth noting that Blacks from the period of their enslavement extending throughout their entire existence here in America have taken great

interest in education.

The public schools that eventually did take in Blacks shortly after 1865 (mostly in the northern regions of America) did not possess environments that appropriately addressed the educational, psychological, and sociological needs of these students. By and large, American schools have consistently failed to provide appropriate educational environments for black students from the era of Reconstruction to Jim Crow to Separate but Equal to No Child Left Behind. From its inception, American schooling did not seek to meet the needs of Black students. That is, as an institution, American schooling never made a legitimate attempt to both acknowledge and merge interpersonal relationships with a supportive school structure that would address the needs of Black students (Siddle-Walker, 1996).

In 1865, shortly after the legal eradication of slavery, Blacks began to work diligently toward creating institutions to address literacy. Although they were legally accorded the same rights as Whites in 1875, the Civil Rights Bill signed by President U.S. Grant did not deal with the incessant racism and intense disdain that most White Americans held toward Blacks. Approximately eight years later the Supreme Court struck down the Civil Rights Bill of 1875. Unequivocally, the Supreme Court ruling was a devastating blow to Blacks since the decision legally relegated them to the status of subpersonhood (second class citizenship). The ruling made it virtually impossible for Blacks to enter predominantly White educational settings at any level. The reality of “separate but equal” and Jim Crow motivated Blacks to establish their own schools at all levels including the establishment of numerous institutions of higher learning (Historically Black Colleges and Universities or HBCU's). Frederickson (1995) asserts that HBCU's reduced illiteracy amongst African Americans from 90 percent to 50 percent between 1865 and the early part of the twentieth century. As well, from 1865-to-the-mid-1950's, Blacks established one and two-room school houses. The valiant action taken by African Americans to educate themselves in such a racially charged social climate represented an outright challenge to the social/racial contract. The American educational system sought to create students who would become compliant, servile, God-fearing adults who would possess unconditional allegiance to the political, economic and social ideals of this country. In essence, American schooling was, and continues to be, a sociopolitical enterprise that prepares students to be both willing and uncritical participants in a capitalist culture that perpetuates some of the more disturbing sociocultural conditions in the world. The system during this period exemplified what Patricia

Williams (as cited in Mills, 1997, pp. 76-77) refers to as “Racism in drag, a system of racism as status quo which is deep, angry, eradicated from view but continues to make people avoid the phantom as they did the substance, deferring to the unseen shape of things.

**Examining how the sociopolitical construct of segregation emerges as a subtext of the Racial contract which compromises the educational realities of African American students**

No nation can enslave a race of people for hundreds of years, set them free bedraggled and penniless, pit them, without assistance in a hostile environment, against privileged victimizers, and then reasonably expect the gap between heirs of the two groups to narrow. Lines, begun parallel and left alone, can never touch (Robinson, 2000, p. 74)

Mills’s (1997) racial contract theory speaks to the significance and implications of European history vis-à-vis Eurocentrism. As well, it offers a powerful and critical examination of the European experience in America vis-à-vis their social, economic, and political interactions with non-Europeans. Over the course of European history the social/racial contract has exemplified Eurocentric characteristics that encompass the following: 1) the naturalization of race, 2) naturalization of a racial hierarchy, 3) the privileging and veneration of European history, and culture while simultaneously marginalizing and exoticizing non-European history and cultures, and 4) arranges the world into binaries whereby one side of the binary is privileged over the other side. These four characteristics of Eurocentrism, in varying degrees, are manifested in subtle, subliminal, and sometimes explicit ways throughout the enterprise of schooling.

While this concluding section does not primarily deal with the enterprise of schooling vis-à-vis African Americans, nonetheless, it will attempt to illuminate how the nexus of Eurocentrism–White supremacy–and–the Racial contract impact the ideological sociocultural and political realities of our society. However, attention will be given to the dilemma of school desegregation and how it represents certain aspects of the Racial contract. The discussion will delineate that this nexus produces a sociocultural and political reality that both informs and influences our social and material world at macro, meso, and micro levels. Also, I will utilize racial contract theory to illustrate how the sociopolitical construct of Eurocentrism affect various elements of our sociopolitical reality which invariably impacts public institutions (e.g., educational, economic, political, and legal, etc.). In sum, I will present a critical discourse via

Racial contract theory that interrogates some of the seemingly obscure features of the Racial contract. The discussion will reveal how the mainstream discourse of democracy that is rooted in a false notion of egalitarianism that actually represents a racial contract (nation-state, segregation, Jim Crow, slavery, conquest, and colonization, etc.) which privileges people of European descent while simultaneously rendering non-European peoples, especially African Americans to subhuman status.

Throughout its history, many of America's social, political, and economic enterprises have been adversely affected by the Eurocentric characteristics explicated above by Mills, especially, in the case of non-European Americans. On the one hand, American society via its judicial system and social customs, in many ways, sought to establish a naturalized hierarchy of race (e.g., slavery, *Plessey v. Ferguson* 1896, Jim Crow, and Separate but Equal, etc.). Such naturalization of race would inform almost every sociopolitical institution throughout America, particularly the enterprise of schooling.

Meanwhile, on the other hand, White elites sought to galvanize all of its citizenry around the notion of a nation-state. That is, America following the charge of the White bourgeoisie would move toward establishing a common national identity along with forging a nation-state that would provide mutual protection and benefits for all of its citizenry (i.e., social contract). The rationale of the nation-state would prove to be immensely beneficial to the economic system of capitalism, in that the discourse of the nation-state was conveniently adapted to fit certain historical moments where certain groups of Europeans sought to advance certain sociopolitical and economic agendas that fostered the rise of the industrial corporate state. As a result, the application of the social contract in the U S which is actually founded upon nation-state ideology was in fact establishing a racial binary. This is so due to the reality that the nation-state was contrived solely amongst Europeans.

Given the exclusivity of its membership and the history of America that followed, in my opinion, it is more than reasonable to presume that this was clearly a racial contract. Especially, when examining how various enterprises throughout American society privileged European Americans over non-European Americans (e.g., schooling). This reality substantiates most of the argument Mills (1997) presents at the beginning of this discussion regarding how Eurocentrism naturalizes race, a racial hierarchy, marginalizes non-European cultures and people, and establishes binary oppositions pitting European culture and customs against those of

other non-Europeans.

In theory the concept of a nation-state that is founded upon the principle of the social contract that was applied to America may have seemed to be a plausible endeavor to many observers. However, the reality of the so-called social contract in America reveals it to be nothing more than a manifestation of European descendants forging a nation-state not around a nation of people of European descent with a common history, but instead around the sociopolitical construct of race. Undoubtedly, the discourse of American law played a major role in aiding the move toward the establishment of a Eurocentric nation-state that for a number of centuries sought to naturalize a racial hierarchy that pitted people of European descent at the apex of the socially constructed racial pyramid. Consequently, African Americans found themselves encountering, in varying degrees, numerous forms of racism, oppression, hegemony, and disenfranchisement throughout virtually every sector of society that was influenced by law.

One of the most scandalous motifs in American law and policy has been the infamous "separate but equal" ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessey v. Ferguson*. This monumental decision generated a sixty-year period where seventeen states were governed by the most rigid and dehumanizing segregationist policies. This was both reinforced and substantiated by the White dominant populace who participated in coerced racial separation in every sphere of American society. Enormous dedication was expended by the Black community, particularly civil rights lawyers and the NAACP to dismantle this fortress of racial oppression (Orfield & Eaton 1996).

The racial contract provided the unwritten rationale for a policy that deliberately ignored the democratic ideal of this country. The color-coded morality of the racial contract reserves the notions of natural freedom and equality solely for Whites. Mills (1997) argues that the legal formalized practice of segregation illustrates the racist civilized/barbarian binary construct that shapes much of the racist discursive practices embedded in the social/racial contract. Whites believed that it was appropriate to accord partial privileges and rights to Blacks, thus creating Blacks as subordinate citizens.

Segregation should not be viewed as merely a bad law; instead, it should be understood as an extension of a racist ideology assumed in the racial contract. During the dawn of the twentieth century, it had become crystal clear that Blacks would be disenfranchised throughout America, but particularly in states located south of the Mason-Dixon Line. In many ways the

segregation codes were similar to the Black codes that preceded them. Essentially, they were unscrupulously supported and enforced by a legal institution that at the time was to ensure that justice, equity, and fairness is rendered to all residing under its governance. Instead, Blacks were doomed by the imposition of legal sanctions that explicated a racial ostracism that encompassed every sector of society insofar as they were excluded from interacting with their White counterparts and they were not permitted equitable access to the following sociocultural settings: schools, housing, jobs, almost all forms of transportation, recreation, public restrooms and drinking fountains, hospitals, orphanages, asylums, prisons, and eventually morgues, funeral homes, and cemeteries. The social conditions presented here depicts the dehumanizing and humiliating nature of the Jim Crow era that rendered Blacks to the reality that they existed in a world where they were not wanted.

Mills (1997) argues that the racial contract is founded upon formal or informal agreements or meta-agreements amongst one group of humans who designate themselves as being the superior group. This is achieved by their constructing a racial, phenotypical, genealogical, and cultural criteria that is used to categorize people who are not of their group (i.e., ethnicity or race), thus relegating non-group members to differentiated and inferior moral status, hence Jim Crow. Such critical examination of the sociopolitical underpinnings of American society reveals that the above mentioned social arrangements (i.e., agreements and meta-agreements) are indeed characteristic of a racial contract.

Above all, it was clear that Blacks were considered to have none of the rights attributed to *all* citizens of the United States (Vann Woodward cited in Randall Robinson, 2000, p. 225). After World War II the Civil Rights Movement intensified on the American scene and eventually became a sociocultural and political phenomenon that would become a part of the annals of American history. The years 1954-1965 played host to a social movement that revolutionized American law and began to force the unraveling of certain aspects of the racial contract. Successful legal challenges such as the 1954 Brown decision followed by social and legislative victories that dismantled legal segregation were aimed at uncovering the hidden agreements of the racial contract.

But while the Brown decision exemplified the much needed intention of dismantling the vices of racial separation in education, it failed to have any real impact on American educational policy that continued to be influenced, to some extent, by the racial contract. In the following

discussion Orfield & Eaton (1996) delineate how both the courts and government evaded the issues of segregation, and how it failed to have any significant impact on subsequent educational policies, thus arguing:

Brown established a legal goal of bringing down the walls of racial separation in school systems, but it never became the country's dominant educational policy. Even at the peak of the civil rights movement and liberal political power in the 1960s, much larger resources were being invested in upgrading segregated schools than in desegregating them. The government and the courts always funneled much more energy and resources into the pursuit of "separate but equal" reforms than into desegregating schools or trying to achieve equity by access to curriculum, or supporting programs to improve race relations within integrated schools. (p 25)

So while the Brown decision and other social and legal remedies of the fifties and sixties began the process of dismantling the racial contract; they failed to complete that process. The Brown decision failed to connect space with race and race to personhood. In essence, the Brown decision did not discern the reality Whites held the notion that the spaces they occupied (e.g., schools, restrooms, movie theaters, sporting events, and other events open to the public) were not to be invaded or shared with Blacks who they believed to be inferior people, thus interaction with Blacks or the sharing of spaces with Blacks meant compromising the civility and legitimacy of the occasion or locale. In other words, Blacks were allowed to live and survive as best they can in America; however, it was to be done in non-White settings. Mills (1997) captures the essence of this phenomenon, by offering:

Since the Racial Contract links space with race and race with personhood, the white raced space of the polity is in a sense the geographical locus of the polity proper. Where indigenous peoples were permitted to survive, they were denied full or any membership in the political community, thus becoming foreigners in their own country. (p. 50)

Clearly, Mills is describing a situation of colonial conquest; nonetheless, it is a sociopolitical situation that is analogous to that of Blacks dealing with school desegregation here in America. Although Blacks are accorded many opportunities to share spaces with Whites in various sociopolitical settings, it is rather ironic that it is extremely difficult to get Whites and Blacks to share spaces throughout the enterprise of American schooling, hence the ongoing dilemma of desegregation.

A common misnomer associated with the dismantling of the "separate but equal" doctrine with respect to education was that Black students needed to be in the presence of White students to learn. This was clearly a misrepresentation of the sentiment of much of the Black community regarding their children's education. In hindsight, many now recognize that it was more of an issue of having educational resources and facilities that were equitable to those that were present in schools that White students attended. Meanwhile, since the inception of the Brown decision a notable mantra of the Black community has been; it is not necessary for Black kids to be in the presences of White kids to experience educational success and vice-versa (Kunjufu, 1990; Shujaa, 1994, 1996). Ostensibly, this reaction by Blacks does not quite address the essence of the sociopolitical construct of property that is associated with the issue of desegregation. Clearly, the policy of desegregation is most effective when it is void of the paternalistic presence of Whites seeking to "help minorities," instead it is most beneficial when it creates legitimate opportunities for success for all students. As for the present layered opportunity structure, it is clearly evident that disproportionately poor "minorities" are denied access to both middle-class schools and the world beyond them (Hale, 1982; Hilliard, 1988, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Wilson, 1998).

Madhubuti (1994) explicates that the fight to educate African Americans was not about having the opportunity to share the same educational space as European Americans; rather, it was and continues to be a struggle to create an equitable and level playing field that encompassed all sectors of society. Madhubuti (as cited in Shujaa, 1994) articulates poignantly both the initial sentiment regarding the lofty expectations associated with desegregation and the unfortunate educational outcomes for African Americans post Brown v. Board. In the following account he elaborates on the shortcomings of educational integration with respect to African Americans, stating:

Many believed that if we had first facilities/buildings, supplies, environment, teachers and support personnel, a quality education would follow. This is obviously not true. We now understand that there is a profound difference between going to school and being educated. We know that close to a half-million children frequent the Chicago Public Schools each day and less than twenty percent (20%) are truly receiving a first-class education that could stand remotely close to the best private schools. (p.3)

Shortly after the landmark ruling, at once Brown's apparent power and noticeable limitations would become increasingly evident. On the one hand, the Supreme Court's eloquent dismantling of segregation served as the legal reinforcement for Blacks vying for equality and integration throughout all public spheres of American society. However, on the other hand, the Supreme Court in both Brown and Brown II, failed to define in either numerical or educational terms, how desegregation ought to be made a reality (Tate, Ladson-Billings, & Grant, 1996). Basically, it was not made clear as to how integration would be implemented. So it came as no surprise when initial efforts taken to eradicate segregation were predictably slow, which was manifested by the oppositional stance many school districts took in implementing integration. The outcome of their less than earnest efforts revealed the obvious, which was, most of them opted to cling to segregation. In the case of African Americans, Brown vs. Board did not in any way deal with issues of cultural congruency and curriculum. These two problems would prove to be intensely debated topics throughout the field of public education. (Asante, 1988, 1995, 1998; Hale, 1986; Hilliard, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Smitherman, 1977; Wilson, 1998).

Equally disturbing, as was the case a century ago, the Supreme Court today acknowledges the sentiment of anti-integrationists who believe segregation is natural and unsolvable. As well, the sovereign court of the land has taken the position that local governments will ensure that the concept of equal rights is upheld without the involvement of higher authorities or the courts. Even more disturbing, is the re-emergence of post-reconstruction theories that suggests the genetic inferiority of Blacks which is embedded in the "survival of the fittest" theories. The 1994 text *The Bell Curve* and the work of Dinesh D' Souza's titled *The End of Racism* (1995) represent such pseudo genetic theories that are recapturing the attention of the nation. Unfortunately, ala their counterparts of a century ago politicians, opinion makers, critics, scholars avoid the arguments such as the one mentioned above that is used to exacerbate the incessant issue of segregated schools (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Watkins, 2001).

Such sentiments represent the continued refusal of the legal system, school administrators, and politicians, etc., to acknowledge the racist nature of the social/racial contract. Also, it reveals how the above mentioned sentiments impact contemporary segregation and educational practices throughout the American public schooling system. This reality clearly illustrates the failure of our society to develop a public discourse that problematizes the racial

subtext of the so-called social contract which invariably, adversely impacts the sociopolitical reality of African Americans. The discourses of genetic inferiority and survival of the fittest that fuels contemporary pseudo-genetic theories work in tandem with Eurocentric domination, exploitation, and hegemony to reduce African Americans to a status of subpersonhood.

It is worth noting that many, if not most, pseudo-genetic theories and other discourses that suggest that non-Europeans, particularly Blacks, are intellectually inferior to Whites can be traced back to so-called social contract theorists like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. Each of these individuals in varying degrees, via their respective philosophical rhetoric passionately argued the inferior nature of Blacks in almost every essence of their existence. As well, in some cases, they provided extensive explanations supporting their racist notions regarding the subpersonhood of Blacks (Eze, 1997; Mills, 1997). Moreover, these European philosophers along with many others developed a theory of race that spoke to Black intellectual ability (i.e., lack of) and limitation (Mills, 1997). In my opinion, there is little reservation about the aforementioned philosophers' role in the formalized development of the racist discursive element of the social/racial contract. In fact, Kant unquestionably gauged personhood on race, given his belief that Black people should be denied full humanity due the reality that full and unequivocal humanity accrues primarily to the White European.

Given the above mentioned reality, it is clear how the modernistic version of the social contract that emerged out of the discourse of antipatriarchalist Eurocentric Enlightenment liberalism represents one of the more puzzling contemporary sociopolitical paradoxes (Mills, 1997). Mills argues that, at once, the social contract that is informed by human liberalism proclaims equal rights, individual autonomy and freedom, while simultaneously, in many cases, the social contract bears witness to violent acts of aggression, enslavement, domination, genocide, and exploitation of non-European peoples.

Mills (1997) argues that this contradiction is reconciled via the Racial contract. Essentially, the Racial contract denies African Americans fullpersonhood by defining them as being uncivilized, savage, and barbaric while reserving the terms of the social contract for civilized European Americans. It is important to note that less inflammatory terms and explicit discriminatory practices are used today to place African Americans outside the realm of the social contract which leads to their sociopolitical disenfranchisement (e.g., labeling, differentiated dissemination of resources, and limited opportunities at social upward mobility,

etc.).

The issue of desegregation and equitable opportunities at success regarding African Americans illustrates how the racial contract privileges certain members of society while simultaneously marginalizing and exploiting the people who are not members of the privileged group. Also, the racial contact through discourses of oppression, hegemony, normalization, and disenfranchisement established an ideology of White supremacy that served as the vessel through which Eurocentrism emanated from to influence institutions, law, social customs, and the sociocultural realities of the American citizenry.

In the case of desegregation, the racial contract serves to privilege middle-class and upper middle-class European Americans who are not in need of resources to facilitate educational success due to the fact that they possess the cultural capital necessary to be successful in our society. Additionally, the resistance of many Whites to embrace desegregation reveals what Mills describes as the spatialization and norming of certain public spaces. That is, many Whites believe that Black spaces are destined to have problems like incessant violence, street crimes, high levels of welfare and poverty, all of which is attributed to their characteristics; hence, ignoring the role that mainstream sociopolitical and economic discourses play in these unfortunate realities.

Clearly, many Whites are conditioned to think negatively of Blacks which compels them to stay away from them. On the other hand, in many cases, there are Blacks who are conditioned to think negatively of Whites as well. As a result, it should come as no surprise that many of these White parents are reluctant to send their children to school with Black children. Mills (1997) suggests that this is a manifestation of the Racial contract due to the partitioning of space (e.g., schools) and along the lines of personhood (i.e., race). He also argues that many Whites adamantly resist sharing spaces with Blacks on the grounds that the mere presence of the latter group compromises the integrity and authenticity of the event or activity that is taking place.

On the other hand, in many instances, when African Americans are introduced to the idea of desegregation, they are inclined to believe that there will be some sort of redistribution of those resources that facilitate success in the educational setting. In this sense, racial contract theory recognizes that being White has its benefits socio-politically and economically. It also recognizes that many Whites view the sharing of spaces with Blacks as circumventing the essence of the human experience along with drawing distinction between political and public

territory, thus denoting that the two does not possess either the same temporal scope or boundaries. That is, the Black experience compromises mainstream Eurocentric ideals of reality and the sharing of space are highly politicized. Mills (1997) captures this reality by arguing:

Thus one of the interesting consequences of the Racial Contract is that the *political space* of the polity is not coextensive with its *geographical space*. In entering these dark (spaces), one is entering a region normatively discontinuous with white political space, where the rules are different in ways ranging from differential funding (school resources, garbage collection, infrastructural repair) to the absence of police protection. (p.50)

Mills captures the reality of the societal politics of race vis-à-vis Whites and Blacks that influences the dilemma of desegregation throughout the enterprise of public schooling. The unfortunate realities of African American and other non-European American students are linked to the Racial contracts intention to establish norms in spaces that Whites occupy while simultaneously demarcating civil and wild spaces. Throughout the enterprise of schooling the normalization aspect of the Racial contract with respect to space is achieved by some of the, racist practices of separating students along the lines of academic performance, students conduct, cultural orientation, and worldviews (e.g., overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, low-level tracking of large numbers of African American students, low-representation of African Americans in gifted education, and disproportionate numbers of African American students suspended and expelled from school).

The reality mentioned in the preceding paragraph that uses the enterprise of schooling as an example is a manifestation of how the Racial contract dictates the terms by which Blacks and Whites will negotiate and share public spaces. Mills (1997) argues that the racial contract throughout the history of America has been central to regulating the interactions between Blacks and Whites, stating:

Thus in the United States, from the epoch of slavery and jim crow to the modern period of formal liberty but continuing racism, the physical interactions between whites and blacks are carefully regulated by a shifting racial etiquette that is ultimately determined by the current form of the racial contract. (p. 52)

### **Conclusion**

The theories, arguments, and radical problematizing in this chapter sought to illustrate that a simplistic common-sensical and uncritical examination of how schools and our

society function will not help to improve the many problems African American students experience throughout the enterprise of schooling. Instead, a more critical approach must be utilized to deconstruct the racial contract that compromises the success and negates the cultures of African American students. Such an approach will initiate the important task of gaining greater insight into the White Supremacy/Eurocentrism nexus with respect to how it dominates the rationale of certain areas of the world, our society, and American schooling in ways that marginalizes, oppresses, and disenfranchises African American students.

Most importantly, a critical interrogation that links school structures and processes (e.g., special education, tracking, and assessment) to the Eurocentric values, attitudes, and needs that reflect the dominant culture is necessary to first deconstruct and then respond with efforts to transform society and institutions that fail to ascribe to democratic practices that embrace the major tenets of social justice (Apple, 1979,1982; Cherryholmes, 1988; Lipsky & Gartner, 1989; Skritic, 1991; Patton, 1998). Numerous Afrocentric scholars and critical theorists contend that the enterprise of schooling, especially special education, is founded upon structured power relationships. They argue that such relationships are devised to support the interests of those individuals and groups who possess inordinate sociopolitical and economic prowess which, for the most part, adversely impacts the sociopolitical and economic realities of African Americans throughout virtually every sector of our society (Apple, 1981; Asante, 1988; Carruthers, 1999; Giroux, 1988; Quantz, Cambron-McCabe, & Dantley, 1991; Woodson, 1933). The chapters that follow will offer a critical interrogation of some of the disproportionate power relations which, in some cases, are fueled by White supremacist/Eurocentric agendas that exist throughout the enterprise of schooling and beyond as they relate to the sociopolitical realities of African Americans.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Examining Eurocentrism and its Impact on the Construction of Identity in Education via Racial Formation Theory**

#### **Introduction**

##### **Claim**

*Eurocentrism normalizes educational discourse to reflect a European conception of meaning and, as a result, African Americans who do not fit this conception of normalization are deemed at-risk students. Subsequently, this Eurocentric discourse of normalization leads to the disproportionate assignment of African Americans to special education.*

Throughout this chapter, I will utilize racial formation theory along with other theoretical and scholarly sources to address the following: 1) How Eurocentrism constructs identity in education, 2) How Eurocentrism implicitly denies non-European culture and ethnicity, 3) How the Enlightenment historicizes Eurocentrism as a racial and cultural construct that marginalizes African Americans, 4) How Eurocentricity propagates normalization in education, and 5) How what students learn in school impacts the greater society.

Considerable attention will be given to assessing both how and why Eurocentric discourse, for the most part, views identity and culture as being fixed. This perspective emerges out of the objectification and scientism of the Enlightenment era that continues to impact both institutional settings and the sociopolitical realities of all people in the world but especially in the Western Hemisphere. A connection will be made between positivism and the Enlightenment to illustrate how the thinkers, morals, and values of this historical moment set in motion a Eurocentric discourse that marginalizes, devalues, and oppresses non-European people. It is a discourse that privileges natural, especially mathematical, reality, thus rendering the social construction of hierarchy invisible.

The argument that I present in this chapter will denote positivist discourse as being the dominant and primary epistemology that informs special education. Also, it is the sole rationale used to identify students who are eligible for special education services. Due to the over-reliance on traditional models of intelligence testing that is rooted in scientific discourse, the field of special education is ill-equipped to appropriately assess and address the unique sociocultural

needs of African American students. This rationale has contributed significantly to the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. Throughout this critical analysis of the normalization effects of Eurocentricity, I will delineate how it serves to disenfranchise African Americans in the educational setting.

### **Racial Formation Theory**

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that racial formation is both a consequence of and reaction to Eurocentrism. In my opinion, racial formation theory is a powerful critique of Eurocentric logic. It is a theory that postulates the phenomenon of race is a social enterprise along with being contractual in the social order via the discourse of hegemony. For a given society to experience stability and productivity, it is imperative that it possesses some form of social order. Furthermore, the social order encompasses the symbolic and ritualistic consent of its citizenry. Such order is necessary so that the economic, political, cultural, and historical can remain intact. This type of social atmosphere is usually sustained by unconditional social consent. These are both major characteristics and tenets of the social/racial contract.

Omi and Winant (1994) explicate that racial formation is a “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed” (p.55). The initial premise of their argument is based on the notion that racial formation is a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized. This premise is followed by their connecting racial formation to the evolution of hegemony, which has to do with the way a given society is structured and governed. Omi and Winant suggest that this type of approach generates a comprehensive acknowledgement of the complete spectrum of contemporary controversies and problems involving race, notwithstanding, “the nature of racism, the relationship of race to other forms of differences, inequalities, and oppression such as sexism and nationalism, and the dilemmas of racial identity today” (p. 56).

Examining Eurocentrism from a racial formation perspective suggests that race is an issue associated with both cultural representation and social structure. This approach is necessary due to the reality that most researchers and critics attempt to reach simplistic interpretations of race that routinely focus on only one of the aforementioned analytical dimensions. “For example, efforts to explain racial inequality as a purely social structural phenomenon are unable to account for the origins, patterning, and transformation of racial difference that have been influenced by Eurocentrism” (Omi and Winant, 1994, p. 56).

Conversely, numerous critiques of racial difference that are either viewed as an issue of cultural characteristics (e.g., ethnicity theory), or understood as a society-wide signification system (e.g., numerous poststructuralist perspectives) are incapable of appropriately ascertaining “such structural phenomena as racial stratification in the labor market and educational setting or patterns of residential segregation” (p. 56).

Omi and Winant (1994) state that it is important to consider racial formation processes as transpiring via a connection that links structure and representation together. They argue that racial projects perform the ideological “work” of establishing the links. In the following account Omi and Winant explain what constitutes a racial project, by stating:

A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to recognize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning. (p. 56)

Racial formation theory appropriately critiques the elitism embedded in Eurocentrism. For instance, many Europeans saw themselves as being the apex of human evolution. This perspective coincided with their linear logic and ways of conceptualizing reality. Also, their rationale regarding evolution was applied to everything that they did (e.g., human achievement). This perspective held by Europeans impacted their understanding of identity as well. The Enlightenment, in a major way, perpetuated the modernistic perception of identity. That is, they saw identity as being a monolithic and fixed reality (i.e., limited in agency). In essence, this is one of the most disabling characteristics of both Eurocentrism and the social/racial contract with respect to its impact on non-European groups.

### **Implications of the Enlightenment on Sociopolitical Enterprises**

Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (1997) in his work *Race and the Enlightenment* revealed that much of the philosophical and scientific writing of the Enlightenment era was saturated with both theoretical and racial bias toward peoples of other cultures. The negative perceptions and portrayals of non-Europeans were adroitly camouflaged in the language of philosophy and science. The works of some of the more prominent philosophers that he interrogates can be viewed as being either neutral disquisitions of race or anti-racist. Given the ambiguity of Enlightenment discourse regarding race, it is difficult (however, not impossible) to ascertain the

relationship of philosophy and scientific reason with the sociocultural phenomena of racial diversity during this era.

Racial formation theory clearly delineates that race was a pervasive feature of the Enlightenment. This was manifested via the virulent and incessant opinions of some of the more recognized philosophers of the Enlightenment (e.g., Hegel, Kant, Hume, Locke, and Jefferson). Also, racial formation theory notes that problems presented by race throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century differed significantly from the problems it presented during the era of discovery, expropriation, and slaughter. The discourse of the Enlightenment was developed through social structures that relied less on military domination, and pillage.

Additionally, racial formation theory posits that during the era of the Enlightenment, race posited some complex issues that could not be easily resolved. The process of nation-building, erecting national economies in the global trading system, challenging the random authority of monarchs, the declaration of the “rights of man,” and the freedom to form a revolution were not easily reconciled with racially organized domination and oppression, in the realm of slavery, the growth of colonies, and the ongoing eradication of native peoples. According to proponents of Enlightenment discourse, the former conditions was necessary whereas the latter conditions were difficult to justify, however, both conditions were needed to continue with the expansion of global white supremacy. This endeavor was supported by a scientific and positivistic rationale that blatantly violated the major tenets of the social contract.

The contemporary discourse of educational philosophy continues to omit the works of prominent Enlightenment thinkers who have written extensively in the area of race. Although there is an increased interest in the relationship of race and culture in the disciplines of Black and cultural studies of late, it is rather disconcerting that there are no existing work that coalesces both the most significant and influential scholarship on race that emerged out of the Enlightenment era. Educators and students of both modern philosophy and science rarely acknowledge the voluminous scholarship and essays that dealt with the social construct of race and crosscultural anthropology that emerged out of the Enlightenment era. Eze (1997) elaborates on the widespread reluctance of contemporary academicians and students to deal with Enlightenment scholarship that engaged race and cultural anthropology, thus stating:

Quite often, teachers and students of the history of modern science and the history of modern philosophy pay little or no attention to the enormous amount of research and

writings on race and crosscultural anthropology that was undertaken and accomplished by the philosophical luminaries of the eighteenth century, in the Age of Reason. (p.2)

Moreover, when scholarship, essays, and other types of writing that was constructed by Enlightenment thinkers are engaged in traditional philosophical discourse at institutions of higher learning, it is standard practice to dismiss the aforementioned work as being either journalistic or offering little to enhance legitimate philosophical interest. An example of such disinterest can be found in the teaching of Immanuel Kant at institutions of higher learning. Rarely, if ever, it is communicated or taught in standard curriculums where Kant is the subject of study that he spent most of his academic career as both a professor and scholar researching, developing, and teaching what he deemed as the twin sciences of physical geography and anthropology. Also, it is little known that Kant was the individual who initially inserted geography into the curriculum at the University of Konigsbsberg, in 1756. In fact, he was the first professor to teach anthropology at the University during the winter term of 1772-73 (Eze, 1997).

According to J. A. May (1970), Kant, who spent his entire career at the University of Konigsberg, clearly devoted much of his time to the fields of anthropology and geography. The following is a breakdown of Kant's activities as a professor and lecturer at the University: he taught 72 courses in anthropology and geography, 54 courses in logic, 49 in metaphysics, 28 in moral philosophy, and twenty in theoretical physics. With these statistics, it is evident that Kant seriously entertained questions associated with race and the biological, geographical, and cultural dissemination of people throughout the world. These questions were pivotal to his science of geography and anthropology. It would be a serious mistake to infer that Kant held minimal interest in the race question in comparison with his other research interests (Eze, 1997).

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that the major racial project of American education by functioning in the manner described in the preceding paragraphs constitutes a racial dictatorship. In a rather clandestine way, American society via law, politics, and education seek to mask the reprehensible views and actions of those Europeans who were complicit in the racial ordering of the world. The hegemony of American culture and education does not allow students and citizens to comprehend how the racial ordering of the world culminated into the contemporary reality of the social/racial contract which is actually a world order that is founded upon white supremacy. In keeping with some of the major tenets of Eurocentrism, certain groups of Whites

seek to elevate those attributes that speak favorably of themselves above those of non-Whites. On the other hand, those attributes that shed a negative portrayal of their disposition are simply dismissed as being insignificant. As a result, this is one of several ways that Eurocentrism/White supremacy reinforces the hegemonic and oppressive nature of both education and society.

A historical comparison of the European Enlightenment to Greek antiquity illuminates that in the discourses of philosophy and politics, the preeminent thinkers of Greek antiquity argued social and human geographical differences on an antithetical premise that set up the binary opposition between the “cultured” and the “barbaric.” An examination of Aristotle’s differentiation of the human being as a rational animal and the barbarian serves as the genesis of distinguishing that cultured people (i.e., Greeks) were most capable of living in a reasonable fashion who thereby constructed their society to this end. On the other hand, the barbarian (i.e., non-Greeks) lacking the ability to possess culture, superior rationale, ability to establish a sociocultural-political society that mirrored an Athenian type of democracy, in the eyes of the Greeks, lived savagely. Most European Enlightenment thinkers embraced the Greek ideal of reason along with the reason’s complicit discrimination between the cultured (now identified as being “civilized”) and the barbarian (the “savage” or the “primitive”). With the Enlightenment positioning itself as the Age of Reason, modern Europe would put forth the assumption that reason could achieve its fullest potential primarily in this area of the world (Eze, 1997).

Omi and Winant (1994) suggest that Europeans used this rationale to engineer European conquest of non-Europeans throughout the world. The conquest of America represented a major historical event without rival. It served as the genesis “of a consolidated social structure of exploitation, appropriation, and domination. Its representation, first in religious terms, but soon enough in scientific and political ones, initiated modern social awareness” (p. 62). Given its magnitude, the “conquest” of America was probably the greatest racial formation project. In the following discussion Omi and Winant (1994) provide a provocative account on the far-reaching implications of European conquest and their disposition of claiming to be “the civilized people” of the world, thus stating:

Its significance was by no means limited to the Western Hemisphere, for it began the work of constituting Europe as the metropole, the center, of a group of empires which could take, as Marx would later write, “the globe for a theater.” It represented this new imperial structure as a struggle between civilization and barbarism, and implicated in this

representation all the great European philosophies, literary traditions, and social theories of the modern age. In short, just as the noise of the “big bang” still resonates through the universe, so the over-determined construction of world “civilization” as a product of the rise of Europe and the subjugation of the rest of us, still defines the race concept. (p. 62)

Despite a major shift in the discourse of the philosophy of history during the Enlightenment where the emergence of science supplanted the biblical story of creation, in that reason both challenged and replaced the authority of religion, the phenomenon of nature continued to be presented as a hierarchical system whereby every being (i.e., all living things) had a “naturally assigned position and status. Eze (1997) presents some of the more notable natural historians who arranged the human race according to the “naturally arranged” hierarchy in the following account, stating:

Influential natural historians, such as Carl von Linne, Georges-Louis Leclerc, and Comte Buffon embarked upon the classification of the human races (and indeed all objects of existence), according to this “naturally” ordered hierarchy. At the top of the human chain in this general schema was positioned the European, while non-Europeans were positioned at lower points on the scale of a supposed human, rational and moral, evolutionary capacity. (p. 5)

The Enlightenment was not only instrumental in putting forth a quasi-religious scientific ordering of humanity during the eighteenth century, but also from a European perspective they experienced considerable expansion in their ability (albeit arrogantly) to classify the natural world. The two centuries prior to the Enlightenment was a period where extensive exploration and voyages throughout the world yielded many published accounts about geographical locations beyond Europe and people from some of those areas along with the Europe’s accumulation of vast wealth during this era. Those writings that contributed mightily to the notion of Europe as being recognizable and “civilized,” and existing in the Age of Light, whereas the inhabitants of other areas of the world such as America, Africa, and Asia possessed unusual habits and customs. To this end, savagery was capable of being physically identified beyond Europe. Moreover, locations outside of Europe were considered to be out of the realm of light, such was the case for the continent of Africa, in that they were often referred to as the Dark Continent (Eze, 1997; Mills, 1997).

Notably, Enlightenment philosophy played a pivotal role in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and widespread European notions of the human race. In fact, many writings by Hume, Kant, and Hegel took center stage in explicating Europe's notion of both its cultural and racial superiority. The message imbedded in many of their respective writings argued that "reason and "civilization" ought to be exclusively equated with both Europe and White people. Conversely, they elucidated that unreason and savagery were inherent characteristics to be found amongst non-Whites beyond the borders of Europe. Eze (1997) delineates the magnitude in which Kant's ideas and writings influenced the discourse of cultural anthropology along with establishing a foundation from which European historical sentiments would exert a major impact on future Global socioeconomic and political arrangements, stating:

...while his writings in philosophy of history synthesize the philosophical and anthropological perspectives of eighteenth-century European thinkers and missionaries (and paved the way for the subsequent discipline of cultural anthropology), his writings in political philosophy transformed the European historical perspectives into concrete projects of international politics and economics (imperialism, colonialism, and the trans-national corporation) (pp. 7-8).

The thematic and chronological arrangement of the sociopolitical and economic phenomena mentioned above, illustrates a sense of the "genealogy" that is entrenched in the Enlightenment's "racial" discourse.

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that the development of scientific criteria that served to exhibit the "natural" basis of a racial hierarchy represented a reasonable consequence of the emergence of this type of knowledge. Also, it was an effort to offer a more understated and nuanced description of human complexity in the early Enlightenment period. Motivated by the classificatory system of living organisms orchestrated by Linnaeus in *Systema Naturae* (1735), numerous scholars during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries committed themselves to the identification and ordering of the human race. Moreover, "race was envisioned as being a biological concept, a matter of species" (p. 63). Omi and Winant (1994) argued that both Voltaire and Jefferson offered philosophical perspectives that claimed there was identifiable biological distinctions that distinguished one ethnic group from another. "Such claims of species distinctiveness among humans justified the inequitable allocation of social and political rights, while still upholding the

doctrine of the rights of man” (p. 64). In fact, the pursuit to attain an exact scientific definition of race sustained disputes that continue to take place today.

Although this discussion has digressed a bit from the discussion of the contemporary realities of American schooling, I believe that it is necessary to discuss the historical, cultural, and racial significance of the Enlightenment in a geopolitical sense. Many of the distinctions (e.g., intelligence, cultural, racial, and achievement/ability, etc.) that are made throughout contemporary American schooling can be linked to the scientific and philosophical rationale that emerged out of Enlightenment discourse. In fact, Hegel and some of his contemporaries “transformed the European historical perspectives into concrete projects of international politics and economics (imperialism, colonialism, and the trans-national corporation)” (Eze, 1997, p.7-8).

The implication of Enlightenment discourse on the White supremacy-Eurocentrism-identity nexus is a profound sociopolitical and economic reality that has had a considerable impact on non-Europeans, particularly people of African descent in America. This is so, due to the reality that the discourse of philosophy is informed by many of the metanarratives, notions of identity, and methods of academic inquiry (e.g., scientific discourse) that emerged out of the Enlightenment era. Furthermore, all of the academic disciplines in institutions of higher learning are, to a large extent, informed by the discourse of Western philosophy which draws a lot of ideas from Enlightenment discourse.

So it should come as no surprise that much of the education disseminated at colleges and universities throughout the U.S. inculcate students with discourses that perpetuate Eurocentric notions of social and political realities. It is a sociopolitical enterprise that reinforces Eurocentric notions of identity, culture, community, governance and democracy, etc. which unquestionably posits European ways of becoming above all other non-European realities. Moreover, institutions of higher learning reinforces the economic and sociopolitical values and customs of American society which in many ways marginalize certain groups, espouses rhetoric that support existing disproportional power relations, and perpetuate White supremacy, etc. As a result, individuals who encounter these institutions uncritically, in most cases, take on the customs and values of the dominant culture. Therefore, it would be reasonable to presume that most of these individuals engage in professional practices along with leading lives that unwittingly support the

negation of alternative non-European notions of identity (e.g., culture, worldviews, and community, etc.).

### **Problematizing Eurocentric Concept of Identity via Diverse Theoretical Perspectives**

The modernistic concept of identity is an example of how Eurocentrism naturalizes race, naturalizes a racial hierarchy, privileges European history and culture, minimizes and exoticizes non-European history and culture, and organizes the world into binaries in which one side of the binary is privileged over the other side. As a result, the modernistic conception of identity elicits a monolithic and fixed conception of the human condition. In response to the modernistic concept of identity a few theories have emerged to contest this hegemonic construct. The theories of Afrocentricity, postmodernism, structuralism, poststructuralism, postcolonial theory and racial formation theory respectively present a strong response and appropriate deconstruction of the modernistic concept of identity. In the following paragraphs, I will delineate how these theories interpret identity and how some of them problematize the modernistic concept of identity.

#### Modernism.

According to numerous critics, modernism exemplifies an aura of elitism, in that it unquestionably advocates the notion of “universalism” that was a major feature of the Enlightenment era. Also, it represents a propensity to dictate from a privileged position what constitutes culture. The universalist stance of modernism is understood as being the masking of the hegemony and marginalization of alternative voices that have both been excluded from modernist developments and speak against modernism. From an educational perspective, modernism seeks to disseminate a universal education that is founded upon universal methods that is uniformly applicable trans-globally (to all nation and cultures). Functioning on the principle of merit, its chief objective is to utilize a mass educational agenda that would provide individuals with the essential knowledge and skills, attitudes and attributes that would enable them to become useful citizens and good workers. The Enlightenment era epitomized the essence of modernity, in that it fostered the idea that humanity is concerned with securing universal and intellectual self-realization, thus relegating humanity to the level of nothing more than subjects of a universal historical experience.

As well, modernity explicated a universal human reason that suggested that virtually all social and political tendencies could be assessed as “progressive” or otherwise. Thus, suggesting

that politics can only become a reality via the process of reason in practice. To a large extent, American schooling is guided by the universalist application of knowledge and reason (e.g., essentialism, perennialism, idealism, and realism). Basically, this is nothing more than normalizing the abilities, attitudes, and identities of those individuals who partake in this type of education, which is also known as identity-formation. That is, students are “educated” to reason and think a certain way that endorses a Eurocentric approach of interpreting and understanding information and the world. This type of schooling and socialization leads to enmass cultivation of a standardized notion of identity where the objective is to attain cohesion around a common set of beliefs, customs, values, and worldviews (Michael Peters, 1996; Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999).

Additionally, the discourse of modernism exerts considerable influence on the notion of identity with respect to how the individual is alleged to be free of external social constraints. As a result, the discourse of modernism takes the position that individual agency reigns supreme. That is, individualism is central to modernism. The sociopolitical reality of identity formation explicates that the individual is expected to be an autonomous subject. The individual is alleged to have autonomous agency. Such rationale fails to acknowledge the reality that our agency is limited and it is always impacted by the social.

Clearly, modernism, to a certain extent, appropriately presents the reality that individuals can act and do react to their world (e.g., By introducing and advancing policies that exemplify individual and human agency as evidenced in numerous neoliberal policies of market, choice, and privatization). However, modernism fails to take into account the sociopolitical construct of power and how power is exerted over the individual regarding social control and identity formation, especially as subjects of the government. The government and numerous public agencies play a significant role in constructing acceptable notions of identity and conduct. Also, modernism fails to realize that new relationships emerge out of individuals being governed and individuals responding to government, hence new subjectivities are created out of this phenomenon (e.g., The relationship between American schooling and many historically marginalized ethnic groups). Essentially, modernism fails to take into account that the individual, in many instances, is influenced considerably by specific social practices vis-à-vis conduct and identity formation. In sum, modernism refuses to recognize the impact that the social has on the individual.

### Structuralism.

The theoretical discourse of structuralism asserts that language and the system are supreme in determining who we are and that all human beings are constructed via language. Also, language is always seen as a science that is capable of studying all phenomena, hence, culture is always linguistically centered (.i.e., language uses science to study all phenomena). Structuralists believe in both binary oppositions and that one can only attain knowledge via binary logic. It also asserts that power lies outside of the autonomous individual due to the notion that the structure (or system) determines all phenomena (hence structuralism). Furthermore, structuralists reject humanism and communalism. They don't have answers to questions that relate to humanitarian concerns which represent the racist and culturally insensitive nature of this discourse. For the most part, structuralists argue about a notion of social reproduction that does not appropriately acknowledge the role and agency individuals bring to this situation (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The work of Gintis & Bowles has served as the genesis of correspondence theory in American schooling. Also, the work of Harris (1979) and Matthews (1980) advanced the structuralist perspective that encompassed the "knowledge as production" thesis (Peters, 1996).

The structuralist contributions to the discourse of education were deemed void of recognizing what McLaren (1989) describes as "the partial autonomy of the school culture and . . . the role of conflict and contradiction within the reproductive process itself" (p. 187). Due to the reality that structuralist discourse informs numerous sociopolitical enterprises, it is virtually impossible to ignore the fact that we continue to live in a structuralist world. For structuralist's identity formation emerges as fixed, monolithic, deterministic, and very limited in agency. While the discourse of modernism alleges individual autonomy that is free of social constraints, structuralism recognizes that social structures play a major role in the reality of the human (individual) experience. Thus, taking the position that the structure is everything and therefore, one (.i.e., the individual) must always submit to the structure.

If structuralism represents the center of contemporary Eurocentric discourse, poststructuralism represents the opportunity to carve out potentially liberatory terrain. A major premise of the poststructural perspective is that the cultural value of the Enlightenment along with the development of modernization that connects subjective autonomy with 'scientific reason' masks a desire for power that eventually enjoins the individual to the technological

apparatus (Peters, 1996). Another premise of poststructuralism is that it is a space where decentered, plural, multiple or constantly de-established subject positions and identities are not solely defined or gauged against primitive essentialist perspectives of gender, race, class, and sex. Edgar and Sedgwick (1999) suggest that subjects from the poststructuralist perspective should be viewed as being “dispersed across an array of discourses, multiple positions, and sites of struggle, etc., with nothing (least of all some grand “totalizing theory) that would justify their claim to speak on behalf of this or that oppressed class or interest-group” (p. 302). Furthermore, it possess its own form of radical politics, one that envisages a subject-in-process “whose various shifting positions within language or discourse cannot be captured by any theory (structuralist, Marxist, feminist, or whatever) premised on old-style ‘enlightenments’ ideas of knowledge and truth” (Edgar & Sedgwick, 1999, p. 302).

### Poststructuralism.

Poststructuralist discourse views the concept of "structure" as too simplistic. It is suspicious that in the simplicity of "structure," power is misarticulated. Poststructuralist discourse does not see structure as a big monolith, but as infinite pieces where the meaning of text becomes forever deferred. Language can never be separated from speech and, therefore, can never be completely understood through science; but is, instead, a very unstable and fragmented enterprise. In this way the whole speech act, not just language, becomes the primary way to make sense of the world and construct knowledge. In this way, human beings themselves become a part of the equation--a piece of the puzzle that was left out of structuralism. Poststructuralist's don't see a disconnect between the structure and the human being, it is all inextricably linked.

Derrida believed that language is always deferred and that the meaning that humans give it is ever changing. In his deconstructionism, he set out to prove that this was a compelling reality (Derrida, 1976, 1978, & 1981). Derrida's deconstructionism reveals that all texts can be read in ways that invert their accepted meaning. In this way, what is accepted as truth can become untruth and what is known as false, can become true. Deconstruction shows the absurdity of the Eurocentric binary which turns out to be nothing other than culturally constructed fallacies.

Like Derrida, Foucault did not believe in either/or binaries, but believed that power is fused into all existing human reality, thus delineating that power does not solely reside in the structure (Foucault, 1979, 1980a, 1980b, & 1982). He believed that the self (subject) is always in a state of flux. All of the interconnections of the human experience warrant interrogation. Therefore, credence must extend beyond binary and dualistic interpretations of the human experience, hence, suggesting that all human phenomena ought to be examined. Foucault spent most of his research examining the ambiguities and nuances embedded in power at institutional and individual levels as they oftentimes related to one another. Identity formation in this discourse is viewed as being fractured, unstable, non-deterministic, and changing.

### Postmodernism.

Central tenants of Eurocentrism have also been challenged by the discourse labeled "postmodern." Postmodernism represents both a reappraisal and critical interrogation of the culture of the Enlightenment and its concept of a universal reason possessing a healthy skepticism of the ideals and culture of the Enlightenment. Lyotard (1984), an advocate of postmodernism theory, problematized the Enlightenment's ideal of subject-centered reason. Also, he characterized the postmodern attitude as one that holds skepticism toward metanarratives, which is a staple of the Enlightenment's universalist educational ideal. Lyotard appropriately critiques how the inherent totalistic, universalistic, and absolutist dispositionality of Enlightenment discourse presents these notions in an ahistorical fashion. Thus, suggesting that their formation came to fruition beyond history and social practice (Lyotard, 1984).

Furthermore, Lyotard sought to problematize the dogmatic, terroristic, and violent nature of Enlightenment discourse. As well, he questioned the Enlightenment's position that suggested that their discourse presented the only notion of "truth." This elitist perspective excluded and silenced other discourses from constructing their own realities. Peters (1996) states, "Lyotard's indirect assault is against the concept of 'totality'—he elsewhere announces 'a war against totality'—and the notion of autonomy as it underlies the sovereign subject" (p. 3). The stance taken by Lyotard "challenges two grand Hegelian metanarratives: the emancipation of humanity and the speculative unity of knowledge" (Peters, 1996, p. 3).

Magnus Bernd (1989), who is influenced by Nietzsche's concept of interpretive space vis-à-vis a group of concepts, offers another postmodern critique of Eurocentric modernism.

Bernd speaks to the rejection of discourses that explicate monolithic notions of knowledge and identity. Bernd (as cited in Peters, 1996, p. 3) states:

...a putative anti (or post) epistemological standpoint, antiessentialism, antirealism about meaning and reference, antifoundationalism, a suspicion of transcendental arguments and viewpoints, the rejection of truth as correspondence to reality, the rejection of canonical descriptions and final vocabularies and finally, a suspicion of metanarratives (p. 3).

In sum, Bernd depicts postmodernism as suggesting the reality that all vocabularies are both optional and conditional, extracting a moral from the history of our own philosophical reality: “The history of philosophy counts against the metaphysical realist precisely because there is not now nor has there ever been a canonical consensus on *any* ‘philosophical’ question” (p. 304).

Lyotard argues that the heart of postmodernism is the realization that the age of grand narratives/metanarratives are dead; and, therefore, we must realize that society is driven primarily by micro-narratives. This focus on micro-narratives may solve the problem of reification of structure but it leaves postmodernists ill-equipped to appropriately ascertain the full realities of macro oppressions that result from institutionalized racism, patriarchy, capitalism, and heteronormativity. In essence, postmodernists fail to acknowledge the role that structure plays in the human experience. Their notion of identity formation rests upon a totally decentered, fractured, unstable, non-deterministic, and changing self. Its rejection of grand narratives provides no viable alternative to the democratic narrative that some claim to be the modernist project. It runs the risk of promoting a radical individual liberty.

#### Racial formation theory.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) have developed a theory of race and racism that avoids the many problems of either the Eurocentric structuralist/modernist theories as well as the fewer, but equally troublesome, problems of poststructuralist/postmodernist theories. Their racial formation theory posits that identity is a fluid and dynamic reality that is intricately associated with collective group identity and located in specific historically situated racial projects. It suggests that one's identity is shaped as much by their individual perception of self vis-à-vis both ethnic membership and the norms of society as it is to the sociopolitical movements and agendas that place race at the center of public discourse. Those public discourses that require certain ethnic groups to galvanize around issues that are of particular concern to their survival and ability to participate equitably in a democratic society challenges such groups to identify morals,

values, and common cultural themes that are embraced by the group (establishing group identity). Therefore, living in a democratic society that is afflicted with hegemonic structures that privileges one racial group's identity over all others forces the populace to continuously engage in public and political discourse that deals with identity and race related issues, which in multiple ways both positively and negatively impact the republic.

According to racial formation theory the result of such activity facilitates the process of certain groups (e.g., African Americans, Latino Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, etc.) re-evaluating and altering how they interpret their identity and how they wish others to view them as well. For example, as a result of specific social movements, the term "Negro" was replaced with the term "Black" which itself was replaced with the term "African-American" (Omi & Winant, 1994). The Civil Rights Movement is one of the more notable social movements in the history of this country that vividly illustrated a group (i.e., Blacks) presenting a challenge to the social/racial contract that blatantly violated their rights as they are described in the U.S. Constitution. This monumental movement, in a formal way, eventually led to Blacks simultaneously developing a new perspective of themselves and their sociocultural and political realities that contrasted the "racist" and "inferior" views that permeated American society socially, politically, and legally.

The above mentioned social movements represent, at once, individual and group identity changes that seek to address issues of recognition, respect, self-esteem, and empowerment. This type of individual and group action is engaged so that groups who have been historically marginalized and oppressed can respectively continue to strive for equitable participation in society (e.g., education, housing, political, economically, and politically, etc.). In many ways, race and identity undergoes numerous forms of reconfiguration given the sociopolitical climate of a particular historical moment. Omi and Winant (1994) elaborate on the significance of social movements and their potential to empower certain groups to rally around a common identity that assists them with posing formidable challenges to hegemonic and oppressive social, political, and legal entities, thus explicating:

... social movements create collective identity, collective subjectivity, by offering their adherents a different view of themselves and their world; different, that is, from the characteristic worldviews and self-concepts of the social order which the movements are challenging. Based upon that newly forged collective identity, they address the state

politically, demanding change. This is particularly true of racial movements. In fact these movements largely established the parameters within which popular and radical democratic movements (so-called “new social movements”) operate in the U.S. (pp. 88-89)

The perspective presented above by Omi and Winant depict the reality that it is not uncommon for groups to establish social movements that is founded upon some type of sociopolitical or economic imperative. In many instances, such groups galvanize themselves around a collective identity that leads to some sort of activism (e.g., Afrocentricity, Black feminism, feminism, and Gays & Lesbians). The Afrocentric movement here in America is an example of a social movement that is geared toward the sociopolitical and economic empowerment of people of African descent both in America and beyond.

Afrocentricity is a theory of both resistance and agency that encourages marginalized individuals and groups to latch on to those constructs (morals, values, belief systems, epistemologies, and worldviews, etc.) that make-up their identity. Equally important, Afrocentric theory encourages oppressed and marginalized groups to draw on their historical tradition and realities in a way that empowers them to deal with injustices, facilitate transformative outcomes that lead to the betterment of the human condition, and to understand that identity is not a fixed phenomenon that is based primarily on Eurocentric notions of identity. Furthermore, Afrocentricity recognizes that identity is a fluid and dynamic phenomenon that is an inherent reality of the human experience. It is necessary for groups to interact and engage in genuine exchanges of good will, and participate in democratic activity that is respectful of all identities. This is necessary so that the human experience can continue to move in a direction that does not exclude individuals and groups on the basis of socially engineered racism and bias.

Most importantly, Afrocentricity presents a stern challenge to Eurocentrism and its devastating sociocultural and political impact on non-Europeans throughout the diaspora, particularly people of African descent. The notion of identity formation in Afrocentric discourse delineates how we should aspire to live. It is a discourse that endorses the construction of a democratic narrative that is large enough to entertain the multiple voices that constitute our society which would be antithetical to postmodernist thinking. An Afrocentric democratization of our society explicates that we must utilize all narratives to construct organization and

community and that society is founded upon all narratives (people) coming together to create a democratic society.

### **Postcolonial perspective on Eurocentrism**

In brilliant, dynamic, and insightful ways post-colonial discourse affixes its theoretical gaze on the marginalization and hegemony that is embedded in Eurocentrism. It does a good job of ascertaining the disparate ways in which Eurocentrism via various forms of media, schooling, and education disseminates gross misrepresentations of non-European people and cultures throughout the diaspora. Also, postcolonial theory problematizes how Eurocentrism both defines and presents non-European people as though they are permanently attached to static, paternalistic, and fixed ways of being. Eurocentric discourse fails to acknowledge the role and concept of cultural hybridity with respect to how people of all ethnicities and a globally diverse world, in many instances, continuously engage in the reality of cultural border crossing.

Homi K. Bhaba at a conference in New York of May 1991 titled *Critical Functions* postulated that present methods of representation that is monopolized by the West frame the historical realities of former colonized Third World areas of the world. He further argued that a major objective of the post-colonial term is to operate in a manner that not only focuses, but zooms in on and illuminates the inequities present in various arenas of representation.

Post-colonial thought is mostly concerned with deterritorializing longstanding notions of ethnic nationalism, national borders and the seemingly outdated anticolonialist discourse. The prefix “post” shares a similar philosophical and methodological sentiment to that of ‘postmodernism,’ ‘poststructuralism,’ and ‘postfeminism,’ in that they all represent a departure from ineffective and/or outdated discourses. A major feature of post-colonial theory is that it takes up the task of interrogating the complexity of multilayered identities. It also seeks to discern how cultural mixing and cultural border crossing produces hybrid individual and group identity. In its attempt to better understand the complexity of identity, post-colonial theory acknowledges that the following constructs play important roles in the reality of hybridity: “religious (syncretism); biological (hybridity); human-genetic (mestizaje); and linguistic (creolization)” (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p.41).

Shohat and Stam (1994) suggest that post-colonial theory’s acknowledgement of hybridity runs parallel with the contemporary reality of post-independence displacements that created dual and, in some instances, multiple hyphenated identities (African-American, Native-

American, Asian-American, Latino-American, Franco-Algerian, Indo-Ugandan-American). As a result, the notion of hybridity rejects modernistic notions of identity that informs the colonialist perspective of racial purity which invariably establishes a racial hierarchy. They further argue that in contemporary terms, post-colonial theory does a good job of critiquing cultural paradoxes that emanates from the global movement of “peoples and cultural goods in a mediated and interconnected world, resulting in a commodified, mass mediated syncretism” (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p.42). This reality demonstrates that the sociopolitical construct of hybridity assumes paradoxical discursive and social spaces. Therefore, hybridity should be recognized as an unfinalizable process that predated colonialism and continues to exist beyond the aforementioned historical moment. It is a vibrant, agile, “less an achieved synthesis or prescribed formula than an unstable constellation of discourses” (Shohat and Stam, 1994, p.42).

Post-colonial theory to a considerable extent suggests that applying definitions to culture and humanity within the realm of Western cultural domination should be done with caution. In addition, notions of hybridity and diaspora have emerged in post-colonial discourse to reinforce the notion of an inherent cultural diversity embedded in the identities of post-colonial and ‘Third World’ cultures. Out of this situation, theoretical narratives and discourses have been utilized as a method to depict differences between non-Western and Western culture. With respect to identity, post-colonial theorists would argue that any notion of a fixed identity is both highly presumptive and flawed. The human condition undergoes continuous change that impacts how individuals, groups, and nations shape their respective identities vis-à-vis sociocultural and political environment of a particular historical moment. Above all, many post-colonial theorists would argue that identity is fluid and a conflictual sociocultural construct.

Fanon (1967) argued that material inferiority induces a sense of both cultural and racial inferiority, and that colonization was manifested through language. An example of this phenomena is exhibited in situations where the colonizer forces the colonized to speak the language of the former while the latter must subjugate their own linguistic abilities and identity (e.g., British West Indies, and Africa, etc.). In a similar fashion this occurs in American schooling. Identity formation in post-colonial discourse represents an amalgamation of colonial subjects. They see hybridity as being a compelling reality in the formation of identity. It is believed that people from certain areas of the world take on multiple cultural lenses through which we live and see. One becomes hybrid by virtue of acculturation. That is, it is an

inescapable reality that any one individual must be comprised of multiple identities. All in all, post-colonial theory interrogates the post-colonial subject to better understand how they are constructed.

### **Implications of Eurocentrism on Education**

Whiteness has historically been appropriated in unmarked ways by strategically maintaining as colorless *its* color (and hence its values, belief systems, privileges, histories, experiences and modes of operation) behind its constant constructions of otherness. In other words, everyone or everything else is “marked”; “whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything-white is no colour because it is all colours” (Dryer, 1988, p. 45).

Shohat and Stam (1994) state that Eurocentrism can be defined as narcissistic, puzzling, disoriented, and historically unstable construct. As an eclectic phenomenon, Eurocentrism taken as an ideological perspective can be viewed as partaking in a variety of dualistic reinforcing intellectual patterns or operations. In the following account Shohat and Stam present five tendencies and patterns of Eurocentrism, stating:

1) Eurocentric discourse projects a linear historical trajectory leading from classical Greece (constructed as “pure,” “Western,” and “democratic”) to imperial Rome and then to metropolitan capitals of Europe and the US. It renders history as a sequence of empires: Pax Romana, Pax Hispanica, Pax Britannica. In all cases, Europe, alone and unaided, is seen as the “motor” for progressive change: it invents society, feudalism, capitalism, the industrial revolution, 2) Eurocentrism attributes to the “West” an inherent progress toward democratic institutions, 3...Eurocentrism elides non-European democratic traditions, while obscuring the manipulations embedded in Western formal democracy and masking the West’s part in subverting democracies abroad, 4) Eurocentrism minimalizes the West’s oppressive practices by regarding them as contingent, accidental, and exceptional. Colonialism, slave trading, and imperialism are not seen as fundamental catalysts of the West’s disproportionate power, and 5) Eurocentrism appropriates the cultural material production of non-Europeans while denying both their achievements and its own appropriation. (pp. 2-3)

The above passage illustrates the reality that Eurocentrism sets up an antithetical relationship with non-Europeans throughout the world. It is a relationship that positions Europe

as the image and entity that is representative of everything that is both good and positive in the world whereas non-Europeans are relegated to a position of inferiority, thus rendering their respective cultures, customs, and values unworthy of acknowledgement. The following discussion will illustrate how racial formation reinforces the sociopolitical construct of Eurocentrism in American schooling.

Ani (2000), Asante (1998), Giroux (1988), Hale (1986), Hilliard (1998), McLaren (1988), Shujaa (1994), and Wilson (1998), argue that the philosophical orientation of American schooling is, for the most part, based on a mix of essentialist and perennialist perspectives. Both of these educational philosophical approaches to education reinforce a Eurocentric presence throughout the institution of schooling that blatantly suggests that all other non-European cultures are not worthy of acknowledgement. For example, the perennialist approach to education represents a culturally conservative educational theory that is founded upon European authority and classics that initially rose to prominence during the Enlightenment era. The following perspectives constitute the rationale of perennialism: 1) truth is universal and does not depend on the circumstances of place, time, or person, 2) a good education involves a search for understanding of the truth, 3) truth can be found in the great works of Western Civilization, and 4) education is a liberal exercise that develops the intellect (Ornstein & Levine, 1997, p. 391).

According to Omi and Winant (1994) racial formation theory states that the reality described above represents the hegemonic nature of sociopolitical enterprises in American society. Winant (1994) claims that the institutional rationale of sociopolitical enterprises (e.g., American schooling) in our society in hegemonic fashion seek to create its subjects (i.e., producers, patriots, and true Americans, etc.). On the contrary, those individuals who contest unfair Eurocentric constructs are seen as being the other.

I will only elaborate on the first rationale presented. This rationale of the perennialist perspective explicates that the ultimate goal of education is to both pursue and disseminate truth. Supporters of this philosophical and theoretical approach to developing a curriculum believe that truth is universal and fixed. As a result, they believe that education is universal and constant, in that the school curriculum should be comprised of permanent (perennial) studies that focus on the recurrent theme of the human condition. Perennialist's argue that the school's curriculum should possess cognitive subjects that cultivate rationality via the academic subjects of language, history, mathematics, logic, literature, science and the humanities. These subjects should be

accompanied with the study of the following principles that are expected to assist with nurturing ethical behavior: 1) aesthetics, 2) moral, and 3) religious. In essence, perennialist education is expected to develop the mind and its intellectual powers. This involves the academic engagement of the seminal literary works of Western Civilization.

Essentialism is another conservative educational philosophical orientation that perpetuates Eurocentric sensibilities throughout the institution of schooling. It emerged on the scene as a challenge to progressive education. It possesses some of the philosophical rationale that is located in both realism and idealism. Essentialism is a theoretical educational perspective that endorses an academic subject-matter curriculum which suggests that teachers should be responsible for maintaining order, discipline, and focusing on getting students to put forth their best efforts. According to proponents of essentialist education, the chief objectives of education ought to encompass the following: 1) transmit basic skills and knowledge that is part of the cultural heritage, 2) focus on skills and subject matter that help develop higher-order skills and lead to an expanded knowledge base for learners, 3) and utilize education as a civilizing agency that establishes a link between the knowledge and values of the past and the mandates of the present (Ornstein and Levine, 1997).

Both perennialist and essentialist educational discourse are inherent aspects of Eurocentric hegemony. Racial formation espouses that institution and interpretation, structure and culture, society and self are concretely linked. Of course, all of the sociopolitical realities mentioned in the preceding sentence exist throughout the enterprise of education. With that being the case, it is not difficult to see how Eurocentrism is firmly entrenched in the logic of American schooling; given the reality that American schooling is both guided and dominated by a Eurocentric rationale that fails to, in equitable ways, to include certain members of our society, particularly African Americans.

An essentialist education is concerned with students garnering the basic skills and learning the sciences, and arts that sustain civilization. Supporters of essentialist education argue that mastery of these skills and subjects enable students to develop into adult citizens who function effectively in a civilized society. A contemporary reality of essentialist education is represented in the “back-to-basics” movement in American K-12 education. Proponents of the ‘back-to-basics’ movement adamantly argues that educational approaches that encompass social experimentation and untested instructional programs have adversely impacted academic

standards. At the elementary level they propose mastery of basic computational and literary skills, and at the high school level learning should be founded upon a prescribed curriculum.

As a sociocultural and political construct emanating from Eurocentrism, American schooling creates an ethnic (racial) binary that pits European culture against all other non-European cultures. This is manifested in the perennialist and essentialist philosophical orientation of American schooling whereby curriculum is established on the major tenets of Eurocentrism that positions the European worldview at the top of the epistemological pyramid above all other ethnic groups. Asante (1998), Dubois (1972), Carruthers (1999), Giroux (1988), McLaren (1988), Shujaa (1994), and Woodson (1933) argue that American schooling presents a Eurocentric disposition that represents the standards by which everyone are to either be judged against or they should ascribe to.

The disposition of American schooling is clearly an undemocratic one, in that its Eurocentric stance is a biased one that engenders supporters of white supremacy (Eurocentrism) with a disproportionate amount of power that enables them to dominate non-European groups in the educational setting by monopolizing the curriculum, policies, and protocol that govern the American schooling process. This disproportional balance of power between the Eurocentric proponents of American schooling and the non-European students participating in this social enterprise reveals via cultural and political contestation that European culture overshadows and, in most instances, excludes non-European cultures.

Racial formation theory purports that the purpose of American schooling is to assist other political and economic entities in forging a nation-state that is founded upon Eurocentric ideals, thus negating the histories and cultures of other ethnic groups. Needless to say, such an endeavor is complicit in the social construction of a racial hierarchy that is used to reinforce White domination over non-Whites and, by dividing the poor against themselves, is used to reinforce the domination of wealthy Whites over poor Whites. The sociopolitical realities depicted in the above paragraphs substantiate the theoretical position of racial formation theory which asserts that all sociopolitical enterprises in America are continuously embroiled in some form of racial politics.

Furthermore, via the controlling and hegemonic nature of Eurocentric American schooling it is extremely difficult for non-European students to exercise any significant level of agency in the educational setting. By and large, non-European students are bombarded with

Eurocentric images, notions of identity, and history that suggests to them that the American-European culture is the only culture worthy of study, thus, in the same vane dismissing the significance that other cultures could have in the schooling process. In addition, such interaction with this type of school culture is likely to have a profound effect on the self-esteem and attitudes of all students. Much research has documented that students who participate in educational settings that are culturally relevant both perform better academically and experience appropriate social development (Hale, 2001; Billings, 1994; Irvine, 1990, 2003). Racial formation theory claims that such educational realities serve as the impetus for racial ideologies/movements (e.g., Afrocentricity and multicultural educational discourse, etc.) that seek to challenge the hegemonic structure of American schooling. These movements are committed to reconceptualizing the meaning of both race and culture while simultaneously mobilizing certain “minority” groups to engage in political activities that vigorously challenge deep-rooted racism and social injustice that emerges out of Eurocentrism.

Unsurprisingly, movements like Afrocentricity present alternative approaches to education that were established beyond the parameters of traditional schooling. As well, Afrocentrists contextualize their “common identity” in response to Eurocentric national and Global initiatives that both negates and suppresses their racial identities. Omi and Winant (1994) offers some insight into the phenomena of marginalized groups resisting racist, discriminatory, and exclusionary practices in sociopolitical arenas (e.g., American schooling, etc). They also delineate how essentialism fails to acknowledge the differences that are present within institutions located in a diverse republic along with failing to acknowledge the history of European domination and oppression of Africans, Native Americans, and Mexicans. Indeed, this is the case with American schooling. Omi and Winant (1994) state that a major problem with essentialism is its reluctance to acknowledge the reality that there is differences between ethnic groups as well as within ethnic groups. In the following section, they illustrate why certain marginalized groups resist oppressive systems and practices with strategic essentialism (e.g., Afrocentricity). Most importantly, Omi and Winant (1994) caution critics not to confuse strategic essentialist movements that seek to contest various types of social injustices with the essentialism manifested by dominant groups, by stating:

Members of subordinate racial groups, when faced with racist practices such as exclusion or discrimination, are frequently forced to band together in order to defend their interests

(if not, in some instances, their very lives). Such “strategic essentialism” should not, however, be simply equated with the essentialism practiced by dominant groups, nor should it prevent the interrogation of internal group differences. (p.72)

Unfortunately, American schooling offers little or no opportunity that encourages students to become critical learners and thinkers. This is manifested via the reality that none of the dominant educational theories (e.g., perennialism and essentialism, etc) provide students with educational settings that support both critical learning and thinking. Instead, dominant educational theories support curriculum instruction, and school culture that cultivates rational and competent students, and at best students are given the opportunity to participate in educational settings that are aligned to their respective interests. Rarely, are African American students and other non-European American students given the opportunity to critically juxtapose their realities against those of their European counterparts. As well, African American students are not consistently given the opportunity to engage in learning that permits them to construct both their own identities and sociocultural and political realities. This is due, in part, to the monolithic philosophical orientation of American schooling which is, as I mentioned earlier, guided by racial theory that represents the core of the Eurocentric curriculum.

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that such realities represent how American schooling is a racial project. As a sociopolitical enterprise the American educational system is philosophically founded upon essentialist representations of race (e.g., curriculums are dominated by texts written by Europeans, European accomplishments are venerated while non-European accomplishments are rarely mentioned, European culture serves as the societal norm while non-European cultures are negated and viewed negatively, etc.). The Eurocentric institutional rationale and essentialist culture of American schooling perpetuates and reinforces its existence as a sociopolitical entity that dominates, oppresses, and marginalizes certain non-European groups. Throughout its existence American schooling has always supported the socioeconomic and political agenda of this country. It is a relationship that has always benefited the sociopolitical and economic interests of the elite which has ruthlessly exploited the less privileged citizens of this country (e.g., African Americans, descendants of Africa, Native Americans, Latino Americans, etc.). That is, American schooling possesses an academic hierarchy that favors those students and groups who embrace and are capable of adapting to the Eurocentric mainstream societal values of America. Conversely, those individuals and groups

who for whatever reasons don't embrace the values of the dominant culture or have difficulty adapting to the culture of American schooling find themselves placed at the bottom of the academic hierarchy. As a result, they experience considerable difficulty breaking vicious and incessant cycles of illiteracy and poverty. The discussion presented here articulates the reality that, to a considerable extent, education has an intricate relationship with political and economic agendas of American society that reinforce existing social structures of domination.

According to Omi and Winant, racial formation theory illuminates the reality that virtually every public and social enterprise is informed by education. In many ways the enterprise of American education is constructed to reinforce and perpetuate the social/racial contract. In essence, the American schooling system reinforces social stratification by mirroring the practices of the greater society. Artiles and Trent (1994) from a critical sociocultural and political perspective argue that educational structures have continued to emerge without going through a comprehensive interrogation to gauge how the belief systems, prejudices, biases, and socioeconomic injustices that have persisted for several hundred years in American society are transmitted to and perpetuated throughout American schooling which serves as a microcosm of the greater society. As a result, there is no place for non-European narratives to figure prominently in educational curriculum and discourse, thus, representing the hegemonic and marginalizing nature of American schooling. This perspective is corroborated by Gintis and Bowles (1976) who conceptualized the enterprise of schooling as being an agency mostly concerned with maintaining and reinforcing existing status quo. They passionately argued that American school structures replicate the existing social order in the form of duplicating the hierarchical structures of society and training indigent students who fall at the bottom of the social order to take on jobs that are reserved for people who are positioned at the low end of the social order.

The perspective presented above suggests African American students and other non-European students will continue to experience hegemonic and marginalizing social and economic practices that germinate from the numerous flagrant educational and social injustices that permeate American society. While there may be numerous factors that are associated with the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, nonetheless, there is still a considerable amount of uncertainty regarding the reasons why such large numbers of this ethnic group are identified for special education placement. Hence, the American schooling system

appears to be a sociocultural and political construct that facilitates ongoing oppression and racism that leads to second-and-third generation educational discrimination (Meier, Steward, & England, 1989).

Essentially, Eurocentrism is a discourse that possesses the capacity and power to establish the terms and the criterion as to what and how certain things will be communicated along with who is given the authority to speak and who is relegated to the role of listener (McLaren, 1988). In some ways, post-colonial theory draws on the Foucaultian concept of power to interrogate the perspective presented by McLaren regarding the oppressive and disquieting nature of Eurocentrism. This is manifested in its critique of Eurocentrism. Foucault postulated that it is important to move away from traditional interpretations of power that draw distinctions between practice (i.e., technologies) and discourse (semiotics). Rather, legitimate attempts should be made to examine the connectedness of both discourse and practice, hence, all practices are discursive and all discourse is a practice which reveals the discursive interplay of domination and knowledge. It is important to note that Foucault saw all forms of power as being interconnected; hence, rejecting the notion that the phenomena of power ought to be understood in dualistic terms.

As a modernistic “regime of truth,” Eurocentrism is reinforced by the hegemonic relationship of knowledge and control. Foucault (1980) argued that knowledge and control enjoins to create social phenomena’s like Eurocentrism. In the following account Foucault elaborates on the interplay of control and knowledge that leads to the actualization of “regimes of truth”:

Each society has a regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded values in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980, p. 131)

The term post-colonial is frequently utilized to delineate a particular genre of social criticism. This discourse identifies some of the interplay between domination and knowledge, distorted misrepresentations of non-Europeans, and disequilibrium of power that exists between Europeans and non-Europeans that is embedded in the insidious prevalence of Eurocentrism. In addition, it is taken to be a naturalized reality to the extent that it is a permanent fixture in

commonsensical discourse. This hegemonic construct wreaks havoc on many non-European groups and individuals throughout the world.

Notably, Eurocentrism exerts a tremendous amount of influence on the intellectual sensibilities of people throughout the diaspora in a geopolitical sense. As it was mentioned in the previous section of this work, it is clear that the most powerful element of Eurocentrism is that its imposition on the world is devastating, in that it disempowers non-Europeans culturally, politically, and economically. It is a sociopolitical construct that is both driven and reinforced by propaganda and proselytizing campaigns that place European culture, customs, and norms at the apex of human phenomenon. This instrument of social domination is dramatically manifested globally via both contemporary media representations and subjectivities that are engulfed with European cultural insensitivities. Meanwhile, Eurocentrism is being vigorously challenged at the intellectual level by various contemporary intellectual discourses. According to some observers, Afrocentricity, post-colonial, and certain multicultural discourses, along with a few others, are presenting a strong and much needed challenge to Eurocentrism (Ani, 1994; Asante 1999; Carruthers, 1999; Shohat & Stam 1994).

Eurocentrism is one of the most oppressive sociopolitical and economic realities. Even though European colonialism is rarely ever linked to discussions of Western civilization; nevertheless it served as the driving force behind the meteoric rise of capitalism and the misrepresentation of non-Europeans. Those who problematize the presentation of Western Civilization note the important role that Eurocentric misrepresentation plays in the formulation of European standards and ideologies that are institutionalized in mainstream sociopolitical entities (e.g., schooling, institutions of higher learning, political parties, legal system and government etc) (Ani 1994; Carruthers, 1999; Asante 1999). By and large, many of these institutions unwittingly assume a complicit role in the hegemony, oppression, and disenfranchisement of non-European peoples both here in America and throughout the diaspora.

In a devastating way Eurocentrism utilizes various forms of media to promote distorted representations of non-European people, cultures, government, customs, and values. It is this type of mediated miseducation that adversely impacts the intellectual interpretation of non-European human phenomena. This view of the historical hegemony and domination of Eurocentrism is shared by Shohat and Stam (1994) who state, “The residual traces of centuries of axiomatic European domination inform the general culture, the everyday language, and the

media, engendering a fictitious sense of the innate superiority of European-derived cultures and peoples” (p.1). All in all, Eurocentrism encompasses the following characteristics: 1) naturalizes race, 2) naturalizes a racial hierarchy, 3) privileges European history and culture, 4) minimizes and exoticizes non-European history and cultures, and 5) organizes the world into binaries in which one side of the binary is privileged over the other side.

Interrogating Eurocentrism via racial formation theory reveals that Eurocentrism is the driving force behind numerous racial projects (e.g., institution of education, school reform initiatives, educational policy, rationale that under-girds the discourses of achievement, special education, gifted education, public action, state activity, interpretations of race via artistic, journalistic, and academic mediums, etc.). Most, if not all, racial projects in the U.S., in some form, on the surface seek to address sociocultural and political phenomena that is in violation of the social contract. Unfortunately, such good intentions fall short of addressing customs, laws, and practices that violates the social contract due to the dominant Eurocentric rationale that negates all other non-Eurocentric perspectives.

Also, Eurocentrism affects our individual experiences with respect to the countless racial assertions and practices that we exhibit respectively at the individual level. Omi and Winant (1994) elucidate that our society is bombarded with racial projects both large and small that impact everyone. Such racial “subjection” is typically ideological and it is based on a Eurocentric ideological perspective. They argue that members of our society develop an understanding of the rules of racial classification and of their respective racial identity on their own. Rarely, do individuals learn about racial classification and their own racial identity via formal teaching or conscious inculcation. By and large, most people gauge their identity against the Eurocentric notion of identity which is taken as the standard by which U.S. citizens are expected to ascribe to.

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that Eurocentrism has kept the U.S. from being a color-blind society due to its historical notorious color-conscious customs, practices, morals and ethics that were reinforced by both U.S. constitution and law. As a result, Eurocentrism has exerted a devastating toll on the realities of Blacks and other non-European groups educationally, politically, and economically throughout their respective existence in this country. Omi and Winant (1994) delineate in detail the historical practice of European American mistreatment of non-European Americans.

From the very inception of the Republic to the present moment, race has been a profound determinant of one's political rights, one's location in the labor market, and indeed one's sense of "identity." The hallmark of this history has been racism, not the abstract ethos of equality, and while racial minority groups have been differently, all can bear witness to the tragic consequences of racial oppression. The U.S. has confronted each racially defined minority with a unique form of despotism and degradation. The examples are familiar: Native Americans faced genocide, blacks were subjected to racial slavery, Mexicans were invaded and colonized and Asians faced exclusion. (p.1)

### **Contemporary Reality of Eurocentrism vis-à-vis Schooling**

The reality of forced Eurocentric assimilation is manifested throughout the American schooling system when teachers who uphold mainstream Eurocentric standards attempt to get students who come from a different cultural orientation to discard potentially intrusive elements of their identity. In such cases, these teachers are requiring students to replace some, if not, all of their non-Eurocentric cultural attributes. Such behavior by teachers demonstrates a lack of cultural understanding and a lack of sensitivity. True, it is important for educational communities and teachers to establish a certain level of cohesiveness throughout the learning environment; however, it is often done in a manner that fails to respect many of the non-intrusive cultural differences (e.g., language, communication and learning styles, worldviews, and belief systems, etc.).

For the most, African American students are silenced by the institution of schooling; thus creating major implications for the construction of a democratic society.

The logic of racism will never be fully understood if students are forced to alienate themselves in a Eurocentric educational construct. It would negate the larger possibility of African Americans mobilizing themselves to fight for the cause of their own sociopolitical survival. The culture of African Americans is both routinely ignored and dismissed by the institution of education thereby suggesting to African American students that their culture is insignificant. Meanwhile, African Americans who either don't fit into or are not viewed as a close match to the abstract Eurocentric ideal are subsequently deemed abnormal or uneducable. If democracy is about social justice, fairness, caring, and equality; then problems that have beset society as a result of the social/racial contract continue to be perpetuated, if the existing contract is not redrawn so as to create a more culturally inclusive brand of democracy.

As a result, the marginalizing and hegemonic cultural perspective of American schooling exerts a significant impact on the cultural sensibilities of educators, clinicians, and administrators who perform their respective professional tasks. For the most part, school personnel reinforce the monolithic Eurocentric cultural perspective through their actions and belief systems. Unfortunately, the schooling process places African American students and other non-European students at a distinct disadvantage. Mercer (1973) suggests that Anglocentrism, which emerges out of Eurocentrism, represents a clearly identifiable form of ethnocentrism in American society by arguing:

In the United States, the cultural patterns of the segments of the population consisting of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants has been the dominant influence since the colonial times and has never been seriously threatened (Gordon, 1964). English language, English literature, Anglo-American political and social systems, and Anglo-American history make up the major portion of the public school curriculum. Training in a language other than English and learning about the history and culture of other societies comes late in the educational sequence and has never been a primary concern in American life... Anglo conformity has been the measure of success. (p. 121)

Harry (1992) states that the role of cultural discontinuity in the adverse academic and social development of non-European ethnic groups in American schooling illustrates that students experience greater success when they are participating in educational settings that give them the opportunity to learn and express themselves in culturally relevant ways. Irvine (1990) further developed the concept of “cultural synchronization” that was linked to the historical and anthropological research that asserts African Americans possess a distinct culture that is situated upon identifiable languages, norms, attitudes, and behaviors that can be located in Africa. Herskovits (1958) in his work *The Myth of the Negro Past* identified the above mentioned retentions; in fact, he was one of the first researchers to do so. His research vigorously contested the rampant and incessant notion that Black people were void of their own culture and that they no longer possessed any of their African ways-of-becoming. It was widely speculated that Blacks in America held no African retentions that survived their mass involuntary exodus via the transatlantic crossing and their several hundred years of enslavement.

Meanwhile, negative, degrading, and misinformed perspectives about African American culture continue to permeate mainstream discourse. It is a discourse that has been entrenched in

the sociocultural and political realities of the following historical moments: The Middle Ages, The Renaissance, The Enlightenment, The institution of African enslavement, Jim Crow, The Civil Rights Movement, and contemporary discourses involving the issues of Affirmative Action and reparations for African Americans for the enslavement of their predecessors and the long-term negative effects of slavery that continues to exist today (these are just a few of many more contemporary discourses that involve contesting racially based hegemony and marginalization). Misinformed and racially biased perspectives about African American culture embraces a “pathological” approach that suggests that as a group African Americans are inherently flawed. This perspective of African American culture suggests that African Americans are the source of their problems due to their dysfunctional existence.

During the 1960’s Senator Moynihan was known as one of the more notable proponents of this pathological view of African Americans despite his intention of delineating that their problems stem from social structures and resultant culture that, in varying degrees, adversely impact their family structure. He put forth a perspective of the African American family unit that suggested they were afflicted with the highest levels of dysfunctionality along with singling out African American adult females as being the most dysfunctional member of the family unit. In addressing the problems of the African American family Senator Moynihan accorded blame to the family structure of this group, while ignoring the role that both racism and social injustice play in the misfortunes of the African American family. However, there is existing data that support the reality that African Americans possess a distinct culture that is rooted in African cultural retentions, that is identifiable, and that precedes European culture. Also, such data suggest that African American and European cultures are incompatible and antithetical to one another.

Samunda and Kong (1989) elucidated that there is no such thing as “cultural deprivation,” given the fact that no living person exists outside of some form of cultural frame of reference. It is not uncommon for culture to be lacking whenever either the instrument or rationale that is used for assessment is an ethnocentric tool. As well, the problem many non-European students experience is that respective individual performance is measured against the norms of the dominant culture (Harry, 1994). It is apparent that the institution of American schooling lacks the ability to appropriately acknowledge the role that culture plays in the

educational setting (i.e., respective learning environments). (Harry, 1994; Samunda & Kong, 1989).

Grossman (1995) states that the institution of schooling is an extension of the greater society. He argues that numerous psychologists, teachers, and school administrators exhibit dispositionalities and attitudes toward indigent European American and non-European students that clearly convey the rampant bias that permeates the greater society. The dispositions of these educators prove to have adverse implications on the educational experiences of non-European students. For example, exposure to the bias of those educators who are responsible for educating the above mentioned students contribute to their falling behind academically, and students exhibiting defiant dispositions in the educational setting whereby these students actions, in many instances, are inappropriately viewed as misbehaving, and the disproportionate and seemingly permanent assignment to special education programs (Grossman, 1995; Irvine, 1990)

According to the findings of a study conducted by Shinn, Tindai, and Spira (1987)) certain student characteristics put some students at-risk of having unsuccessful educational experiences that lead to chronic failure. Also, these students are at-risk for being assigned to special education programs. Also, at the intermediate level of education a noticeable trend is manifested, that is, African American students are referred to special education in the academic area of reading. On the other hand, Lietz and Gregory (1978) observed that students were being assigned to special educational services for disciplinary reasons and most of the students being assigned for such reasons were of African American ethnicity. They concluded that whether the decision for referral was behaviorally or academically related, the outcome was one that yielded the disproportionate referral of African Americans to special education programs.

Gottlieb, Gottlieb, and Trogone (1991) in their study *Parent and teacher referrals for a psychoeducational evaluation* revealed that it was three times more likely for teachers to refer African American students for special education services for reasons related to behavior problems than African American parents. They further concluded that the school's notion of disruptive behavior was found to be characteristic of male students. These findings are rather compelling, given the reality that for quite some time African American males have been the most disproportionately represented gender in special education. There are similar studies that coincide with these findings (Hutton, 1985; Hyde 1975).

According to the discussion presented in the preceding paragraphs, it is apparent that many African American students, particularly males have considerable difficulty conducting themselves in a manner that coincides with the expectations that schools have regarding student conduct. Given the disproportionate assignment of African American students to special education, it is likely that they, for issues probably related to cultural incongruity have difficulty ascribing to the fixed definition of appropriate student conduct that fails to take into account the sociocultural orientation of the student. This reality suggests that schools are looking for all students to manifest themselves in identical and uniform ways; hence, there is minimal allowance for variation in student conduct. The action taken by schools to define, regulate, and sanction student conduct illustrates their quest to normalize student conduct.

Omi and Winant (1994) argue that is through the process of normalization that identity becomes fixed, and it is important to note that normalization is a major characteristic of Eurocentrism. The Eurocentric view of an educated person is basically someone who can learn the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions that would reinforce the social contract which is actually Eurocentric and racist. Those individuals who are capable of demonstrating the characteristics mentioned above are deemed the exemplary citizen. On the other hand, individuals who do not possess the preferred Eurocentric characteristics mentioned in the preceding sentences are viewed in negative, deficient, and abnormal terms.

Irvine (1990), Ladson Billings (1994), and Hale (1986) state that due to the reality that the sociocultural orientations of African American students are culturally incongruent to that of the dominant culture which undergirds a traditionally oriented school culture (e.g., learning and curriculum approaches that are culturally biased), oftentimes, large numbers of these students are ignored, misunderstood, unfairly disciplined, and over-identified for special education services. As a result, many of these students experience cultural discontinuity. Delpit (1995), Ladson-Billings (1994), and Irvine (1990) argue that many of these students experience cultural discontinuity in educational settings that are comprised of mostly European American teachers, administrators, support staff who represent and sustain the dominant Eurocentric cultural ideologies that negate non-European cultures. The absence of cultural synchronization or cultural discontinuity is manifested in learning environments where teachers misinterpret, malign, and dismiss African American students' communication styles and physical

dispositionalities (e.g., language, nonverbal cues, physical movements, learning styles, cognitive approaches, and world view) (Irvine, 1990, p.35).

Bondy and Ross (1998), Hale (1986), (2001), Kunjufu (1995), and Moore (2002) argue that the field of special education fails to acknowledge the significance of appropriately acknowledging distinct individual characteristics that are associated with sociocultural orientations, values, belief systems, worldviews, culturally influenced learning styles, behavioral and communication mechanisms. For example, Moll and Diaz (1987) suggest that culture is not of any major significance in the educational setting by suggesting that “all” a student has to do, notwithstanding, their respective ethnicity and cultural background is master or ascribe to the ideals of the school organization if they desire to experience success. Essentially, this perspective all but dismisses the significance of culture in the context of schooling. Moll and Diaz (1987) suggest:

The key to understanding school performance is not in the study of mental aptitude or attitude toward schooling; it is in understanding the dynamics of material, local settings. To succeed in school, one does not need a special culture; we now know, thanks to ethnographic work, that success and failure is in the social organization of the experience itself. (p. 311)

There are several research studies that counter the perspective presented by Moll and Diaz (1987). Such studies confirm the issues and problems many African American students encounter via their interaction with educators who teach them (Argulwicz, 1983; Baratz & Baratz, 1975; Dao, 1991; Eaves; Figueroa & Gallegos, 1978; Ford, 1992; Heller, 1985)

Those who support cultural congruence are well aware that traditional educational philosophy that is rooted in Eurocentric has not proved capable of acknowledging and taking in consideration the distinct cultural dispositions of African American students (Asante, 1988; Hale (1986); King (1994); Ogbu, 1981, 1990, 1992; Shujaa, 1994). Conversely, opponents to the belief of an existing African American culture, dismiss the idea that African Americans by virtue of their respective ethnic culture possess fundamentally different approaches to learning than European Americans (Frisby, 1993; Hilliard, 1976).

Omi and Winant (1994) further argue that implications of this worldview on education becomes problematic for non-European students who possess contrasting cultural, social, political, and historical perspectives. Oftentimes, non-European students have considerable

difficulty experiencing academic success and social development that doesn't conflict with their sense of identity in institutions dominated by Eurocentric rationale, particularly in the realm of American schooling. The difficulty that these students encounter throughout their respective educational experiences can be attributed to the monolithic Eurocentric cultural perspective of American schooling. As a result, the Eurocentric orientation and rationale, in significant ways, impact the identity formation of African Americans. It sets up a binary tension between African Americans and the Eurocentric ideal of education that alienates, marginalizes, oppresses, and silences African Americans.

Ani (1994), Asante (1998), Carruthers (1999), Hilliard (1998), Irvine (1990), Shujaa (1994), Smitherman (1977), and Wilson (1998) argue that there is an ongoing African cultural legacy that continues to impact African Americans (cuisines, language, linguistic patterns, epistemological and ontological orientations). These are all important discourses that inform the African American identity formation. This brings about the compelling reality of hybrid identity formation among African Americans by virtue of African Americans merging their Africaness with European culture brings about cultural hybridity. This reality of cultural hybridity becomes oppositional in that it is situated in oppositional terms in the discourse of schooling. The school seeks to develop the characteristics of the African American student that coincides with the Eurocentric ideals of education. When the school functions this way, it establishes a binary that depicts what behaviors of African American students are normal (behaviors that are aligned with the norms of mainstream Eurocentric culture) against behaviors that are deemed abnormal (behaviors that represent the Africaness of these students). As a result, the Africaness of these students are negated, ignored, dismissed, and, in some cases, disrespected.

## CHAPTER 3

### **What does Normalization mean in a Schooling Context vis-à-vis African Americans Disproportionate Representation in Special Education?**

#### **Introduction**

##### **Claim**

*Eurocentrism perpetuates the negative sanctioning of student actions that deviate from a Eurocentric construct that normalizes the “ideal student.”*

This chapter will utilize social censure theory to examine how the discourse of normalization marginalizes certain groups and individuals throughout our society. An important aspect of this critical analysis will be the assessment of how the normalization of language both reflects and creates culture. To achieve this end a neo-Marxist critique that utilizes arguments presented by Bakhtin/Volosinov will be used to illustrate the intersection of ideology, power, and sociopolitical contestation vis-à-vis language.

The chapter will provide a detailed synthesis of the following characteristics: 1) Ideal/idealism, 2) Normalcy, 3) Subnormal, and 4) Lunacy. These labels will be used to put into perspective how certain groups, individuals, and political movements are both perceived and defined according to the labels presented above. The labels are socially constructed terms that emerge out of public discourses more often at micro levels; however, sometimes they are manifested at meso and macro levels as well. As I stated earlier, the four terms (i.e., labels) are frequently used by people in their daily informal and, in some instances, formal interactions to describe the actions and conduct of people. Some of these terms are used by people at an informal level of interaction and various forms of the media to describe the conduct and action of people. In both instances, these terms are gauged against Eurocentric notions of conduct, disposition and identity. Given this reality, the politics of identity will be explored, thus illuminating both the complex nature and cultural contestation that is inherently imbedded in this

phenomenon. Most importantly, this chapter will delineate how the aforementioned phenomena impact the sociopolitical realities of African Americans in the educational setting.

### **Social Censure Theory**

Frank Fitch (1999) developed social censure theory and initially introduced it to critical discourse in his study *Special Education and Social Censure: A Case Study of an Inclusion Program*. Fitch investigated how “included” and “non-included” special education students developed an understanding of themselves in multiple segregated and inclusive educational settings. He conducted a critical ethnography that examined how social censure is played out in the educational setting. The findings of the study suggested that students developed a sense of themselves that transformed according to changes in their respective placements. Also, students who participated in inclusive educational settings developed a sense of self that was both considerably different and more positive than students in non-inclusive or “traditionalist” educational settings.

The emergence of social censure theory signals an important departure from labeling deviance theory which for many years proved to be a viable alternative to the medical model of disability that dominates the field of special education. Social censure theory distinguishes itself from labeling deviance theory, in that it addresses the phenomena’s of ideology, dialogue, history, and resistance. It is a theory that problematizes the aforementioned phenomena’s vis-à-vis schooling to better understand both disability and how student disability is constructed along with how the notion of identity is constructed in the educational setting. Furthermore, social censure theory’s adherence to an ethic of democracy that is founded upon the major tenets of social justice and transformative leadership represents an important and major shift from labeling deviance theory.

As a critical theory, social censure discourse both acknowledges and illuminates the vital roles of discourse, ideology, resistance, and history with respect to how they impact the sociocultural and political realities of a significant number of individuals and groups throughout our society, particularly in public schooling vis-à-vis special education. Social censure theory represents a comprehensive and in depth engagement of the interconnectedness of the sociocultural and political constructs of power, ideology, knowledge, identity, and history with respect to how they impact existing social and political enterprises. Meanwhile, it is both useful

and important to understand the role that labeling deviance theory played in the discourse of deviance and social censure prior to the arrival of social censure theory. A brief synopsis of labeling deviance theory is presented in the subsequent section.

### **Labeling Deviance Theory**

As an extension of deviance discourse in sociology during the 1960's labeling deviance theory or "labeling perspective" became a major force. The following theorists assisted with the development of labeling deviance theory: Lemert (1951, 1957); Erickson (1962); Becker (1963), 1964); Kituse (1967); Matza (1964); Simmons (1969); Goffman (1952, 1963); Schur (1971); Rubington & Weinberg (1968); Scott & Douglas (1972); Prus (1975); Burbach (1981) and others. An important tenet of this orientation is conveyed by Howard Becker (1963). Becker and Lemert take the position that the essence of deviance resides in society's reaction "to an act, not in the act itself" (Fitch 1999).

Deviance is seen as being manifested via interaction between the individual and the social groups offering a reaction to particular acts. They (i.e., deviants) are separated into two groups (i.e., motivated and unmotivated). According to Kurtz (1977) and Quantz (1979) motivated deviants intentionally violate the rules of society whereas unmotivated deviants are viewed as being unable to harness their actions (i.e., mental retardates). This perspective articulates how it is plausible for an individual to be viewed as being a deviant in one sense and not in another sense. It is not uncommon for a deviant to acquire numerous labels via the process of changing groups.

The dawn of labeling deviance and categorization theory took the position that naming and labeling were a mundane reality while simultaneously representing an important aspect of social interaction. It was initially offered by Durkheim that all societies engage in some form of social censure. Also, all members of society actively participate in stereotyping with respect to their meeting and interacting with other people. Not only does this sociocultural reality play a critical role in decreasing potential confusion, but it also serves to minimize the amount of tension and uncertainty present in social action. The actuality of this perspective is realized in interactions where it involves a nonconforming person. That is, someone who doesn't match the standards or meet the expectations of a particular social setting (e.g., schools and classrooms). The dynamics of tension is decreased when the nonconformer is identified (labeled) as a deviant. Such tension reduction is most useful when the labeling is orchestrated by a high ranking or

institutionally recognized member of the social community. It is even more effective when the nonconformist (i.e., labeled person) takes on some or all of the characteristics attributed to the deviant label.

Throughout the 1960's labeling deviance placed significant emphasis on social context, and institutional and political power. Conversely, categorization theory came on the scene with a political stance. This theory ascribed to the notion that the rationale behind creating labels led to a better understanding of the importance of having a definition as well as resolving ambiguity. In contrast, label deviance theorists due to their concern with authority, status, and power, hold the view that labeling should, for the most part, be seen as a process of exercising greater social control instead of being seen as simply resolving uncertainty in a given social environment. The lack of certainty, consistency, and clarity associated with interpreting or "reading" other people introduces the issue of whose definition should prevail. Scholars within this discourse postulate that social control agencies routinely utilize labels to, in a selective way, attach positively valued characteristics to those they endorse and attach negatively valued identities (i.e., criminal, mentally ill, or mentally retarded) to those characteristics that they don't endorse (Ashforth & Humphry, 1995). This is indeed the case in American public schooling due to the reality that many African American students who are placed in special education are described as having either characteristics or behavioral problems that deviate considerably from the culturally biased norms of a given educational setting (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Hale, 2001). In the following section this reality will be elaborated on in greater detail.

### **Normalization and Schooling**

The sociocultural and political concept of normalization is essential to the survival and perpetuation of Eurocentric notions of normalcy and abnormality in American society. This reality is played out in culture and language, particularly in language (linguistic forms). Ornstein and Levine (1997) state that schools should be viewed as a cultural agent that is partly concerned with sustaining and perpetuating mainstream culture (i.e., dominant culture). Schools are highly formal sociocultural and political entities that are responsible for educating students between the ages of 3-21 years of age. It is in this institutional setting where the values, beliefs, and norms (rules of behavior) of the dominant culture of our society are both reinforced and transmitted. The reinforcement and the transmission of Eurocentric ideals are manifested via the curriculum and the overall operation of the educational system.

By virtue of being rooted in a discourse of normalization, schools fail to appropriately acknowledge and address the needs of students who come from cultures that are not congruent to that of mainstream culture (dominant culture). In many instances, educational sites establish practices that contradict the alleged democratic intentions of American public schooling that is founded upon equity, fairness, and respect for cultural diversity. They do so by implementing institutional practices (e.g., tracking, and special education, etc.) that place many non-European Americans and poor European Americans at a major disadvantage in the educational setting to the extent that they are unable to experience positive academic and social development.

Brantlinger (1995) stated that school practices and programs that are created to address existing differences amongst students reinforced mainstream perceptions of differentiation of ability vis-à-vis socioeconomic standing. Such thinking suggests that students who come from well-to-do families (high income, middle-class, upper-middle class, etc.) possess higher levels of talent (academic ability) and are worthy of all of the favorable resources that American schooling has to offer. Conversely, in far too many instances, less fortunate (low-income) students are deemed inferior by many in the educational setting, thus resulting in their chronic failure and, in some cases, genuine disdain toward formal education. Oftentimes, students who come from disparate non-European ethnic and sociocultural orientations project academic performance that does not meet school standards. Unfortunately, accepted school practices designed to deal with these differences not only, in many instances, fall short of their goal of remediation, but also leads to segregation, differentiation, alienation, and humiliation for many students (Brantlinger, 1995, p. 4).

Over the past 50 years public education has experienced the important challenge of educating a diverse student population. It has encountered considerable difficulty in achieving this end due to the reality that universal K-12 education is founded upon the premise that large groups of children usually 20, 30, or more who are of the same ages can be taught by a single teacher who uses a common curriculum. Clearly, the immense diversity amongst the student population in the educational setting poses some challenges to such a model of instruction. In the same vane, the “normalized” model presents numerous difficulties for many non-European Americans who come from culturally diverse backgrounds and disadvantaged European American students as well. “The expectations and demands of the classroom may reinforce the familiar for many students yet be indecipherable for others. While some students may be

hopelessly left behind, others may be frustratingly bored” (*Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education*, 2002, p.17). The educational philosophy of one-size-fits-all has been, for the most part, an ineffective approach to educating the diverse student population of the American public schooling system.

Another normalizing aspect of schooling is located in the hidden curriculum that is concerned with establishing institutional conformity. The hidden curriculum plays a complicit role in perpetuating prevailing myths and stereotypes (e.g., people from low-income backgrounds are low-achievers, people from high-income backgrounds are high-achievers, and people who exhibit behaviors that fall outside of mainstream norms are considered abnormal and are subject to experiencing social sanctions depending on how much the behavior deviates from the established norms, etc.). Furthermore, in numerous ways (e.g., textbooks, video presentations, and school personnel that reinforce negative racial and sexual stereotypes, etc.), the hidden curriculum communicates negative notions and perspectives that intersect along the areas of race, class, sex, and gender (Ornstein and Levine, 1997).

Kedar-Voivodas (1983), Finn and Cox, (1992) claim that schools are embedded in a socialization pattern that establishes a school culture that seeks to cultivate the obedient student while simultaneously admonishing students who don’t fit the criterion of the obedient or ‘normal’ student. Therefore, in my opinion, it would be reasonable to presume that American schooling should be understood as being a sociocultural and political enterprise that both upholds and reinforces mainstream notions of identity and normalcy. Above all, American schooling substantiates the economic enterprise of capitalism in our society along with maintaining existing notions of identity and asymmetrical power relations. Social censure theory utilizes the Foucaultian concept of ‘normal’ which depicts the notion of ‘normal’ that is discussed in the preceding sentences.

Foucault argues that the concept of normal constitutes a subjectivity or self that is configured in a way that allows it to be more “conforming” and useful in an economic sense. As a result, dominant identity groups (i.e., Whites, males, and middle/upper-class, etc.) are viewed as being normal; conversely, non-dominant identity groups are seen and positioned in our society as abnormal and deviant. Those fitting the criterion established for non-dominant groups are censured, condemned, and marginalized. They are usually defined according to one or more of

the following characteristics: deficient, immoral, stupid, weak, sinful, unclean, lazy, crazy, bizarre or diseased, etc.

Since the sociopolitical enterprise of public schooling is a microcosm of the greater society, it should come as no surprise that similar censure-ship exists throughout its domain as well. For example, a considerable number of school personnel convey, often in an openly obvious manner, genuine disdain, and sentiments of intolerance toward students with special needs. Such reaction to these students has everything to do with the reality that these students exhibit different dispositionality and conduct from mainstream students. Unfortunately, the difference that is identified in many students with special needs is considered to be deficiencies by those who censure their conduct, dispositions throughout the enterprise of public schooling. For the most part, the disciplinary technology of normalization functions via resistance/oppositional mechanisms that reciprocally creates both the normal and abnormal. In this sense, normalization creates and legitimate disproportional power relations. The more notable primary agents of normalization or disciplinary power are professionals and scientific specialists whose chief objective is to create more effective technologies of normalization (Carlson, 1997).

Social censure theory explicates that norms usually coincide with either the values or ideology of productivity and docility which functions below or beyond our realm of consciousness/awareness. As a result, such norms become taken for granted assumptions that are oppositional to laws rooted in egalitarian principles of Western democracies. Given this reality, methods aligned with both discipline and normalization produce systematic forms of censure (individuals and groups who are identified and labeled as “other” or “deviant” are categorized outside of the established norms, thus assuming a position at the bottom of the social hierarchy).

Skrtic (1991) argues that schools are one of several institutions that utilize disciplinary technologies to attain normalization, particularly the discipline of special education. Public schooling is able to achieve normalization via an effective regimen that includes observation, examination, and supervision. Despite the fact that the institution of public education and the discourse of special education are in a rhetorical sense founded upon egalitarian values like equality and freedom, it is inevitable that the power of the two disciplines ultimately work in opposition to such values (Foucault, 1979).

Fitch (1999) suggests that understanding social censure via a Foucaultian synthesis of power that delineates the process of normalization and use of disciplinary technology is useful. A Foucaultian analysis depicts a number of ways in which normalizing social and political enterprises (such as schools) “structure, reify, and define otherness in and through the process of social censure, thus continuing systematically to produce hierarchy, exclusion, and inequality” (p.89). For example, the field of special education over the years has developed an elaborate system of defining both students with special needs and developing categories which also serves as programs that are designed to address the needs of students who are deemed eligible for special education services (e.g., Educable mentally retarded, learning disabled, and emotionally disturbed).

While it is apparent that the special education initiative was created with good intentions, nonetheless, it is rather apparent that it has become a discourse and professional practice in the context of schooling that is representative of Foucault’s notion of normalization which entails control and censure over “difference.” From its inception, special education has been complicit in exacerbating the hierarchical arrangement of schooling (e.g., mainstream students are held in higher esteem than special education students---there is a hierarchy within the field of education, in that certain categories are more socially acceptable than others, etc.). It is through this process of special education that many African American students are socially censured in the educational setting. Moreover, the situation for African American students is further exacerbated by the reality that they encounter an educational system that is institutionally biased and staffed with a significant number of professionals (e.g., administrators, teachers, and other licensed personnel) who possess biases and expectations that may perpetuate the disproportionate assignment of African Americans to special education.

### **Ideology and Worldview**

Goodlad's research titled *A Study of Schooling* (1983) suggested the institution of schooling curtails the enthusiasm of students and that they are groomed to be passive learners (e.g., they rarely did any of the following: initiated or planned any activity, created their own projects, and utilize critical thinking). Jackson (1968) argues that this is all fueled by societal demands that require students to learn conforming behavior. The schools’ focus on passive learning is closely aligned with the reality that students are expected to function according to mainstream norms in social institutions beyond the formal educational setting (i.e., students are

to be socialized so that they can appropriately follow routines and regulations). Jackson laments in greater detail about this aspect of the hidden curriculum that shapes the disposition of students to prepare them for life beyond the school setting, by offering:

It is expected that children will adapt to the teacher's authority by becoming 'good workers' and 'model students.' The transition from classroom to factory or office is made easily by those who have developed 'good work' habits during their early years. (p. 32)

Language establishes dualisms, categories, and binary oppositions that emerge into social constructs that establish mainstream notions of normalcy and abnormality that fall along the following continuum; ideal, idealism, normal, subnormal, and lunacy. Throughout both the greater society and institution of American schooling language is used to make distinctions via the use of categories and definitions among citizens and students that, in many instances, reinforce prevailing stereotypes and lead to the creation of socially constructed categories that produce binary oppositions at a common sense level.

The norms of "conduct" in our society are based upon a mainstream notion of identity that is intended to coincide with the existing social contract. That is, individuals participating in economic, political and various types of social enterprises are expected to ascribe to a set of dispositional customs that govern the mainstream populace. Such dispositions and manifestations of identity are deemed acceptable insofar as to the extent that neither individual(s) nor group(s) dispositional poses a significant threat to circumventing the existing sociopolitical and economic order. Those individual(s) or group(s) who deviate from mainstream notions of identity are considered deviant, defiant, and in some instances, radical. For the most part, both individuals and groups (e.g., political and social, etc.) fall along a continuum of social labels that are used to both define and categorize the characteristics most people exhibit which serves as a method of "censorship."

The following labels (i.e., social labels) represent a continuum in our society that is used to simultaneously depict to what extent certain individuals and groups fit into our society, and to what extent the aforementioned parties don't fit into our society: 1) Ideal/idealism, 2) normalcy, 3) subnormal, and 4) lunacy. Meanwhile, it is important to note these categories are not mutually exclusive. It is possible for a given individual to be assigned to one or more of the

categories mentioned above by virtue of the reality that all people will manifest certain characteristics in varying degrees.

Those individuals and groups who fall into the “category” of ideal/idealism most represent what the “social contract” asks of its citizenry: 1) unconditional compliance with rules and regulations, a) uncritical stance, and b) unconditional regard for the sovereign ideology of existing political, legal and social institutions (e.g., Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, Ward Connerly, Condoleezza Rice, Shelby Steele, Douglas Wilder, Colin Powell, and J. C. Watts, etc). Individuals and groups that fall into the category of normalcy exhibit ideological perspectives that at times pose a challenge to the existing social, political, and economic order. Usually, individuals and groups who fall into this “category” abide by existing rules and regulations, but respectively they are inclined to protest against certain social, political, and economic issues that they take issue with. In essence, they are not seen as a “real” threat to the establishment (i.e., the existing social/racial contract—sociopolitical and economic arrangement), however, the aforementioned entities are indeed capable of bringing about, in some instances, important and much needed change.

As stated earlier, it is important to note that many of these individuals listed in the following categories manifest characteristics in varying degrees. Given this reality many of them can be placed in one or more categories (e.g., Martin Luther King, W. E. B. Dubois, and Malcolm X, etc.) at different times of their political careers. For example, Martin Luther King can be placed in each of the three categories listed in the subsequent section. There were times during his life when he was adored and accepted by mainstream America (i.e., advocacy of non-violent activism, March on Washington, and “I have a Dream” speech) in which he was considered a normal upstanding American citizen. On the other hand, King’s actions that spearheaded boycotts and civil protests that challenged racist institutions practice and customs, in many instances, landed him in jail. This type of conduct exhibited by King moved many in mainstream America, to some extent, think of him as being subnormal or a lunatic. This reality illustrates that the notion of identity is a socially constructed phenomenon that emanates from cultural and political struggle. Also, this determination as to who is to be seen as legitimate and who is not is in fact one central element of cultural political struggle.

The following individuals at some point in their years of sociopolitical activism, in my opinion, possessed characteristics befitting the category of normalcy: 1) Alexander Crummell, 2)

Martin Luther King, 3) Ralph Abernathy, 4) Hosea Williams, 5) Adam Clayton Powell Sr., 6) Adam Clayton Powell Jr., 7) Jesse Jackson, 8) Maxine Waters, 9) Al Sharpton, 10) W. E. B. Dubois, 11) Wyatt T. Walker, 12) Frederick Douglas, and 13) Cornel West, etc.

In most instances, individuals and groups that are considered “subnormal” in our society are either people or organized entities who ascribe to belief systems, ideological perspectives, and philosophical rationales that are intensely antithetical to the existing sociopolitical and economic rationale that under-girds the social/racial contract. That is, the above mentioned parties, in some cases, may resort to either alternative or unconventional methods, if not both, that are incongruent with the mainstream notion of sociopolitical activism. They are usually perceived by the dominant culture as representing a threat (oftentimes exaggerated) to the existing order of things and, in some instances, such individuals and groups are socially sanctioned via a variety of control “methods” (imprisonment, surveillance, etc). For example, the following individuals who postulate counter hegemonic discourses to Eurocentrism have at one time or another during their political activism exhibited characteristics that were deemed “subnormal” by the dominant culture: 1) Angela Davis, 2) Assata Shakur, 3) H. Rap Brown, 4) Huey Newton, 5) Bobby Seale, 6) Malcolm X, 7) Louis Farrakhan, 8) Elijah Muhammad, 9) Leonard Jeffries, 10) Leopold Senghor, 11) Eldridge Cleaver, 12) Frederick Douglas, and 13) Kwame Ture.

The term “Lunacy” is reserved for those individuals and groups who, in the minds of the dominant culture represent both an extreme and serious challenge to the existing sociopolitical system—social/racial contract. Usually, people and groups who fall into this category have become exacerbated with existing conditions to the extent that their protestation is viewed by the dominant culture as circumventing mainstream notions of appropriate social activism. Oftentimes, such individuals and groups are considered dangerous and if necessary extreme measures are taken to immobilize, control, and eradicate citizens and organizations that fall into the category of the mainstream notion of “lunacy.” The following individuals at some juncture in their sociopolitical activism have exhibited characteristics that are representative of mainstream notions of “lunacy”: 1) Marcus Garvey, 2) Malcolm X, 3) W. E. B. Dubois, 4) Fred Hampton, 5) Geronimo Pratt, 6) Mumia Abu Jamal, 7) Carter G. Woodson, 8) Nat Turner, 9) Denmark Vesey, 10) Harriet Tubman, 11) Kwame Ture, and 12) Martin Luther King.

As a microcosm of the larger society the institution of public schooling possesses its own method of labeling and placing students in particular categories. The powerbrokers of the institution of public education utilize the concept of labeling to control both the educational environment and, more importantly, students. As social control agents policymakers, administrators, educators, and other certified staff through various types of collaborative endeavors create and define categories such as gifted, emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, educable mentally retarded, at-risk, and oppositional defiant, etc. The practice of assigning students to the aforementioned categories, in many ways, defines their respective social identities. In the same vane, the actual educational site is physically structured according to stigmatizing labels such as regular education, special education, and mainstream education. It is important to define and identify in the realm of education, however, it is important that the two are not done in an insensitive fashion that stigmatizes students in a way that leads to various types of voluntary and involuntary in-school segregation. Oftentimes, the impact of labeling students' forces them into groups where a common status is shared amongst them.

Kaplan and Johnson (1991) presented a model that suggests labeling an individual as deviant (i.e., stigmatizing labels, behavior that is different from established "norms") significantly increases the possibility of them joining other individuals (students), thus establishing a group that demarcate boundaries from others who do not share their common status as deviants. Kaplan and Johnson further suggest that due to their common status as deviants, it is not uncommon for deviants (students with disabilities) to rely on one another for support and, in some instances, they establish outgroups and ingroups. Ashforth and Humphry (1995) argue that organizational subcultures usually take shape around labeled outgroups which leads to the creation of boundaries that unequivocally separates the two groups. Also, a major problem presented by such group formation and polarization is that it oftentimes leads to the institutionalization and subsequent perpetuation of culturally insensitive stereotypes of those who have been labeled. In addition, the conditions presented in the preceding sentence adversely impact their social mobility.

Ladson-Billings (1994), Hale (2001), and Kunjufu (1982) argue that the culturally insensitive nature of public schooling and teacher bias both serve to create less than adequate learning environments for African American students. For example, the practice of labeling African American students at-risk, emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, and educable

mentally retarded, in many instances, forces these students to develop subcultures that respectively serve as their support systems. Unfortunately, in far too many cases, the subculture that “labeled” African American students proves to be detrimental to their social and academic development. They often develop either an oppositional or defiant stance toward the institution of public schooling which is due to the reality that they feel that the educational community has both rejected and ostracized them. In fact, the existence of the above mentioned subcultures figures prominently in both establishing and sustaining a dangerous pattern of career deviance (Burbach, 1981). For the most part, deviant subcultures provide members with a desirable position/status within the group. As well, these deviant subcultures shield group members from external threats from the greater society. Furthermore, they foster group unity and seek to bring members together via numerous types of social control (Hargreaves, 1967). The longstanding practice of self contained special education classes are an example of this type of deviant subculture.

To better ascertain why African Americans in disproportionate numbers experience academic failure and social maladjustment throughout their k-12 years, it would be a good idea to take note of John Ogbu’s work *Voluntary and Involuntary Minorities: A Cultural-Ecological Theory of School Performance with Some Implications for Education*, 1998. Although Ogbu takes the position that structural barriers and various forms of discrimination in both society and school are not the sole determinants of poor academic achievement among African Americans; nonetheless, he acknowledges that the two do indeed play a major role in the sociopolitical challenges that African Americans are forced to contend with in our society. His research suggests that voluntary minorities (minority groups whose socially constructed categories are associated with voluntary immigration) and involuntary minorities (minority groups whose socially constructed categories are associated with involuntary immigration or a conquered people) develop disparate cultural models of American society. Such cultural models represent the ways in which members of a particular minority group view and interpret their world, and how they navigate through that world. Ogbu further argues that a particular group's understanding of their world falls into at least one or more of the following cultural models: 1) “frames of reference (e.g., ambivalent/oppositional or nonoppositional), 2) folk theories of “making it” (and role models), 3) degree of trust of white people and their institutions, and 4) beliefs about the effect of adopting white ways on minority identity” (p.9).

While a particular “minority” group may utilize at least one of the cultural models depicted by Ogbu, it is important to note that it is not a given that all members of a “minority” group ascribes to the dominant cultural model that shapes their group reality. In my opinion, I believe that it is imperative that Ogbu’s cultural ecological theory be further developed and utilized to examine the expansive societal, school factors, and the sociocultural dynamics of the African American community that contribute to the problems African American students experience academically and socially in the educational setting, particularly their disproportionate assignment to special education and referrals for discipline.

Social censure theory suggests that those in power utilize labels in a calculated manner so that they can control people. Labeling is an extremely powerful socializing and controlling sociocultural/political phenomena. Despite its subjective nature, labeling is clearly an authoritative practice of definition that validate and institutionalizes labels and categories. The consequence of labeling leads to the imposition of differential patterns of constraint and opportunity for those who are assigned stigmatizing labels, particularly in the context of public schooling (Ashforth & Humphry, 1995; Fitch 1999). Lilly (1992) argues that the field of special education utilize a labeling and classification process that is unmistakably antithetical to the belief that is held by many in the field of education that students can learn.

The aforementioned sociocultural constructs as a whole are representative of the concept of ideology and ideological hegemony. Social censure theory explicates that ideology is a concept depending on ones conceptual orientation that can be interpreted in multiple ways. It is a concept that must be appropriately acknowledged, if one is to possess a sound understanding of both power and normalization. It should be noted that the use of this term is oftentimes, problematic. Despite the multiple interpretations and usage of this term most critics would agree, to some extent, that ideology refers to some type of “system” of ideas, commitments, beliefs, or values related to social reality. There is minimal consensus on what ideology both represents and speaks to beyond the basic level depicted in the previous sentence (Apple, 1979).

For the most part, ideology is viewed in a negative sense, given its capacity to misrepresent reality and justify existing asymmetrical power relations. However, this is not the only way to characterize ideology. Giroux (1997) avers that ideology can either distort or clarify, it is present in both critical discourse and taken-for-granted assumptions, and it can be

coherent and contradictory. Giroux (1997) delineates the diverse nature of ideology in the following section, stating:

...Ideology refers to the production, consumption, and representation of ideas and behavior, all of which can either distort or illuminate the nature of reality. As a set of meanings and ideas, ideologies can be either coherent or contradictory; they can function with the spheres of both consciousness and unconsciousness; and finally they can exist at the level of critical discourse as well as within the sphere of taken-for-granted experience and behavior. (p. 75)

Social censure discourse denotes that ideology is deployed and invoked through “master signifiers” or strong identity bearing words like masculine, beautiful, white, ugly, smart, conservative, and scholar (Lacan, 1982). Ideology is also manifested via negative or deviant master signifiers such as “mentally retarded” and “emotionally disturbed.” Burbules (1992) suggested that ideologies provide plausible, common sense understandings and interpretations of social life that create the basis for solidarity. According to Bakhtin (1984) both identity and in-group solidarity and unity are established via binary categories (e.g., regular and special, mentally retarded and gifted, etc.) that construct definitions and boundaries that separate insiders from outsiders. Fitch (1999) draws on several scholars to delineate the following: 1) social censure which embraces the notion of distinction is intertwined with exclusion, 2) ideology and institutions are codeterminus, and 3) ideology is explicated via networks of practice as well as transforming routines and rituals. In the passage below, Fitch elaborates:

Distinction (social censure) depends on exclusion: individuals and groups reciprocally define themselves by delineating what is pure and normal, and by projecting discredited attributes on the “other,” defining them as inappropriate and contaminating (Morrison, 1993). Ideology and institutions such as schools are codeterminus. As Gertz (1973) points out ideology takes form and is articulated through networks of practice (such as special education). It saturates school routines as rituals, such as grading and grouping (Stanley, 1992; Brantlinger, 1997). (p. 91)

Gramsci, whose ideas on hegemony, ideological hegemony, and resistance and counter hegemony are utilized considerably by social censure theory, suggests that such notions of language that do not acknowledge the intersection of ideology, language, and the social is a fatal error. He argues that the positivistic rationale of Saussure, and other positivistic linguists’ perspective on language in conjunction with other sociocultural activities set in motion a form of

modern technology and science that facilitated fundamental change in social control. Clearly, eschewing methods like coercion or physical force (militaristic, legal system, and politics, etc.) social control is achieved through an all-embracing and detailed system of norms and imperatives which emerge out of language that is used to identify, define, and categorize. According to Gramsci this type of control is that of “ideological hegemony.” He argued that this form of social control manipulates consciousness along with saturating and shaping the daily experiences which frame dispositions. Ideological hegemony constitutes the systems of practices, meanings, and values that offer legitimacy to the dominant society’s institutional structures and interests. Also, ideologies galvanize larger segments of a given society and establish the landscape through which individuals move and attain consciousness of their respective social position. There are a number of intellectual and sociopolitical movements that have offered various forms of resistance to such ideological hegemony (e.g., feminism, Black feminism, Womens Liberation Movement, Civil Rights Movement, critical theory, Afrocentricity, etc.).

Giroux (1997) avers that agencies of socialization should not solely be understood as sociopolitical phenomenon that just produces dominant arrangements or functions to impart passiveness into certain roles. They possess elements and opportunities for resistance to shape and reconstruct new realities that are rooted in the major tenets of social justice and equity. The social reality of social censure encompasses both domination and resistance. Gramsci (1972) argues that domination and the hegemonic course of action is to some degree, manifested through structural imperatives and limitations along with discursive practices. As well, this can be viewed as legitimation (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) or normalization (Foucault) or secondary deviance (Lemert, 1951). It would be a mistake to assume that the individual is solely a passive instrument that is manipulated by greater structural forces. Both space and autonomy (the autonomous gap) are staples of the hegemonic process by which struggle, contestation, and resistance is exhibited. Giroux and McLaren (1988) argued that resistance can also be viewed as the antithesis, contestation, or denial of this process. In the following section they describe this process, stating:

...resistance refers to a type of autonomous ‘gap’ between the ineluctable widespread forces of domination and the condition of being dominated. Moreover resistance has

been defined as a personal “space” in which logic and force of domination is contested by the power of subjective agency to subvert the process of socialization. (p. 162)

Apparently, resistance possesses the capacity to challenge dominant discourses and practices, and oppressive forms of political and moral regulation. Meanwhile, it is important to acknowledge that resistance is not primarily a conscious or overt act. Oftentimes, it is void of coherent political intent and is usually atheoretical and disorganized. From another vantage point, counter hegemony represents an increased political and critical awareness of domination and potential opposition. This includes a language of critiques, and it attempts to create alternative and more equitable social relations and spaces (Giroux & McLaren, 1988).

In a similar fashion, Afrocentricity coincides with the sociopolitical discourse of social censure theory in that it encourages African Americans to recognize the reality that they are not passive instruments to be dominated by sociopolitical enterprises such as the institution of public education, government, and the law. The notion of activism and agency that are both major tenets of Afrocentricity encourages people of African descent to both understand and problematize how institutions of socialization marginalizes and oppresses them. Once this is achieved, it is imperative that they acknowledge and act on their respective notions of agency to initiate transformative democratic and emancipatory realities that reshape those institutions that have historically disenfranchised, marginalized, and oppressed them. As well, people of African descent must always be cognizant of the reality that this world is made up of multiple realities and languages which influence and impact their ways-of-becoming, thus such a reality warrants continuous critical reflection and reevaluation of sociopolitical philosophies and ideologies that are to be used in our pursuit to make this world a fair and just place for all people.

Therefore, it is imperative that we don't become subsumed in a discourse of exclusivity to the extent that we sever ties with individuals and groups who are genuine in their efforts to improve those areas of our society that are in need of transformation. In sum, people of African descent will recognize through their activism and strategic and tactical collaboration with others that the aforementioned institutions are indeed capable of being positively influenced by change agents who are committed to creating and sustaining legitimate public spaces that represent the best intentions of a democratic and free society.

Given the social and linguistic conditions in the preceding paragraphs, any individual who is confronted with such conditions encounters a process where they must take in all of the

existing ideological signs and social accents. Voloshinov calls the emergence of this sociocultural reality that is routinely manifested in social struggles *multiaccentuality*. The phenomenon of multiaccentuality signifies the encounter of disparate social accents. Bakhtin suggests that Voloshinov's notion of multiaccentuality within all languages is a condition of *heteroglossia*. In the following passage Bakhtin (1981) provides greater insight into his notion heteroglossia as it pertains to language, thus offering:

at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth...Each of these 'languages' of heteroglossia requires a methodology very different from others...all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making them unique, are specific points of view of the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. (pp. 291-292)

Both multiaccentuality and heteroglossia constitute the ideological sign as a phenomenon that is socially important and changeable throughout the social milieu. Bakhtin (1981) argues that the reality of multiaccentuality is a partial element of the larger reality that humans co-exist in a "polygot world." The notion of a polygot world has to do with how specific dialects exists vis-à-vis other dialects (i.e., linguistic relationships throughout the world). Bakhtin (1981) contends that a given language is only capable of seeing itself by juxtaposing itself against another language. Out of this linguistic condition emerges the reality that there will always be struggles and ongoing contestations taking place between "territorial dialects, social and professional dialects and jargons, literary language, generic languages within literary language, epochs in language and so forth" (p.12). The ongoing interaction between different dialects represents the dynamic, reciprocal cause-and-effect and the inter-illumination that takes place during dialectical exchanges. Even if each existing language maintained their respective linguistic composition (vocabulary, phonetics, and morphology, etc.), it would be virtually impossible for them to escape the change process (socially and ideologically) that transforms them into becoming distinctively different rhetorical discourses that is founded upon a notion of consciousness that represents one of more of the following constructs: political, social, and

ideological, etc. (Bahktin, 1981). Given this reality, it is clear that human consciousness is constructed by history.

The use of categories ideologically serves to determine who gets what (resources, benefits, special attention, etc.) and how individuals and groups are identified, perceived, and engaged throughout every sector of our society. This reality leads to the establishment of binaries that distinguishes what is acceptable and unacceptable or what is good and bad in our society as it pertains to identity and behavior. Furthermore, the structuralist binary oppositional conceptualization of language establishes and reinforces the Eurocentric notion of identity that negates most, if not all, non-European manifestations of identity and disposition. For example, in public schooling the present concept of special education and mainstream education represents a binary opposition. There are a number of sociocultural and political realities that emerge out of this condition that warrants a critical investigation that is too enormous for the scope of this study. However, I will speak to some of these realities. Attention will be given as to how these categorical and binary oppositional imperatives adversely impact the realities of African American students. The discussion will illuminate how binary logic under-girds the rationale of American schooling in the following section.

The Afrocentric conception on language coincides with several of the major tenets of language offered by Voloshinov/Bakhtin. Due to the formal parameters of this project, I will illuminate one important tenet shared by both Afrocentricity and the Bahktin circle. Afrocentricity ala the Bakhtin circle takes the position that there is no disconnect between language and the social. Asante (1998) argues that all people possess the cultural capacity that respectively renders them capable of observing, explicating, and comprehending from the vantage point of their respective sociocultural and political realities. In doing so, it is impossible to separate the significance and the role that language plays in creating the social, political, and economical conditions that permeate a given society. Asante further argues that the 'voice' is connected to culture in dynamic ways that put forth a particular reality. All one has to do is examine the impact that Eurocentric values, customs, economic practices (capitalism) and beliefs have on the world to understand its dominance. Such evidence clearly illustrates that it is apparent that the 'voice' of Eurocentrism is the driving force behind White supremacy which projects White domination throughout much of the world, particularly in America.

The Eurocentric worldview and positivist notions of language and culture have created a major problem in America and beyond. It is a problem that renders Eurocentric constructs incapable of appropriately acknowledging the interconnection of language, dispositionality, and the social. This type of philosophical and ideological positioning projects an essentialist perspective of reality that produces a fundamental problem. In the following section Asante (1998) delineates the contrasting perspectives on reality between Eurocentric and Afrocentric ideology, hence stating:

In the West and elsewhere, the European, in the midst of other peoples, has often propounded an exclusive view of reality; the exclusivity of this view creates a fundamental human crisis. In some cases, it has created cultures arrayed against each other or even against themselves. Afrocentricity's response certainly is not to impose its own particularity as a universal, as Eurocentricity has often done. But hearing the voice of African American culture with all of its attendant parts is one way of creating a more sane society and one model for a more humane world. (p. 23)

The Afrocentric interpretation of language acknowledges how language over the course of history has impacted the social reality in education whereby language is used as an instrument to educate. School children learn at an early age the language/categories that set up binary oppositions at a common sense level (e.g., Bad/Good, Black/White, upper-class/lower-class, and Christian/Islamic/Pagan, etc.). As well, educators and administrators via their respective educational and professional experiences have also developed and embraced a common-sensical understanding of existing language/categories that guide them in their professional responsibilities. These categories should be taken as common-sensical realities, however, they should be understood as powerful symbolic discourses that both sustain and perpetuate the social/racial contract. Such categories reinforce the prevailing norms, standards, hegemony and ideology that maintain and preserve the dominant Eurocentric notion of sociocultural reality throughout our society (i.e., identity and normalcy). The aforementioned dynamics serve to reinforce longstanding asymmetrical relationships between individuals (e.g., male and female, White male and Black male, White female and Black female, etc.) and groups (e.g., Native Americans and European Americans, African Americans and European Americans, Latino Americans and European Americans, etc.) in our society.

Although many argue that special education was established with good intentions, it is obvious that despite such good intentions, the concept and system of special education has done more harm than good to disproportionate numbers of non-European American students, particularly African American students. During their early/formative years students usually function either at the periphery or outside of the realm of the social/racial contract. However, as students move through the socialization process the social/racial contract impacts them more as they transition into adulthood. That is, if they desire to both benefit from the existing sociopolitical and economic systems, and be accorded the opportunity to navigate through society without being socially censured, it is likely that they will, for the most part, embrace the dominant ideological stance that guides the nation's citizenry.

## **History**

According to Girieux (1997) critical thinking warrants a type of hermeneutic understanding that is historically oriented. By critically engaging history we move toward comprehending the constraints, structures, and traditions that have formed the individual biographies and intersubjective relationship with others. Fitch (1999) argues that those who embrace the major tenets of functionalism believe that our sociopolitical and economic realities reside outside of the parameters of history. Such positivistic thinking has evaded the use of historical consciousness as a way of deconstructing prevalent forms of domination. Fitch further proclaims, unsurprisingly, such thinking has offered no conceptual view with respect to how hegemony is played out in both language and daily social realities. Furthermore, it has failed to reveal how the dominant order is recreated via "facts" and common sense assumptions that shape our understanding of the world. Girieux (1997) explicates that such avoidance of history is actually the suppression of history, the rejection of human agency that is connected to historical insight and committed to emancipation that encompass the realm of human activity.

James Marsh (1989) states the often overlooked process of visual perception at its most fundamental level is essentially a historical reality. That is, it is inseparable from cultural and historical language. Marsh explicated that all language is linked to a past that exerts considerable influence on the "perceptual present." So as to acknowledge "something" presupposes a language that possess contrasting meanings of the same thing. A similar rationale

is taken by Afrocentric discourse, in that it espouses and interrogates how Eurocentrism possesses a language that depicts norms, standards, and worldviews for universal acceptance. Afrocentricity challenges such monopoly on language and identity; it is a theoretical discourse that acknowledges the reality of multiplicity of meanings and that individuals and groups are likely to interpret particular events, meanings, symbols, and other sociocultural and political experiences in contrasting ways.

Labeling deviance theory differs considerably from other research traditions to the extent that it is not chiefly ahistorical. It has done an adequate job of turning history into an active methodological concept. For example, the critical engagement of oppressive and marginalizing institutional practices and structures have served to problematize the adverse impact they have on certain individuals and groups as well as delineate the responses of the latter as they journey through life.

A shortcoming of major labeling deviance theory is that it has failed to invigorate history as an analytical concept in critical discourse. Despite possessing the ability to both ascertain and categorize transformations in individuals in a micro-historical sense, it has not been able to achieve similar results in a macro-historical sense. That said, it is clear that labeling deviance theory has failed to understand and conceptualize individual and group dynamics in the sphere of contemporary historical and cultural patterns (Quantz & O'Conner, 1988). Quantz (1992) elaborates in greater detail about how history ought to be critically engaged, thus suggesting:

History must be understood to be both the “march of time” and an active force in structuring the moment, so that we cannot limit our concept of history to the “settling of the chronological stage” and “the shoulders upon which we stand” but we must also realize that history is continually expressed through constraining cultural formations and that it is an active force in constructing the future. (p. 493)

It is important to discern history as possessing the capacity to constraint as well as the potential to emit positive social transformation. Given the reality that social structures are historical in the sense that they were created by humans, therein lies the ever-present reality that humans are capable of bringing about social change. Hence, simultaneously validating the potential embedded in this perspective to negate reification and social transformation (Quantz & O'Conner, 1988).

Afrocentric discourse shares a common sentiment with that of social censure discourse with respect to the importance of recognizing that history is an ever-present reality. It is a discourse that problematizes the historical relationship of America and African Americans. This critical interrogation of the above mentioned relationship brings into focus the ever-present reality that mainstream American society has always interpreted African American ways-of-becoming as falling outside of the norms of society. In essence, mainstream America interprets the difference (distinct dispositionality) that African Americans bring to the sociocultural reality of this society as being some form of deficiency. Therefore, given the reality that sociopolitical enterprises such as public education is a microcosm of the greater society, the problems African American students encounter in the educational setting should come as no surprise to the critical observer.

The institution of public education à la the greater society has had a considerable amount of difficulty both accepting African Americans and providing them with the necessary support systems that would increase their chances of being successful academically. By and large, the institution of public education has failed to acknowledge the unique culture of African Americans and how their sociocultural orientation impacts their ability to learn and their worldview vis-à-vis Eurocentric institutional rationale and curriculum. The outcome of this relationship clearly delineates the reality that the Eurocentric philosophical orientation of the institution of public schooling is, to some extent, culturally incongruent to that of African American culture. As a result, the institution of public schooling established the longstanding practice of sanctioning (social censure) the behaviors of African American students (learning styles, communication-ebonics, how they interact with authority figures, etc.). The following realities of African Americans are, in my opinion, representative of the practice of social censoring that permeates the institution of public education: 1) disproportionate discipline of African American students, 2) underrepresentation of African Americans in gifted education, 3) overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, particularly in the areas of educable mentally retarded, and emotionally disturbed, and 4) overrepresentation of African Americans in vocational and general educational programs.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, it is important that viable alternative pedagogical approaches like Afrocentricity are utilized to improve the educational realities of African American students. One of the major and important tenets of Afrocentricity is that it adamantly

purports the perspective that students, particularly African American students perform better in educational settings that are culturally sensitive. An Afrocentric philosophical and pedagogical approach presents a formidable challenge to the existing social/racial contract which provides an opportunity to bring about transformation for marginalized groups.

Clearly, in my opinion, social censure theory does a good job of problematizing the sociopolitical constructs of power, ideology, ideological hegemony, resistance and counter hegemony, normalization, and history. However, I identified some important areas in which social censure theory could be both strengthened and further developed. Firstly, it fails to problematize the social/racial contract. It would be a much more powerful and proactive theory, if it rendered a critical interrogation of the social/racial contract which, in many ways, circumvent the democratic ideals of this society and the sociopolitical and economic enterprises that is an extension of this nation's notion of democracy. For example, it would be a much stronger theory, if it interrogated the contradiction of social censure and the institution of education. Secondly, it does not acknowledge the sociopolitical construct of race and how it plays a pivotal role in the privileging of some ethnic groups over others. For example, it would be a more powerful theory if it lent itself to performing a critical interrogation of asymmetrical power relations that fall along the lines of "race." In fact, it would be strengthened immensely, if it problematized the interconnectedness of race, language, and culture. Thirdly, social censure theory could be further developed in a way that it could facilitate a discourse that identifies viable approaches that can be taken to create a concept of education that continuously aspires to become a legitimate democratic enterprise.

Additionally, I believe social censure theory needs to ask some important questions: 1) How do we reconcile the contradiction of social censure and the institution of education? 2) Whose knowledge and culture should be acknowledged in throughout the institution of education? 3) Why are certain cultures acknowledged and others silenced? As I mentioned earlier, social censure theory would be immensely improved, if it sought to identify ways in which our society could work to create an educational system that is committed to both establishing and sustaining legitimate democratic practices. Such a reality would allow for African Americans and other marginalized groups to become legitimately accepted from an epistemological (i.e., respective narratives) standpoint. As a result, the politics of identity formation would become more complex. Ultimately, this would lead to a democratization of the

social contract. The following chapter will utilize Afrocentric discourse to illustrate how it can be used as a cultural imperative. As well, the discussion of Afrocentricity will explain how we can both empower African Americans and galvanize an educational community around some of the major tenets embedded in legitimate democratic practices that is rooted in social justice.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Emancipatory Implications of an Afrocentric Educational Discourse: The Pursuit of Self and Community Development via Educational Ideals that Promote Emancipatory Implications moving beyond Eurocentric Normalization and Oppression**

#### **Introduction**

##### **Claim**

*Afrocentric educational discourse possesses the ability to empower African Americans by reaffirming them with the agency to contest hegemonic Eurocentric constructs that have marginalized them historically, socially, politically, economically, and culturally. African Americans embracing the major tenets of Afrocentricity will become empowered to advance sociopolitical agendas that address their unique respective and collective needs.*

This chapter will discuss the genesis of African-centered thinking that has its roots in the multiple Black educational reform discourses of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Considerable attention will be given to how the numerous African-centered discourses promote agency that encourages Blacks to challenge conventional Eurocentric institutional and societal customs. It will be noted that African-centered educational discourse embraces an ethic of risk. The discussion will clearly illustrate how and why Pan-African and Afrocentric discourses deviate from mainstream discourses. However, it will be noted that Afrocentric and Pan-African discourses are supportive of some mainstream discourses such as African American educational reform, the Civil Rights Movement, culturally pluralistic educational settings, and contestation of segregation and discrimination.

The critical interrogation of American schooling will introduce an Afrocentric educational discourse that encourages the enterprise of schooling to embrace epistemological pluralism, new approaches to meaning-making and other practices that guide the direction of schooling, etc. By embracing Afrocentricity schools will become culturally inclusive settings that endorse social justice and equity, thus fostering the appropriate academic and social development of all students. Also, the African-centered educational perspective will delineate how it can empower educators and students to create educational sites that are responsive to not

only the needs of African American students, but all students as well. The chapter demonstrates how Afrocentricity moves beyond multicultural and other culture neutral discourses in that African-centered educational discourse seeks to serve the needs of all students and penetrate the epistemological landscape of schooling. Most importantly, the discussion in this chapter will offer some ideas as to how African Americans can develop certain mechanisms that could help increase the success of their children in a schooling enterprise that they, in many cases, have been marginalized by.

### **Afrocentricity**

Afrocentricity is at once a theory of resistance and agency; it is a discourse that celebrates the many disparate voices of people of African descent throughout the diaspora. These voices, although speaking to unique sociopolitical issues that impact upon their respective communities, nonetheless, share certain cultural commonalties. Also, in a real sense they all, in varying degrees, courageously and diligently contest sociocultural constructs that marginalize, oppresses, colonize, and culturally dislocate people of African descent. As a result, the reality for people of African descent is such that they are both viewed and treated as second class citizens throughout the world.

Despite the lack of recognition of our significant contributions to both African and world civilization, the achievements of African people are well documented and continue to emerge. For example, most Western universities continue to dismiss the African origins of civilization (e.g., agriculture, architecture, technology, writing, mathematics, science), despite the obvious evidence that ancient Greece was preceded by ancient Africa and ancient Greek philosophers testified to the fact that they were taught by ancient Africans (Asante, 1999; Diop, 1974). Hence, these universities continue to perpetuate the myth of Greek origins of philosophical and rational thought. Such falsification of history led to the dehumanization of African people and helped to justify the Western Europeans' rationale for enslaving and colonizing Africans. Moreover, the continuation of the falsification of African history as well as the legacy of the aforementioned horrors and current exploitation of African people still work to dehumanize African people. Given this reality, it is not difficult to discern why various societies throughout the world have the perception that Africans never made any noteworthy contributions to the world (Ani, 1994, Asante, 1988; Carruthers, 1999; Clarke, 1993; Diop, 1974; Hoskins, 1991).

By virtue of these phenomena it comes as no surprise that people of African descent are treated as though they come from an insignificant and backward culture. Moreover, it is rather evident that people of African descent have internalized some of this negative propaganda, mis-education, and dogma to their detriment. This reality is manifested by many people of African descent in ways that are harmful to their development as a people (e.g., self-alienation, self-hatred, intense desire to assimilate into other oppressive cultures, and the inability to address their own problems) (Asante, 1988, 1995; Wilson, 1998, Woodson, 1933). One of the major goals of Afrocentricity is to appropriately address the aforementioned problems. Most importantly, Afrocentricity works to promote the emancipation and liberation of people of African descent, thus preparing them to take their rightful place in the world (i.e., equitable opportunity to contribute to the advancement of the world) (Asante, 1988 & 1995; Shujaa, 1994; Woodson, 1933; Wilson, 1998).

Individuals such as Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Martin Delaney, Hosea Easton, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Alexander Crummell, Sylvester Williams, Leopold Senghor Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Dubois, Marcus Garvey, Mary McCloud Bethune Cookman, Ida B. Wells, Arna Bontemps, Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, C. L. R. James, Kwame Nkrumah, Chancellor Williams, John Henrik Clarke, Cheikh Anta Diop, William T. Fontaine, George E. James, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and many others both exemplified and laid the foundations for contemporary Afrocentric discourse. Each of these individuals along with others represented the proactive dynamism and agency that Afrocentrists seek. This type of dynamism and agency enabled them to both resist oppressive discourses and contest the dominant culture's attempts to dehumanize and silence people of African descent. For example, Delaney (1960) and Blyden (1895) rejected the prevailing sentiment regarding the African personality as being inferior by documenting the presence of a unique and global African world-view before the European partitioning of Africa. Furthermore, Blyden is a significant figure in the emergence of Afrocentric intellectualism and activism in that he problematized how education was used globally to foster the mental enslavement of people of African descent. His thinking influenced one of the most profound educators of African descent in the person of Carter G. Woodson who, in 1933, wrote the seminal text *The Miseducation of the Negro*. The thinking of Woodson encouraged subsequent generations to challenge the racial hegemony of White supremacy as it was manifested via education throughout the Diaspora. In addition,

Woodson's work serves as the impetus that encourages people of African descent to establish their intellectual freedom by developing new methods of studying themselves and the world in which they live, thus paving their way to liberating themselves educationally.

An important concept of Afrocentric discourse is the intent of certain African American scholars to identify important moments of the African American past and to simultaneously illuminate its existence in both the culture and behavior of African American people. Also, it is a critical discourse that is used to establish an African-centered approach to educating people of African descent. Educators ascribing to the major tenets of African-centered education are committed to creating culturally responsive educational communities, pedagogies and curriculums that take into account the histories, identities, and politics of the students they serve. This is all done with the intent of preparing students to develop into adult citizens who are capable of addressing the unique needs of their respective communities while simultaneously making important contributions to the world (Shujaa, 1996; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000). All in all, Afrocentricity is by far, one of the most intellectually stimulating and creative conceptual frameworks to enter the academy and the discourse of educational reform in recent decades.

Afrocentricity as a theory takes the position that African values and ideals ought to be central in all discussions and analyses that deal with African culture, customs, discourse and behavior. To undertake Afrocentricity as a theoretical lens to analyze issues that are germane to people of African descent possesses tremendous emancipatory and liberatory potential. As well, to position oneself as an Afrocentrist, it is imperative to have a sound understanding of the African American experience vis-à-vis this group's sociopolitical reality, which of course includes their rich culture and history (Asante, 1988).

Molefi Kete Asante, the initial architect of the formal Afrocentric movement, suggests that the Afrocentric perspective permits people of African descent to secure their legitimate territory as subjects of historical realities as opposed to being objects existing on the fringes of European discourse. The Afrocentric position rejects the sole use of Western constructs to examine and analyze both African American identity, culture, and phenomena associated with people of African descent. Instead, scholars, theorists, and students ascribing to the tenets of Afrocentricity are to use the lens of African culture to better comprehend African American identity, conduct, and reality. Afrocentrists deem it unacceptable to examine the history and sociopolitical conditions of African Americans and people of African descent primarily via

European lenses and standards, due to, in many instances, their inaccurate, misleading, and biased interpretations of non-European peoples. Given the problems associated with outside analyses, African American reality warrants examination via methodologies and standards that coincide with African cultural realities. Asante (1988) delineates a rationale for Afrocentric resistance of other epistemologies that seek to place African people in cultures other than their own, by presenting the following perspective:

The most crippling effect of Islam as well as Christianity for us [African people] may well be the adoption of non-African customs and behaviors, some of which are in direct conflict with our traditional values. We out Arab the Arabs as we have out Europeanized the Europeans from time to time. This is not so with the Afrocentrist. He or she studies every thought, action, behavior, and value, and if it cannot be found in our culture or in our history, it is dispensed with quickly. This is not done because we have something against someone else's culture; it is just not ours...for us it is impossible to see how anything from outside ourselves can compare with what is in our history...Our problems come when we lost sight of ourselves, accept false doctrines, accept false gods, mistaken notions of what is truly our history, and assume an individualistic, antihumanistic, and autocratic posture. (pp. 5-6)

In response to Asante's epistemological stance, some scholars are likely to view him as being essentialistic. Asante has responded by arguing that essentialism for the Afrocentrist is not a negative quality; however, he does not simply ignore such criticism. Asante argues that if a group of people decide to be adherents to a particular cultural framework, it should not automatically suggest that they would create and sustain cultural tunnel vision. So from this vantage point the Afrocentric worldview should not be inappropriately seen as being stagnant or complacent. Within the Afrocentric perspective there is space for growth, creativity, and development. Meanwhile, in the same vane, the integrity (i.e., center or core) of the culture is to remain unchanged. Asante (1998) offers an explanation of the allowance for change and development within Afrocentric discourse, while simultaneously illustrating both the importance and purpose of maintaining a cultural core, hence stating:

...one must be open to the possibilities of dynamism, moving, and flowing, but you have to be moving and flowing from some base. Those who do not move from a base are just floating in the air. It is clear to me from my own study of history that

cultures do exist and in fact persist for centuries with many basic characteristics hardly changed. This is the nature of human societies operating on the foundations of myths, history, and memories. The African American community is no different from others in this regard. There are certain essential characteristics that identify the contours of our African American community. These are not essential characteristics, in the sense of being inborn, but rather the fundamental outlines of what we regard and preserve as characteristic of our society. Thus, while I may answer to being an essentialist, I am not an immutabilist. (p.13)

The argument presented above by Asante (1998) denotes the reality that African-centered peoples are committed to maintaining and asserting their identity. Therefore, they should not be viewed as being any more essentialist than individuals and critics who identify themselves by taking positions as “feminist, gay/lesbian, and cultural studies and others who challenge established hierarchy” (Asante, 1998, p.14). A major feature of Afrocentricity, is that it is a cultural imperative that facilitates movement toward emancipatory outcomes for people of African descent in all spheres of their respective sociopolitical and economic realities.

### **The Cultural Imperative of Afrocentricity**

When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his “proper place” and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (Woodson 1933, p. xiii)

Madhubuti (1994) states that the number of people of African descent living outside of Africa extends well beyond 100 million throughout the Western Hemisphere. Needless to say, we are all contending with similar sociopolitical issues that adversely impact our realities. Despite the fact that people of African descent find themselves in distinctly different locations like the United States, Caribbean islands, Canada, and Brazil, they continue to find it extremely difficult to establish self-definition and self-reliance. There are millions of people of African descent who are speaking Portuguese and English, but for some reason we don’t communicate with one another. He further argues that this is learned human activity and acutely cultural. The reality of 100 million Africans galvanized around liberatory initiatives in the same Hemisphere would represent a legitimate threat to any oppressive system. Clearly, people of African descent

have experienced a number of positive sociopolitical realities in the U.S.; nonetheless, they are, in many cases, too dependent on European Americans. The action of liberating this society which is steeped in Eurocentrism is indeed a progressive and revolutionary endeavor (Carruthers, 1990, 2000; Madhubuti, 1994; Wilson, 1998).

For Afrocentrists, the critical interrogation of schooling and education has always been pivotal in our assessment of the enterprise of American schooling. In fact, the distinction between schooling and education in the Black community has been a longstanding practice. Throughout our history as African Americans many Blacks problematized the reality that, oftentimes, a formal education disconnects members of this group from community concerns. Madhubuti (1994) explicates that Blacks viewed both freedom and education as a birthright. This reality was eloquently articulated by James Anderson in his book, *The Education of Blacks in the South 1860-1935*. Anderson (1988) stated that Blacks were so adamant about their education that they built schools with the same passion that they built churches.

In an effort to establish an inquiry that critically examines the state of Black education, it is imperative that thought provoking and difficult questions are entertained. In the following section Madhubuti (1994) (as cited in Shujaa, 1994, *Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education*) offers some questions to guide such an inquiry, thus stating:

1. What is more important than the enlightened education of our children? Should one's children have any obligation to their own people and culture? Who is ultimately responsible for providing an education – the family, state or others?
  2. Education in the past has been used politically against the advancement of African-Americans. Is it any different today? Will African centered studies connect education to the political, economic and racial realities of today's world? The European-centeredness of today's education continues to place conscious Blacks on a collision course with its basic premise: that European culture stands at the center and is pivotal in ones understanding of the world. Is European culture universal? Will the introduction of African centered thought broaden our students or pigeonhole them into a false sense of security and narrow nationalism?
  4. All education is value based. Whose values are our children learning? Will African centered studies teach a value base that will encourage and allow competition at a world level and cooperation at a local one? (p. 4-5)
- It is imperative that all education represents a journey to higher levels of

understanding and mastery of essential skills. Unfortunately, what many Blacks do understand about life is not enough to improve their sociopolitical realities which leave them incapable of being self-reliant. Afrocentrists recognize that students must be motivated to partake in the latest technologies so that they can become acquainted and participants in those areas where political, community control, and economic statements are being established today. Henceforth, African American students and other oppressed students must develop a critical understanding of social, political, and economic constructs that impact their actual survival locally and globally (Asante, 1988, Dubois, 1973; Hilliard, 1992, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Madhubuti, 1994; Shujaa, 1994; Wilson, 1998).

Madhubuti (1994) states that African American students must be grounded in a worldview that encourages crosscultural interaction, it should involve, sharing and genuine reciprocity that is achieved via understanding. Notwithstanding, the reality that they remain self-protective due to the reality that the world is not fair and that one's interest is usually incongruent with the interests of others, especially when race is part of the equation. Madhubuti asserts that if we want African American students to be successful they must acquire, acknowledge and, in some instances, realize the following: 1) A critical understanding of the world which is founded upon a knowledge-base that reinforces a positive self-concept, 2) They must be educated in an environment that fosters academic and social development, 3) The understanding that all education is foundational, 4) The values of MAAT must be embraced throughout their entire educational/schooling experience in both school and non school settings, 5) They must realize that successful development is challenging when one has a good education, but is virtually unfathomable without one, 6) They must realize that attaining a good education requires strong dedication and intense study, 7) Most importantly, they must find that education can be an enjoyable and sometimes fun experience.

Although there may be some overlap between schooling and education, Afrocentrists contend that there is a distinction between the two. The inability or reluctance to acknowledge the diverse cultural orientations and asymmetrical power relations among groups that make up a society represents a major dilemma in perspectives that link schooling and education. Such conceptualizations are vigorous, and resilient "superorganic principles" that resist demands for change engineered via institutional transformation of society. Meanwhile, it is important to understand that cultural orientations exist in the realm of group historical experience. Given this

reality, it is clear that the African American cultural identity from their initial arrival to America has been influenced by the social context of this society. However, it is crucial to note that the African American cultural orientation is accompanied with numerous aspects of their African roots. Although African Americans live in a Eurocentric social context, it is self-evident that they too exist within an African historical cultural continuum that existed well before our arrival to the U.S. Unfortunately, this is not acknowledged in sociopolitical enterprises like schooling. The influence of their African roots would continue to be manifested whether or not the current sociopolitical arrangement of the existing nation-state changed or terminated (Ani, 1994; Hamlet, 1998; Shujaa, 1994).

Essentially, American schooling's chief objective is to facilitate the maintenance of our nation's existing power relations and the institutional structures that support such arrangements. Clearly, all progressive societies ought to provide opportunities for their citizenry to learn, develop, and become self-reliant for survival. Also, members should be adequately encouraged to participate in socially valued and organized patterns of action. However, this sociopolitical reality is difficult to achieve in the United States due to the reality that it is a nation-state despite the existence of numerous non-European cultural orientations (Shujaa, 1994; Wilson, 1998). In the following section Shujaa (1994) illustrates how values, concepts, skills, and the worldview of the dominant group is disseminated throughout the enterprise of American schooling that is supportive of the nation-state, by arguing:

...when multiple cultural orientations exist within a nation-state, it is the leadership among the adherents to the politically dominant cultural orientation that exercise the most influence on the "concepts, values, and skills" that schools transmit. Such is the case with White Anglo Saxon Protestants in the United States. It is the leadership within this cultural group whose worldview largely determines what is socially valued and controls patterns of action within a society. (p. 15)

Afrocentrists argue that education represents a stark contrast to schooling, in that it involves the transmission of knowledge, values, spiritual beliefs, and aesthetics, along with other activities and rituals that comprise the uniqueness of their respective cultural orientation. These important aspects of group culture should be passed on to each subsequent generation. It is imperative that all cultural groups engage in such a process, if not, they will cease to exist. Notwithstanding, the reality that there is a clear distinction between schooling and education, it

would be a major mistake to presume that the two were mutually exclusive. Furthermore, there are certain elements of schooling that possesses the capacity to serve the common interests of a culturally diverse society.

Lee, Lomotey, and Shujaa (1990) argue that public schools in America can and should cultivate the academic (i.e., adequate skills in literacy, mathematics, technologies, etc.) and social development of students so that they can become socio-politically and economically self-sufficient citizens in the society. Also, special attention should be given to ensuring that students acquire citizen skills that are rooted in a realistic and comprehensive understanding of the political system. This can be achieved by teaching students democratic values and how to be critical thinkers. Additionally, students should be presented with a comprehensive overview of our nation and beyond that appropriately depicts the contribution of all ethnic groups to the human condition. If these goals are attained, it would constitute a major movement toward ensuring that all students acquire the necessary skills so that they can enjoy full and equitable participation in American society.

As I mentioned earlier an important function that American schooling serves is shaping the minds of certain segments of the schooling enterprise and, to a large extent, the greater society. Shujaa (1994) argues that “decisions are influenced by the interplay between a society’s structural conditions and members’ achievement expectations and perceptions about the quality of their lives (achieved outcomes)” (p. 17). This perspective supports the notion held by many Afrocentrists who assert that structural conditions are the institutionalized arrangements of the human experience (Asante, 1998, Carruthers, 1999; Hale, 1986; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings 1994; Wilson, 1998). These Afrocentric scholars argue that the enterprise of schooling exercises a considerable amount of influence on the sensibilities of all who partake in this process, particularly students. It is common knowledge that schooling impacts school members’ notion of expectations and achievement via policies like tracking, testing, and referrals for special education. As well, everyone participating in this enterprise is impacted by reward systems grading scales, and the ritual of receiving credentials along with trends in human interaction (e.g., social inclusion and exclusion) that support and reinforce our society’s sociopolitical structural conditions.

Clearly, existing structural conditions play a major role in the expectations one might have in this society. For example, the individual who understands him/herself to be poor is

likely to possess expectations that don't extend beyond poverty. Unfortunately, such an individual has fatalistically accepted their seemingly miserable condition. By giving up on the possibility of improving their less than desirable circumstances, it is highly unlikely that they will challenge the existing sociopolitical arrangement. Arguably, this phenomenon is prevalent in the African American community, due, in part, to the reality that, as a group, we have had to suffer through various forms of oppression in this country. As a result, when individuals find themselves believing that their second-class citizenship (subordinate) status is an inherent reality of the existing sociopolitical arrangement, they are likely to possess little hope for upward social mobility.

Whether or not an individual is located in the poverty or prosperity camp is of little significance, if flagrant social injustices and the system (structure) that supports sociopolitical injustices go unchallenged. Of course, this is a regrettable situation, due to the reality that such apathy allows for the perpetuation of power relations and the social arrangement (structure). It is important to reiterate that the maintenance of the two aforementioned phenomena relies heavily on a pattern of thinking that permeates our society. Such thinking is engineered by the notion that some citizens in our society are either unworthy or ill-equipped to attain a quality of life that they see others enjoy.

This type of thinking coincides with the way the enterprise of American schooling's goes about choosing certain individuals to occupy low status, but essential, positions in our society. Needless to say, this type of thinking, in far too many instances, has encouraged African Americans to throw their support behind numerous programs and projects that were designed to fix those things that appeared to be wrong with us (Hale, 1986, 2001; Irvine, 1990; Shujaa, 1994).

Consequently, many African Americans entertain and support this type of action when they internalize Eurocentric explanations that suggest that they possess some type of internal dysfunction which keeps them from meeting certain achievement expectations. These types of explanations are primarily concerned with identifying and examining intrapersonal and group deficits instead of utilizing explanations that problematize the existing social order. Conversely, this type of thinking is utilized in the American schooling selection process to motivate certain students and citizens to attain high-status positions. Undoubtedly, individuals and groups who fall into this group are heavily inundated with the notion that they can achieve anything. Shujaa

(1994) states that when African Americans connect their inability to achieve at high levels to their respective characteristics it is a phenomenon that should be understood as the manifestation of racism's ability to perpetuate existing sociopolitical domination. In the following section Shujaa provides greater insight into this reality, hence stating:

When African-Americans attribute unmet achievement expectations to their own characteristics, we see the realization of racism's ultimate impact as a strategy for maintaining and perpetuating social domination. Its most overt manifestation is the internalization of the racial inferiority ideology. The most insidious manifestation is the adoption of the "minority" perspective. In the former instance "Whiteness" is perceived as superior. In the latter case there is the perception that White people will always be in power because they are the majority. The internalization by African-Americans of White supremacist ideologies is painful to discuss (and many of us do not discuss it); but it can and does occur. (p.20)

Oftentimes, many African Americans wrestle with determining whether or not they or the existing sociopolitical structure is responsible for the discrepancy between their respective expectations of upward mobility and their quality of life. To the degree that these African Americans absorb the blame for flagrant discrepancies between the two, the chances of critiquing, challenging, and transforming socially unjust social conditions are reduced considerably. Unsurprisingly, the enterprise of schooling plays a major role in making African Americans feel as though they are primarily responsible for their inability to both meet achievement expectations and enjoy life as a critically informed and self-reliant citizen. Woodson (1933) argued that this phenomenon is exacerbated throughout the enterprise of schooling due to the reality that, for the most part, Blacks are taught to admire everyone but themselves. As a result, many Blacks develop a certain level of contempt toward members of their own ethnicity. In the following account Woodson succinctly describes this ill-fated reality, by stating:

The "educated Negroes" have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African. (p.1)

Woodson's perspective on schooling and its impact on African Americans were

further developed by contemporary Afrocentric scholars who in a variety of ways examined how schools reduced Blacks to objects instead of subjects throughout the enterprise of public schooling. (Asante, 1998, 1999; Carruthers, 1999; Hale, 1986, 2001; Hilliard, 1998; King, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Shujaa, 1994; Wilson, 1998). Fortunately, many Afrocentric scholars have taken up the task of interrogating the function of leadership within the politically dominant culture of American society. They along with other critically conscious individuals and groups understand the unmistakable reality that the leadership of the dominant culture utilizes the enterprise of schooling to instill its worldview as being a universal reality (i.e., Eurocentrism). Also, it is important for African Americans to understand that seemingly benevolent (philanthropic) gestures rendered in support of their schooling should be viewed with great caution. Oftentimes, such gestures of benevolence coincide with a White supremacist agenda that is mostly concerned with maintaining existing power relations (status quo) (Shujaa, 1994; Watkins, 2001).

An important moment of the African American legacy (Black experience) is that of the Civil Rights Movement. This movement represented for Blacks the ascension to a more critical level of consciousness. It was a consciousness that, via social activism, boldly confronted an unjust social system that treated Blacks as though they were a sub-human entity. Shujaa (1994) states, "This degree of consciousness is the basic prerequisite for social activism in education and other areas of life" (p. 21). The Civil Rights Movement reflected how various segments of the Black population along with well intentioned Whites rallied around a common cause (full citizenship for Blacks) to successfully dismantle an oppressive element of the sociopolitical structure (Jim Crow). Unfortunately, despite the noteworthy accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement, it failed to establish a clear cut and comprehensive agenda that would serve the unique needs of the African Americans beyond the Jim Crow era. In my opinion, a critical analysis of the Civil Rights Movement would reveal that, in many respects, the movement utilized the method of strategic activism that was clearly successful in dismantling the formal practice of Jim Crow. However, it failed to take into account the importance of creating a long-term action plan that would proactively facilitate the ongoing development of African Americans after the infamous era of "Separate but Equal."

Although there are many individuals and groups (e.g., Clarence Thomas, Ward Connerly, Shelby Steele, Newt Gingrich, George Bush Jr., E.D. Hirsch Jr., and many prominent

Republicans, etc.) in our society of all ethnicities who believe that we live in a nation that has attained racial equality; it is important to note that there are individuals and groups (e.g., Michael Eric Dyson, Al Sharpton, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Cornel West, Molefi Asante, Manning Marable, and the NAACP, etc.) who vigorously contest such thinking. Marable (1990) and Hacker (1994) argue that the idea that racial equality has been attained in America is fueled by the noticeable increase of African Americans who have been elected as officials throughout this country, successful African American entrepreneurs within the capitalistic economic system, and the reality that African American managers and administrators are experiencing upward mobility within the hierarchies of both the public and private sector. Marable (1990) contends that the notion that racial equality has been attained in America is, simply put, an illusion. In the following section he illustrates why this is the case, by stating:

The true test of any social thesis is the amount of reality it explains, or obscures. And from the vantage point of the inner-cities and homeless shelters, from the unemployment lines and closed factories, a different reality emerges. We find that racism has not declined in significance, if racism is defined correctly as the systematic exploitation of Blacks' labor power and the domination and subordination of our cultural, political, educational and social rights as human beings. (p. 16)

Shujaa (1994) argues that there is indisputable evidence that American schooling marginalizes the cultural identity of African Americans. In fact, Shujaa states, "This process has been justified as being consistent with the promulgation of a common American culture" (p.30). The notion of a common culture that is presented by individuals like William Bennett, Diane Ravitch, and E. D. Hirsch are inextricably linked to and supportive of the politically dominant culture. Due to this reality, Afrocentrists appropriately acknowledge that that the quest to overcome the oppressive and hegemonic nature of schooling for African Americans is unquestionably a cultural imperative (Asante, 1998, 1999; Hale, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1994, Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Wilson, 1998). These scholars share a perspective similar to that of Freire's who suggests that an assault on a people's culture represents the initial act in any process of domination. Freire (1991) (as cited in Shujaa, 1994) describes this reality in the following account, by offering:

Cultural identity is the first point the dominative people, or class, or nation, or individual [attempts] to destroy in the dominated people. In other words, there is no oppression, no domination without the attempt ... to destroy the cultural identity of the invaded. (p. 30)

African Americans who participate in the enterprise of American schooling find themselves force fed a “common culture.” It is a rhetoric that is endorsed by mainstream Whites who believe that their sociocultural orientation ought to serve as the standards for American society. Those who ascribe to the discourse of “common culture,” essentially, fail to acknowledge the significance and unique qualities that other cultures (African American, Native American, Asian American, Latino American, and Mexican American, etc.) bring to our society. For the most part, individuals and groups who endorse the “common culture” perspective are privileged and beneficiaries of the dominant political culture. A major criticism rendered by Afrocentrists is that cultural diversity is discounted or patronized in American society. Hirsch (1987) offers a conceptualization of cultural literacy which coincides with American society’s routine practice of disregarding the fact that cultural diversity is indeed a reality in our society, thus stating:

By accident of history, American cultural literacy has a bias toward English literate tradition. Short of revolutionary political upheaval, there is absolutely nothing that can be done about this ... We have kept and still need to keep English culture as the dominant part of our national vocabulary for purely functional reasons. (pp.106-107)

In essence, Hirsch is arguing that there should be no challenge rendered against White Anglo Saxon Protestant political dominance in our society. Too, he is suggesting that everyone that lives within its influence is left with no other choice but to accept it in the name and interests of national unity. Furthermore, Hirsch’s perspective is rooted in the idea that social history should be understood as being the history of American society’s dominant political culture (Shujaa, 1994). There are many Afrocentrists who believe the United States is a society that wields hegemony via powerful individuals and groups who link their ways of thinking, philosophical orientations, and their canons of knowledge to the various cultures of Western Europe. From its genesis, the aforementioned groups and individuals have utilized American sociopolitical institutions and other resources to exalt the legacy of Western European culture, while simultaneously marginalizing the historical cultural legacy of many non-European groups. This is achieved via the process of exclusion, and misrepresentation of the historical legacies and

contributions that non European peoples have rendered to the world (Ani, 1994; Asante, 1995, 1998; Carruthers, 1999; Shujaa, 1994; Wilson, 1998).

As I stated earlier, education is clearly a cultural imperative for African Americans. We have been part of a longstanding legacy where men and women of African descent have exhibited numerous forms of cultural resistance that emanated out of their critical understanding of the reality that their respective cultures and identities have been under continuous attack (Ani, 1994; Asante, 1998, 1999; Clarke, 1993; Diop, 1974; Dubois, 1903, 1973; Houston, 1985; Woodson, 1933). Woodson (1933) passionately argued that it is imperative that African Americans delineate and engage in educational endeavors that counters the mis-education that the enterprise of American schooling disseminates to them en-masse. In the following discussion Woodson substantiates his reasoning, by arguing:

The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples. For example, the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching. The oppressor has the right to exploit, to handicap, and to kill the oppressed. Negroes daily educated in the tenets of such a religion of the strong have accepted the status of the weak as divinely ordained ... (p. xii)

Afrocentric discourse espouses the belief that human agency is capable of contesting and thwarting the perpetuation of marginalization, oppression, and domination that emanates out of the ideology of the dominant culture. Meanwhile, the crucial task that the African American community must take on is developing a broadened understanding of how a strategic differentiation of education and schooling would benefit assist us in our efforts to resist cultural and political domination. It is imperative that such action must be undertaken with goal of achieving emancipatory outcomes.

### **The Genesis of African-centered Educational Reform and Emancipatory Initiatives**

Watkins (1996) explicates the reality that African Americans have a longstanding and broad discourse of educational reform that began during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Unfortunately, those Blacks who were instrumental in establishing the discourse of culturally relevant education and actual educational initiatives for Blacks receive little or no attention from many contemporary historians of education. In fact, it is doubtful that there is any course being offered

at institutions of higher learning that engages the extensive history of African American ideology vis-à-vis educational reform. The remainder of this discussion draws heavily from Watkins' (1996) titled, *Reclaiming Historical Visions of Quality Schooling The Legacy of Early 20<sup>th</sup> - Century Intellectuals*.

Watkins in examining the history of Black sociopolitical activism during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century reveals that there was both an American Negro Academy and numerous philosophical and ideological movements that emerged out of the Black community. The American Negro Academy was the first, so to speak, "Black think-tank" that was designed and committed to the following: 1) Provide a critical examination of the sociopolitical realities of Blacks, 2) produce scholarship that described the realities of Blacks, 3) establish a Black intellectual community that was committed to activism, 4) promote, and in some instances, participate in the intellectual development of young Blacks, and 5) make known and disseminate the actual realities of Blacks. He states that Nationalist-separatist, Christian-Humanist, Progressive-Liberal, and Reconstructionist each represented a particular Black perspective on Black educational reform and protest ideology. The following discussion will briefly delineate the four Black discourses and, to a certain extent, movements that were indeed the genesis of African-centered discourse that engaged educational reform.

### **Black Social Reconstructionists**

For the most part, social reconstructionist discourse is seldom linked to African American education. Usually, this discourse is believed to have been primarily shaped by individuals like George S. Counts, Sidney Hook, the Ruggs brothers and their colleagues. By and large, these individuals along with their contemporaries are viewed as being radical progressives who possessed counter status quo perspectives throughout the latter part of the 1920's and early portion of the 30's. Collectively, their interests extended far beyond education. As social reconstructionists, they espoused the need for schools to become more active in contesting and transforming socially unjust economic and political conditions in American society. By making a commitment to democratic socialism, collectivism, and various forms of egalitarianism, this group of alleged radicals created the historical, and probably to some extent, philosophical foundation for many of the contemporary critical scholars (theorists) and radical reformers. Furthermore, they sought to mobilize an agenda built around social reform, which brought much needed attention to problems emanating out of the American corporate-industrial state and

problems associated with this sociopolitical phenomenon. As a result, the enterprise of schooling was placed under intense examination.

Concomitantly, there were numerous Blacks espousing socialistic ideas during the early past of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The notables of this group are Carter G. Woodson, A. Phillip Randolph, and W. E.B. Dubois. While each of these individuals respectively made important contributions as alleged social reconstructionists, it was Dubois who stood out as the most influential contributor to this discourse. He is accorded such distinction, by virtue of his perspectives, multiple approaches to activism, and commitment to producing scholarship that spoke to unfair social and political realities that Blacks and other disenfranchised peoples were to contend with. While Dubois never identified himself as being a social reconstructionist, it was clear that he and social reconstructionists shared commonalities regarding their perspectives on the sociopolitical realities of America, issues related to school curriculum, and school reform. It is worth noting that social reconstructionists never claimed Dubois as being a member of their group. Despite their lack of a formal collegial camaraderie, they shared strong and similar views.

Those associated with the educational progressive movement initiated a fresh inspection and critical interrogation of schooling which is commonly linked to Dewey. Meanwhile, the more radical social reconstructionists argued that schools were intimately connected to the narrow objectives of the corporate state, which, in fact, framed the dominant political and economic ideologies of American society. This is where Dubois's perspectives and concerns on the sociopolitical reality of America intersected with those of the progressive educational community. Clearly, societal reform signified the common historical link between Dubois and social reconstructionists. As well, the democratic-socialist perspectives of the leftwing political movement coincided with those of Dubois's between 1910 and 1930. Dubois both believed in and endorsed the creation of a socially just economic arrangement that did not involve revolution. Meanwhile, Dubois did interact with progressives like Jane Adams, Walter Lippman, and several other progressives to the extent that there was a genuine exchange of support between him and certain members of the progressive movement. Additionally, Dubois was an ardent supporter of reform movements like unionization, feminist movements (the suffrage movement), and educational reform.

Due to the reality that Dubois examined the world through the prisms of race, class, and politics, it has become longstanding practice of mainstream Eurocentric discourses to dismiss

him as a major voice in the discourse of education. His views on the purpose of education were similar to those of the leading proponents of the social reconstructionists during the 1930's. Watkins (2001) argues that the following perspectives that Dubois held unequivocally signify his classification as a social reconstructionist: 1) Dubois believed that a differentiated educational system existed for most Blacks, 2) the enterprise of American schooling regarding Blacks served as an instrument of control, 3) the disingenuous relationship of corporate philanthropies and other private agencies with Black schools and institutions of higher education produced curriculums that were designed with the primary objective of socializing Blacks, 4) it was important that Blacks received intense academic training so that they could competently participate in a complex and challenging world, 5) the Black college should possess a curriculum that deals with issues of race, class, and the socially unjust socioeconomic arrangement and it should interrogate all manifestations of injustice 6) Ultimately, the Black college should be deeply committed to the overall improvement of civilization.

Dubois viewed education as a social and political arena that could be utilized to influence society. He believed that the attainment of an education is capable of empowering individuals and groups. In fact, he argued that people of African descent would have to navigate their way through the world by “outthinking and outflanking the owners of the world who are too drunk with their own arrogance and power to oppose us successfully” (Dubois, 1973. p. 77). As a socialist, he attempted to identify legitimate approaches to social reform and he believed that ideas and ideology were capable of promoting change. While Dubois held a reconstructionist perspective during this period of his life, many of his African American contemporaries were rooted in more traditional views that were a big part of the African American legacy regarding social and education reform. One such discourse was that of the Christian humanists.

The Christian humanists were instrumental in the discourse of Black educational reform during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a discourse of Black sociopolitical and educational reform that was informed by approximately a century of abolitionist and missionary social thought. The Christian humanists shared a common sentiment with other missionary groups who adamantly protested the institution of chattel slavery. As well, they were guided by a firm commitment to the reality that God and human righteousness inspired their activism for human justice vis-à-vis Blacks. Although they were concerned with addressing the adverse sociopolitical realities of Blacks to an extent, unfortunately such efforts were circumvented by

their missionary perspective. The missionary perspective failed to see the distinction between Christianizing, education, and civilizing. As a result, they argued that the missionary curriculum ought to be primarily comprised of academic learning in the humanities, natural sciences, and literature. Most missionary organizations, Christian humanists included, held the perspective that vocational education was of minimal benefit to the image of Blacks. There was a general consensus amongst many missionary societies that such training only exacerbated the myth that Blacks were nothing more than beasts of burden. Therefore, missionary education utilized a curriculum that offered mostly classical or liberal education.

Watkins (1996) asserts that Christian humanism had a significant impact on how Blacks theorized about education. The Christian humanists possessed the notion that the essence of the abolitionist movement was interconnected with the missionary. They were also in sync with the already existing sociospiritual perspective that many African Americans ascribed to in the United States. Furthermore, there was a consensus among African Americans that a formal education offered an opportunity to live a productive life as a citizen who is capable of making meaningful contributions to society.

A major figure of the Christian humanist movement was that of Alexander Crummell who strongly believed in the efficacy of a classical education and God's will. Crummell was born a free African American during the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was educated by Quakers at the African Free School in New York City during the early part of the 1820's. It was a school that was well known for its Lancastrian or Monitorial format that encompassed parent volunteerism, strict discipline, routine inspection, and oral academic activities. The curriculum concentrated on the following academic areas of study: astronomy, geography, grammar, spelling, reading, elocution, penmanship, and arithmetic. Crummell resumed his classical-liberal schooling upstate New York at Oneida institute where he received training in multiple languages, studied the histories of Romans, Greeks, English, and the classics of English poetry (Watkins, 1996). It was evident that Crummell's classical Eurocentric schooling had a profound impact on his perspectives regarding education along with influencing him to take up ministry as a career. As the most respected Black scholar of his time, he exerted a considerable amount of influence on educators in institutions of higher learning and beyond, particularly W. E. B. Dubois. An argument can be made that Crummell's philosophical and ideological stance coincided with Christian humanist discourse which influenced larger numbers of Americans throughout much of

the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This tradition had a longstanding impact on ideology for over a century.

Crummell believed that humans were inherently reasonable and that they possessed the intellectual and moral capacities that required cultivation. For him, the purpose of education was to cultivate the intellectual capacities of the individual, while religion addressed their moral development. The process of development was extremely important to Crummell, due to the reality that, at least to him, the world was incomplete. As an individual living in an imperfect world, Crummell always believed that the world was engaged in the process of becoming, hence, both moral and intellectual education would aid this process. Essentially, “mans responsibility to God is to complete the world” (as cited in, Watkins, 2001, p.17).

Crummell also held the notion that brotherhood was important to the advancement of Blacks in America. In fact, it was pivotal to his philosophy of performing and participating in endeavors that aided in the betterment of African Americans. The liberation of people of African descent became one of his most revered quests. According to Crummell, it was a quest that required the full support of all African Americans. Dubois's concept of the "talented tenth" was clearly derived from Crummell's work with the American Negro Academy which consciously focused on gathering together the most "talented" and respected African Americans to work to advance the interests of Blacks in America. Crummell held the perspective that the most talented people should be given the responsibility to serve as leaders for the masses. His talented tenth concept has led to many critics branding him as being an elitist. However, there are some scholars who believe that Crummell's and Dubois's notion of the talented has been erroneously interpreted (e.g., Molefi Asante, John Henrik Clarke, Amos Wilson, Jacob Carruthers, Asa Hilliard, and Manning Marable, etc.). Watkins (1996) states that Crummell (1992) defended his notion of the talented tenth in his essay “*Civilization the Primal Need of the Race*” by arguing, “If the academic scholars are not inspired with the notion of leadership and duty, then with all their Latin and Greek and science they are but pendants, trimmers, opportunists” (as cited in Watkins, 1996, p. 18).

For all intents and purposes, talented Blacks should not simply relish privilege; instead they should be using their abilities and expertise to improve the sociopolitical realities of their people. A vital philosophical perspective of Crummell's Christian humanism is that he held firm convictions regarding God's will vis-à-vis humans. He believed that the pursuit of education

should lead to the acquisition of truth; and that it was this human endeavor that met the fulfillment of God's will. Essentially, for Crummell, the pursuit of truth was one of the most important responsibilities of humanity whereas. Accordingly, everyone, especially Blacks, should be committed to acquiring an education, thus there was no tolerance for ignorance. In sum, failure to attain an education represented a blatant disregard for God's plan. While Christian humanism was deeply embedded in the African American sociopolitical reality, it was the progressive-liberal reform movement that was the most widely accepted discourse throughout the Black community.

The thinking and the activism of the African American community during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and for much of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was rooted in the progressive-liberal reform perspective. It represented the mainstream discourse that most African Americans engaged in that questioned the dehumanizing social injustices that they were forced to contend with throughout the U.S. The rationale that guided the progressive-liberalism during this historical moment was that the democratic state was capable of embracing reform. The progressive-liberalist reform initiative sought to bring about reform in the U.S. that appropriately addressed past social injustice that people of African descent suffered through. They were of the opinion that the political state is designed to contest exclusion and social injustice along with acknowledging the fact that the democratic process allowed for such contestation. As a result, the commitment to legitimate democratic practices would pave the way to social reform. There were many African American scholars and educators who were convinced that the existing political and educational bureaucracy could, in some important ways, be transformed to better embrace African American citizens.

Watkins (2001) states that there were four African American educators who made strong and important contributions to the discourse of progressive liberalism vis-à-vis educational reform during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This discourse of Black educational reform became an instrument of agency and social activism for the African American community via the efforts of Carter G. Woodson, John W. Cromwell, Kelley Miller, and Alain L. Locke. The attention given to each of these individuals in no way discounts the reality that there were other African Americans who made significant contributions to this discourse (e.g., A. Philip Randolph, W. E. B. Dubois, Mary McCloud Bethune Cookman, and E. Franklin Frazier, etc.).

Of the four, Woodson and Locke received more mainstream attention than Cromwell and Miller; however, both Miller and Cromwell were well recognized in their respective fields.

One of the strongest voices of the progressive liberalist reform movement was that of Carter. G. Woodson. He earned all of his post-secondary degrees from the highly recognized institutions of the University of Chicago and Harvard. Woodson is widely known as a historian and educator, however, he is most recognized as the father of Black history and the founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and Life (ASNLH) in 1915. This organization created the, *The Journal of Negro History* which continues to exist today and for several years Woodson served as an editor of the journal. During the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Woodson joined American Negro Academy which was included some of the leading Black progressives of this era. As a result, Woodson held a unique distinction at the time, in that he was a member of the two most recognized African American scholarly organizations. It is believed by some critics that Woodson was instrumental in averting a rivalry between the two organizations.

In sharing similar concerns with the other members of the ANA, Woodson possessed strong views regarding the concept of education and curriculum as it pertained to Blacks. He eventually wrote what is considered to be, in many respects, one of the most important commentaries on the inability of Blacks to experience legitimate collective sociopolitical emancipation in an educational system that both de-educates and mis-educates them.

Woodson's text, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* boldly confronted the Eurocentric curriculum that was being delivered to Blacks throughout the educational system. The tone of this work exemplified both Woodson's frustration and genuine disdain toward the type of education Blacks were receiving at the time. Woodson was convinced that the existing educational system did little to advance the agenda of African Americans (i.e., increasing their opportunities at becoming a self-determining and self-sufficient people). Additionally, he held the conviction that the Eurocentric curriculum of American education was creating docile, conforming, and uncritical citizens. In no way could such education cultivate critical, socio-politically conscious, and dynamic citizens who were capable of advancing the causes of their respective groups, particularly African Americans. While his work should not be interpreted as a treatise on progressive education, nonetheless, Woodson's perspective on education, to some extent, coincides with Dewey's notion of education. The two believed that education should facilitate civic participation. Dewey believed that civic participation should be manifested in a

way that leads to the perpetuation of the ideals of the democratic society, while for Woodson; it was the cause of social justice (equity) in the democratic society (Dewey, 1916; Watkins 1996; Woodson, 1933).

As a legitimate representative of the essence of progressive education, Woodson was openly perturbed by the shortcomings of the political education that was being delivered to African Americans. In his view, the process of political participation should aggressively introduce a new discourse on social justice and public policy. However, this was not the case for African Americans, due to the reality that they were being marginalized and socio-politically dominated throughout the enterprise of schooling. Woodson believed that the curriculums and processes utilized throughout the enterprise of American schooling were complicit in the silencing of Blacks. Such practices led to the depoliticization which invariably excluded them from engaging in political endeavors that could improve their sociopolitical and economic realities.

Woodson was particularly displeased with how Eurocentric culture dominated the curriculum to the extent that other non-European cultures were excluded from the curriculum. This practice suggested that the African was not worthy of study and should not be given any scholarly consideration. Woodson condemned both industrial and European classical education as being incapable of preparing African Americans for the new social arrangement. As for the middle-class and well schooled African Americans, Woodson believed that their uncritical embracement of Eurocentric culture and values moved them further away from their fellow Blacks. In fact, he adamantly argued that most middle-class and well schooled Blacks were abandoning their people. Woodson passionately argued in his text that this reality was directly related to the fact that Blacks were participating in an educational system that influenced them to turn their backs on the Black community. Watkins (2001) eloquently captures Woodson's perspective on the failure of African Americans to go back to the very communities that supported their academic and social development. On a broader scale, Watkins aptly describes Woodson's discontent with the failure of those African Americans possessing the attributes mentioned in the preceding sentence to utilize the Black church and other institutions to advance the cause of this group on local, regional, and national levels. In describing these realities that Woodson held strong views on, Watkins (1996) states:

He lamented that the formally educated were abandoning the African American church and other institutions where their talents could be put to use. Christian agency for Woodson was important to foster the kind of altruistic uplift needed for the African American masses. Instead, he felt that formally educated African Americans were being drawn to a misguided degenerate theology that justified inequality and the inhumane social order. (p.20)

Additionally, Woodson intensely argued that the African Americans described above were too willing to broker their morals for short-term benefits. He believed that such actions were the manifestations of a confused and broken spirited people who had been ravaged for centuries by the formal inhumane practice of segregation and inequality. Woodson (1933) describes the perplexing actions of these African Americans by stating, “At one moment Negroes fight for the principles of democracy, and at the very next moment, they barter it away for some temporary advantage” (p.3). As a result, formally educated African Americans who are unable to entertain the notion that success is possible either individually or collectively routinely fall victim to the oppressive and hegemonic sociopolitical order. Due to their inability to believe that they possess the capacity to change their seemingly unchangeable sociopolitical arrangements, many African Americans who are in positions of “leadership” partake in sociopolitical endeavors that further exacerbate the exploitation of fellow African Americans. Most importantly, Woodson argued that any ethnic group that found itself disconnected from their history had virtually no chance of ever locating itself.

Although an important contributor to the progressive-liberal educational reform movement, John W. Cromwell is rarely mentioned as a curricularist. Instead, he is well recognized as being journalist. Cromwell was one of the founding members of the African Negro Academy (1896) along with having a close professional relationship with Alexander Crummell. For much of his life Cromwell was a public school teacher in Washington D.C., and the publisher of the highly regarded, *The Washington Record* newspaper where he served as the chief journalist. Cromwell’s commitment to creating a paper that revealed the perspectives of African Americans was a top priority for him, for he believed that the Black community needed this form of communication to advance their cause. As well, Cromwell earned a law degree from Howard University and was awarded a clerkship in the U.S. Treasury Department. As with other Black intellectuals of his era, Cromwell was active in a variety of sociopolitical projects

that sought to advance the cause of African Americans. During his early years, he was very active in the Reconstruction politics of Virginia.

The desire to disseminate important information during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to resonate deep within Cromwell throughout the progressive movement. He held the perspective that African American educators and the masses ought to be exposed to the dialogues and debates that address slavery, Reconstruction, and the sociopolitical condition of disenfranchised Blacks. Cromwell was extremely concerned with the issue of Reconstruction in the south during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. He vigorously contested White scholars who held little regard for Reconstruction (Black self-governance) and the likelihood that Blacks were competent enough to benefit from it. Cromwell responded to such sentiments by becoming the editor-in-chief of the *American Negro Monograph Company* magazine, which was created to offer African American educators various resources to develop curriculums that embodied progressive education. The educational magazine was in existence for just under a year. It was the only magazine designed to reach large numbers of African American educators.

Given his activism in matters pertaining to social justice and educational reform, it is clear that Cromwell was a major contributor to the progressive movement as a scholar, historian, activist, and educator. Of the three, he is most remembered for his strong passion with respect to getting African Americans to understand the importance of learning as much as they could about themselves and the history of Africa. Additionally, his passion for ensuring that African Americans were treated fairly was just as strong as his desire to see them take pride in their culture and history. In fact, he devoted much of his life to encouraging African American educators to become advocates of social justice regarding the cause of sociopolitical and economic uplift.

Another important figure of the progressive educational reform movement, but yet overlooked in mainstream circles was that of Kelley Miller. Miller was well respected throughout the community of African American educators as an important contributor to curriculum scholarship. He studied mathematics and physics at Johns Hopkins University and spent much of his career teaching mathematics where he earned the reputation of being one of the best educators of his era. Miller eventually joined the founding members of the American Negro Academy who all believed that scholars of African descent were compelled to engage history and be active in advancing the sociopolitical cause of the African American people. They

were attempting to reconstruct the notion of civilization regarding Blacks during a time when many of the White scholars of this era argued that Blacks offered no meaningful contributions to society. In an extremely important matter that involved a particular White scholar's use of scientific racism that suggested Blacks were degenerate and would soon be extinct, Miller in defense of African Americans responded with a strong rebuttal that stood out as one the major scholarly works of his time. Miller in 1897 waged an intense scholarly response to Hoffman's *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*.

In 1900 Miller made his mark as an educator when he responded to the president of the American Social Science Association who argued that it was useless to provide Blacks with an education at the college level. Charles Warner, the president of the ASSA further argued that post-secondary education would not provide individual improvement and social upward mobility for Blacks. Instead, he argued it would create in Blacks little regard for work, unclear desire as participants in the political process, and an arrogant vulgarity that the world could do without. Miller offered an argument that higher education is pivotal to the process of restoring and advocating the prominence of the African American people.

Some years later, his perspective on education and curriculum were eloquently displayed in his widely disseminated essay about Howard University titled, *Howard: The National Negro University*. Miller put on display his notion that group advancement, politics, and education were pivotal to the positive future development of African Americans. In short, he strongly argued that both Howard and the African American Academy must become and remain committed to providing formal educational opportunities for African Americans. Furthermore, Miller believed that the Black academies should have a major role in cultivating future leaders who are capable of advancing the sociopolitical and economic agenda Blacks; thus acknowledging the reality that the Black college must offer the best training possible in the areas of vocation and social responsibility. Moreover, he believed that race consciousness ought to be infused throughout the curriculum and that it should be founded upon a philosophical premise that endorses the major tents of democracy and human brotherhood. Above all, Miller believed that curriculum should not only offer professional training, but must also develop Blacks for life as citizens capable of making important contributions to society.

The discussion of some of the more prominent voices of the Black progressive-liberalist perspective concludes with Alain L. Locke. Locke was well known throughout the African

American community as a philosopher and educator. As well, in the academic sense, he was a highly academically credentialed Black during his day. His formal academic training involved studying at the Philadelphia School of Pedagogy and earning three degrees at Harvard University. Also, he was the first African American to earn the widely celebrated Rhodes Scholarship. During the early stages of his life, Locke further developed his thinking and scholarship abroad at the University of Oxford and the University of Berlin. Throughout his professional career, he served in the departments of English, education, and philosophy at Howard University.

Throughout his career as a scholar, educator, and activist, Locke garnered much acclaim and respect for the numerous books and articles he published that dealt with African American culture, art, literature, and issues associated with race. Eventually, he caught the attention of the American Negro Academy who invited him to become a member. As a member of the ANA, he had a major impact as a leader and public intellectual. In 1925 Locke put on full display his adroit understanding of how the changing social arrangement would facilitate a major transformation for African Americans. In his text *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, Locke's progressive liberalist orientation was self-evident. Throughout this text, he offered vivid and insightful perspectives on how the African American people would experience an awakening via their attempts to construct new identities, emancipatory forms of spirituality, and other dynamic emancipatory endeavors. Additionally, Locke spoke about the possibility of African Americans experiencing an improvement in their sociopolitical and economic realities with the advent of new industrial democracy. That is, African Americans via the process of being transplanted were actually experiencing necessary change. This sociopolitical process offered them a legitimate chance at upward social mobility that emanated out of the major tenets of democracy. Most importantly, Locke was optimistic that new democratic social arrangement would protect African Americans.

Approximately 15 years later in 1940, Locke wrote an article titled *With Science as His Shield: The Educator Must Bridge Our Great Divides*, which was published in *Frontiers for Democracy* (1940/1971). In the above mentioned article, Locke articulated his perspective on curriculum. Throughout the article he strongly suggested that education ought to be an intercultural venture. His notion of intercultural education is similar to the contemporary curriculum of multicultural education. Also, a clear connection can be made with Locke's

concept of curriculum to that of the discourse of progressivism. The major premise of his argument explicated that the curriculum should develop students academically and socially for competent participation in a culturally diverse democratic society. Additionally, the essay illustrated his belief that the enterprise of schooling should be understood as having a social purpose. In fact, Locke argued that one of the main objectives of schooling is to facilitate democratic social development. Locke along with his contemporaries were optimistic about educational reform becoming a reality in a more democratized America. The educational reform that Locke and his Black progressive contemporaries were advancing sought to ensure that most African Americans would have the opportunity to receive an education. Most importantly, Black progressive-liberals wanted African Americans to be prepared for competent engagement with the sociopolitical and economic arrangement of the new liberal democratic state.

The discussion presented here on prominent African-centered educational reform exemplifies the reality that the discourse of Black educational reform is a little more than a century old. It is clear that the longstanding tradition of Black resistance illustrates the fact, that the African American educational community has been engaged in the ongoing critical contestation of systemic colonial and marginalization practices, and Eurocentric notions of education and schooling. An examination of African American perspectives on educational reform will reveal that their discourse ran parallel with Black reform initiatives that sought to improve the sociopolitical realities of African Americans beyond the realm of education.

Although there are distinctly different perspectives that exist amongst African American educators, scholars, and activists, etc., it is important to note that each of the perspectives are deeply ingrained, in varying degrees, in the consciousness of the extended African American community. For example, Christian humanism has a firm place in the realities of African Americans insofar as their thinking and communal cultural practices delineate that they desire for all people to be treated fairly. Meanwhile, the perspectives of Black nationalists, Pan-Africanists, and separatists groups are strong responses to overt and covert societal practices of racism, domination, and marginalization. Throughout their respective existence, in a variety of ways, they have respectively clamored for the reinvigoration of an African culture that could bring about emancipatory outcomes for people on the African continent and throughout the diaspora. On the other hand, the discourse of Black reconstructionism articulated the radical and somewhat revolutionary disenchantment of a beaten and downtrodden people. As

reconstructionists they sought to transform socially unjust practices that most Blacks were forced to contend with. Lastly, Black progressive liberals demonstrated an unwavering commitment to the seemingly endless potential of the democratic state. Their outlook coincided with the major tents of the Democratic Party along with believing that societal reform could take place via the current sociopolitical arrangement.

It is important to note that the aforementioned conceptual frameworks regarding Black educational reform encompassed not only the educational aspect of the African American experience, but also the sociopolitical realities of African Americans vis-à-vis education. They represent both socioeducational ideas and worldviews that were instrumental in the African American quest to improve their sociopolitical realities. The knowledge of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century African American educational reform is capable of aiding contemporary efforts that seek to ensure that African Americans and other marginalized groups are provided with an education that prepares them for competent participation in a culturally diverse world. Watkins (1996) argues that such knowledge serves as a historical referent for contemporary African American educational reformists. For this reason, it is imperative that contemporary reformists fully comprehend and interrogate the legacy of Black educational reform so that they can see that there was no disconnect between educational and the sociopolitical and economic realities of African Americans in their reform initiatives. Moreover, this reality should promote a sense of caution for contemporary African American reformists who attempt to make distinctions between the educational and sociopolitical and economic realities of African Americans. Lastly, the multiple Black educational reform discourses presented throughout this section addressed the following topics that continue to be at the center of African American educational reform initiatives: identity formation, cultural pluralism and democracy in the enterprise of schooling, and cultural discontinuities, etc.

### **African-Centered Mobilization via the Pan-Africanist Initiative**

Asante (1995) and Watkins, Lewis, and Chou (2001) state that Black activism and protest can be traced back to the antebellum era of the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This reality dismantles the widespread contemporary notion that Black protest is a recent sociopolitical phenomenon that emerged out of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950's and 1960's. Throughout the antebellum era many Blacks (e.g., professionals, clergymen, educators, and missionaries, etc.) held little hope regarding their ability to fully matriculate into American

society as full citizens. As a result, large numbers of the Black community began to embrace ideas of voluntary separatism, self-sufficiency, and a migration back to Africa. In the midst of these various forms of protest is the reality that education is pivotal to the improvement of the Black sociopolitical reality. Throughout years of protest numerous Blacks have argued passionately that Black children who represent the future of our much maligned group must attain a critical education so that Blacks can continue to make much needed advancements in all spheres of our society.

While there has been long and continuous support for education within the African American community, there has also been an equally long and continuous skepticism that Whites will ever permit Blacks to fully integrate into the American social fabric. This reality has served as the driving force behind Black separatism and nationalism. Such sociopolitical activism by Blacks illustrated their frustration with the American judicial system and sociopolitical enterprises that relegated them to sub-personhood (i.e., second-class citizens). Essentially, from the time of their involuntary migration to this country and continuing up to the actual eradication of the formal sociopolitical practice of “separate but equal,” Blacks were subjected to various forms of inhumane punishment, psychological abuse, cultural assassination, and domination (Omi & Winant, 1994; Watkins, 2001; Woodson, 1933). Clearly, Blacks in America have experienced a reality that violated the major tenets of the so-called social contract. During the late 1800’s and extending into the 1900’s there were a number of Blacks who constituted a sociopolitical movement that encouraged the notion of self-help throughout the Black community.

On the other hand, Pan Africanists during the same time period sought to establish alliances with African and people of African descent throughout the diaspora. These two separatists movements continued to be major forms of Black resistance throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, separatist movements that encouraged the relocation of Blacks to Africa began to lose momentum during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although Black activists and “militants” possess, in some cases, distinctly different philosophical sociopolitical perspectives; nonetheless, members of the two groups were driven by deep-seated contempt for the mistreatment of Blacks by American society. The contempt and outrage Blacks held toward American society served as the impetus for both social and educational theorizing (Asante, 1994, 2000; Shujaa, 1994, 1996; Watkins, 2001). The two movements exerted a substantive impact on

how Blacks critically engaged the importance of creating a culturally relevant educational experience along with how they participated in various forms of sociopolitical protest. Watkins (2001) offers greater insight into the sociopolitical constructs of Black separatism and nationalism, by stating:

Rooted in Christian humanism, civilization-building, absolutism, and elitism, black separatism and nationalism evolved to become more relativist, culturalist, and secular in the twentieth century (Moses, 1978). Separatist and nationalist theories run the gamut from movements of identification, racial pride, cultural pluralism, physical separatism, back to Africa, and straight-out race war. In general they have opposed slavery, colonialism, racism, and the Euro-American exploitation and brutalizing of colored peoples. While most separatist and nationalist outlooks cover broad social arenas, it was inevitable that such views made themselves known in the expanding movement for black education. (p. 51)

The Pan-Africanist movement emerged out of the repatriation movements of the mid-19th century. This sociopolitical movement was spearheaded by Paul Cuffe, Martin Delaney, and other Blacks who sought refuge from domination, oppression, and hegemony in America. These Pan-Africanists believed that Blacks would be better off returning to Africa. As well, members of the early Pan-Africanist movement were equally concerned with improving the sociopolitical realities of Blacks via education. Subsequently, just beyond the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Pan-African agency was comprised of two distinctly different sociopolitical movements. The first movement was lead by W. E. B. Dubois who organized international conferences during the period of 1900 to 1945. All of the conferences were used as opportunities to establish a sociopolitical agenda that would eventually result in the decolonization of Africa. Meanwhile, these efforts had minimal, if any, impact in the United States.

During the period of Dubois's Pan-African initiative, Marcus Garvey was making tremendous strides in the Pan-African sociopolitical arena. The Pan-Africanist initiative of Garvey differed greatly from that of Dubois. In fact, the two disagreed on many things regarding what action should be taken to liberate Africans and people of African descent throughout the diaspora, especially African Americans. However, at the core of both of their movements was the indisputable reality that the attainment of a critically liberating education was intricately intertwined to the destiny of Blacks. Ironically, towards the end of Dubois's life, he embraced

much of Garvey's philosophical perspective regarding the serious consideration of leaving a racist American society that offered little hope of fully embracing Blacks. Ultimately, W. E. B. Dubois became exacerbated with the sociopolitical realities for Blacks in America resulting in renouncing his U.S. citizenship. After this action, he and his second wife migrated to Ghana, Africa until his death.

As a proponent of Pan-African activism, Garvey served as the leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). It was a sociopolitical Pan-African movement that was used to mobilize millions of Blacks during the 1920's to seek liberation for Africa from colonialism. Additionally, Garvey sought to galvanize people of African descent throughout the world to achieve such liberation. Garvey and members of his movement passionately believed that Africa not only existed on the continent, but also throughout the diaspora. This was due to the reality that the institution of African slavery touched almost every area of the world either directly or indirectly. As a result, this reality unquestionably illuminated the fact that the destinies of Blacks throughout the world were interconnected. Essentially, Garvey held that people of African descent and Africans would never be free until the continent of Africa was liberated from colonialism.

An aspect of Garvey's Pan-African initiative that is routinely overlooked by critics is that he was influenced by Booker T. Washington's notion of Black self-sufficiency in the form of independent economic development. It is important to note that Garvey's perspective on a separate Black economy was radically different from that of Washington's. The difference between the two regarding a separate Black economy was manifested via Garvey's adamant stance against the exploitation of Africa and African labor throughout the diaspora. Furthermore, Garvey interpreted Black self help in America as establishing the path toward Africa's redemption. To achieve this task, it was imperative that Blacks become politically aware which would lead to their becoming empowered to engage in successful movements of liberation of the African continent and descendants of Africa throughout the diaspora. As well, Garvey's perspective of political empowerment represented a stark contrast to the non-political stance taken by Booker T. Washington. Especially, if Blacks could establish a strong economic base in the United States that could ultimately lead to the liberation of Africa and simultaneously create a global confraternity of Africans and people of African descent.

### **The Power to Construct and Reconstruct and Transform the Enterprise of Schooling**

It is important to acknowledge the societal prescriptions that lead to the marginalization of African Americans in public education. Such prescriptions are based upon a faulty and presumptive rationale that suggests there are some inherent problems residing within the African American student that adversely impacts their ability to achieve academically. Basically, such prescriptions consist of societal beliefs that are embraced by the dominant culture. The goals and standards that are both established and valued by society become the guiding framework for what is to be considered the norm. Numerous educational researchers are interested in both the educational and social problems of African American children. As a result, they focus their efforts toward acquiring the prescriptive view, a quest for the seemingly unattainable goal, an often-desired for dream, but an unreachable reality (Irvine, 1990). In response to the deficit model, Asante (1987) and Ladson-Billings (1994) have resisted this by suggesting that African American achievement is an issue of cultural relevancy.

Attempts to attain the aforementioned prescriptive view have been relegated to past and contemporary innovations that assume a wide range of approaches as well as possessing attention-getting acronyms. Some of these innovations include the following: Parent Child Centers, Upward Bound, Chapter I, Head Start, Job Corps, Follow Through, and Home Start. Such programs, along with their predecessors and successors, are in essence, a by-product of the Great Society's compensatory efforts that were founded upon the beliefs and assumptions that an effective formula or method would appropriately address the problems of underachieving African American children. Hence, suggesting that if these children were accorded the following support systems, they could reduce the academic and social discrepancies that exist between them and European American children: the appropriate environment, parenting style, money, program, materials, and personnel. Clearly, this deficit view implies that African American children—due to cultural, biological, environmental, and social differences—do not possess the necessary coping skills and knowledge to fully benefit from formal schooling (Irvine 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ogbu 1992; Wilson 1998).

It is apparent that both the educators and policymakers who possess this cultural deficit perspective, view schooling as an institution whose purpose is to disseminate a body of knowledge, values, skills, and norms that possess significant support for dominant society. Such a view reveals the political hegemonic aspect of schooling, thus diverting the possibility of

African American students developing into informed citizens and critical observers of the world. Furthermore, it serves to have a negative impact on African American students' future potential and ability to control their respective and collective, political and economic destinies (Wilson 1998; Hilliard 1997; Kunjufu 1995).

The educators and policymakers who embrace the cultural deficit perspective believe that schools serve all students equally and "indiscriminately" thus suggesting that the institution of schooling is meritocratic and value-free. They perceive education as giving individuals (who possess certain intellectual attributes) the needed skills and knowledge that would allow them to attain employment and occupational opportunities. Ultimately, they defend education as "positively and directly related to individual and societal productivity and to economic development" (Irvine 1990, p.2). But as Ogbu (1992) asserts, "The school learning and performance of minority children are influenced by complex social, economic, historical, and cultural factors" (p.7).

The use of an African-centered approach to education will appropriately address the areas of culturally-centered pedagogy, academic achievement, cultural and sociopolitical competence. As mentioned earlier in this work, the African-centered approach to education encourages students to understand that their history, identity, culture, and politics must be acknowledged when attempting to effectively deal with their problems. Furthermore, an African-centered approach to education introduces a new way of interpreting the conduct, disposition, belief systems, worldview, and manifestations of identity of non-European American groups throughout the enterprise of schooling. This approach to schooling could prove to be immensely successful in decreasing the adverse impact that the institution of schooling has on the academic and social development of non-European students (e.g., ethnic groups like African and Latino Americans are disproportionately represented in special education, drop out of school at disproportionate rates, and are disproportionately sanctioned for conduct that is in violation of the rules and regulations of the educational setting, etc.).

The reality mentioned in the preceding paragraph illustrates how an African-centered approach to education will enable African and other non-European American students to be both understood and evaluated beyond the standards of Euro-American schooling. Additionally, the utilization of Afrocentricity would be extremely beneficial in moving the enterprise of schooling toward becoming a public arena where all cultures and voices are genuinely embraced.

Furthermore, such an approach to education will facilitate the movement toward getting the enterprise of schooling to come to terms with the reality that education should be situated in culturally oriented discourses. This would represent both a radical and much needed departure from the alleged longstanding notion that schools are both value free and guided by culturally neutral discourses.

Such a departure would serve to reinforce the reality that cultures are historical constructs that fueled by sociopolitical and economic ideologies and discourses. Moreover, an African-centered approach to education would clearly delineate that cultures do not emerge out of some neutral process and they should not be interpreted as being universal entities (Asante, 1988, 1998, 1999; Gordon, 1995; Gittens, 2001; Shujaa, 1994). This reconceptualization of culture and its role in the educational community would lead to the legitimate democratization of the enterprise of schooling. Most importantly, this approach to educational would require the support of the entire educational community, parents, politicians, and grassroots leaders, etc so as to ensure that democracy and social justice is a reality for everyone participating in the enterprise of schooling. Subsequently, African Americans and people of African descent would benefit immensely from such reconceptualization, to the extent that all people of African descent would be able to galvanize themselves to develop into a self-reliant and self-sufficient people (Asante, 1988 & 1998; Hilliard; Wilson, 1998).

Asante (1988) argues that an Afrocentric educational perspective that is rooted in a clear relationship between institutional racism, oppression and dominant European-American culture, which masquerades as a seemingly culturally unobtrusive and non-oppressive sociopolitical construct. Moreover, Afrocentricity's critical interrogation of the Eurocentric dominant culture reveals the inevitable reality that throughout much of the Western Hemisphere, it exists as a universal master narrative. Conversely, it takes the position that the culture, identity, and disposition of African Americans are best evaluated through African cultural retentions in place of Eurocentric discourses (Ani, 1994; Asante, 1988; Clarke, 1993).

Concomitantly, Afrocentricity must also be used to expand the epistemological landscape of schooling. Essentially, the enterprise of schooling must move toward establishing epistemological pluralism that endorses diverse curricular approaches that delineate multiple ways of knowing. It must be an epistemological pluralism that extends to leadership and school management that moves away from traditional hierarchical approaches, the rewriting of certain

texts, and testing and assessment, etc. The implementation of a pluralistic epistemology will benefit the social and academic development of all students who participate in the enterprise of schooling. Such an educational discourse creates an educational community that allows students to have genuine exchanges of knowledge (Lee, 1992, 1994; Lee & Slaughter-Defoe, 1995; Asante, 1988, 1998, 1999; Carruthers, 1999; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000).

As for the extended African American community, the movement towards an Afrocentric education among certain African Americans emerges from a belief that their children must receive an education that empowers them to control their own destinies as well as prepares them to be major contributors to the global world stage (Shujaa, 1994; Wilson, 1998). If this is to become a reality, they must be provided with educational services that are radically different from what many of them are currently receiving in public education.

Anderson (2001) suggests that African Americans are not educated in a way that permits them to appropriately develop educationally, socially, and psychologically. Rather, they are provided with an education that almost permanently relegates them to the position of world consumer. Of course, this is done with the intent of maintaining the current social order. Supporters of Afrocentric education hold the position that it is a comprehensive and appropriate response to the dilemma of miseducated African Americans (Ani 1994; Asante 1988; Carruthers 1999; Lomotey, 1978, 1992; Hilliard 1998). The following delineates some of the positive realities that would emerge out of the democratization of schooling: 1) The cultures of all students would be respected and embraced, 2) Equitable attention would be given to the ethnic groups that constitute American society, 3) Increase in achievement for historically marginalized and disenfranchised ethnic groups, 4) All students will have the opportunity to become culturally competent citizens, 5) Decrease in the disciplining of students who are of non-European origins, 6) Decrease in the disproportionate identification of African American and other non-European American students for special education services, and 7) Schools will learn to embrace the culturally diverse conduct and dispositions of all students.

Hamilton's (1968) view of a quality education germinates from the notion that the school is an extension of the community. It should be a relationship where the school belongs to the community and it is utilized as a community center. This is how both the school and community

can garner strength from both group identity and unity, thus requiring the involvement of parents and community leaders to maintain a successful relationship.

Asa Hilliard (1998) avers that the challenge that lies before African Americans is the job of getting the world to recognize what cultural democracy means in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The inability to appreciate and respect the culture of others serves as the foundation for the newest forms of discrimination and inequality. Before this can be attained African Americans must become proactive in the education of their children. In my opinion, parental involvement in the educational and academic development of their children is of extreme importance. I will argue that parents must be fully aware of the sociopolitical and economic discourse and ideologies that drive school. Those parents who acquire such an understanding of schools will be better able to ensure that the enterprise of schooling does what is in the best interest of their child.

### **The Emancipatory Implications of Afrocentricity**

The movements of separatism, nationalism, and pan-Africanist activism that spans approximately 150 years and inform Afrocentric discourse share the belief that Americans of African descent need to develop, what Paulo Freire called "critical consciousness" (citation). Afrocentric discourse is aligned with Paulo Freire's (1970) notion of "conscientization" or "critical consciousness" that comprises a process that facilitates individual and group movement toward attaining a critical understanding of their respective sociopolitical realities which subsequently leads to emancipatory outcomes. African-centered educators and critical theorists, scholars, activists, and Freire assert that the attainment of "critical consciousness" enables students to become owners of their educational experiences and invoke the "practice of freedom," instead of exploiting others and their environment. Those individuals and groups who ascribe to the major tenets of Afrocentricity understand the importance of utilizing critical pedagogy in a way that brings about sociopolitical consciousness that effectively engage local community issues (e.g., the disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education, dropping out of school, incarcerated, illiterate, and unemployed, etc). Also, members of the African-centered movement understand the importance of using this type of critical pedagogy to contend with national and geopolitical issues that impact Africans and people of African descent throughout the diaspora.

Just beyond the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century W. E. B. Dubois (1935) pondered an extremely important question regarding the education of African Americans. Dubois posed the question,

“Does the Negro need separate schools?” It is obvious that he was disturbed by the poor educational services that were being rendered to African Americans during this time. Ironically, this continues to be the reality for African American students receiving their education via public education (see Ladson-Billings, 1994).

In addition, Woodson (1933) suggested that the education of African Americans has always forced them to neglect their culture. They are taught in a way that facilitates their movement from their culture, language, and community. Woodson vehemently detested this insidious form of indoctrination in his legendary text *The Mis-education of the Negro* (1933) by illuminating the devastating impact both public education and higher education had on people of African descent. This was achieved via an educational system that is representative of the dominant American culture’s world-view, values, morals, and societal behaviors. Equally important, the American institution of education is aligned with capitalism, competitiveness, racism, sexism, and oppression (Warfield-Coppock, 1992). In the following account Warfield-Coppock (1992) provides a clear depiction of the problems African American people encounter via their educational experiences, stating:

Historically, African American parents and their offspring have been faced with the prospect of participating in a public school system that values independence over interdependence and mutual aid, competition over cooperation, materialism over spiritualism, and youth worship over elder reverence. These values have confused African American people and oriented them toward the American definitions of achievement and success and away from traditional African values. (p.471)

Unfortunately, African American students continue to struggle in disproportionate numbers when compared to their European American counterparts. Ladson-Billings (1994) gives a vivid portrayal of the dismal educational, social, and economic experiences of many African American students in the following section:

The high school dropout rate in New York and California is about 35 percent; in inner cities, where large numbers of African Americans live, the rate nears 50 percent. African American students make up only about 17 percent of the public school population but 41 percent of the special-education population. These dismal statistics hold despite the two waves of educational reform initiated in the 1980s. These poor education statistics for African American students correlate with some harsh social and economic realities.

Nearly one out of two African American children is poor. The rate of infant mortality among African Americans is twice that of whites. African American children are five times as likely as white children to be dependent on welfare and to become pregnant as teens; they are four times as likely to live with neither parent, three times as likely to live in a female-headed household, and twice as likely to live in substandard housing. More African American men are under the control of the criminal justice system than in college. Indeed, an African American boy who is born in California in 1988 is three times more likely to be murdered than to be admitted to the University of California. (p.2)

Cornel West in the text *Race Matters* (1994) presents a powerful and cogent analysis of what leads to the facilitation of resistance and appropriate responses to the conditions described above by Ladson-Billings. West suggests that we must first understand that culture is as much a structure (institution/process) as is both politics and economics. Second, it is imperative that African Americans don't allow for "nihilism" to set in. That is, they must not give in to the self-fulfilling prophecies of the conservative populace who believe that they are simply unable to overcome social and economic obstacles that would permit them to become productive citizens. Most importantly, African Americans must not lose hope and resort to nihilistic behaviors that destroy their families and communities.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Examining the Overrepresentation of African Americans in Special Education from an African-centered Perspective**

#### **Introduction**

##### ***Claim***

An African-centered approach to education possesses the ability to ameliorate the problem of the disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education. Afrocentricity is capable of assisting African Americans in the context of schooling with reaffirming themselves with agency to contest hegemonic Eurocentric constructs that have marginalized them throughout their participation in the enterprise of schooling. Lastly, an African-centered approach to education possesses the potential to transform educational sites into culturally responsive locations.

This chapter will examine how teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and biases impact the phenomenon of the disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education. The discussion will delineate some of the ways that the attitudes of teachers are manifested toward African American students in the educational setting which, in many cases, lead to the disproportionate assignment of the aforementioned students to special education. A brief examination of how the cultures of African American students conflict with culture and expectations of the enterprise of schooling, thus resulting in their encountering various types of problems that retard their academic and social development. Also, attention will be given to how an African-centered approach to education could be instrumental in curtailing the problem of the disproportionate assignment of African American students to special education. The chapter will conclude with presenting some ideas on what an African-centered educational initiative would look like in certain educational settings.

### **The Problems of Special Education vis-à-vis African Americans**

How we arrived at the present state of affairs can be understood only by studying the forces effective in the development of Negro education since it was systematically undertaken immediately after Emancipation. To point out merely the defects as they appear today will be of little benefit to the present and future generations. These things must be viewed in their historic setting. The conditions of today have been determined by what has taken place in the past, and in a careful study of this history we may see more clearly the great theatre of events in which the Negro has played a part. We may understand better what his role has been and how he has functioned in it. (Woodson, 1933, p. 9)

There are large segments of the educational community, particularly individuals and groups among school personnel who are closely associated with the special education community who are both understandably alarmed and concerned with the mass involuntary migration of African Americans entering special education. Unfortunately, over the years, not enough attention has been given to this phenomenon with respect to a thoroughgoing scholarly investigation of some of the critical sociocultural issues associated with this problem. The fact is that this important issue was illuminated for the educational community approximately 36 years ago.

According to Lloyd Dunn (1968), a noticeable trend of disproportionate numbers of both African Americans and other low-income students were being placed into classrooms designated for students identified as educably mentally retarded. Interestingly, approximately two years later, Evelyn Deno (1970) revealed that a significant segment of the educational community had become preoccupied with the use of a pathological model used to identify, serve, and place disproportionate numbers of African Americans and low-income students in general into special education programs. Given this situation, several factors impact the relationship between African American students and the institution of education. In the following section, I will identify some of these factors. However, the discussion in this section will deal mostly with explicating the reality that teachers' expectations, beliefs, and attitudes play a major role in the phenomenon of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education.

As I mentioned above, for almost 36 years the educational community has been aware of the dilemma of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education. During this

time span various segments of the educational community initiated multiple analyses of the problem, and there were numerous research studies aimed at increasing academic success for African American and other non-European American students. Unfortunately, despite the well-intentioned efforts of certain segments of the educational community, the issue of African Americans being disproportionately assigned to special education has become one of the most puzzling and socially unjust realities in the enterprise of American public schooling (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Bondy & Ross, 1998; Hilliard, 1992; Patton, 1998).

This seemingly blatant miscarriage of social justice has been well documented at both local and national levels (Bondy & Ross, 1998; Harry & Anderson, 1995; Patton, 1998). Furthermore, there is no existing data, research, or literature that comes close to remotely suggesting gains in achievement for African American students assigned to special education. At best, information in the form of research and other forms of data that attempt to gauge the academic achievement of African American students in special is considered inconclusive (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Hilliard, 1992). As a result, this reality has moved many African-centered scholars and other concerned scholars to develop major reservations about the legitimacy of assessment, placement, and services provided throughout the enterprise of special education (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Harry & Anderson, 1995; Hilliard, 1992).

Over the years numerous reasons have been given by various segments of the educational community to explain the disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education. There are several scholars who argue that there are aspects of the enterprise of special education that play a pivotal role in exacerbating the problem of assigning disproportionate numbers of African American students to special education (Artiles & Trent 1994; Franklin, 1992; Harry & Anderson, 1994, Skrtic 1991, Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Thurlow, 1992). Some of the problems involve the following reasons: 1) the longstanding practice of relying on IQ scores for assessment and use of a medical model that seeks to ameliorate problems that allegedly reside within the student, instead of addressing external factors that may be adversely impacting the student (e.g., the quality of instruction, the culture of the classroom, and teacher expectations, and perceptions of African American students, etc.), 2) the reluctance of the educational community to undertake reform initiatives that transform general educational services in a way that it will endorse and promote the success of African American students in both general and special education, 3) the enterprise of education's strict adherence to the traditional approach to

instruction in both special and general education, and 4) there are definitional and validity problems with the socially constructed categories of serious emotional or behavior disability, learning disability, and mild mental disability that has proven to have dire implications for many African American students (Artiles & Trent, 1994; Franklin, 1992; Skrtic, 1991).

Taken a step further, numerous African-centered and other scholars concerned with the overrepresentation of African American and non-European American students hold the perspective that the attitudes, biases, and beliefs of general and special education teachers represent the core of the problem. To a large extent, the numerous scholars argue that teachers' attitudes and beliefs play a major role in the referral and instruction processes (Gay, 2000; Harry & Anderson, 1995; Hilliard, 1992; Irvine, 2003; King, 1994; Kunjufu, 1985; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 2000; McIntosh, 1989; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000).

Harry and Anderson (1995) argue that the problems with definition and validity regarding the special education categories mentioned above are just part of the African American disproportionate representation problem. They also argue that the cultural variability of African American students conduct and teachers' beliefs and attitudes vis-à-vis their respective judgments place the aforementioned students at significant risk of being erroneously identified as seriously emotionally disturbed, educable mentally retarded, and specific learning disabled. The inherent problem of definitional and validity ambiguity and subjectivity with the mild categories of special education combined with the oftentimes negatively biased judgments of teachers and the bias embedded in the assessment process collectively contribute to the disproportionate referral and assignment of African American students to special education (Anderson, 1994; Artiles & Trent, 1994; Gould, 1981; Harry & Anderson, 1995; Nobles, 1991; Patton, 1998; Skrtic, 1991).

### **Exploring the implications of teacher attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and biases vis-à-vis the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education**

The argument presented in this section and the following section of this chapter deals with teachers' attitudes, expectations, and beliefs. Although this project is guided by the premise that the White supremacist/Eurocentric institutional logic of American schooling marginalizes African American students, it is also important to acknowledge the student and teacher relationship. Also, it is equally important to note that the institutional logic of schooling invariably impact the attitudes, beliefs, and expectations of teachers. As well, teachers and

school administrators are impacted by external societal influences beyond the parameters of the enterprise of schooling (i.e., stereotypes of African Americans that are disseminated throughout our society in the form of entertainment, news, and print publication).

Therefore, presenting a discussion that examine teachers' attitudes, expectations, and beliefs will, in my opinion, provide greater insight into how rules, regulations, achievement expectations and other Eurocentric institutional practices (which are implemented by teachers) adversely impact African American students. Thus, establishing a link between institutionally biased norms and teacher bias regarding they work to disenfranchise and marginalize African American students.

Such an examination of the aforementioned constructs as they pertain to teacher performance, perceptions, and interactions will reveal, to some extent, the outcome of the institutional racially biased modus operandi of schooling. Most importantly, the discussion will illustrate that many teachers acting on the Eurocentric logic of schooling fail to take into account the culture, values, beliefs, and customs of African American students with respect to their ability to achieve and develop socially. As a result, disproportionate numbers of African American students are assigned to special education, placed in low academic tracks, and disciplined. An argument for culturally responsive teaching and educational environments will be presented as representing a viable alternative to existing Eurocentric institutional and teacher practices that adversely impact the educational realities of African American students.

Research findings with respect to teacher expectations can be summarized quite simply: teacher expectations of student performance may alter, in varying degrees, the ways that teachers treat students; and this differential treatment may have a negative effect on the behavior and learning of students for whom teachers hold low expectations (Bony & Ross, 1998; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 2000; Kunjufu, 1985, 1990, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The significance of teacher expectations and their potential effect on student achievement was dramatized with Rosenthal and Jacobson's *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (1968). Their findings revealed that teacher expectations for student performance can operate as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Despite some intense criticisms of their methodology and data analysis, many subsequent studies support the existence of expectation effects which have been sometimes described as sustaining rather than causing student achievement differences (Harry & Anderson, 1995).

Subsequent research about the implications of teacher attitudes regarding student achievement has revealed that teacher expectations exert a considerable amount of influence on the quality of instruction that is disseminated to students (Good & Brophy, 1994). It is important to note that values and beliefs do not always convert to action (conduct or manifestation of some form of disposition). On the other hand, expectations does indeed transform into action. That is, many teachers believe that all students are capable of learning, but they do not expect certain students to learn. Essentially, the expectations of teachers dictate how they go about teaching their students. For example, if teachers have high expectations of certain students, they will act in ways that facilitate academic achievement for such students. Conversely, teachers' who possess low expectations for certain students will act in ways that do not stimulate substantial academic achievement for these students (Good & Brophy, 1994). Brophy and Good advanced the argument of Rosenthal's and Jacobson's notion of the self-fulfilling prophecy effect that claimed teacher expectations impact the learning environment, opportunities, and the academic outcomes of their respective students. Furthermore, the assumptions held by teachers regarding students' intellectual capacity and conduct affect how they engage and treat students in the educational milieu. Moreover, self-fulfilling prophecies do not occur incidentally or instantaneously, instead they emerge out of strong beliefs and intentional and methodical action that is manifested for an extended amount of time. Good and Brophy (1994) assert that there are six steps that encompass the formation of a self-fulfilling prophecy: 1) The teacher anticipates specific achievement from certain students, 2) the teacher engage their respective students according to the expectations that they hold for them, 3) the actions of the teacher expresses to students what the teacher expects of them and this process persists for an extended amount of time, 4) students internalize what teachers expect of them, which eventually affects their self-esteem, desire to achieve, school conduct, and relationships with teachers and authority figures, 5) over time the students' conduct will fall in sync with the expectations of the teacher, except in situations where the student resists the teacher and develop strategic coping skills, and 6) finally, the academic and social development, and other outcome measures are affected.

Recent research is providing a growing understanding of the importance of teacher beliefs, expectations, judgments, practical knowledge and cognitions in guiding their classroom practices. Therefore, to understand the actions of teachers, it is important to explore their thoughts (Delpit, 1995; Van Horn, 1999; Irvine, 2003; Koehler, 1988; Ladson Billings, 1994).

The second rationale relates to the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their motivation to change. Teachers adapt or adopt new practices in their classrooms if their beliefs match the assumptions inherent in the new programs or methods. Thus, understanding teachers' beliefs is crucial to the development and implementation of new programs and effective in-service education (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2003; Koehler, 1988).

According to Van Horn (1999), research shows that teachers' attitudes influence both their expectations for their students and their behavior toward them. These attitudes, expectations, and behaviors influence both student self-image and academic performance. Negative teacher attitudes toward students can prove to be detrimental to students' academic and social development. Artiles & Trent (1994) share a similar perspective by arguing that teacher prejudices, expectations, differential treatment, and class and racial bias, in many instances, have a profound impact on the referral of African Americans to special education.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that many teachers are hesitant and not willing to make the necessary accommodations and changes required for students with special needs to be educated in regular education classrooms. Such negative attitudes reflect attitudes historically taken by many people toward disabled persons in general. Without radical changes, the limitations that will inherently be placed on students with special needs will inhibit successful implementation of a culturally responsive school culture. Thus, teachers' attitudes are critical, not only to successful culturally inclusive education, but also to the success of individuals with special needs. As the movement to educate students with special needs in regular education classrooms continues, it is necessary to have sound means of assessing teachers' attitudes toward African American and other non-European American students, and the practice of inclusion (Cochran, 1997; Franklin, 1992; Gay, 2000; Moore, 2002; Townsend, 2000).

Many school professionals who participate in research and development have long pointed out that American education would change drastically if we implemented what we already know about teaching and learning. Culturally responsive schools represent how school professionals are capable of improving educational experiences and outcomes for students, thus, clearly suggesting that many professionals already know how to cultivate educational communities that is capable of embracing students of diverse ethnicities (Banks & Banks, 1997;

Gay, 2000). The restraint is not students' types and levels of disability but educators' personal ambivalence toward changing school practice (Bondy & Ross, 1998; Moore, 2002).

According to Patton (1998) the overrepresentation of African American students in special education continues to be a compelling reality for this group that has spanned almost three decades. A close examination of this problem reveals that basic assumptions, worldviews, epistemologies, and beliefs possessed by certain members of the educational community serve to perpetuate the dilemma of the disproportional representation of African Americans in special education.

### **Institutional Racism Student Referrals and Teacher Attitudes and Beliefs**

Both educators and parents are aware of how the identification of a student for admission into special education has adverse long-term implications on the student academically and socially. Notably, in most instances, a "minority" student who is identified as being disabled, are destined to contend with the lifelong negative implications of having been identified for special education assignment. The U.S. Department of Education (1995a) revealed that African American students, in some instances, are routinely identified as being viable candidates for special education services and are oftentimes placed in highly restrictive educational settings. This is due to the descriptive practices that negatively impact the academic and social development of numerous African American students throughout the educational community. As a result, it is important to acknowledge that institutional racism frequently reduces many African Americans to a status some observers describe as that of a second-class citizen. The following are descriptive practices that negatively impact African Americans in the institutional context: school practices and policies that usually manifest in the form of school-wide curriculum, teaching, tracking, disproportionate assignment to special education, and disciplinary protocol/practices (Irvine 1990).

According to Cooper (1993), it is important that members of the educational community view some of the problems that African American students encounter in the educational setting as a symptom of institutional rather than individual pathology. Unfortunately, far too many of these students enter the educational system with relatively positive self-esteem and self-concepts, but leave with them severely damaged. Meier, Stewart and England (1989) aver that when an educational community utilizes academic grouping and disciplinary procedures in a

discriminatory fashion, such practices deny African American students the opportunity to positively benefit from the educational setting.

Gordon, Della-Piana, and Keleher (2000) claim that American public schools do not function in an equitable manner in regard to race. In fact, data gathered throughout the nation reinforces what many “minorities” claim to already know; that public schools historically continue to fall short of providing a k-12 educational experience that is comparable in quality to what European American students receive in the educational setting. By and large, African American and other “minority” students are exposed to a unique form of “racial profiling: on the road to a decent education, students who are Brown or Black can expect to be pulled over frequently, while their white counterparts whiz on by” (p.1). In essence, African American students who become victims of teacher self-fulfilling prophecies are eventually placed in homogeneous ability groups that do little to improve their academic and social development. Actually, it is a practice that appears to contribute to their miseducation and poor achievement in the learning environment (Gay, 2000; Hilliard, 1992).

Meanwhile, numerous studies over the years studying both the interactions and effects of teacher ethnicity and students continue to be alarming (Hull, 1994; Lee, Carter, Cooley, & King, 1996). Some studies encompassing a broad range of research regarding African Americans lead one to a powerful if not unchangeable conclusion: American public education is failing in its efforts to educate many of the African American students who attend their schools (Hull 1994). Clearly, this is indicative of systematic failure comprised of both long and continuing duration with a cumulative effect. The reality of this overrepresentation negatively impacts African American students and our society for which these students are allegedly being educated. So much so is this the case that the present American public school system has become an institution that perpetuates racial stereotyping and bias in our society (Lee et al., 1996).

Also, institutional racism and bias by some teachers, who frequently refer non-White students for special education, suspension, or expulsion, are possible contributors to the drop-out phenomenon (Cress-Welsing 1991; Hare and Hare, 1991). *California Cities, Towns, and Counties* (1995) data confirmed that 57% of all students enrolled in public school in California were non-White, while 82% of the total certificated staff was White. Faculties were 56% female with that percentage increasing. Nationwide, 83% of all elementary teachers were female. Hale (1994) posits:

One explanation for the difficulty African American children have in school is that they are required to master two divergent cultures in order to achieve upward mobility in school and the workplace—the African American culture and the European American culture. African American male children, however, may have to master three cultures, because African American males have a culture distinct not only from the White male culture but from the African American female culture as well. This African American male culture is not recognized and may even be condemned by the school because it is not understood. Most elementary school classes are taught by women, with the result that a female orientation is created in the classroom. As we enter the twenty first century, inner-city classrooms will increasingly contain a majority of African American children being taught by White female teachers. White female teachers tend to be more comfortable with and knowledgeable about the behavior of White female children and, to a lesser degree, White male children. (p. 191)

Clearly, a strong argument can be made to examine the attitudes and beliefs of teachers regarding African American students and males in particular. This is a topic that makes most teachers and administrators uncomfortable, especially, European American school personnel. It is not uncommon for many European American teachers and administrators to become offended by the idea that there is some variation in how they treat their students. Or in other words, they do not treat all students the same. In fact, most teachers are inclined to believe that they deal with all students in an indiscriminate fashion. In the case of many White teachers, it is not uncommon for them to state that they treat all students the same and that unfair treatment of Blacks is no longer a reality in our society, but if it does occur, it takes place in small remote areas of our society where there is a low level of education (Bondy & Ross, 1998).

Pajares (1992) examined the construct of teachers' beliefs with respect to how they impact how they go about their duties as an educator. Pajares's study revealed that beliefs are persistent and powerful to the extent that they exert considerable influence on teachers' decision making, planning, and it plays a vital role in how they conduct themselves in the learning environment. Needless to say, teachers' belief of African American students significantly impacts their respective approaches to teaching, and eventually the academic success of African American students. In general, most teachers possess a much stronger negative perspective of African American students than other "minority" students due to the reality that the construct of

“Blackness” is devalued and maligned, for the most part, in our society (Ladson-Billings & King, 1990). Artiles and Trent (1994) identified that there was a correlation between school failure, ethnicity, and special education placement. Hence, they argued that the aforementioned correlation reinforces some of the most flagrant stereotypes about African American students and, to some extent, African Americans in general. Also, the correlation that Artiles and Trent speak of perpetuates an insidious and vicious cycle of disproportionate referral and assignment of African American students to the enterprise of special education.

It is important to note that most teachers are not blatant racists and they sincerely believe that their actions and interactions with African American students are free of any bias. Nonetheless, there are numerous African-centered scholars who argue that many teachers continue to be influenced by negative stereotypes of African American students (Bondy & Ross, 1998; Hilliard, 1992; Irvine, 1990, 2003; King, 1994; Kunjufu, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Moore, 2002). In many instances, such stereotypes play an important role in shaping the beliefs and attitudes of teachers toward African American students. Despite their good intentions, many teachers are cultural hegemonists (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Essentially, most teachers expect all students to conduct themselves in a similar fashion that coincides with the Eurocentric cultural norms and standards that govern the enterprise of schooling. The problem of cultural hegemony arises when African American students conduct themselves in ways that violate the cultural norms and standards of the educational setting. Consequently, most teachers view them as being extremely difficult to work with, embrace, respect, along with being problematic, and, in some cases, unlovable. Unfortunately, most teachers are unable to build on the talent, knowledge, and cultural diversity that African American students bring to the educational setting in ways that could make their learning a more enjoyable and rewarding experience. Instead, many of these teachers seek to correct and compensate for the alleged cultural deprivations of African American students. In essence, they take up the task of getting African American students to take on middle-class Eurocentric norms (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2003; King, 1994; Kunjufu, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Shujaa, 1994).

The approaches discussed above depict the ethnocentric actions of many teachers who encounter African American students in their respective educational settings. Gillborn (1990) argues that despite good intentions many teachers act in racist ways, thus stating:

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to evaluate other groups from the standpoint of one's own ethnic group and experience. Ethnocentric judgments of others' behavior, culture and experience may lead to misunderstandings and even to conflict and control. In some circumstances ethnocentrism on the part of power-holders will lead to consequences which are 'racist' in as much as they act against the interests of other ethnic groups. (p. 10)

The perspective given by Gilborn on ethnocentrism illustrates the reality that people can conduct themselves in racist ways that doesn't involve overt aggressive, adversarial actions (behavior), or individual specific manifestations of cruelty toward people of a different ethnic group. Although ethnocentrism is a less explicit form of racism, it is still a powerful manifestation of racism. The reality of ethnocentrism should serve as a wake-up call for the educational community.

Nationally, African American students comprised only 17% of the public school population. However, when we look at African American representation in special education, they comprise a staggering 41% of the population (The National Research Council, 2002). Arnez (1978) discovered that in five southern states 40% of the public school students were African American. In these states, African Americans collectively represented 80% of the Educable Mentally Retarded (EMR) population. The National Research Council (2002) reveals that these numbers have remained virtually unchanged some 25 years later and that African Americans approximately comprised a little less than a third of the emotionally disturbed student population at 27% despite constituting only 17% percent of the national student population in 1998. This reality reveals that far too many African American students experience considerable difficulty navigating a successful path via general educational.

Kunjufu (1990) states that the enterprise of schooling both neutralizes and confuses the mind of numerous African American students somewhere around the fourth grade by changing the rules; instead of having a nurturing environment, they are ushered into a rigid, hostile situation for which they are not prepared. One mother says, "My child couldn't wait to start school. He left home excited and ready to learn. By the time he reached the fourth grade, I wondered what had happened to him" (Kunjufu, 1990, p. 6).

Tribble (1992) concurs with Kunjufu, by appropriately identifying that the cultural values of African American students have never been a legitimate reality in the educational setting. He

suggests that African American cultural values have always been overshadowed by the European cultural values to which all students were expected to conform within the schools. There are numerous studies that encompass expansive research that illuminate biased-based issues. Also, many of these studies and scholarly critiques present a well-informed and powerful argument for radical change in the enterprise of American schooling (Bondy & Ross, 1998; Kunjufu, 1985, 1990, 1995; Lee et al, 1992; 1996; Patton, 1998). Hale (1994) offers the following:

Middle-class teachers attend to middle-class children and label them the most talented and ambitious children in the class (Spindler, 1959). School success follows. Lower-class children over time give up trying and amass “instructional biographies” of failure (Goffman, 1963) as they move through school, because they are unable to give evidence of their intelligence in terms of the limited code that teachers use for evaluating children. African American children are particularly at risk of being overlooked because of a nonrecognition by their teachers of African American culture and its strengths. I have pointed out, in assessing intelligence, elsewhere (Hale-Benson, 1986) that Western social science overly emphasizes linguistic and logic/mathematical skills, which must hew to patterns that approximate those used by European Americans to be recognized by the educational system. Skills that emerge from African American culture are recognized only when they are marketable in the capitalist system, such as the athletic skills of Michael Jordan, or the musical skills of Michael Jackson. When these skills are exhibited in early childhood by African American children, they are virtually ignored. (p. 163)

The Urban League conducted a study in 1979 that revealed 20% of African American males between 12 and 17 years of age were unable to read at the fourth grade level (Brown, Greene, Harris, Hughes, Moore, Tucker, Waters, & Watson, 1990). Furthermore, the study showed that significant numbers of African American males were dropping out of high school due to academic or discipline problems. Moreover, this study revealed that the aforementioned African American males accounted for 41% of all school suspensions, which is well beyond their representation in the overall student population. These findings indicate an imbalance suggestive of systemic, institutionally based problems.

Most notably, referrals of African American males to special education services were identified as having been made on a criterion other than the learning disability criteria established for appropriate identification purposes. In essence, this practice conveys that African

American males exhibited or were viewed as demonstrating attitudes and other behavioral characteristics that the referring school personnel apparently found meaningfully objectionable.

A study conducted by Bennett and Harris (1981) disclosed that teacher ethnicity and ethnic based biases are intricately associated with both disproportionate and inappropriate referrals of African American male students. This study was validated by the Tobias, Zibrin, and Bodlavkova's (1982) study when it analyzed the unwarranted assignments of African American male students to special education programs. Hale (1994) claims that the cultural discrepancies that exist with regard to status and identity between European American teachers and African American students cause them to shut down psychologically. In many instances, the students begin to distance themselves from learning and eventually align themselves with certain peers to establish a classroom subculture that usually results in reading disabilities and school failure in many cases.

The African-centered approach to education indicates that the enterprise of American schooling must move toward becoming an entity that provides nurturing educational communities that are genuinely concerned with the academic and social development of all students. In the case of African American students, it is imperative that their voices make the important move from the periphery of the major discourses that inform the various processes of schooling. Also, the educational community must understand and embrace the reality that the voices and sociopolitical realities of African American students must be given attention and respect so that they can move from their marginalized existence in the educational process. Should this become the reality for African American students, it is likely that their disproportionate representation in special education and many of the other problems that they encounter would eventually subside. Furthermore, the educational community must make the move toward becoming an arena where legitimate democratic practices is the reality that all of its participants are privy to participating in. The development and maintenance of a legitimate educational enterprise will provide the opportunity for far more culturally affirming and emancipatory outcomes for previously marginalized groups. An African-centered approach to education would be instrumental in facilitating the much needed transformation of American schooling to a more culturally inclusive and socially just enterprise that offers equitable participation for all of its participants.

## **Implications of an African-centered approach to education**

In a recent visit to an African-centered school in the East, I was amazed at the sheer number of students in attendance who had previously been identified by traditional public schools as mentally, emotionally, or learning disabled. Of course, in this setting it was virtually impossible to distinguish the formerly “labeled” children because they were performing on par with the other students. The expectations of academic excellence was explicitly stated to students on a consistent and regular basis, and the standards they held for themselves were high. (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p.193)

The perspective presented above by Ladson-Billings depicts the effectiveness of African-centered education regarding the academic and social success of African American students. The African-centered educational initiative is deeply committed to reaffirming the culture, identity, and historical legacy of people of African descent in the context of education. The strong liberatory, cultural, historical, and sociopolitical initiative of African centered education represents a few of the major reasons why African-centered education is increasingly gaining momentum with members of the African American community and other scholars and educators who are committed to making the enterprise of schooling a more culturally pluralistic sociopolitical reality for all students. Another important feature of African-centered schooling is that it provides an important alternative to the existing rigidly defined dynamics of teacher and student performance that dominate the European-centered enterprise of American schooling. Most importantly, the African-centered educational initiative addresses important cultural, sociopolitical, and economic issues with respect to African American students that previous and current educational reforms have failed to respond to (Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000).

The enterprise of American schooling alleges to take a culturally neutral and objective approach to the process of educating and socializing students despite the fact that it is deeply rooted in a Eurocentric cultural, epistemological, axiological, and ontological context. Also, the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century clearly illustrated the legitimacy of reproduction theories regarding the educational and sociopolitical realities of African Americans. This reality was most evident in the realm of education due to the fact that neither the desegregation initiatives of the 1950's, 60's, and 70's nor the reform initiatives of the 80's came close to effectively addressing the

needs of African American students. Despite such reform initiatives the problems continued to increase for African Americans (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000).

Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century the problems African Americans encounter in the enterprise of schooling, in my opinion, validates the statements mentioned above. The problems of disproportionate representation in special education, high dropout rates, low levels of literacy, the astonishing rise in discipline, low level academic tracking, and other unfortunate realities African American students experience throughout the enterprise of schooling unequivocally illustrates that their needs are not being adequately met.

As the problems continued to mount for African American students in the realm of public education, especially the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education, an alternative perspective of how to educate these students was being cultivated. During the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the African-centered approach to education was being entertained on an increasingly broader scale by members of the African American community. The African-centered approach to education is founded upon an Afrocentric worldview that re-examines the history of African people and their culture with respect to how they made contributions to the world. Asante (1992) strongly asserted that when African American students begin to learn in an environment that respectfully and critically engages their history and culture, they would be better able to relate to the knowledge that was being disseminated to them. Subsequently, this process would move African American students to begin recognizing the reality that they are participants in the learning process, instead of being observers of other people's culture and history.

Despite the fact that Afrocentricity is one of numerous centered educational approaches, nonetheless, supporters of African-centered education passionately argue that this approach offers a viable and legitimate conduit toward acknowledging the pluralistic reality of American society and the world in the context of schooling (King, 1990, 1991, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; C. Lee, 1992, 1994; C. Lee & Slaughter-Dafoe, 1995; Lomotey, 1992; Shujaa, 1994). The African-centered approach to education is firmly committed to a culturally pluralistic discourse that requires the entire educational setting to respect and recognize diverse cultural perspectives and world views. As a result, administrators, teachers, and students who participate in the African-centered educational setting will embrace a "non-hierarchical" multicultural orientation that enables them to develop a critically coherent understanding of their respective

place in history and contemporary reality, which allows them to develop a better understanding of their relationship with other people throughout the world (Asante, 1992). Clearly, African-centered education is a cultural and sociopolitical imperative that suggests the importance of cultural congruency in the educational setting. Therefore, I would argue that an African-centered approach would serve as an appropriate intervention for the problem of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education.

The remainder of this discussion will delineate how an African-centered approach can be useful in reducing the problem of the disproportionate referral and assignment of African Americans to special education that primarily deals with the issue of cultural congruency. The major premise of the following discussion asserts that if the enterprise of American schooling embraces the cultural imperative of African-centered education, it will begin to make the important move toward becoming a more cultural responsive entity that reaffirms the realities of all students. As a result, the enterprise of American schooling will begin to move away from marginalizing, oppressive, and disenfranchising practices (e.g., disproportionate low-level academic tracking of non-European American students, disproportionate assignment of African American and other non-European American students to special education, disproportionate dropout rates for non-European American and poor European American students, and the disproportionate discipline of African American students and other non-European American students).

Gay (2000) asserts that culturally responsive educational environments and teaching pedagogy would be beneficial to reducing a lot of the problems that African American and other non-European American students encounter throughout the enterprise of schooling. A problem that arises in the educational setting for many African American students centers around communication style. In many instances, the communication discourses of African American students are culturally incongruent to the conventional classroom discourse that requires students to possess a passive-receptive posture (Kochman, 1985). The passive-receptive posture requires students to listen quietly while the teacher speaks. Only after the teacher has finished speaking are students allowed to respond in a methodical and prearranged fashion (e.g., asking or responding to questions, confirming or disproving what was said, and waiting for their teacher regulated turn to speak). The conventional classroom discourse includes nonverbal conduct and modes of speech that warrant eye contact with the teacher, but is void of physical movement. As

a result, students are expected to remain quiet while watching the teacher speak, and they must wait to be acknowledged before they take their turn to speak (Kochman, 1981; Philips, 1983).

The structure of conventional classroom discourse is manifested in other areas of classroom pedagogy as well. For example, most teachers expect students to always use complete sentences to convey their thoughts in a logical and sequential fashion, which should be accompanied by correct vocabulary, specific information, and appropriate use of grammar (e.g., subject-verb and noun-verb tense agreement). Additionally, student participation in the educational setting is facilitated by the teacher posing questions to specific students which require highly constricted responses (i.e., minimal description, and information). Furthermore, the conventional classroom discourse requires students to distinguish themselves as individuals in conversations. That is, students are expected to respond to the specific demand of a given question, along with maintaining clear boundaries between the role of the speaker and audience (Gay, 2000).

Conversely, many African American and other non-European American students come from cultures that exemplify the participatory-interactive communication style (Asante; 1998, Kochman, 1985; Smitherman, 1977). In this form of communication the speaker expects the listener to interact with them via multiple non-verbal and verbal measures. Throughout the extended African American community the participatory-interactive style of communication is frequently referred to as call-response (Asante, 1998; Baber, 1987; Smitherman, 1977). This is a communication style that involves the listener providing feedback to the speaker in the form of encouragement, motivation, criticism, commentary, and compliments, etc. This phenomenon denotes why African Americans who have been socialized through this type of communication style are inclined to respond to a speaker in almost in any setting or situation who triggers a response in them. So the reality for many African Americans when placed in the speaker-listener situation as a listener is that they are likely to talk back to the speaker either verbally or non-verbally.

Oftentimes, African Americans enter or become participants in conversations via personal assertiveness, the intense desire to be involved, and the conviction that the point that they seek to make is a persuasive one, thus ignoring authority and shunning permission. In essence, African Americans usually accompany and advance their participation with a powerful persona, demonstrative displays of non-verbal and verbal actions, and strong emotions. As a

result, many African Americans are viewed as being verbal performers whose manifestations of speech are driven by personal verve and advocacy, emotionalism, dynamic fluidity, and immense creativity (Abrahams, 1970; Asante, 1998; Baber, 1987). The communication style of African Americans is linked to the oral-aural essence of their cultural and communal value orientations (Asante, 1988, 1998; Gay, 2000; Smitherman, 1977).

Unfortunately, many teachers throughout the enterprise of schooling view the communication style of African American students negatively. In fact, some of these teachers consider students who manifest the participatory-interactive communication style as “being inconsiderate, rude, disrespectful, disruptive, and feel that students speak out of turn” (Gay, 2000, p. 93). Consequently, teachers who hold this perspective regarding the communication styles of African American students usually impose heavy sanctions on them. In many instances, their communication style is considered as being defiant of authority that eventually results in their being referred to special education services.

Harry and Anderson (1995) argued that the special education process is set in motion for many African American students, particularly males, as early as their first day of school. They asserted that teachers, especially many European American teachers, who embrace the Eurocentric norms of schooling over a period of time develop a negative view of the enthusiasm and cooperation of African American students. These teachers are extremely troubled by African American students’ enormous vitality, and desire and tendency to move around the learning environment. As well, many of these teachers develop a strong disdain for the aggressive verbal style that African American students bring to the educational setting.

Gouldner (1978) conducted a study of 242 Black elementary classrooms that revealed what many of the teachers thought of the actions of the Black students. Most of the teachers complained that the African American students exhibited “aggressive and disruptive” behavior. On the contrary, Gouldner and his associates observed student conduct that was associated with boredom. They observed the African American students’ movement about the classroom and interaction with their peers as a clear manifestation of poor teaching taking place in the learning environment. Hence, disagreeing with the teachers who believed that the African American students were unmanageable and lacking the capacity and desire to learn. This and similar culturally insensitive educational environments are complicit in the perpetuation of the phenomenon of the disproportionate referral and assignment of African Americans to special

education. Furthermore, Kochman (1981) noted that African American students are much more likely to contest authority and alleged experts than other students.

An African-centered approach to education recognizes the reality that the teachers' ethnicity is not the most important factor in culturally responsive teaching for African American students. Instead, the most important factors to be considered when developing teachers' cultural awareness, sensitivity, and competence are: 1) teacher's knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity, 2) whether or not they possess positive attitudes toward cultural diversity, and 3) the ability to teach the sociohistorical realities of African American and other non-European American students effectively. By understanding that communication is intimately associated with culture and that it is experientially located and functionally strategic the educational community will begin to move toward becoming a culturally responsive educational site. Also, members of the educational community will begin to see that the communication styles of the different ethnic groups possess important distinctions, uniqueness in delivery, and are open to numerous interpretations and instructional possibilities (Gay, 2000).

The utilization of Irvine's concept of cultural synchronization would offer alternative conventional practices of interpreting the actions and conduct of African American students that oftentimes appear to in violation of the Eurocentric norms of the educational setting. Irvine's (1990) concept of cultural synchronization rests on two major premises: 1) people who share the same culture (e.g., values, customs, language, beliefs, learning styles, emotions, worldviews, and how they conduct themselves, etc.) are, in most instances, able to sustain positive, fruitful, and enjoyable interactions, and 2) On the contrary, when people don't share cultural understanding, their ability to relate to one another can swiftly become a futile endeavor.

An important feature of cultural synchronization that could be useful in stemming the problem of the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education would be to begin examining and interpreting the impact that the structure of the school has on African American students. Such interpretation would provide greater insight into how the enterprise of schooling impacts their respective skills, attitudes of themselves and others, knowledge, and other conduct that they might exhibit. A critical examination of schooling would reveal that the structure of homogeneous ability grouping of African American students adversely impacts their academic and social development (e.g., tracking, and special education). Several scholars have noted that African American students who are disproportionately assigned to special education encounter

considerable difficulty with appropriately developing their social, academic, and intellectual skills in conventional classroom settings (Ladson-Billings & Irvine, 1990; Hilliard, 1992; Kunjufu, 1995; Oakes, 1985; Patton, 1998).

Teachers can increase their effectiveness with African American students by recognizing the learning styles of these students and creating instructional strategies that match their learning style. Gay (2000) suggests that this can be achieved by reviewing research, theory, and practice on teaching via sensory modalities (Barbe & Swassing, 1979) and learning about brain lateralization (Springer & Deutsch, 1998). Teachers can develop a greater insight into multiple intelligences by reviewing the work of scholars in this field (Armstrong, 1994; Gardner, 1983; Lazear, 1991, 1994). While these models were not specifically created for African Americans, nonetheless, there are considerable commonalities between them and the learning styles of African American and other non-European American students. These models can be used in various combinations to improve the achievement of many African American students.

An African-centered approach to educating students' requires teachers who are both willing and capable of engaging their students in active learning. Teachers who are capable of engaging African American students in intense, serious and prolonged intellectual activity would aid in the reduction of these students enrollment into special education (Haberman, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Also, teachers participating in the African-centered educational setting see their jobs as making students want to learn (Haberman, 1995). Shade (1994) suggests that due to the reality that many African American students tend to be extroverts who give more credence to the social aspect of the teaching-learning process than the academic dimension of the learning process, it is necessary for their teachers to provide high levels of encouragement and support. Such recognition and support serve as reassurance to African American students and reduce the anger and frustration that many of them develop in uncaring and un-nurturing educational settings (Franklin, 1992; Gay, 2000; Irvine, 2003; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000).

The insight provided above delineates the reality that African American students' academic achievement is highly correlated to nurturing, supportive, and reassuring teachers and a highly stimulating and engaging learning environment that involves significant socialization (Franklin, 1992). Another important component of African centered education that is successful in the educational and social development of African American students is that most of the learning activity is based upon communal learning (group activity) whereas conventional

classroom practices focuses on the individual. Numerous African-centered educational scholars have argued that African American students perform best in educational settings that utilize cooperative, communal, and group activities as the primary approaches to the teaching-learning process (Bondy & Ross, 1998; Boykin, 1982, 1983, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Irvine, 1990; Irvine, 1990). Foster (1993) offers insight into what takes place in learning environment where the emphasis is placed on cooperation instead of individual competitiveness:

Much of the activity is . . . focused on the group, not the individual. The activities emphasized cooperation instead of competition . . . learning in these classrooms was structured as a social activity . . . It was only by talking collectively about the texts that they came to have meaning. (p. 386)

Instead of seeking to dictate student movement and interaction, teachers are likely to be much more effective in getting students to learn by creating more opportunities for interaction and student movement. Additionally, teachers can improve their effectiveness with students by continuously adding variety, and sustaining a rapidly moving learning environment that is highly stimulating. This approach to the teaching-learning process can serve to reduce student boredom and student conduct that disrupts the learning environment; all of which places African American students at risk of being removed from the general education setting and placed into special education or placed in low level academic tracks.

Furthermore, teachers and administrators must acquire keen insight into the cultural style of African American students so that they can better understand their actions and conduct. This will enable them to view the actions of African American students in new ways that eschew traditional interpretations that branded them as being unsocialized and pathological, thus allowing school personnel to see them as students who manifest unique cultural characteristics (Bondy & Ross, 1998; Gay, 2000; Hale, 1986). Irvine and York (1995) stated that establishing cultural congruity across multiple aspects of the learning process of ethnically diverse students and the type of instruction utilized by teachers converge to play a pivotal role in their academic and social development. This continuity compels the teacher to contextualize classroom instruction of students of color that represents the multiplicity and sociohistorical dynamism of their culture in a way that reaffirms the student in the learning process.

Teachers in the African-centered educational community understand that classroom management and instruction are intricately connected. McCollum (1995) conducted a two year

study of 140 classrooms of indigent African American students. He concluded that the quality of instruction and curriculum influenced how students conducted themselves in the classroom. McCollum's study revealed that by structuring the learning environment to meet the unique educational needs of African American students in a way that supported their strengths, ultimately created a climate of success for them. Interestingly, Haberman (1995) noted that many teachers utilize top-down classroom management styles that regardless of ethnicity most students were likely to oppose and conquer through resistive conduct. To avoid this problem, he suggested that teachers should build and maintain trusting relationships with students and be willing to empower them.

The African-centered educational community is committed to appropriately developing the academic and social development of African American students. To be highly successful in this endeavor, it is imperative that the educational community is guided by an ethos of collaborative decision that all members of the educational site are committed to ensuring that students are successful. There are several scholars who believe that top-down rigidly controlled organizational structures are ineffective in improving student interaction, cooperation, and achievement. Instead, a process of legitimate democratic practice is best suited to facilitate the overall development of African American students (Asante, 1988, 1998; Lee, 1992, 1994; Irvine, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Shujaa, 1994).

### **Conclusion**

If Afrocentricity is to continue gaining momentum throughout the enterprise of American schooling, in my opinion, I think King's (1994b) concept of Afro-humanitarian education would serve as a viable initiative to bring about a legitimate form of democracy that endorses the sociopolitical affirmation of all students in ethnically diverse educational settings. The terms Afrocentricity and African-centered education are terms that are used by all independent African-centered educational institutions and those public schools that have embraced the African-centered educational initiative that have predominantly African American student populations. Clearly, the uses of these terms are fitting for predominantly African American student populations. However, in public education settings where there are representations of different ethnic groups, it might be more appropriate to use the term Afro-humanity.

The use of Afro-humanity signifies the reality that the cultural ethos, curriculum, and learning processes will not be monopolized and normalized by the cultures of Africans and

African Americans. Also, the educational community would endorse the recognition and respect of all of its participants. The term Afro-humanity would unequivocally articulate that this alternative approach to education is different from the Eurocentric sociopolitical approach to schooling that has unfairly dominated the enterprise of American schooling. The successful implementation of Afro-humanity will require intense and creative thinking and the participation of all the ethnic groups participating in the educational community.

It is important to note that King provides a detailed explanation of what the Afro-humanity curriculum should look like and what it should achieve in the education of African American students. However, I am inclined to infer that King's concept can be adapted and successfully utilized for other homogeneous educational settings as well (e.g., Native American, Asian American, European American, Latino Americans, and Mexican Americans, etc.). Indeed, how the Afro-humanitarian school would carry out the process of schooling in an ethnically diverse educational setting is an extremely important and challenging issue. Nonetheless, I believe that King's concept of Afro-humanity could be used and successful in ethnically diverse educational communities, but it will require the unconditional commitment to authentic democratic practices that offers equitable participation in the decision-making processes, creation of school culture, and all of the other processes involved in formulating an educational community. Needless to say, such an endeavor is a daunting task; however, the long-term benefits would result in the establishment of an educational community that continuously strives to maintain a culturally sensitive ethos that supports the success of all of its students regardless of ethnicity. Watkins, Lewis, and Chou (2001) captures the essence of King's concept of Afro-humanity, by stating:

She calls for a freeing, or a "Being free," which require the "emancipation of human knowledge." She calls for a curriculum rooted in the Afro/human legacy. That legacy, for King, offers a pedagogy that challenges the social justifications of poverty, sexism, human ranking, exploitation, racism and unhealthy environments." It rejects the "colonizing mission" of school as it rejects dominance. (p. 58)

King's concept of Afro-humanity reveals the fact that the enterprise of schooling must abolish the practice of assessing and evaluating African American and other non-European American students against Eurocentric norms. The abandonment of Eurocentric norms will do away with thinking and actions that suggest African American students who bring unique

learning styles and different types of socialization to the educational community are in need of deficit education and compensatory skills. Also, instead of misinterpreting the conduct, abilities, and talents of African American students, the enterprise of schooling will become an entity that accommodates their learning styles.

Finally, African-centered education should be understood as moving away from taken-for-granted assumptions about African American students that are heavily influenced by Eurocentric values and norms. By dismissing such negative assumptions enables the enterprise of schooling to become a more socially just, nurturing and caring enterprise. The enterprise of schooling will begin to be supportive of educational sites that are committed to ensuring that all students learn and providing instruction that enhances their academic, social, and intellectual development. Essentially, the African-centered approach to education is concerned with creating emancipatory educational sites that offers hope and the opportunity to our children so that they can develop into critically conscious adult citizens who are capable of making meaningful contributions to their respective communities and to the world.

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