

## **African American Homeschooling and the Question of Curricular Cultural Relevance**

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*Homeschooling, and academic interest in this phenomenon, have increased tremendously over the last decade. The surge of African American involvement in the homeschool movement has also become noticeable. However, there continues to be a general paucity of research on the motivations of African American parents that choose homeschooling. In order to capture the voice of African American homeschoolers, the authors conducted seventy-four interviews in the spring and summer of 2010 in several large U.S. metropolitan areas. The findings revealed that curricular considerations play a critical part, since many African American homeschoolers believe that a Eurocentric curriculum is bound to gravely interfere with their children's self-esteem and sense of purpose.*

**Keywords:** *homeschooling, African American, Afrocentricity, Protectionists, Culturalists*

Academic interest in homeschooling has increased over the last decade, as what was once perceived as a marginal development, has, in fact, turned into a significant and growing phenomenon. It is estimated that over two million children are being homeschooled today in the United States, as opposed to 300,000 in 1990, thereby indicating a dramatic increase over a relatively short period of time (Gathier, 2007; Ray, 2010). In fact, homeschooling appears to be the most rapidly growing form of education in the United States. While White homeschooled students still represent about 75% of all homeschooled children, there has also been a noticeable surge in African American involvement in the homeschool movement. In 1999, it was estimated that nearly 10% of all homeschooled children were Black and those numbers appear to be consistently growing (Coleman, 2003; Fulbright, 2006; Ray, 2010). However, there continues to be a general paucity of research on the motivations of homeschooling Black parents, as the common and implicit assumption seems to be that African Americans' disengagement from the school system is dictated by reasons quite similar to those cited by European Americans (Gathier, 2007; Taylor, 2005). Nonetheless, the very unique experiences of African Americans in this society should be cause for caution. Throughout this article, Black, African, and African American will be used interchangeably for the same population as will White and European American.

It is the purpose of this article is to

- explore one of the main reasons why African Americans increasingly choose to educate their children at home, namely African American discontent with the common Eurocentric orientation of school curricula, at times assorted with a rejection of schooling altogether;
- provide a historical and philosophical contextualization of African American discontent with Eurocentric education and;
- present empirical evidence regarding African American motivations for homeschooling. Too often, previous research on African American homeschooling has presented it as simply an epiphenomenon of the failure of public education. While it may not be incorrect, such a view nonetheless fails to appreciate homeschooling as the latest phase of the African American struggle for adequate education.

While previous studies (Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Llewellyn, 1996) have been limited by narrow geographical scopes, and small subject pools, this study sought to overcome these

limitations by drawing from a larger number of households distributed over a wide geographical area.

## AFRICAN AMERICAN QUEST FOR EDUCATION

As pointed out by many scholars, there exists a long history of a sustained and heroic effort on the part of Africans in America to obtain education. Many enslaved Africans, in their quest for freedom, did not hesitate to risk severe punishment, and sometimes even their lives in order to learn to read and write (Lomotey, 2010). During and after the Civil War, more than one thousand Sabbath schools, for example, were established in the South by formerly enslaved Africans for the purpose of making literacy available to adults and children. Sabbath schools, as Span and Benson (2010) correctly noted, “were truly a testament to the self-determination and value African Americans—free or freed—placed on literacy” (p. 558). Overall, African Americans, despite the great precariousness of their circumstances, courageously set up schools in order to educate themselves. Later, in the midst of Jim Crow, African American parents also actively organized to bring about the end of school segregation, through the historic case, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). In their minds, school segregation denied their children access to the best schools, hence their resolute and brave fight to put an end to it (Fields-Smith, 2005).

The reason for this emphasis on education is that African Americans perceived the latter as their passport away from the plantations, and generally speaking, away from material poverty and its far-reaching negative consequences. They quite understandably aspired to a better life, and education occupied a central place in that new scheme. African Americans were the first and most ardent promoters of free public education in the South. In that regard, they faced fierce opposition on the part of most planters who saw their educational aspirations as both pretentious and dangerous for the socioeconomic and racial status quo.

Not only did Africans have to fight to secure access to formal education, they also had to struggle over what they felt was the most appropriate educational course for the fulfillment of their desire for freedom and social mobility. While there was a wide consensus among Whites that African Americans should primarily receive vocational training that would teach them to better serve without question in a system still largely dominated by wealthy Whites, Blacks, for the most part, begged to differ, and fought sedulously to change and improve their conditions through what they felt was a better quality education, a liberal arts one. This was, of course, the crux of the famous debate (Robinson, 2010) between Booker T. Washington, who, under the influence of his White patrons, defended industrial training as the most reasonable option for his people, and W. E. B. Du Bois, who did not deem such sole option compatible with the emergence of a much needed Black leadership.

Despite the incredible odds that they faced, Blacks were able to reduce their illiteracy rate from 95% in 1860 to 30% by 1910 (Anderson, 1988), and down to 20% by 1940 (Gatto, 2006). Similarly, the exclusively vocational schools set up to train Blacks into obedience to the new social and industrial order eventually had to include liberal arts training, in order to satisfy the demands of Black students, as well as the general trend of the day. Even Hampton and Tuskegee had to broaden the scope of their teaching, in order to meet more rigorous and modern standards (Anderson, 1988).

## THE CURRICULUM: A THORNY ISSUE FROM THE BEGINNING

The liberal arts curriculum was not without problems of its own; given its profound Eurocentric facture, it was bound to have deleterious effects on the psyche of those subjected to it. The New England classical liberal curriculum that was adopted in most schools set up by Blacks (Anderson, 1988), included among other subjects, Latin, Greek and Western philosophy. This meant that “the subjects taught in post-Civil War Black elementary, normal, and collegiate schools did not differ appreciably from those taught in northern white schools” (Anderson, 1988, p. 28).

Downplaying the potentially debilitating impact of this choice, Anderson (1988) further asserts that that curriculum “did not necessarily convince Black students that they were inferior to white people” (p. 29). Nonetheless, it would have been exceedingly surprising if it did not, for not only did such a curriculum implicitly assume Europe to be the norm, thereby reinforcing prevailing notions of European evolutionary superiority over other groups, especially Blacks, but it also largely contributed to the intellectual and mental marginalization of Africans by making them largely invisible, and therefore irrelevant even to themselves.

Many scholars expressed concerns about the epistemological and psychological implications of such a state of affairs. In fact, one will remember that this is what prompted Carter G. Woodson to launch the *Journal of Negro History* as early as 1916, and to initiate in 1926 Black History Week, which later became Black History Month. Dagbovie (2010) explained that by doing so, Woodson was seeking “to help educate and instill racial pride within African Americans, introduce and integrate African American history into U.S. educational institutions, dispel racist stereotypes and prejudice within White society, and inspire African American youth (p. 674),” for he realized that the Eurocentric curriculum of most schools attended by young Blacks was not conducive to such developments. Woodson began his famous *Miseducation of the Negro* (1990) lamenting that “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. 6).

Marcus Garvey, the leader of a massive Black and Pan-African nationalist movement in the first part of the twentieth century, also raised questions about the Eurocentric curriculum that African Americans were taught. Garvey feared that in the name of education, Blacks were in fact made to swallow whole notions of Black inferiority and White superiority. Of particular concern to Garvey, was the concept of Africa’s historical irrelevance, which led to the profoundly incorrect and unjust misrepresentations of African contributions to the world. “The educational system of today hides the truth as far as the Negro is concerned,” wrote Garvey (1986, p. 12). “For instance, you will read that the Egyptians were a great people, the Carthaginians, Libyans, etc., but you will not be told they were Black people or Negroes” (1986, p. 12). Marcus Garvey thus urged his followers to never accept at once, but always “scan” whatever they read by analyzing it and researching it further.

Similarly, Du Bois (1925) raised concerns about the European style of Black education, thereby encouraging the creation of a “Negro Academy” devoted to the study of Black life, as well as Black institutions of higher learning. It was also his great desire to document and study the history, institutions, and culture of African people worldwide which fed into Du Bois’s grand plan to edit a “Negro Encyclopedia.” Such a reference book, he felt, was necessary to provide accurate and scientific knowledge about Africans, to themselves as well as others.

There were a few notable exceptions, such as the Clara Muhammad Schools in Chicago (Muhammad, 2010), which started in the mid-thirties; however, Black education remained largely dominated by Eurocentric assumptions and perspectives, with Africans continuing, for the most part, to be educated away from themselves and their sanity.

It would not be until the Black Power movement in the late 1960s that the issue of a culturally appropriate and relevant curriculum would be raised in a forceful manner by African Americans, within universities and colleges, consequently leading to the emergence of a new discipline, Black Studies, or Africana Studies, as it is commonly referred to today. This development occurred as a result of political demands made by Black students, and the Black community at large, on White institutions to break their racist silence about, or otherwise malignant misrepresentations of the Black experience (Karenga, 2002; Rose, 1976).

At the elementary and secondary level, the most noticeable development was the creation of independent schools, financially supported and controlled by Africans. Guided by a nationalist ideology, those schools proceeded to instill in their students self-knowledge and self-confidence as Africans. However, their private nature may have been an obstacle to the massive enrollment

of Black children in such institutions, which remain for the most part few, small, and often unavailable in many areas where African Americans reside.

The subsequent emergence of African-centered (a term often used to mean 'Afrocentric') charter schools, in the early 1990s, promised to make African-centered education available to larger numbers of African children at no cost. However, having to operate within the confines of public schooling, charter schools have been faced with many challenges, including the fact that they must, African-centered or not, abide by curricular standards and meet performance expectations imposed from without, which, of course, represents a profound contradiction and impediment yet to be resolved.

However, the creation of institutions, private or public, devoted to teaching African children relevant cultural and historical information is certainly not, as alluded above, the only approach used by African Americans over the years to secure a more culturally appropriate education for their children. Indeed, many attempts have been made and continue to be made to pressure public school districts into infusing the curriculum with African information, the most notorious of such challenges occurring in New York, Atlanta, and Washington, DC in the 1980s and 1990s (Binder, 2002). This was the period when Afrocentricity emerged as a liberation theory. Often loosely defined, Afrocentricity became associated with efforts on the part of African Americans to claim a cultural space of their own, in schools and elsewhere.

## AFROCENTRICITY

First articulated in 1980 by Molefi Kete Asante, in his classic essay *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, and further developed in subsequent publications (1990, 1998, 2007), Afrocentricity is a philosophical and theoretical perspective "whose essential core centers on interpretation and explanation based on the role of Africans as subjects in historical, cultural, and social reality" (Asante, 2007, p. 26). Drawing its roots from Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon, Negritude, Kawaida, and Diopian historiography, Afrocentricity is the most recent and potent manifestation of Black Cultural Nationalism since the 1960s (Mazama, 2003).

The ultimate avowed goal of Afrocentricity is the liberation of African people from the maddening grips of Eurocentrism, by grounding them in their own history and culture, and teaching them to systematically and consciously apprehend reality from their own perspective, not as objects, but as subjects. While Eurocentrism denies African agency to naturally posit the African as mere consumer and poor imitator of Europe, Afrocentricity maintains that Africans are best understood and served as people capable of historical and cultural initiatives of their own (Asante, 1990). What is at stake is the effective challenging and dismantling of the "rhetoric of domination" in which white supremacy rests, with schools and the academy as major sites for the development and dissemination of such oppressive rhetoric.

This Eurocentric rhetoric is based on racist notions, as articulated in particular by arguably the most distinguished and influential Western philosopher since Plato, Fredrick Hegel. According to Hegel, Africans having failed to reach a certain level of consciousness due to evolutionary retardation had not entered human history yet, thereby negating African contributions to world civilization. Hegel went so far as to refer to "the Negro" as "an example of animal man in all his savagery and lawlessness" (cited in Tibebe, 2011, p. 179). Needless to say that within this racist paradigm, being enslaved by Europeans in the Americas was regarded as a blessing for the Africans (Tibebe, 2011). Unfortunately, as noted by Tibebe again, although repudiated in its most outrageous forms, "the subtext of the discourse on Africa continues to remain essentially Hegelian because Africa is still perceived through the prism of essential otherness" (Tibebe, 2011, p. 174).

One of the most striking attributes of "otherness" is a total void of agency. In his insightful book, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, Blaut (1993) explained how, starting in the 16th to 17th centuries and culminating in the 19th century, Europeans embraced diffusionism to account for their self-proclaimed superiority. According to this metatheory, the world is made up of two parts, one characterized by cultural and intellectual inventiveness, the other by uninventiveness.

Quite predictably, the uniquely creative human communities “remain the permanent centers of culture change, of progress” (Blaut, 1993, p. 14). Consequently, “At the global scale, this gives us a model of a world with a single center—roughly, Greater Europe—and a single periphery; an Inside and an Outside” (1993, p. 14). The rest of the world is therefore condemned to consume European intellectual and material products, due to its own creative impotence. Worse still, the rest of the world must wait on Europe to be rescued from its cultural and historical lethargy.

It is this largely unacknowledged diffusionist paradigm, based on notions of African inferiority, cultural and historical apathy, which informs common school curricula in the United States and elsewhere. The systematic exclusion or misrepresentation of anything African is its inevitable by-product. It is the same paradigmatic logic that insists only when placed in contact with Europeans that Africans can exist, hence 1619 as the beginning of African history in the United States. The question of the cultural and historical baggage of those Africans unfortunate enough to reach American shores cannot even be posed within that conceptual framework. Asante commented,

[Africans]... have been negated in the system of white racial domination. This is not mere marginalization, but the obliteration of the presence, meaning, activities, or images of the African. This is negated reality, a destruction of the spiritual and material personality of the African person (Asante, 1998, p. 41).

Asante further noted how,

With regards to African literature, history, behavior, and economics, the Eurocentric writers have always positioned Africa in the inferior place with regards to every subject field. This has been a deliberate falsification of the record. It is one of the greatest conspiracies in the history of the world because what was agreed upon, tacitly, writer after writer was that Africa should be marginalized in the literature and downgraded when it seemed that the literature spoke with high regard to Africa. (Asante, 1998, p. 45)

What educational institutions functioning within Eurocentric premises deliver is therefore, not true education, Asante contends, but Eurocentric triumphalist propaganda, “a racist education, that is, a white supremacist education” (2007, p. 82). In such a context, the development of history, philosophy, mathematics, writing, arts, and religion is automatically, and without any questions, attributed to Europe, as a result of the so-called Greek miracle. However, closer scrutiny of the facts would compel advocates of the Greek miracle theory to far more humble and reasonable claims.

As a result of this overall obliteration and inferiorization, Africans have often “lost sense of their cultural ground” (Asante, 2007, p. 35) and live in a state of mental and cultural exile. Asante also wrote of the Africans as a people who have been “relegated to the fringes of the society” (1998, p. 39), “de-centered” and “dislocated,” as a consequence of European cultural (and intellectual) imperialism.

It is out of concern for the massive confusion, disorientation, ignorance of self, and self-destruction generated by a dislocation among Africans that Afrocentricity emerged, urging Black people to become centered again, that is, consciously and systematically located within their own cultural traditions and historical reality (Asante, 1990; Mazama, 2005).

In the educational arena, Asa Hilliard was, without a doubt, one of the most ardent advocates of the grounding of African children in their own history and culture in the classroom: “African views must be a part of any discussion of the design of education today, especially the education and socialization of Africans,” wrote Hilliard (1997, p. 216). Such inclusion is in fact imperative: “There is a defining African and African American culture, which is shared by most people of African descent. It is powerful enough that it must be considered if Africans are to be understood and served in education as in other areas” (Hilliard, 1997, p. 126).

Arguing against the common views of Black students as “failures,” Hilliard contends that the African conception of education, that is, as a transformative process toward higher consciousness, could be, tapped into to connect the students to the school. Failure to learn about, and failure to appreciate African and African American culture inevitably leads to “varying degrees of alienation of students from school experiences, the impairment of communication, a reduction in motivation and effort, and ultimately in low achievement” (Hilliard, 1997, p. 138). However, Hilliard had no illusions about the school’s ultimate ability or willingness to truly educate African children, given the prevalence of white supremacy, and its use of schooling as “one of the major tools to structure the domination of Africans by Europeans through curriculum, school structure, and methods of instruction and public policy” (1997, p. 132).

The political and structural reality, which is not limited to Africans, indicates that schools in the United States were largely designed, to begin with, for the purpose of schooling those to be subjugated, not of educating them. In his groundbreaking study of compulsory schooling in the United States, Gatto (2006) convincingly argued that schools are best understood as “prisons” and schooling as “mass incarceration,” whose object is “the engineering of stupefaction” and “dumbness.” Schools, Gatto continued, steadily and scientifically deprive children of their ability to think in order to preempt any possible threat to the status quo. Modern schooling

set out to build a new social order at the beginning of the twentieth century (and by 1970, it had succeeded beyond all expectations), but in the process it crippled the democratic experiment of America, disenfranchising ordinary people, dividing families, creating wholesale dependencies, grotesquely extending childhoods. It emptied people of full humanity in order to convert them into human resources. (Gatto, 2006, p. 105)

At stake, then, is the “manufacture of consent,” to ensure the maintenance of a particular social order, one based on capitalism, racism, and sexism. In that context, it appears highly dubious that European-controlled schools, public or even private for that matter, could ever deliver true education to anyone, especially African people. While no attempt is made here to downplay the school as a site of resistance (Giroux, 1983; Leonardo, 2011; Macleod, 1987; Willis, 1977), commonplace observations seem to indicate that schooling has in effect been quite successful at producing large scale intellectual numbing, ignorance, and apathy.

Furthermore, as institutions set up and are controlled by those who have an interest in the maintenance of the status quo, schools have also countered the resistance offered to their often oppressive agenda. Therefore, when one examines, for example, the gains made by Afrocentrists pushing for infusion in New York, Atlanta, and Washington, DC, one realizes that they proved only temporary, as “educators found ways to make their concession temporary—often by surreptitious or, at least, behind-the-scenes, means” (Binder, 2002, p. 6). What is left most often and in the best case scenario, is not any meaningful engagement of the African experience, but some cosmetic “multiculturalism,” which claims to account for the “diversity” of the society without challenging the profound inequities that serve as its foundations.

Shujaa (1994) keenly observed that one of the challenges facing Africans in America is that they are, in fact, receiving “too much schooling and too little education.” Education, according to Shujaa, is the process whereby a community of people ensures the transmission of its cultural values, traditions, and sensibilities to the next. The critical importance of this process cannot be underestimated since: “Through education we learn how to determine what is in our interests, distinguish our interests from those of others, and recognize when our interests are consistent and inconsistent with those of others” (Shujaa, 1994, p. 173). Failure to be educated, as opposed to being schooled into accepting current social and racial arrangements, makes someone particularly vulnerable to outside assaults, since he or she may not even be able to recognize that a war is being waged against the community, and certainly does not have the knowledge of one’s own past struggles to fall back and build on.

## RESEARCH DESIGNS AND DATA

In order to capture the voice of African American homeschoolers, the conducted seventy-four interviews across a wide geographical area, from Mid- and South Atlantic, and the Midwest during the spring and summer of 2010. Additionally, surveys, focus groups, and participant observations of Black homeschooling parents were done in order to provide a comprehensive view of the Black homeschooling experience (See Table 1). The largest pool of subjects came from Chicago and its surrounding suburbs (29.7 %), followed by the metropolitan areas of Philadelphia (25.7 %), Washington, DC (17.6 %), New York (10.8 %), and Atlanta (8.1 %).

A snowball sampling procedure and active recruitment from local and national homeschooling associations accounted for a majority of respondents. The interviews consisted of two parts: a survey that sought demographic and background data for each homeschooling family, followed by a semi-structured, open-ended interview with the participating parent, where issues touched on in the survey were further explored and elaborated on by the parents. Over eighty % of the interviews were conducted with one parent—usually the mother ( $N = 60$ )—representing the homeschooling family. The interviews ranged from roughly one and a half hours to two hours in length. As a follow-up, three focus group sessions were conducted in the fall of 2011 to further investigate the homeschooling experience of Black families. The focus groups consisted of 5 to 6 mothers from a large metropolitan area in the Northeast of the United States. Finally, on many occasions, observations were made at forums specifically geared for homeschoolers (e.g., science museums or sporting events). The data gathered in the focus groups and participant observations were used to complement and triangulate the data gathered in the individual interviews and surveys. The information presented in this study, however, is largely culled from the surveys and interviews.

**Table 1**

*Respondents Interview Locations and Percentages in Pool (N = 74)*

<b>Place of Interviews</b>	<b>%</b>
Chicago metropolitan area [Chicago Land]	29.7
Philadelphia metropolitan area	25.7
Washington, D.C. metropolitan area	17.6
New York City metropolitan area	10.8
Atlanta	8.1
Columbia and Florence, South Carolina	6.7
Bridgeport, Delaware	1.3

Table 2 considers the demographic characteristics of the subjects interviewed. As shown there is little variation in the ethnicity of Black respondents interviewed. The majority of the respondents self-identified as native born African Americans, with only a few self-identifying as foreign born or racially mixed. In terms of family description, the average family consists of 3.2 children and most were raised in a two-parent household (91 %). Aside from these initial similarities among respondents, there is a considerable amount of diversity in other areas.

**Table 2**

*Demographic Background of Respondents in Percentages (N = 74)*

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
Black/African American	92.7
Caribbean	2.9
African	1.4
Mixed race	1.4
Hispanic/Latino	1.4
<i>Immigrant origin</i>	
U.S. born	95.6
Born abroad	4.3
<i>Children's characteristics</i>	
Average number in household	3.2
Younger than 18	59.8
Aged 18 to 24	21.9
H.S. graduate	12.9
Aged 25 or older	2.2
College graduate	3.1

Table 3 provides a general socioeconomic profile of the homeschooling parents. Overall, they are quite educated, with more 80 % of the mothers and more 60 % of the fathers having an undergraduate college degree or higher. These figures are significantly higher than the national trend of only 19.4 % of Blacks with a bachelor's degree or more in 2010 (Aud et al., 2011). This suggests a substantial human capital on the part of this study's homeschooling parents. If human capital is understood as the skills, abilities, and knowledge possessed by specific individuals (Becker 1964), educational attainment becomes the most common and direct indicator of that construct. It is believed that parents who possess substantial human capital are in a better position to supervise and instruct their children in the further acquisition of human capital (Lareau, 2000). These well-educated parents aside, the figures do suggest a bimodal trend that ought not to be ignored. In effect, a substantial number of homeschooling households have parents with no college degree. Although this trend is higher among fathers—who for various reasons are not as involved in homeschooling instruction as mothers—the data suggest that almost 20 % of mothers and close to 40 % of fathers do not possess a college degree.

When considering household income, the data reveal a broad representation across the income spectrum with a slight increase at the high end. A quarter of the subjects are in households with an income of \$100,000 or more, and over 60 % report an income of \$50,000 or more. These figures leave, however, a substantial portion of subjects with an income less than \$50,000 a year. According to national labor statistics, the poverty line for a family of five with three children is \$26,023. With this number as a baseline, it can be ascertained that 15.6 % of the subjects are living below the poverty line and an additional 12.5 % hover near the poverty line. Consistent with the household income trend, 65.2 % of the respondents report living in a home they own, but ironically the values of those homes do not trend at the high end, as one would expect given the income and education distribution of the sample. The values of the homes owned by this sample are distributed evenly across scale. These figures suggest

- the historical legacy of racism and discrimination which accounts for the wealth gap between Whites and Blacks, and
- the way in which segregation moderates homes' value in the American housing market (Massey & Denton, 1993; Oliver & Shapiro, 1997; Shapiro, 2004).

Consistent with the distribution of home values, we find our sample living in quite segregated areas. About 40 % of our respondents live in a neighborhood where over 75 % of their neighbors are Black, and combined with other markers of segregation, over 50 % of our respondents live in a majority Black neighborhood.

**Table 3**

*Respondents' Socioeconomic Background and Percentages (N = 74)*

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>%</b>
<i>Mother's highest level of schooling</i>	
Some high school	0
High school graduate	1.4
Some college	17.4
College graduate	37.7
Some postgraduate	14.5
Graduate or professional degree	29.0
<i>Father's highest level of schooling</i>	
Some high school	1.5
High school graduate	7.5
Some college	27.5
College graduate	37.3
Some postgraduate	2.9
Graduate or professional degree	22.4
<i>Household income</i>	
4,000–24,999	15.6
25,000–34,999	12.5
35,000–49,999	10.9
50,000–74,999	18.7
75,000–99,999	17.2
100,000–or more	25.0
<i>Own home</i>	
Yes	65.2
No	31.9
<i>Estimated value of property (in \$000s)</i>	
Less than 200	23.2
\$200–\$300	30.2
\$301–\$500	20.9
\$501–\$950	25.6
<i>Percent Black in neighborhood</i>	
≤10	18.8
11–30	13.0
31–50	17.4
51–75	11.6
>75	39.1

### **Findings**

When asked, in the open-ended interview, to explain and to elaborate as fully as possible what influenced this crucial decision about the educational path for their children, most parents gave two to three reasons for homeschooling and rarely were they motivated by a single cause. Among the many reasons given was a concern with the quality of education provided in brick

and mortar schools, which was most often mentioned (23.2 %). This finding is consistent with previous research, and consistent with the history of homeschooling in America (Gathier, 2007). The second most cited factor was the desire to strengthen family bonds (13.7 %), which respondents felt schools systematically undermined. Surrendering one's child for seven hours or more to "strangers," coupled with the demands of work, made for strained family relations. Many parents felt that an investment in time, especially at the early stages of a child's life, would avoid subsequent difficulties.

In the midst of these two reasons, however, the findings reveal that a substantial number of the respondents couched their desire to homeschool in clear racial terms. About 12.6 % of the subjects interviewed assert culture as a reason for homeschooling. More specifically, the desire on the part of parents to teach their children using a curriculum that positively reflects African American culture is the third most mentioned motivation for homeschooling (Hilliard, 1997). The next most mentioned factor is racism. Parents mentioned racism as their motivation for homeschooling their Black children almost 10 % of the time. This reason was couched either as a desire to protect one's child from possible racist actions or a reaction to past racist incidents. In many interviews cultural compatibility of the learning experience and the fight against institutional racism undergird other reasons provided by the subjects. That is to say, parents who mention religion or family bond as motivations for homeschooling do so within a context that acknowledges institutional racism and the imperative of a curriculum that espouses a positive self-image of African American people. In fact, when combined, culture and racism rival quality of education as the largest category of motivation for homeschooling. Table 4 summarizes this information.

**Table 4**

*Respondents Reasons for Homeschooling and Percentages (N = 74)*

<b>Reasons</b>	<b>%</b>
Quality of education	23.5
Racism	22.4
Family Bonds	12.8
Religious	8.9
Safety concerns	7.1
Financial constraints	3.9
Moral-nonreligious	3.9
Too much homework	3.9
Special needs	3.2

The findings therefore reveal a general dissatisfaction with the European ethnocentrism that characterizes traditional school curricula. Many African American homeschoolers feel that a Eurocentric curriculum is bound to undermine, if not destroy their children's self-esteem and sense of personal worth, leading to stunted growth. Furthermore, for some parents the challenge presented by a European-focused schooling cannot be solved through mere infusion of culturally relevant information, but by rejecting altogether a process intended to prevent the development of a strong African identity, thereby making it impossible for those subjected to that process to protect and build the African community. Consequently, it became apparent that African American homeschoolers fall within a Protectionist-Culturalist continuum. Protectionists, on the one hand, are primarily concerned with their children's ability to develop a positive self-esteem through exposure to relevant historical and cultural information, while Culturalists, on the other hand, see education as a means to socialize their children as Africans committed to the African community.

***General Dissatisfaction with the Curriculum: 'All they teach is their stuff, and then we don't know nothing about our stuff...'***

The need for a curriculum that includes African people and does not simply center on Europe was commonly expressed. In fact, only one of the respondents displayed indifference to the question of an African or African American presence in her children's studies, with most reporting making special efforts to teach their children about their heritage.

The frustration with a curriculum pretty much devoid of anything meaningful, truthful, or empowering about Africa and African Americans was expressed by many, such as Alvin, father of two in Georgia (Pseudonyms are used to protect our subjects' confidentiality):

I mean these [White] schools don't educate our children on their greatness, their history, you know, the first thing you learn is slavery, that's it, that's where your history starts.

However, even the treatment of slavery may be quite disturbing. David, of Lansing, Illinois, shared how he and his wife, Dorothy, decided to withdraw their four children from a Christian cyber school because of the its disrespectful approach to the enslavement of Africans:

This one particular Christian school had a worldview way different from ours. It became apparent, particularly when talking about the African American slavery experience. They didn't think it was 'that bad'. We were done with them. Nuh-uh. They tried to soft-peddle it, like it was almost a benevolent field trip to America, and Robert E. Lee was a great Christian man, I mean, I thought what planet are you from?

Kofi, the father of two in Washington, DC, further commented that one of the major benefits of homeschooling for African children is not to have to unlearn untruths:

So, you know, just the whole history piece, not to have to have to unlearn lies is also important. You know, I did not want to send my son to school to learn lies. Like he knows Christopher Columbus did not discover America. He knows, and whenever we are talking or reading something about history and there is a reference made to the Greeks, I have an opportunity to stop and let him know that, okay, the Greeks learned from the Egyptians and from the Nubians. So, I'm able to teach him the truth. And, I really appreciate that and what it does for him.

Reflecting on the omission of Black historical achievements from the curriculum, Jonathan, the father of two, in Richmond, Virginia, recalled his own experience and explained how homeschooling allows the Black experience to be starting point and not an afterthought or a footnote for teaching his daughters:

One of the things I recognize is the way I gained my education was through extracurricular activities and extra homework and weekends and having to really focus, because the way traditional education really is doesn't share Black history appropriately. What I found myself doing was extra stuff. I didn't want my children having to do extra stuff in order to get their history. So the sense of identity we wanted to give them was one, a sense of who we're as a family but also a sense of our historical perspective being primary, not being "extra." That was very important to us and one of the reasons we do it [homeschool]. It's integrated in all we do. We talk about history, and we don't call it "history," necessarily. We just talk about the figures in history, either from Africa or African American communities, and that's how they learn different things. We had a course once on astronomy; and we talked about Benjamin Banneker's contributions in a very natural discussion. We also cover other things, but we start from that.

It is clear, however, that despite their common concern for the inclusion of information relevant to their children's historical and cultural background, homeschooling parents differ significantly in terms of the purpose of such inclusion.

### *The Protectionists: 'I would rather build a child today than repair an adult tomorrow . . .'*

At one end of the continuum, parents are primarily concerned with imparting self-esteem and self-pride to their children as African Americans. Those should be labeled 'Protectionists.' Imparting knowledge about the achievements of outstanding Blacks will instill their children with a sense of pride and direction that will serve them well. It will give them the courage and faith to face the obstacles that they are bound encounter as Black people. Failure to impart self-knowledge, will deprive them of knowing who they are and what they are capable of (by association), and most importantly, will leave them vulnerable to outside assaults.

Maya, the mother of two in Washington, DC justifies her decision to make her children the center of their education this way:

And, so my philosophy with Shaka, my son, was up to age five we did not read any books that had anybody other than Africans or African Americans. No books with white people, because I felt as he got older and as we started reading books about more general things he would see, I mean, we live in a predominantly White world, so in our learning, in our reading, I wanted him to feel really good about himself. And I think it worked. One day, I'll never forget this, I was in the living room on the computer and he was dancing around and playing basketball or something, 'cause we used to have a basketball court in the living room. And he stopped and he came up to me and he said, "Mom, I love being Black." And, I yeah, I was typing and I was like really? And then, I stopped and I turned around and looked at him and I said, "What do you mean?" He just said, "I love the color of my skin." And, he just went back to playing basketball like it was not big deal. And, I just felt so good about everything that I had done because that was what I wanted. I wanted him to just love himself, to be confident.

The imperative need to build their children's self-esteem and self-confidence through systematic, conscious, and positive exposure to themselves as Black people was frequently expressed by many parents. For example, when asked if she would agree to send her children to an all-White, elite school, all expenses paid for, Saraya, the mother of three in Richmond, Virginia, was adamant about declining the offer:

Why not? Because for us, education starts with them and who they are. And I think no matter how elite the school is, if they aren't reflected in that school, everything else goes down the drain. You have to start with who you are and you have to have self-esteem and self-confidence. I just think that in an environment where they are not reflected could completely destroy all that.

### *The Culturalists*

At the other end of the continuum are the 'Culturalists,' parents for whom a successful education of their children imperatively includes instilling in them a sense of identity; not as African Americans, but as Africans in America; a sense of purpose as Africans; and a sense of responsibility toward the African community. Not surprisingly, these parents are the closest to embrace Afrocentricity and to question Eurocentric schooling.

**Questioning schooling: "Schools make slaves out of our children . . ."** Aya of Atlanta, Georgia, a school teacher herself, when asked why she chose to homeschool her two children, explains the profound inadequacies of schooling this way:

I think the driving factor was the understanding that it is impossible for a system of education that feeds into capitalism to adequately educate any child. The purpose of that system is to make slaves out of you whether you are a slave on Wall Street or a slave on Main Street, you are still a slave. And, coming to that realization, and also as a parent coming into a very strong African-centered identity, I could no longer feed my children into that system.

Similar feelings were echoed by Alvin: "These White institutions pretty much breed our children to work for the system."

The analysis of the school as a detrimental force in the lives of Africans was shared by Dwayne, a father of two, in New York City:

So, why do we homeschool? Because when we were sending our children to school . . . school was accomplishing what it was supposed to do, which was divide our family and miseducate our children.

The miseducation in question does not simply involve teaching inadequate academic skills, nor about misrepresenting his/her history and culture, but most tragically, it is about destroying the spirit within the child. This is what Marilyn, another school teacher and mother of three, had to say about her experiences with public schools in Washington, DC:

It was complete chaos and madness and disarray. I think the single most disturbing thing is just interacting with students who had no sense of self, and no sense of spirit. Because children to me can't be educated thoroughly without spirit.

**Of becoming consciously African.** What many asserted was the imperative need for their children to develop a strong and clear identity as Africans, in order to counter "anti-African assaults," but also to be able to "fight for African liberation." The issue of identity is intricately tied to the notion of purpose. Therefore, answering a question about his children's sense of identity, Kwame, of Atlanta, Georgia, stressed how important and how interwoven the questions of identity, struggle, and mission are for his family:

Their mission and their purpose is to, at some point, struggle for the liberation of African people. That's their mission and purpose. And I can really say that, because they have a strong sense of themselves as Africans. You know if you ask them, if you ask each one of them and you say, "What do you think. . . .What do you consider yourself? African American, Black Negro?" whatever, they are going to say "I am an African," because they see themselves as being African and nothing else. And that's what we wanted, me and my wife, wanted first and foremost from them. And, from the littlest to the oldest you feel that they understand that. And that from that, then it's just about their talents and their gifts and what they are going to contribute to it.

Abena, the mother of three in Atlanta, Georgia, also aptly captured this sense of purpose and how it relates to the question of identity:

We are at war, you know, and so we have to make sure that our children are equipped with understanding who they are, having a good sense of self, identity and purpose, so that they can fight back and help build the African community.

It is critical to understand; however, that for those parents who have consciously opted for Afrocentric education for their children, the curriculum cannot be reduced to the introduction of information relevant to African history and culture. The approach taken by these parents is a holistic one, whereas life is curriculum in which children must learn and practice African cultural values as well as show evidence of character development. They must be educated, and not simply schooled into African ways, thereby gaining consciousness of self as Africans. Children must learn, for example, to recognize and practice the primacy of the community over the individual. Afrocentric teaching cannot occur in isolation, but in a group, which was the case with the parents interviewed. Afwa, who heads with her husband Ausar, one such Afrocentric home-learning community in Atlanta, Georgia, explained this quite eloquently:

African centered homeschooling . . . the whole curriculum, everything centers around our search for knowledge through the traditions of our ancestors. In fact, we say there are four major areas of focus: that we are African centered; that we provide a good academic foundation, so that is important as well;

critical thinking skills, part of the academic not provided in public schools; but also we learn personal development, character development, something that is very important, being centered in our culture, that is very important to us.

The ultimate goal, for these parents, is the 'Afrikanization' of their children through proper socialization. Not surprisingly, African spiritual beliefs and rituals, such as libations and rites of passage, play an important part in this process, with many of the parents reporting that they practice an African religion.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The overall aim of this study was to gain insight into the actions and views of African American parents who choose to educate their children at home because of their discontent with the Eurocentric curriculum of most schools. The interviews conducted for this study illustrate how, while curricular considerations may not necessarily be the most often cited reason for educating Black children at home, they play nonetheless a critical part, as many African American homeschoolers feel that a Eurocentric curriculum interferes in a profound and destructive manner with their children's ability to develop a healthy sense of worth and self-confidence. For some parents, overcoming the challenge presented by European schooling extends beyond the introduction of relevant historical and cultural information, and requires a rejection of schooling altogether. Some, with a strong cultural nationalist sensitivity, feel that schooling is simply incompatible with the nurturing of a strong African identity. Nevertheless, such an identity is indispensable for the protection of the interests and integrity of the African community. Homeschooling, which allows greater control of the minds and souls of Black children, is regarded by these parents as the best option for African Americans, at this point in history, since they still thrive to ensure that their children are properly educated in America.

Furthermore, retracing the rich history of African Americans' heroic efforts to secure adequate education for their children, the authors contend that the decision by an increasingly large number of Black parents to take back their children's education is part and parcel of the long history of African American parental involvement in the access to, and shape of the academic training and socialization of Black children. The full scope of the African American embrace of homeschooling as a result of discontent with Eurocentric curricula can thereby be grasped only within the context of the African American ongoing quest for a quality education. In other words, it is an education that is defined by many African American homeschoolers as not only providing a sound academic foundation, but also acknowledging the historical and cultural experiences and accomplishments of African Americans. In that sense, African American homeschoolers often take issue with, and assert their determination to end the devastating marginalization and invisibility commonly experienced by Black people in Eurocentric-controlled schools. *Many* expressed the wish that more African American parents would embrace homeschooling, given the notorious and persistent failure of schools to facilitate African American children's academic, social, cultural, and emotional harmonious development.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

It is suggested that future research undertake a longitudinal study of African American homeschoolers to examine the potential benefits of homeschooling in order to make adequate comparisons to the non-homeschooling population. This method would also allow researchers to assess the social and psychological development of homeschooled children, as well as the lifespan consequences of homeschooling, as these children enter college. Future research would also do well to investigate the micro-level dynamics of parent-child relationships in the African American homeschooling context. How do parents, if at all, communicate messages of identity, motivation, and overall success? Additionally significant would be the assessment of the

correlation between parental educational level, income level, residential segregation, and other indicators of wealth and status and the decision to homeschool.

*Dr. Garvey Lundy wishes to acknowledge and thank the Spencer Foundation for awarding him a grant (# 201000072), which made the research for this article possible.*

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