What is this research about?
In 2009 the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) opened the first black-focused or africentric school in Ontario. This study explored the opinions of black youth regarding the proposal of a black-focused school. Specifically the research aimed to explore black youths’ ideas about whether a black-focused school would address the issue of academic disengagement amongst black students.

What did the researchers do?
In collaboration with five black community youth organizations in Toronto, the researchers held six focus groups with black youth aged 15-30. Focus group attendance ranged from 4 to 12 participants, for a total sample of 57 black youths.

The focus groups were semi-structured and an interview guide was used to pose questions for group discussion. Sample questions included; what have you heard about the black-focused school proposal?, what are some positives and negatives of an africentric school?, Would you attend such a school?, Would your parents want you to attend?, and what sorts of things belong in this school’s curriculum?

What you need to know:
This study examined the views of black youth in relation to the Toronto District School Board’s proposal to open a black-focused school. Focus groups with 57 black youth indicated that, while some participants were in favour of such a school, the majority of participants did not think that the school was a good idea because of issues around segregation and stigmatization. While a few Participants liked some of the aspects of the school, such as increased exposure to black teachers and black heritage, most felt that these changes could be made in mainstream schools rather then creating a separate school for black students.
All focus group conversations were video-taped, transcribed, and analyzed for common themes.

What did the researchers find?
While specific numbers were not reported, overall, the majority of the participants thought that a black-focused school was not a good idea. A few were decidedly in favor of the proposal while others were unsure. Regardless of their view, the following themes were common amongst the black youth:

1. Fear of stigmatization: a significant number of participants were afraid that a black-focused school might make others view black students as “different” or “special”. Concerns being "set up to fail", and the inappropriate nature of the school’s name were prominent. Some students questioned why a separate school was being created instead of implementing a more inclusive curriculum in all schools.

2. Difficulty seeing the school as a functioning space—Many participants struggled with what the school would look like in comparison to other public schools. They questioned whether the school would prepare them for post-secondary. They wondered what kinds of students would want to go to this school. Again, much of the discussion led back to the question of why not just integrate the same ideas into mainstream schools?

3. Views of the school and its elements – based on the proposal, participants identified positive aspects such as reduced police presence, being able to learn more about black heritage, and having more black teachers. Again it was suggested that these elements should be in all schools. Negative aspects reported by participants included the safety of the school, media representation of the school, and being segregated from mainstream schools.

The researchers conclude that the views of youth and those of adults differed on the issue of the africentric school. While TDSB consultations with adults revealed two opposing camps (those who felt the school promoted segregation and those who felt it would be a culturally supportive environment), the youth in this study were able to see both sides. In addition, while adult supporters of the school usually portrayed it as a safer alternative to an integrated school, the youth in this study felt it was a recipe for violence. Based on
this, the research points to the importance of including the voices of youths when proposing educational changes.

**How can you use this research?**
The researcher recommends that administrators and school boards may wish to consider the following:

- Recognize the diverse contributions of youth when considering significant changes to learning environments.

- Appreciate that alternative schools may not serve the needs of the entire target population and may not eliminate the need for changes to the broader system.

**Original Article:**

**About the researchers:**
Megan Gordon is a PhD. student with the Faculty of Education at Brock University. Her research focuses on preparing teacher candidates for diverse classrooms and the effect of teacher attitudes about race and racism on marginalized students.

Dawn Zinga is an Associate Professor with the Faculty of Social Sciences—Child and Youth Services at Brock University. Her research currently focuses on adolescents perceptions of multiculturalism and racism. dzinga@brocku.ca

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About this summary

The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE’s clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

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