A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF DEI LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN ONTARIO’S CHILD WELFARE

A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF DEI LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN ONTARIO’S CHILD WELFARE

By

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I acknowledge that I am a settler on this land, in the unceded lands of the Anishinaabeg of Mississaugas, which continues to be contested. It is essential to engage in acts of decolonization due to the genocide experienced by Indigenous People.

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For whom all things are possible I humbly thank my Creator. I gratefully acknowledge my Ancestors who have come before me, I stand on their shoulders as they have fought for my right to hold this space.

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Dedication

This thesis is written and dedicated to the memory of Adella and Charles Carr, who created space to foster and liberate multiple understandings for being of African heritage.

# **Abstract**

The primary goal of my research is to understand how practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are used to mitigate the elevated numbers of children of African heritage in child welfare. The disproportionate state-sanctioned child welfare apprehensions of Black children present as policing our most vulnerable members from communities of African heritage – our children. The anti-Black state violence in Ontario has been “acknowledged” by child welfare agencies who are now required to address the racial disparities within child welfare agencies. This thesis attempts to understand the histories, complexities, and current measures aimed at mitigating disparities of African, Caribbean, and Black children involved in child protective services from the perspective of child welfare service providers of African heritage. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are incorporated into hegemonic child welfare institutions while the provincial government has failed to publicly critique the current measures implemented to address the disparities for communities of African heritage. Five participants were recruited from the Greater Toronto Hamilton area to participate in one-to-one interviews.

**Keywords:** African, Caribbean, Black, Africentric, diversity, equity, inclusion, child welfare

**Table of Contents**

[**Abstract** 6](#_Toc114679226)

[**Ch. 1 Introduction** 9](#_Toc114679227)

[1.1 Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality 9](#_Toc114679228)

[1.2 Context 12](#_Toc114679229)

[1.3 Neo-liberal Practices 13](#_Toc114679230)

[1.4 DEI and Child Welfare in Canada 15](#_Toc114679231)

[**Ch. 2 Literature Review** 17](#_Toc114679232)

[2.1 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) 17](#_Toc114679233)

[2.2 The Evolution of DEI in the Canadian Context 19](#_Toc114679234)

[2.3 African, Caribbean, and Black Communities 22](#_Toc114679235)

[2.4 DEI Policies and Child Welfare Legislation 23](#_Toc114679236)

[2.5 DEI in Child welfare 25](#_Toc114679237)

[2.6 Limitations of DEI in the Context of Child Welfare 33](#_Toc114679238)

[**Ch. 3 Theoretical Lens** 39](#_Toc114679239)

[3.1 Africentricity/ African Worldviews 39](#_Toc114679240)

[3.2 The interface between Africentric Worldviews and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Policy 42](#_Toc114679241)

[3.3 Critical Race Theory (CRT) 44](#_Toc114679242)

[3.4 Diversity, Equity, Inclusion /Afrocentric and Critical Race Theory 47](#_Toc114679243)

[**Ch. 4 Methodology and Methods** 49](#_Toc114679244)

[4.1 Research Objectives 49](#_Toc114679245)

[4.2 Data Collection 49](#_Toc114679246)

[4.3 Methodology and Methods 50](#_Toc114679247)

[4.4 Data Collection 51](#_Toc114679248)

[4.5 Thematic Analysis 53](#_Toc114679249)

[**Ch. 5 Findings** 55](#_Toc114679250)

[Theme 1 - Defining Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) 55](#_Toc114679251)

[Theme 2 - The Operationalization of DEI in Child Welfare 57](#_Toc114679252)

[Subtheme 2.1 - Disaggregating Child Welfare Data Collection for ACB Communities 58](#_Toc114679253)

[Theme 3 - Concerns about the Effectiveness of DEI Practices 60](#_Toc114679254)

[Theme 4 - Enacting DEI 64](#_Toc114679255)

[Subtheme 4.1 – Amplifying Asks of ACB Community Members 66](#_Toc114679256)

[**Ch. 6 Discussion** 68](#_Toc114679257)

[Understanding DEI 69](#_Toc114679258)

[Challenges of Operationalized DEI on ACB Service Providers 71](#_Toc114679259)

[Subtheme 6.1 – ACB Disaggregated Data Collection and CPIN 75](#_Toc114679260)

[Subtheme 6.2 – Incorporating Africentric World Views 77](#_Toc114679261)

[Learnings 79](#_Toc114679262)

[**Ch. 7 Implications** 81](#_Toc114679263)

[Sankofa: Understanding the Past to Move forward 81](#_Toc114679264)

[Implications for Developing and Operationalizing DEI in Ways that Work 81](#_Toc114679265)

[Implications for Child Welfare Practice 82](#_Toc114679266)

[Legislation 83](#_Toc114679267)

[Community 85](#_Toc114679268)

[Who pays the piper, calls the tune (government funding) 86](#_Toc114679269)

[Policy Makers 86](#_Toc114679270)

[Implications for Research 87](#_Toc114679271)

[**Strengths & Weaknesses** 89](#_Toc114679272)

[**Conclusion** 90](#_Toc114679273)

[**References** 91](#_Toc114679274)

# **Ch. 1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality**

I am of African heritage.

I have worked in African, Caribbean, and Black communities for over 20 years, and I acknowledge it is difficult to separate my social-political perspective on this issue of child welfare. Although I acknowledge the brutal historical practices towards Indigenous, 2SLGBTQ+, South East Asian, Asian, Jewish, Muslim, and many communities, due to the limitations of this thesis, I cannot focus on multiple communities and their intersections in this research. As a researcher, I am working to uplift and elaborate on the voices of African, Caribbean, and Black participants and community members, regardless of whether or not I agree or disagree with what they have expressed. At the same time, I intend to tell a story and revise DEI within child welfare in a space where African worldviews, spirituality, and ways of knowing and being are centered and celebrated. My reflexive practices have historically questioned subject matter about the continued omissions and resistance towards Africentric thought and worldviews within economies, academia, and governments. What I find disturbing is the colonial matrix and magnitude of violence towards Blackness within diasporic, colonial, and settler states, combined with omissions and retaliatory positions held within society. Systems have historically denounced African ways of knowing and being from a multitude of spaces while profiting from the removal, holding, incarceration, or killing of Black bodies. These facts first urge me to become involved and actively seek answers which work towards a solution and second provide space to understand and discern between normative accounting practices, which can be viewed as performative conduct versus dismantling constituencies, and constructs that disempower communities.

While working in communities of African heritage, I noticed glaring adverse outcomes for children involved with multiple systems such as child welfare and the multitude of tragic stories that were invisibilize through the same system which it has to protect. Child welfare systems have legislative powers granted by the state to ensure they protect the welfare of all children (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2021), as I draw on and endeavor to situate myself in the broader literature. I am questioning the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policy in the context of child welfare and whether or not it ultimately benefits African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) children, families, and communities. This research is essential to understand how communities of African heritage are impacted by the current shifts within child welfare while shedding light on the system’s mechanics.

My independent positionality offers points of reflection that speak to tensions between considerations for ACB child welfare disparities and governments, companies, and organizations to understand power imbalances and how that power is maintained. Evaluating DEI in its current form within child welfare is critical, as normative DEI can be positioned as a complicit gatekeeper when left unchecked. Within DEI, we should be able to acknowledge African axiologies, ontologies, and epistemologies, in addition to shifting away from perfunctory prescriptive practices that have not worked for decades. This is critical as the integration of DEI provides the impression that DEI is about improving the system.

Child welfare presents a counterintuitive state-sanctioned process, which cannot be understood unilaterally due to the independence of multiple systems, laws, and legislations. Although I agree, there should be child protection agencies. I acknowledge that the current process of protecting and providing care to children of African, Caribbean, and Black heritage is from a flawed system. In multiple areas within child welfare, such as the tools used to investigate abuse, the laws, and legislation that do not recognize that an organization can construe abuse, and in multiple additional areas, where it is critical to address these discursive maneuvers. Multiple Africentric knowledges are not included in most degrees from Western universities. However, there is a dependence on graduates from these universities to make decisions regarding communities of African heritage using Eurocentric tools and dogma while discounting Africentric worldviews and knowledges.

My visceral response questions the use of DEI to maintain power structures over African communities in the diaspora, which translates into multiple overlapping oppressions in the area of child welfare, education, health care, policing, courts, and organizations simultaneously. Each of the domains above has had violent or strained histories with communities of African heritage based on the entrenchment of racialization, Eurocentric values and blood memory connections to the violence experienced through coloniality. The intersectional lack of acknowledging African, Caribbean, and Black people presents as a sanitation process in multiple areas. It is essential for Ontario’s DEI processes within child welfare, other systems (health care, policing, education, courts), and the community to understand why questions are being asked. Who is asking the questions? Why the demographic questions are not being asked? How is race-based data collection is being noted? How or if the disaggregated data collected to date is being captured? Why are the accounting practices working against communities of African heritage? There are also many incongruences noted in child welfare training. Previously, child welfare staff were asked not to ask for information pertaining to a community member’s nationality, heritage, sexuality, gender, and race, in addition to tensions between insider-outsider perspectives, which comes with positives and negatives. Some people who work inside the system and advocate for change get pushed out. In particular, it is crucial for people working in child welfare, as they too can become complicit, as part of the system based on their decisions.

## **1.2 Context**

“Children’s Aid Societies (Societies) are established to help protect Ontario’s children at risk of abuse or neglect, provide care and supervision to children, and provide counseling and other services to families to protect children. The Societies are independent legal entities governed by boards of volunteer directors from the community. The Societies’ mandate is established by the Child, Youth, and Family Services Act, 2017, which requires the Societies to provide care and supervision to children and to place them into adoption, if necessary” (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2021, p.11). Ontario’s child welfare has publicly reported on the over-representation of African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) children in child welfare. Alternatively, there has been relatively no research on the impacts of the policies, interventions, and funding used to mitigate the disparities and disproportionalities of ACB children and families involved in Ontario’s child protection systems. In Ontario, current child welfare literature acknowledges the scarcity of research regarding topics such as; experiences of ACB mothers and experiences while involved with child welfare (Clarke, 2011, 2012), child welfare’s lack of understanding African, Caribbean, and Black parenting practices (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018; Clarke, 2011; Adjei, & Minka, 2018: Phillips, & Pon, 2018; Adjei and Minka, 2018), shifts towards anti-Black racism and addressing the child welfare economy (Pon, Gosine and Phillips, 2011), research regarding racial disparities (King, Fallon, Black, Antwi-Boasiako, and O’Connor, 2017), colour-blind laws and policies (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018; Edwards, 2018; Adjei, Mullings, Baffoe, Quaicoe, Abdul-Rahman, Shears, & Fitzgerald, 2018; Akuoko-Barfi, McDermott, Parada, & Edwards, 2021; Crenshaw, 1995), structural factors regarding anti-Black racism, mental health, poverty, and domestic violence which makes African, Caribbean, and Black families known to multiple systems such as child welfare and police (Clarke, 2011, 2012; Contenta, Monsebraaten, & Rankin, 2016, Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018), and issues with the tools used to assess and determine risk within child welfare such as but not limited to the eligibility spectrum (Mohamud, Edwards, Antwi-Boasiako, William, King, Igor, & King, 2021; King, Fallon, Filippelli, Black, & O'Connor, 2018; Barber, Shlonsky, Black, Goodman, & Trocmé, 2008). Discourse within Ontario’s child welfare cites causes of system involvement (Cénat, Noorishad, Czechowski, Mukunzi, Hajizadeh, McIntee, & Dalexis, 2021), discrepancies in which families are involved in systems, differential treatment, and case decisions based on characteristics pertaining to Blackness, resulting in the differential treatment and over-representation of ACB families in Ontario’s child welfare system.

The multiple reports and academic writings on the issues in child welfare have been linked to the disparities of Black children involved with child protection and questionable accounting practices. Additional government reporting and grey literature suggest that the current practices have been enacted to address the disparities for children of African heritage (Ministry of Ontario, 2022). Nevertheless, questions pertaining to the exact numbers of ACB children in care, outcomes for African, Caribbean, and Black children involved with the system, and the role of community involvement present as murky. Calls from the community demanding to know the amount of African, Caribbean, and Black children involved with child welfare have yet to be answered (Contenta, Monsebraaten, and Rankin, 2014).

## **1.3 Neo-liberal Practices**

Neo-liberal practices in child welfare refer to the context where third parties are funded as service providers (Rogowski, 2010) while African, Caribbean, and Black communities are prohibited and relegated to inaction despite the over-representation in their communities and reluctance to account for the disparities.

With continued changes to Ontario’s child welfare re-design (Province of Ontario, 2022), it is important to acknowledge the reproduction of neoliberal politics, procedures, and policies that underpin current shifts in child protection, to “allow” for consciousness. “In defining the term consciousness for African people, the immediate task is to free our thinking from the “meanings and constraints” imposed by our training in Western thought and techniques and especially by the Western episteme and paradigms, we have inherited, for thinking itself” (Nana Kwaku Berko, 2005, p.1). This suggests that there is a dire need to address the way anti-Black racism is denying people of African heritage leadership roles and funding opportunities that could better address the needs and experiences of ACB communities and families who interface with child welfare (Benjamin, 2003).

Anti-Black racism in Canadian child welfare is visible within Ontario’s provincial government’s funding of CAS under the current and previous administrations. For example, the Children’s Aid Foundation of Canada and Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada is receiving 2.2 million-dollars to mentor children aged 7-14 (Province of Ontario, 2022). Yet, there has been no specific funding allocated directly to African, Caribbean, and Black community agencies, outside of Child welfare with the capacity to work proactively in communities of African heritage to stop children from being involved with child protection. The bureaucratic, costly child welfare re-design (Province of Ontario, 2022) aims to further the colonial neo-liberal reach through the disproportionate funding to mainstream agencies after the removal of ACB children from their families and communities. At the same time, failing to address critical issues pertaining to the gross over-representation of African, Caribbean, and Black children within child welfare; and challenging the accounting practices and resistance to this endeavor through an Africentric perspective. The neo-liberal resistance to funding identified African, Caribbean, and Black agencies with power from the legislation to stop the hemorrhage of ACB children leaving their communities is non-existent within current government legislative mechanisms or the recent child welfare re-design.

Neo-liberal policies and practices are embedded in racist practices targeting African, Caribbean, and Black communities and the omission of Black bodies in decision-making spaces. The critical issue here is the reluctance to fund agencies of African heritage located in the community separate from child welfare with the ability to address the disparities proactively. If an Africentric perspective was included in the solution proactively, would there be a change? The current lack of understanding and funding reluctance of ACB communities directly from government, leadership, and policymakers needs to be interrogated based on the resistance. There is a gap in understanding how child welfare workers of African heritage resist colonial oppressive child welfare systems. These queries are foundational to this research and communities of African heritage involved in child welfare. Does a larger haunting question pertain to neoliberalism and the promise of DEI for people of African heritage?

## **1.4 DEI and Child Welfare in Canada**

It is important to understand the nuanced demographics of ACB communities in Ontario. Approximately 1.2 million people in Canada identify as being of African heritage (Statistics Canada, 2022). 52.3 % or 627,715 people of African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) heritage reside in Ontario, representing 4.6 percent of Ontario’s population (Statistics Canada, 2021). A high level break down of cities with higher numbers of ACB communities are Toronto 430,280, Brampton 82,175, Ottawa 60,205, Mississauga 47,004, Hamilton 24,275, Ajax 19,860, Windsor 11,760, and Kitchener/Cambridge/Waterloo 15,110, (Statistics Canada, 2021). The Canadian government acknowledged that inequalities toward people of African heritage in Canada are driven by poor health outcomes, racism, and discrimination (Government of Canada, 2020).

The OACAS round table (2009) noted, “where the Black population totals 8 percent, Black youth represent 65 percent of the youth in group care.” This statistic represents a disparity and disproportionality for ACB children in child welfare. “Disparity occurs when the rate of disproportionality, poor outcomes, or deficient services of one group exceeds that of a comparison group… Disproportionality is evident when the percentage of a certain group within any system, including the child welfare system, is higher than its representation in the general population” (OVOV, 2016). The Child Protection Information Network (CPIN) is a 130-million-dollar venture (OACAS, 2022) established to have a provincial child welfare case management system (OACAS, 2022). Policy directive CW 005-17 allows for public identity data collection and reporting as of February 5, 2018 (MCCSS, 2022). To have more accurate numbers, Ontario’s province has invested substantial funding towards capturing the disaggregated data for communities in Ontario. “Disaggregated data refers to the separation of compiled information into smaller units to elucidate underlying trends and patterns" (Pan American Health Organization, 2020).

There is no data on communities of African heritage working with the creators of CPIN to incorporate an African worldview when collecting disaggregated data or on mechanisms to process the information. The continued use of Eurocentric practices and approaches in child protection has resulted in multiple academics interrogating the continued legitimacy of failed neo-liberal approaches in child welfare. The over-representation of children of African heritage in child protection is grounded on centuries of anti-Black racist discriminatory practices towards people of African heritage. While structural biases incentivize Eurocentric mainstream agencies monetarily, as they simultaneously marginalize and omit communities of African heritage. An argument can be made that the leadership practices to address the disparities for communities of African heritage must be reviewed due to current anti-Black practices, which continue to harm ACB communities.

# **Ch. 2 Literature Review**

## **2.1 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)**

This research questions the value of DEI policy in the context of child welfare. This academic study seeks to understand whether or not DEI benefits communities, families, and children of African heritage. To situate myself in the literature, context will be provided briefly on what DEI is, where did DEI come from, how did DEI make its way into the Canadian context, and how is DEI conceptualized in the child welfare context. Canada has had a series of legislations, laws, and practices that oppress people of African heritage from the slave trade act onwards. After England battled New France, colonialist practices included the 1760 article of capitulation, which read, “Negroes and panis [Indigenous] of both sexes shall remain, in their quality of slaves, in the possession of the French and Canadians to whom they belong; they shall be at liberty to keep them in their service in the Colony or to sell then; and they may also continue to bring them up in the Roman Religion. - Granted, except those who shall have been made prisoners” (Articles of Capitulation, 1760). To address centuries of oppression towards people who are not White and Indigenous People, concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion have been ‘present’ in some of Canada’s legislation. As a settler nation-state, Canada’s legislative history and practices are riddled with racist, discriminatory practices towards people of African heritage. These practices separated families and provided stressors in multiple domains (James & Davis, 2012) without recognizing the impact on ACB communities. An analysis of the term DEI can delineate nuances of each word separately and used together as a unit.

DEI is connected to neo-liberal terms such as multiculturalism and diversity. This section of the thesis will provide a brief definition of; diversity, equity, and inclusion. In the broadest terms, “diversity is the presence, in an organization or a community, of a wide range of people with different backgrounds, abilities, and attributes including ethnicity, race, colour, religion, age, gender and sexual orientation” (OHRC, 2022). Equity-seeking groups are communities that are actively seeking equity in society. Neutral terms such as equity-seeking group, people of colour, and diverse people indicate references to sameness and fail to understand the specific lived realities of African, Caribbean, and Black people, histories, and intersecting experiences.

To begin with, some scholars have made the argument that “diversity has been largely discredited as a practice, idea, or process that can produce the kinds of social, cultural, political, and economic change and impact that would render the long terrible and brutal history of race and racism null and void” (Walcott, 2019, p. 393). The incorporation of diversity alone vis-à-vis representation through staffing does not address disparities. Many people from diverse groups can be hired in front-line positions but do not have sufficient power to make changes or use their unique skill sets to influence decisions. The disempowerment allows for concepts of diversity to be incorporated into child welfare as neo-liberal diversity management (Smele, Siew-Sarju, Chou, Breton, & Bernhardt, 2017).

Secondly, equity is a process that is, “fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people and a goal (equitable outcomes for all groups). Equity does not mean treating people the same without regard for individual differences” (OVOV, 2016). Equity considers multiple histories and experiences and understands, “that treating people differently is sometimes necessary to achieve equitable outcomes” (OVOV, 2016). Equitable processes should include an analysis of the inequity and assist in informing systems, programs, and strategies designed to address the inequities (OVOV, 2016).

Finally, inclusion works to address inequities through the intentional, respectful welcoming of people regardless of their state of being. Inclusion creates space where everyone is valued and celebrated. Inclusion practices work to create and maintain safe spaces for all people, but specific to this research, inclusion must keep safe spaces for Black bodies with unique histories and experiences from a child welfare perspective, diversity and inclusion speak to the need to recognize and address differences in multiple ways, then works towards equitable outcomes (Equity and anti-oppression in child welfare, 2022). There are multiple presenting objectives for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and there is no singular definition or way to address DEI initiatives due to the complexities of the child welfare environment or experiences of Blackness.

## **2.2 The Evolution of DEI in the Canadian Context**

There were successive pieces of legislation that would focus on and promote what is known as equality and equity. Some of the acts which preceded DEI are the; Hunan Rights Act of 1978, Canada Act of 1982, Federal Employment Equity Act of 1986, inform. These Acts will be outlined briefly in this section. To begin with, the Human Rights Act of 1978 believes, “that all individuals should have an opportunity equal with other individuals to make for themselves the lives that they are able and wish to have and to have their needs accommodated, consistent with their duties and obligations as members of society, without being hindered in or prevented from doing so by discriminatory practices based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics, disability or conviction of an offence for which a pardon has not been granted or in respect of which our record suspension has been ordered” (R.S., 1985). While the Human Rights Act allows people who believe they were discriminated against to file a complaint, the burden of proof is on the complainant (Agocs, 2002).

Second, the Canada Act of 1982 and the Constitution Act of 1982 contains the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (SOR/85-781), which “guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society” (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982, p 1). This legislation is divided into fundamental freedoms on conscience and religion, thought, belief, opinion and expression, peaceful assembly, and freedom of association. Democratic rights include voting, mobility, legal, language, minority language, education rights, enforcement, general, and equality. Section 15 (1) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982, p 1) notes, “Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.”

Next the Federal Employment Equity Act of 1986 was formed “to achieve equality in the workplace so that no person shall be denied employment opportunities or benefits for reasons unrelated to ability and, in the fulfillment of that goal, to correct the conditions of disadvantage in employment experienced by woman, aboriginal peoples, persons with disabilities and members of visible minorities by giving effect to the principle that employment equity means more than treating persons in the same way but also requires special measures and the accommodation of differences” (Federal Employment Equity Act, 1986, p1).

Employment legislation directly connects to child welfare. Suppose a caregiver or parent is unable to care for the primary needs of their child, social determinants of health such as poverty can be cited as a reason why a child of African heritage should remain in the care of child welfare, without citing the historical context (Clarke, Mills Minster, & Gudge, 2018).

Finally, the Federal Contractors Program 1986 is a “labour program [that] administers and enforces the federal contractors program (FCP). FCP requires that organisations who do business with the Government of Canada implement employment equity in their workplace. This includes ensuring that their workforce is representative of Canada’s labour force with respect to the members of the following four designated groups under the Employment Equity Act: women, Indigenous Peoples, persons with disabilities, and members of visible minorities”. Although the legislation attempted to place a framework to legislate practices, there were many ways the legislation was implemented within various sectors of society (Agocs, 2002).

Davis (2017) contends that “multicultural are not innocent” because it becomes an ideological tool used within Canada’s democracy to foster narratives of tolerance while sanitizing Canada’s history of genocide, enslavement, and racism. Acts noted above align with written policies and legislation which aligns with normative discourse and assumptions. The election of Michael Harris in 1995 ushered in neo-conservative ideologies, including repealing Ontario’s newly implemented Employment Equity Act, weakening Ontario’s Pay Equity Act, and reducing funding to Ontario’s Human Rights Commission (Agocs, 2002). Neo-conservative agendas resulted in attacks on equity platforms and initiatives enacted to alleviate systemic discrimination (Agocs, 2002). The neo-conservative agendas used accounting strategies to understand who financially benefited from the programs and then shifted power and finances away from community members of African heritage.

Ontario’s public service antiracism policy purports to be guided by principles that target universalism, inclusive processes, transparency, evidence-based approaches, sustainability, systemic focus, and intersectionality while being mindful of a collective impact (Ontario Public Service Anti-Racism Policy Progress Report, 2022). The goal is to allow for diversity, equity, and inclusion within the province through policies that address, identify and remove systemic barriers.

## **2.3 African, Caribbean, and Black Communities**

It is essential to acknowledge that people of African heritage arrived in Canada at different times through the violent forced displacement of imperialism, colonization, and chattel enslavement (Mullings, Clarke, Bernard, Este, & Giwa, 2021). Colonization and anti-Black sediments toward African, Caribbean, and Black communities have resulted in racial discrimination (Mullings, Morgan, & Quelleng, 2016; Whitfield, 2006), manifesting in policies, legislation, and procedures. After WWI, there continued to be discriminatory legislation that impacted people of African heritage who migrated from the Caribbean between the 1960s to the 1980s in search of better opportunities and employment (Smith, Lalonde, & Johnson, 2004).

High levels of attention have been garnered towards DEI in the media, agencies, and governments. This trend continues within Ontario’s child welfare as child protection agencies are reported to use DEI, anti-Black racism leads, and equity practices to address the disparities and disproportionalities of ACB children in care and involved in child welfare (OACAS, 2020). A literature review of the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion has produced multiple definitions. Some scholars equate the use of DEI as performative “institutional rhetoric” (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019) or “cosmetic diversity” (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). Research on the term has resulted in acronym changes such as equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and diversity, inclusion, and equity (DIE). The latter can be interpreted as seeking to overturn practices of equity, diversity, and inclusion through racist ideological summations on the belief that “there simply not enough qualified BIPOC people in the pipeline to meet diversity targets quickly enough” (Peterson, 2022, p. 1).

## **2.4 DEI Policies and Child Welfare Legislation**

“Black children are taught, from an early age, highly sophisticated coping techniques to deal with racist practices perpetrated by individuals and institutions” (NABSW, 1972, p. 2). The practices taught to Black children directly result from the colonial chattel enslavement of African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) people. Institutional anti-Black racism within government-sanctioned agencies such as child welfare surmises Eurocentric ideals, legitimized through colourblind legislation (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018; Clarke, 2011, 2012).

Disaggregated research involving ACB communities in Ontario has relied on literature from the United States, the United Kingdom, and the diaspora, which notes racial disparities for children of African heritage who are involved with child welfare (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018; Costa, Dioum, & Yorath, 2015; Harker & Heath, 2014; Ramon, Weber, & Esenstad, 2015). There is limited independent community-funded data collected on communities of African heritage in Ontario’s child welfare. In Ontario, the policy directive to collect and disseminate disaggregated race-based data commenced on February 5, 2018 (MCCSS, 2022); prior to that, there were no formal government directives in Ontario. However, there are cries from ACB community members and agencies which speak to structural issues, length of time in care, mother shaming practices, and increased ‘child protection’ apprehensions (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018). Communities of African heritage had their concerns somewhat validated in the Ontario Incident Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (Fallon et al., 2013) and the ‘Child Maltreatment-Related Service Decisions by Ethno-Racial Categories in Ontario in 2013’. Both studies noted overlapping and intersectional issues affecting child protective services, race, and poverty, as the latter study noted ACB children have a 40% rate of being investigated compared to White children and increased rates of the investigation being substantiated (Fallon, Black, Van Wert, King, Filippelli, Lee, & Moody, 2016). It is critical to note that reports did not clearly specify the number of ACB children involved with child welfare using an Africentric, anti-Black racism lens.

Historically, racist laws allowed child welfare to hold a dual interest to act as a child protection agent and for community interests (Lafferty, 2012; Lawrence, 2019). Lafferty articulates that “it gave legal force to the dual intention of child welfare to serve both the child’s and the community’s best interests (Lafferty, 2012, p. 49)”. As a colonial, patriarchal settler, nation-state Canadian laws sought to legally assimilate, surveillance, and maintain the commodification of African, Caribbean, and Black bodies through white colonizers. Complicated by a court system that speaks to a high threshold of being an expert while negating anti-Black racism as experts of African heritage are rarely recognized by the courts. The threshold to qualify as an expert in court does not consider historical anti-Black sediments, experiences, and histories.

Legalizing violent, xenophobic, legal practices and laws of the past are carried forwards through mass state-sanctioned apprehensions of African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) children within child welfare systems. Child protection systems sought to disempower, invisibilize, and silence communities of African heritage from the root; through attempts to reinvent and redefine Africentric ontological, epistemological, and axiological worldviews. The violent apprehensions of Black children in the Nova Scotia home of the coloured children (Lawrence, 2019) by white heteropatriarchy settlers utilized colonial logic to justify the propagation of vicious, insidious acts toward children of African heritage in Canada. The Nova Scotia home of the coloured children opened in 1921 (Restorative Inquire, 2021). It was a provincial establishment charged with caring for ACB children who were not placed in the community due to racism. The Nova Scotia home for the colored children is now synonymous as a location where African children experienced large-scale physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, inadequate housing, anti-Black racism, and child estrangements from African culture, identity, language, spirituality, and heritage (Restorative Inquire, 2021). The issues for children and communities of African heritage pertains to overarching neo-liberal systems which have discounted the continued harms and required healing in communities of African heritage.

Due to the numerous atrocities and harmful acts toward ACB children through child protection practices. Child welfare agencies have publicly posited that elements of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) can be used to address the historical violence and inequities towards ACB communities in Ontario (OVOV, 2016). Limited independent community-based research has interrogated the utility and successful implementation of DEI to address disparities and disproportionalities of ACB communities in child welfare.

## **2.5 DEI in Child welfare**

Around 1970 the province of Ontario began to address the over-representation of African children involved in child welfare (Clarke, Hasford, Gudge, and Mills-Minster, 2018). In the 1980s, attempts to shift towards diversifying services, but this initiative was never actualized (Clarke, Hasford, Gudge, and Mills-Minster, 2018). During the same time, “community mobilization efforts to address systemic anti-Black racism led to the establishment of Harambee Child and Family Services Centre, a setting to promote the healing and well-being of Black families through culturally focused services. For several years, Harambee operated as a symbol of the potential of holistic, African centered approaches to engaging Black families. However, the organization collapsed beneath the weight of institutional racism, under-resourcing, and internal issues in the mid-1990s” (Clarke, Hasford, Gudge, and Mills-Minster, 2018, p 49).

One of the ways that issues of disproportionality and disparity of families of African heritage have been understood within child welfare has been through the collection and analysis of race-based statistics. The information regarding the sociodemographic make-up of families on the receiving end of child welfare service has been transported from America and the UK, even with some incongruences regarding legislation, practices, and ACB community make-up. The reliance on importing data from outside Canada increases the urgency to complete this research and understand the implementation and effectiveness of current DEI initiatives within a child welfare context.

The number of ACB families involved with child welfare in Ontario has been estimated to be as high as 65% (Child Welfare Anti-Oppression Roundtable, 2009; Children’s Aid Society of Toronto, 2015; Pon, Gosine & Philips; Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018). In the Region of Peel, 36% of residents identify as South Asian, while 6% of South East Asian children and youth are in the care of the Peel Children’s Aid Society. This statistic demonstrates that not all non-white people experience discrimination and disparities similarly. Disparity “refers to the rate of representation of black children in the child welfare system in comparison to children of other racial/ethnic groups in the child welfare population” (Hill, 2006, Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018, p 188). “The term disproportionality refers to the rate of representation of black children and the child welfare system compared to there representation in the general population in Ontario” (Hill, 2006, Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018, p 188).

Contributing factors to the disproportional removal of ACB children from their homes and communities and increased child welfare involvement include but are not limited to; poverty, social inequities, anti-Black racism, classism, gendered bias, and white supremacy (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018). For over 100 years, the OACAS and child welfare has reveled in structural and systemic oppressive practices that “continue to reproduce discourses of deviance, deficiency, and criminality that had devastating consequences for Aboriginal and Black communities” (Blackstock et al., 2007; Clarke,2012; Esquao & Strega,2015; Gosine & Pon, 2010; Landentinger, 2015; Miller, Cahn, Anderson-Nahe, Cause & Bender, 2013; Pon et al., 2017)” (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018, p 189).

In 2011, the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS) led an Anti-Oppression Roundtable with partners from child welfare and the community, produced a practice manual that has been neglected (Clarke, Hasford, Gudge, and Mills-Minster, 2018). The One Vision One Voice (OVOV) project is located in the OACAS, and funding for the project is provided by the Ministry of Children and Youth Services (Clarke, Hasford, Gudge, and Mills-Minster, 2018). The project has an ACB steering committee and involved over 800 consultations which produced a framework and made recommendations in critical areas such as training, recruitment, accountability, and a community-based strategy (Clarke, Hasford, Gudge, and Mills-Minster, 2018).

The OVOV has limitations and challenges as the framework is optional, and there was no development or increase to African communities separate from child welfare (Clarke, Hasford, Gudge, and Mills-Minster, 2018). Indigenous communities experience the highest disparities in child protection in the province, and communities of African heritage have the second largest disparities in Ontario. There is a possibility that the current numbers for children of Indigenous and African heritage can inflate based on errors in child welfare data collection practices. In 2014, a best practice after a death review called for data collection (Province of Ontario, 2021). In 2016, child welfare agencies in the province of Ontario agreed to start collecting disaggregated race-based data (Contenta, Monsebraaten, and Rankin, 2016). The efforts to collect the data continue to be ongoing. The Child Protection Information Network (CPIN) is a centralized information and management system for child welfare agencies (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018; Brennan, 2015; Pon et at., 2017). When CPIN was established, it could not collect disaggregated race-based data (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018). Later this was corrected.

The bureaucratic role of CPIN’s data collection process presents as an extension of a broken prejudicial child welfare process at an exorbitant cost to Ontario’s taxpayers. In 2022, there continue to be issues with collecting race-based data due to the elevated number of service users placed within generic categories such as ‘other.’ Categories labeled other, unknown, and mixed race should be reviewed. If the data is collected with a race-neutral approach, it can present as problematic as the child welfare agency will often view the child as outside of the ‘other’ and ‘mixed race' categories. This can result in omitting culturally relevant services and lowering the number of African, Caribbean, and Black children in care. Possible questions pertain to the nature of required services for children of African heritage due to the placement of ACB children in categories such as other and unknown, which neutralize the impact of race and being African, Caribbean, and Black in child welfare. This research aims to understand the data collection practices that could be teased out due to a child’s classification of other, unknown or mixed race (Peel CAS, 2019).

In the Children’s Aid Society of Ottawa (2017), “investigation data represents an overrepresentation with the Black (African/Caribbean Descent) population group. In contrast, white families are significantly underrepresented among families investigated. Notably, 55% of files do not have an identified race, significantly impacting data outcomes.” “The lack of data collection and reporting legitimize the removal of [B]lack children and youth from their families, and perpetuate anti [B]lack racism” (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018, p 192 ). The structural issues inherent in the disproportionate removal of African, Caribbean, and Black children are associated with; pathologizing, blaming, shaming, humiliating, surveillancing, controlling, racial profiling, and policing Black mothers (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018).

There are multiple issues with children of African heritage who were asked about their marital status or youth who have aged out of care without connections to their biological families. There is a systemic, pervasive issue due to hospital birth alerts (Howells, 2020) and noted mental health issues on hospital files. Systemic discrimination is “patterns of organizational behavior that are part of the social and administrative structure and culture and decision-making processes of the workplace, and that create or perpetuate relative disadvantage for members of some groups and privilege for members of other groups” (Agocs, 2017). One of the reported criteria for the assessment of system discrimination is “equality of results as measured by indicators such as compensation (salary and benefits) and decision-making power (representation in management) for designated group members equivalent to those enjoyed by majority group members with similar qualifications and/or performance” (Agocs, 2017, p. 259). One of the critical distinctions of equity policies and initiatives is that they are employer-driven and empower employers to mitigate discriminatory practices within the workplace (David, 2017). Multiple scholarly articles and government-sponsored papers omit speaking to disparities for African, Caribbean, and Black communities in Ontario, which identifies shifting power and resources to ACB communities. This issue is further complicated as often non-African, Caribbean, and Black researchers within academies have historically received grants for child welfare research in African, Caribbean, and Black communities. The exclusion is a form of silencing which does not allow for equity in the process.  The ambiguity contained within the data collected by CPIN to inform reports and documents are complicated. Although this writing is specific to child welfare, it is important to note that educational institutions, law enforcement, and health care are the top three referrers to child welfare agencies. These government-funded agencies each have historical issues pertaining to discriminatory practices and disparities towards people of African heritage, as evidenced by the; over-policing of communities of African heritage (Mullings, Morgan, & Quelleng, 2016), the weaponization of housing (Crichlow, 2014), elevating push out rates within educational institutions (Sefa Dei, 2008), increased birth alerts (Howells, 2020), carding (Cole, 2020), and the failed hair strands test motherrisk which provided evidence for court utilized widely by child welfare agencies (MacLeod, 2017). This literature challenges the effectiveness and utility of DEI when working with ACB families in the child welfare context. Multiple media stories demonstrate poor outcomes for African, Caribbean, and Black families involved in one or more systems, resulting in the removal of Black children from their homes. The provincial response to the overrepresentation of children of African heritage in child welfare has included the OACAS-funded One Vision, One Voice (OVOV) which commenced with the Liberal Wynn administration. The funding of child welfare pilot projects in Durham Children’s Aid Society, CPIN, and the incorporation of equity proposes an initial start to address the issues within child welfare.

More significant amounts of funding have been provided to the OVOV project to develop a practice framework to support child welfare to provide better service to ACB communities. The project's first phase involved framing the issue of disproportionality of ACB families in Ontario’s child welfare system. This phase provided an introduction, defined key terms, provided a brief literature review, an overview of issues and recommendations, and steering committee. The four (4) OACAS recommendations are: to create an ACB advisory committee to provide ongoing advice; to update the OACAS worker training, which includes ACB voices, histories, and comprehension of the current disparities; to establish a research team at OACAS to lead the research of disparities and disproportionalities, and; to develop training with input from an ACB advisory committee in the OACAS, to be able to better address the disparities and disproportionalities with trainers with expertise in ABR. The OVOV as a strategy was optional for child welfare agencies in Ontario to implement, but it should have been mandatory.

In 2021/22, the ‘Modernization and Re-design Strategy’ under a conservative Ford administration has been proposed as a re-design strategy that focuses on intervention, prevention, enhanced prevention sectors, collaborative quality of care, and increased stability and permanency (MCCSS, 2022).

 (MCCSS, 2022)

Amendments to the Child, Youth, and Family Services Act (CYFSA, 2017) provides increased powers to child welfare agencies and law enforcement. The Act permits using mechanical restraints 160.4, secure treatment program 160.3 (CYFSA, 2017), and many oppressive acts that have not been repudiated by child welfare leadership or the Ford administration. The legislation allows for regular oppressive practices which can fall outside of narrow circumstances. There needs to be further understanding on how the Act is used and interpreted and how this disjuncture will be demonstrated through independent community-funded research generated in this analysis. The current provincial re-design strategy presents as failing to include African, Caribbean, and Black leadership to address the specific issues faced by the community. In addition, the Act does not address the current stigma and hesitancies of ACB people working with primary referral agencies; or intersectional ways systems discriminate against communities of African heritage (OHRC, 2022).

There are issues pertaining to ownership of data for ACB communities. There should be a review of research conducted on ACB communities to inquire who the lead researchers are and who owns the ACB data collected through institutions and academies. These biases lend to inequities in research methodologies and statistical analysis in how data is captured and interpreted in child welfare. Omissions within data collection, as noted above, or opaque data collection results can result in errors within a Western data collection process. Opaque results such as the ‘Diversity, equity, and inclusion at Peel CAS’ (2019) report, indicate that 21% of children in the care of their agency identify as ACB, 15% celebrate two or more heritages, and 8% identify as other. At the same time, the Children’s Aid Society of Ottawa (2022) reported that “55% of files do not have an identified race, significantly impacting data outcomes.” Additional research and identification practices around demographic disaggregated data collection and interpretation should be conducted independently in all child welfare agencies with mixed race, other, and unknown categories. These categories are significant for communities with disparities, such as communities of African heritage, Indigenous, and 2SLGBTQ. Queries into child welfare categories of mixed race, other and unknown will provide clarity within these subsets for accurate disaggregated reporting, which includes the probability that these groups include children with one parent of African heritage, whom society, in general, would label as African, Caribbean, and Black. Foucault's (1975, p. 189-190) understanding of documentation and the "examination that places individuals in a field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them ... the accumulation of documents, their seriation, the organization of comparative fields making it possible to classify, to form categories, to determine averages, to fix norms." There present to be inequities in incorporating DEI within research, data collection, and data interpretation based on the current reports. As neo-liberal documentation efforts have aided in confusing the process.

The other issue is that by not factoring in the additional categories, the current understanding of the number of African, Caribbean, and Black children in care have been obscured, and any reports based on the current numbers could be challenged.

Part two of the OACAS-funded OVOV project consists of eleven (11) race equity practices. Part three of the practice framework involves a tool kit to assist Ontario child welfare agencies in implementing race equity practices (OVOV, 2020). The final document within the OVOV series is a guide for ACB communities in Ontario.

## **2.6 Limitations of DEI in the Context of Child Welfare**

A small amount of literature outlines a range of ways that child welfare agencies use DEI practices (Peel CAS, 2020; Children’s Aid Society of Toronto, 2020; Durham Children’s Aid Society, 2022; Children’s Aid Society of Ottawa). On one end, child welfare agencies seek and obtain additional ministry funding, which is allocated to address issues of anti-Black racism. On the other end of the spectrum, child welfare agencies have allocated and earmarked money from their initial budget to fund community-guided initiatives in an ‘attempt’ to incorporate Afrocentric worldviews. The issue with current child welfare DEI practices is that they are reactive measures that do not proactively address protecting African, Caribbean, and Black children. The measures fail to mitigate underlying systemic issues that communities of African heritage are involved with when in contact with child welfare.

The singular reactive approach within child welfare has not been able to unilaterally demonstrate the ability to address the underlying reasons which make ACB children involved with child welfare agencies. These reactive measures have reproduced a sustained yearly 1.5+ billion-dollar child welfare industry, where OACAS backbenchers and lobbyists support the continued normalization of anti-Black institutional colonial child welfare practices. What occurs when the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, child welfare agencies, and mainstream organizations attempt to address these issues in absentia of African communities; is those ACB communities remain silenced and marginalized under the weight of poor legislative and policy practices, flagrant corpulent child welfare budgets, attempting to legitimize wasteful public funding. It then becomes necessary to promote a new discussion on separate funding for ACB communities proactively and ACB child welfare initiatives.

Since the Ford government assumed office on March 10, 2018, no substantive findings have been made public on the impact of recent DEI decisions and funding allocated towards child welfare, specific to communities of African heritage, proactively. There has been news releases citing OACAS collaborative research, noting absorbent child welfare projects funded by Ontarians for child welfare’s re-design of child protection agencies, OACAS, and social service agencies (Province of Ontario, 2020), which present as reactive. Although support is required for agencies noted above, the current rollout and funding of child welfare agencies present as reactive and not based on accurate data collected through the 130 million-dollar (OACAS, 2022) CPIN project was on top of a 1.5-billion-dollar child welfare budget. The Ford administration’s top-down approach continues where Kathleen Wynn’s administration had left off, with the mismanagement of an inflated bureaucratic child welfare system, which lacks transparency and accountability (Cohn, 2015) while being funded without restraints. Ontarians who continue to fund the growing gargantuan child welfare systems have the right to transparency in understanding the results of the changes made and new funding allocated within the billion-dollar child welfare industry. The issues about the Ford administration’s provincial response pertain to the lack of clear, uniform reporting responses to justify the monies spent.

The silence from ACB communities is deafening, as there are multiple gaps in Ontario’s child welfare system as it pertains to meeting the needs of children of African heritage. Ontario is currently re-designing child welfare, but there has been no evidence of the African, Caribbean, and Black communities involved in this process (Baker-Collins, 2022). An argument could be made that ACB communities have not been able to independently take a leadership role within the community processes which are necessary proactive steps to engage with parents prior to and separate from ACB communities members involved with child welfare. The new government funding is placed on child welfare and mainstream agencies. While there is scholarly evidence that supports the facts, many ACB community members distrust child welfare. They will be reluctant to meaningfully engage in services under the direction of child welfare agencies (Clarke, Mills-Minster, Gudge, 2018).

The other issue is the reactive nature of the funding supports and services. There are gaps in the MCCSS not providing funding directly to ACB communities, which can build community capacity and slow the flow of ACB children being involved with child welfare while decreasing the number of children who come into the care of child welfare. The current child welfare re-design and its predecessors have; not indicated if or how effective the past and previous funded child welfare strategies have been and how issues on the disparities for ACB children have been addressed in light of the categories created in CPIN. There are gaps in the limited amounts of research generated in Ontario that understands what has been accomplished in the area of child welfare and the impact of ACB children and communities, as literature from the US and UK are limited in this regard. The Ford administration has re-designed Ontario’s child welfare without voices of African heritage at the table.

“First, what we are dealing with, at root, and fundamentally, is anti-Black racism. While it is obviously true that every visible minority community experiences the indignities and wounds of systemic discrimination throughout Southern Ontario, it is the Black community which is the focus. It is Blacks who are being shot, it is Black youth that is unemployed in excessive numbers, it is Black students who are being inappropriately streamed in schools, it is Black kids who are disproportionately dropping out, it is housing communities with large concentrations of Black residents where the sense of vulnerability and disadvantage is most acute, it is Black employees, professional and non-professional, on whom the doors of upward equity slam shut. Just as the soothing balm of ‘multiculturalism’ cannot mask racism, so racism cannot mask its primary target” (Lewis, 1992, p. 2). Ontario’s media and multiple reports have highlighted the child welfare-to-prison pipeline and poor outcomes for children who grow up in the care of child welfare. This research is critical to understanding how child welfare initiatives are impacting ACB children and their communities in multiple domains throughout their lives.

Many scholars have noted the lack of disaggregated scholarly research, data collection, and analysis in Ontario’s child protection frameworks toward ACB children, families, and communities (Cénat, Noorishad, Czechowski, Mukunzi, Hajizadeh, McIntee, & Dalexis, 2021; Clarke, Hasford, Gudge, & Mills-Minster, 2018; King, Fallon, Boyd, Black, Antwi-Boasiako, & O’Connor, 2017). It is important to understand that social work is often employed within child welfare. Scholars have not been able to provide independent research outside of and not generated by child protection agencies, OACAS, or government-funded research associated with child welfare since the use of diversity, equity, and inclusion practices and increased funding. This thesis seeks to understand how African, Caribbean, and Black identified employees within child welfare can actualize Africentric ways of knowing and being to realize possible shifts in the community resulting from the current funding of DEI to child welfare, OVOV, and the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies. The goals of the study are; to understand the impact of the current use of DEI on ACB service providers, to seek out prevention-focused services based in ACB communities, and to understand the role and use of social work in the critique of and process of DEI for ACB people.

This research is in response to the challenges faced by child welfare’s attempts to utilize DEI within their current mandate. Given what we know about DEI, how DEI has been criticized for not reducing disparities from an ACB community vantage point and empowering members of African heritage to address anti-Black racism and systems issues. This research challenges the utility of DEI within Ontario’s child welfare systems when working with ACB children and communities by attempting (1) to understand the impact of DEI on ACB service providers (2) to seek out Africentric DEI practices and policies that effectively promote and support DEI by, with and for ACB communities, and (3) to understand the role and use of social work in the critique of and process of DEI for people of African heritage.

# **Ch. 3 Theoretical Lens**

## 3.1 Africentricity/ African Worldviews

Theoretical frameworks seek to understand intertwined relations of discursive contexts used to support this research. Critical social work provides an avenue for divergence from normative grand narratives toward considerations for discursive frameworks (Maxwell, 1998). My research questions are grounded in Africentric worldviews. “Afrocentricity is a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate. Regarding theory, it is the placing of African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena. Thus, anyone can master the discipline of seeking the location of Africans in a given phenomenon. Regarding action and behavior, it is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behavior. Finally, Afrocentricity seeks to enshrine the idea that [B]lackness itself is a trope of ethics. Thus, to be [B]lack is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia, and white racial domination” (Asante, 2003, p. 2).

Expansive contexts can facilitate Africentric worldviews as the foundation for epistemological and ontological considerations about critical race theory. Walcott (2016) acknowledges African diasporic thought is critical to resist anti-Blackness from state-sanctioned endeavours, society, and institutions. The significance of grounding epistemological and ontological frameworks within Africentricity is to provide foundational thought that supports African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) ways of knowing and being as valid and central within academic research and practices for ACB communities. Second, the centering of Africentricity and Africentric worldviews and intersections work to withstand Euro hetero neo-liberal logic. Providing possibilities to contest inequalities, Gray and Coates (2010) argue that the consequences of chattel enslavement and 19th-century colonialism of the African lands are prejudiced concepts that attempt to delegitimize or seize African wisdom and Blackness. The field of social work presents as shifting away from adapting Eurocentric theories to “fit” people of African heritage.

Consequently, this research is informed by foundational African worldviews that center on Africentricity to support the liberation of African consciousness (McDougal, 2009). In addition, Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman’s Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2005) is used due to their understanding of the implications, intent, and atrocities resulting from the enslavement of people of African heritage, such as but not limited to facets and intersections of anti-Black racism. At the same time, they are providing a response that challenges the denial of civil liberties to diasporic African communities based on colorblind approaches. “Afrocentrity speaks to/about how transnational global capital today manipulates southern economies as well as how indigenous peoples continually resist and transform the encroachment of transnational capital in subtle and unheralded way ” (Dei, 1998, p. 203). Afrocentricity seeks to improve relations between Africans and non-Africans while understanding the histories, lived experiences, and cultures of ACB people (Asante, 1983).

On Turtle Island (North America), thoughts of Africentric ontologies and epistemologies are grounded in African ways of knowing and being, the cosmos, African Ancestors, African land, African knowledges (i.e., Kemetic), spiritualities, and so much more (Nobles, 2006). Pan-Africanism is the organization and mobilization of people of African heritage in opposition to the colonial discriminatory practices and the enslavement of Black people. This includes thoughts and movements such as “Pan African [which] is used throughout when referring to aspects of the formal movement being analyzed” (Walters, 1997, p. 12). In the past century, there have been shifts toward the use of the terms Afrocentricity, Africentric, and African-centered (Nobles, 2006; McDougal, 2009, p. 264). Afrocentrists posit worldviews are critical to understanding African perspectives and are influenced by race and ethnicity, indicating multiple specific cultural ways of knowing as an African (Schiele, 1997). Afrocentrists center on traditional African analysis to refute Eurocentric hegemony while affirming African experiences, histories, and cultures (Schiele, 1997, p. 22). Chawane (2016) argues that methodological and epistemological understandings of the African experience  must be considered from African worldviews, as this will decrease the potential for misunderstanding of the African people.

There are multiple definitions for Afrocentricity (Asante, 2009; Chawane, 2016).

Asante (2009) and Chawane (2016) both suggest that “Afrocentricity is an exercise in knowledge and a new historical perspective” (Asante, 2009, p. 32). Others define Afrocentricity as “an intellectual movement, a political view, and/or a historical evolution that stresses the culture and achievements of Africans” (Early, Moses, Wilson & Lefkowitz, 1994, p 44-54) and; suggest that “it is the first and only reality for African people” (Reed, Lawson & Gibbs, 1997, p 73-79). Furthermore, Chukwuokolo (2009) states, “the centrality of Africans and defines Afrocentricity as meaning ‘African centeredness’, according to which Africans should be given their intellectual pride as the originators of civilization” (p 32). Importantly, Africentricity understands multiple ways of being, such as identities of self concerning history, power dynamics, and intersectional identities (Weber, 2010).

“Afrocentricity is defined in terms of the methodology, theory, and ideology that should be employed to achieve its objectives towards attaining the proposed change. Methodologically, Afrocentricity is intended as an answer to the intellectual colonialism that undergirds and serves to validate political and economic colonialism” (Chawane, 2016, p. 80). Africentric perspectives are holistic in comprehending multiple understandings of Blackness, histories, knowledge production, the land, spirituality, and being.

It is essential to note the multiple ways to be of African heritage. African ontology (being), epistemology (knowledge), axiology (values), cosmology (universe), and reasoning (logic) posit that culture and worldviews are present due to their connections to African ancestors (Nobles, 2006; Husain, 2020). This contributes to how people of African heritage understand their lived and spiritual realities. Africentric worldviews illuminate ethos and values for people of African heritage (Nobles, 2006; Swigonski, 1996) while questioning the centrality of Africans within the discussion (Asante, 1988; Swigonski, 1996). Moreover, in the social work context, Everett, Chipungu & Leashore (1991) have expressed that African teachings attempt to elevate African traditional teachings in multiple interconnecting and intersecting ways emphasizing that understanding African culture values, beliefs, and behaviors are vital within the practice of social work for communities of African heritage. Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge the holistic and interconnected relations within Africentric worldviews and the importance of collective relational communities and familial patterns (Turner, 1991). Africentric thought includes multiple holistic representations grounded in African experiences, paradigms, histories, values, and traditions (Turner, 1991). There is a collective consciousness that is illuminated through past and present events, “pervasive, experiential, and participatory spirituality” (Turner, 1991, p. 157), ancestors, reciprocity, and our relations with the land (Turner, 1991).

## 3.2 The interface between Africentric Worldviews and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Policy

This research is concerned with how child welfare has responded to institutional, systemic injustices towards people of African heritage, resulting in disparities, disproportionate removal of children, and treatment of ACB children and communities. The current child welfare discourse and funded government practices have resulted in heuristic reactive programs and services after children of African heritage have come into contact with the child welfare system. This research is concerned with the impact of current mainstream systemic approaches on communities and children of African heritage, which may exacerbate racist practices within child protection services, suggesting the relevance of grounding this inquiry in Africentric worldviews.

African worldviews will be used to critically analyze equity, diversity, and inclusion practices, specifically within the child welfare context. In Ontario, there have been multiple attempts to address the disparities and disproportionalities of ACB community members who are systems involved by incorporating DEI policies and practices within child welfare organizations. Given the overrepresentation of ACB children in care and the continued anti-Black racism within the child welfare system, Africentric worldviews can help directly address anti-Black racism pedagogy and discourse. Africentricity illuminates African worldviews, histories, and philosophies within African thought and relates to pedagogical, cultural, and gendered discourse (Zulu, 2008).

Africentric worldviews do not center Eurocentric perspectives and colonization, which have resulted in the subjugation of disparities, exploitation, marginalism, and violence toward people of African heritage (Schiele, 1997). Africentric worldviews acknowledge diversities within African people, “Creator or a Supreme Being" (Schiele, 1996, p. 287), collectivity or collective identity (Akbar, 1984; Kambon, 1992; Schiele, 1994; Mbiti, 1970; Schiele, 1997), “collective welfare of everyone in the community” (Karenga, 1993; Gyekye, 1992; Williams, 1993, 1987), all people are good (Gyekye, 1992; Mbiti, 1970; Zahan, 1979), cultural commonalities (Schiele, 1997) and the realities of multiple worldviews. “Afrocentric worldview is a set of philosophical assumptions that are believed to have emanated from common cultural themes of traditional Africa and which are thought to be helpful in not only liberating people of African descent but also for facilitating positive human and societal transformation for all (Akbar, 1994; Karenga, 1993; Schiele, 1996)” (Schiele, 1997).

Africentric worldviews will be used to challenge multiple and intersecting hegemonic praxis (Schiele, 1997; Akbar, 1976, 1979, 1984, 1994; Ani, 1994; Asante, 1980, 1988, 1990; Baldwin, 1981, 1985; Baldwin & Hopkins, 1990; Boykin, 1983; Cook & Kono, 1977; Dixon, 1976; Hale-Benson, 1982; Hilliard, 1989; Kambon, 1992; Karenga, 1993; Khatib et al., 1979; Myers, 1988; Nobles, 1980), and counter Eurocentric systemic practices (DePouw, 2018), while providing justifications for the incorporation of Africentric worldviews, and promoting substantive African, Caribbean, and Black practices. Multiple intersectional theoretical frameworks can be considered in examining diversity, equity, and inclusion concerning ACB communities involved with child welfare. The limitations of using Africentric theories and African worldviews are based on the limited understandings within Euro-White settler societies, which have not explored African worldviews and ways of knowing and being of African heritage.

This can result in false assumptions about the presumption of cultural hierarchies within Eurocentric paradigms (Dei, 1998) or that Afrocentricity equates to anti-White (Chawane, 2016). Mainstream social work teachings have not recognized or included Africentric practices within social work child welfare teachings, despite the glaring disparities and poor outcomes in African communities in Ontario. Persistent omissions have resulted in superficial misunderstandings and inaccuracies pertaining to denotations where Afrocentricity will replace Eurocentrism (Dei, 1998).

## 3.3 Critical Race Theory (CRT)

In the mid-1970s, an African-American legal scholar, Derrick Bell, challenged racial reforms after the 1960’s Civil Rights movements (Bell, 1980; Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993) and in opposition to white Eurocentric master narratives (Bell, 1980; Bell, 1995). CRT began with Derrick Bell’s work on the racial history and civil rights (Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic, 1998). Bell (1980) understood that civil rights movements had stalled or were retracting, normative approaches to change did not yield gains, and white scholars seldomly cited African scholars (Delgado, 1984; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Delgado, & Stefancic, 1998). CRT understands that “people of color experience racism in their everyday lives and that White elites shape race relations to serve their own self-interests” (Limbert & Bullock, 2005, p. 254). CRT posits that racism is a typical and permanent feature of society; recognizes the voice and experiences of people of color; challenges ahistoricism by recognizing contexts and historical factors; challenges dominant ideologies of merit, objectivity, colorblindness, and neutrality; works to eliminate racial oppression; and is interdisciplinary (Delgado & Stephancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Taylor, 2009; Clarke, 2012, p 229). “CRT is the heir to both CLS (Critical Legal Studies) and traditional civil rights scholarship. CRT inherits from CLS a commitment to being “critical,” which in this sense also means to be “radical” [while] … [a]t the same time, CRT inherits from traditional civil rights scholarship a commitment to a vision of liberation from racism through right reason. Despite the difficulty separating legal reasoning and institutions from their racist roots, CRT’s ultimate vision is redemptive, not deconstructive” (Bell, 1995, p. 899). CRT scholars challenge the current analysis of structures and method arguments that are considered legitimate (Gillborn, 2006). CRT is committed to scholarly resistance; it is hoped that this will evolve into wide-scale resistance (Gentilli, 1992; Bell, 1995).

CRT theorists are motivated to address concerns on race and, more specifically, how socially constructed entities such as legal systems are used to disempower people of African heritage while protecting whiteness (Bell, 1995). Systemic issues facilitate white privilege within “rational” or “objective” truth, smuggles the privileged choice of the privileged to depersonify their claims and then pass them off as the universal authority and the universal good” (Bell, 1995, p. 901; Calmore, 1982). CRT is embedded within social justice and anti-subordination (Delgado, 1993) through the adoption of inclusivity, collective wisdom, and the belief that laws are not neutral (Lawrence, 1991).

This thesis will use CRT to understand the legalities and disparities from Africentric perspectives. The questions for the thesis will seek to probe the current DEI lens while seeking changes to issues of race, racism, and legislation that directly align with the main elements of CRT. Critical perceptions of CRT are the “critique of liberalism” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993, p 462), “storytelling/counter storytelling” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993, p 462), “revisionist interpretations” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993, p 462), comprehending foundations of race and racism, structural determinism (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993), “race, sex, class, and their intersections” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993, p 463), “essentialism and anti-essentialism” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993, p 463), “cultural nationalism/separatism” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993, p 463), “legal institutions critical pedagogy and minorities in the bar” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993, p 463), and “criticism and self-criticism” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993). Key perceptions will be weaved into questions that will be explicitly posed to an Afrocentric worldview that centers ACB people, history, ways of knowing and being, questioning how DEI is enacted and whether or not DEI is effective. Multiple understandings around storytelling/counter storytelling, critiques of liberalism, underlying issues of race and racism, and other CRT thought can be used to analyze DEI in connection with CRT. Issues about race, class and spatial equality can be understood through CRT and Africentric worldviews (Calmore, 1982). CRT will query “naming one’s own reality” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993, p 462); within an African worldview, this can facilitate understanding how to navigate the historical underlying neo-liberal majoritarian trenches of discriminatory practices.

Limitations of CRT are perpetuated by cultures of silence (Moses, 2021), where CRT is not taught or found in performative statements and actions (Moses, 2021). CRT has been misunderstood and highlighted in mainstream media in our neighbours to the South. Some CRT scholars have noted that “CRT lacks a formal structure” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 1993, p 463). The limitations of CRT are drowning in resistance to ACB identities without merit from liberalist perspectives.

## 3.4 Diversity, Equity, Inclusion /Afrocentric and Critical Race Theory

Media attention has glared multiple spotlights on disproportionalities and disparities of African, Caribbean, and Black (ACB) children involved with child welfare in Ontario. A review of causalities for the over-representation of ACB children and the child welfare’s response is vital, as they have been funded to address this issue. OVOV child welfare discourse has adapted Ontario’s Ministry of Education definition of equity. “Equity is both a process (fair, inclusive, and respectful treatment of all people) and a goal (equitable outcomes for all groups). If diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) seek ACB people to have active roles within child protective services while addressing anti-Black racism. Anti-Black racism is experiences of racism and resistance to that same racism.

Anti-Black racism is resistance against systemic, structured racism towards ACB communities and resistance towards building a just society in which leadership among Black people is fostered (ABPSI-Toronto, 2019; Benjamin, 2003). African ontologies, cosmologies, and epistemologies are foundational to transforming child welfare through an African worldview and Afrocentric grounding. Africentric discourse analysis is necessary to challenge the inequalities coddled within child welfare actively. The acknowledgment and inclusion of Afrocentric worldviews are necessary to contest anti-Black racist practices within child welfare while supporting ACB communities. Since child welfare is tethered to the Child, Youth and Family Services Act (2017), critical race theory (CRT) could be used to challenge legally sanctioned expressions and discourse power relations (Van Dijk, 1993) of anti-Black racism and color-blind legislation that continue to allow ACB children to be taken from their families and communities. Here the suggestion is to question the legitimacy of child welfare and the inequalities reproduced due to child protection services' involvement with ACB communities. The Ford administration’s child welfare re-design currently does not have any allowances that address ACB disparities and disproportionalities within ACB communities proactively. It is critical to address the legislation and how the disparities are socially constructed, guarded, then reproduced. More research is required to understand how and when the legislation will pivot to include ACB communities due to the historical over representations of children of African heritage in child welfare. “Efforts to achieve equity must therefore begin with an analysis of the context in which inequity operates. This analysis will inform the design of programs and policies tailored to address the root causes and consequences of inequity. These initiatives must be developed in collaboration with community partners who can help identify appropriate strategies for promoting equity” (OVOV, 2016, p. 11).

# **Ch. 4 Methodology and Methods**

## 4.1 Research Objectives

The objective of this study was to hear from ACB community members employed within the area of child welfare, to understand how they understand the operationalization and effectiveness of DEI in child welfare.

## 4.2 Data Collection

The data was collected between May 2022 to June 2022. Using a semi-structured interview design, a qualitative approach was used to conduct individual interviews with service providers (directly involved and at arm's length) of child welfare agencies. Up to five (5) one-to-one interviews with African, Caribbean, and Black identified employees of child welfare agencies or individuals who work at arm's length of child welfare agencies were conducted. To be eligible for this study, ACB community members were over 18 years of age and had experience with child welfare since 2016. Interviews were conducted from an Afrocentric space to explore how the current use of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within child welfare, One Vision, One Voice program, and the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies has impacted the representation of ACB children involved with child welfare.

The interview questions were designed to better understand the impact of DEI on ACB service providers, to understand DEI prevention-focused services based in ACB communities, and to realize the role of social work in the critique of and process of developing DEI for ACB people. Using an Afrocentric discourse provided avenues to interrogate government-sanctioned system supports through exploratory work, relations to society at large, and the significance to ACB communities (Asante, 1998). At the same time, CRT interrogates the practice and structural practices.

## 4.3 Methodology and Methods

Recruitment Process: To participate in this research, participants must; identify as being ACB or having a child who is ACB, self-identify as being over 18 years old, and have experience with child welfare for at least four years. The diversity, equity, and inclusion projects are situated in Ontario. The research was gathered data from child welfare service providers in Ontario. Study participants were able to; describe and understand the impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), speak to the current child welfare policies and practices, articulate current services aimed at prevention, and articulate possibilities for future strategies. The recruitment process included: e-mail communication (appendix 1), letter of invitation (appendix 2), and poster (appendix 3). A general e-mail was forwarded to child welfare agencies to introduce the study. Interested participants were contacted via e-mail. The researcher then responded to interested participants to determine the suitability and continued interest. Once the participant met the research criteria, a mutual time and date were established to conduct the study interview.

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized in the research. This strategy provided opportunities to advertise the research within child welfare offices strategically and in ACB communities by placing flyers in locations where there is a higher probability that the individuals will be from the ACB communities and interact with child welfare. A general flyer distribution allowed a more comprehensive number of people to be included in the process of ethical research practice by recruiting from child welfare organizations and organizations that are arm's length from them. Permission was sought from organizations and individuals prior to engaging in recruitment processes. Consent was obtained through the letter of information and consent.

Once participants were recruited, before the interview commenced, participants were taken through the informed consent process (appendix 2 – consent form).

## 4.4 Data Collection

People of African heritage have been subjected to various forms of violent and systemic formations of anti-Blackness for centuries (Dei, 2020). Methodological approaches considered qualitative approaches that actively challenge all epistemological formations of hate and coloniality. Research on child welfare involved specificity on dominant ideologies, controlling Black bodies, and disrupting the most vulnerable in Black communities. This research explored child welfare DEI practices and then moved towards futurities.

Research methods consisted of the questions developed for the in-depth interview, which were influenced by current EDI literature, discourse, and debates that highlight the gaps such as but not limited to; where are the voices of ACB child welfare workers? The design began with a comprehensive literature review on diversity, equity, and inclusion (EDI) in child welfare and its impacts on people who identify as being of African heritage.

The purpose of the interview was to obtain a service provider's perspective on shifts within child welfare as it pertains to diversity, equity, and inclusion. There was an understanding of potential barriers encountered by gatekeepers (Abrams, 2010) who may not want key research informants to speak about systems they are involved in. The interviews used convenience and site-based sampling (Abrams, 2010) to narrow the sample size and obtain relevant interviewees as data sources.

Each interview lasted 60- 90 minutes in duration (appendix 3). The interview questions were divided into three sections. The first section asked demographic questions in a semi-structured interview to ensure the participant aligned with the demographics sought for the study. The following section solicits two semi-structured interview questions pertaining to the participant's child welfare involvement and length of time in the sector. The semi-structured interview concluding sections raised six questions about DEI (see appendix). The interview concluded with an open-ended question to allow participant information to be received in a conversational format. The interview questions were audio and video recorded over zoom to capture observations and discussions.

Interviews provided an avenue to use the depth of the information collected to form an analysis of the OVOV provincial initiative. If an individual agreed to proceed with an interview but declined due to other commitments, that person would have access to the interview questions and be allowed to provide a written response. The data was collected through one-to-one interviews and surveys. In-depth interviews (Boyce & Neale, 2006) were used to; “plan, develop instruments, collect data, analyze data and disseminate findings” (Boyce & Neale, 2006). Informant interviews were semi-structured, with a duration of 60-90 minutes.

McMaster’s zoom video conferencing platforms were utilized to conduct the in-depth interviews. Zoom was used to create the transcript in English and save the interview recording on their computer. The interviewer took notes to support the transcripts. The recordings were stored in accordance and compliance with the ethics submission. The research data was recorded, collected, stored, and downloaded from zoom transcript services. Any notes taken during the interview will be stored on the computer, password protected, and encrypted. There was a concerted effort not to use hard copies during this research process during COVID-19.

Ethics was received by the McMaster MREB. Information kept on the computer was protected by a password and encrypted in a folder. Once the study was complete, an archive of the data, without identifying information, will be destroyed. Every effort was made to protect the interviewee’s confidentiality and privacy.

The interviewee’s name or any information that would allow them to be identified will not be used. Any information that may compromise a participant's identity was removed from the study. Pseudonyms were used alternatively to protect study participants from being identified.

All interview transcripts, electronic data, and recordings were encrypted, and password protected on the computer. Any notes resulting from the interviews were taken and stored on the computer. A copy of the participant’s transcript was sent to the participant via e-mail for feedback.

Any paper copies made were shredded after the research was complete. Any identifying information was kept in a separate file that only the researcher would have access to them. All interview audio recordings will be deleted after the thesis is submitted. If participants requested a copy of the study, it was shared with them prior to the final submission. Since five (5) interviews were conducted, the presumption will be that there were limited numbers of transcripts. Coding and thematic practices were used to group and sort the data retrieved from the interviews.

## 4.5 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis provides a method to analyze and identify meanings and patterns in datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and derive themes from the data collected by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Anonymized zoom recordings generated transcriptions that were deleted after the thesis had been submitted to McMaster. Afrocentric worldviews and CRT were used to ground the thematic analysis, analytical process, and interpret the data. The purposive data was collected through interviews which were analyzed, sorted, and coded in multiple formats to answer the research questions; to understand similarities, incongruencies, themes, and additional information not considered prior to the commencement of the study from an Afrocentric perspective. Some of the goals were to obtain an increased understanding of how child welfare discourse is maintained and constructed and to create space for different worldviews to challenge the current dogma. The thematic analysis provided space to understand the history of DEI, the role of DEI in maintaining the status quo, possibilities for incorporating Africentricity in multiple spaces such as leadership, how to promote substantive change, challenging power dynamics, and providing avenues for social work.

The research participants were asked primarily open-ended questions. Approaches used to conduct the thematic analysis are proposed by Dei (1998), Asante (1983), Garvey (1986), Bell (1980), and Delgado & Stefancic (1993). The themes identified on the transcripts were coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in the file on the computer. The thematic process outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used to manipulate the data and organize the data. The familiarization process occurred through reviewing transcripts before sorting the data. Next, the data was sorted and coded into groupings that identified similarities and incongruences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes will inform themes through an Afrocentric worldview to understand the research question and analysis of DEI by asking, “How does system theory work? What is its relationship to society in the large? [and] What significance does it have to Africans?” (Asante, 1998, p. 13). Once the codes were grouped in the computer file, they will be determined “in relation to self and all else” (Nobles, 2005, p.1), allowing space for African consciousness, awareness, and being (Nobles, 2005). After making space for reflection and relating the findings to the literature, the goal is to begin the process of answering the proposed research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

# **Ch. 5 Findings**

Five participants were recruited for this research. Each of the participants was over the age of majority and university educated. The participants' education ranged from undergraduate to Master’s degrees. All of the participants identified as African, Caribbean, Black, or all of the above. Three participants identified as female, one as male, and one as queer. Four of the participants worked in child welfare agencies, and one participant worked at arm's length of child welfare. After consent was obtained from the executive director, employees contacted the researcher directly to participate in the research.

This chapter will present four prominent themes at the intersection of DEI and child welfare in Ontario that emerged from the interviews with the study participants. A consistent thread that weaved its ways across all participant interviews and emergent themes was the importance of Africentric ways of knowing, doing, and resisting colonially within child welfare policy and practice. The connections that the participants made between Africentricity and the tensions and possibilities of DEI within child welfare were of equal interest and value to this research. These themes include:

## Theme 1 - Defining Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

An important area of inquiry is how the participants understood and interpreted concepts and definitions for DEI and, more specifically, their thoughts, opinions, and observations about DEI in the Child Welfare context. While participants cited the importance of DEI to be actualized, they voiced some skepticism on how DEI has been implemented and designed to meaningfully address the needs and experiences of families, communities, and workers of African heritage.

Due to the increased prevalence of the term DEI, it is essential to investigate the constructs of each term for each of the five community research participants who were asked, “how do you understand equity, diversity, and inclusion?” The participants held unique and varying definitions and understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Four of the participants provided an interpretation for a definition of DEI. The first child welfare employee understood DEI:

“As a vehicle or an avenue for equity deserving groups to have an opportunity to voice their needs and space for their actions.”

The first child welfare manager noted the importance of making space for everyone, providing everyone with a voice while:

“Ensuring that people feel a sense of belonging in the workplace. Equity acknowledges differences as Black children are systemically over-surveilled separated from their families and harmed. Equity places specific strategies in place for ACB communities to disrupt the corruption, racial biases, and anti-Black racism. Inclusion is the ability to participate and to be treated respectfully in a safe space with the acknowledgement of Black history globally.”

The second child welfare worker noted the need for systems change that DEI could potentially fulfill, noting that:

“… diversity, equity, and inclusion in child welfare assists to examine change for Black people, and to make changes which assist to address the issues of over representation.”

Conversely, the first child welfare supervisor had a different understanding of DEI. From their perspective, there is a need to recognize the historical conceptualization of DEI. Rather than viewing DEI as a way to address discrimination and racism, they felt that DEI was a term that was superimposed on African communities by White people in power, similar to multiculturalism of the 80s. For them, DEI should reflect the following components:

“Equity speaks to parity for people who have been historically underrepresented and denied representation, power, access, and opportunities, in addition to pushing and disrupting, challenging notions and speaking for the voiceless. Equality speaks to all levels of an organization and extends into the community, resources, and representation to ensure fair practices. For us this also includes in community but is not there the way it needs to be. Diversity is the understanding of lived experiences and respect for the full person which includes race, ethnicity, spirituality, sexual orientation, and beliefs. Diversity includes everyone in a space or realm. Inclusion is the intentional process to address biases and inequalities that ensures safe space and practices of belonging.”

Another participant who is part of a legal team echoed the concerns about how DEI is promoted and enacted. When challenging the notion of diversity equity inclusion, they shared:

“I think that they are probably just words that are used to appease the people who are complicit, as the current discourse in child welfare demonstrates systemic polarities which serves the child welfare system and the insular maintenance of power.”

Hence, the participants revealed a range of possibilities and tensions of DEI in the child welfare context demonstrating how the interpretation of DEI is dependent on a range of factors, including (power dynamics, African history, legacy of colonialism towards people of African heritage, omission of a holistic ACB agency outside of the systems, and long-standing issues with intersecting systems such as policing). This small sample size demonstrates the variances in understanding a general term frequently used to address systemic issues.

## Theme 2 - The Operationalization of DEI in Child Welfare

 There appears to be an absence of policies and practices to guide the operationalization and implementation within child welfare that directly respond to the needs and experiences of communities of African heritage. Furthermore, there also presents to be some confusion pertaining to how or if it is necessary to operationalize DEI policy and practice, given the concerns related to the architects of DEI, who exists outside of African communities. As the child welfare supervisor noted:

“I struggle with it [DEI] because it is not something that came from the community, it is something that is kind of imposed on the community, …DEI is just where we're at today. Next 10 years it could be something else.”

The child welfare lawyer noted:

“…I'm not convinced that anything significant has shifted”

Participants discussed the continued tensions between communities of African heritage and child welfare. The practical realization is questioned as participants who understand colonialist assumptions and practices which accrue financial profit outside of ACB communities, openly speak to omissions of Africentric practices.

### Subtheme 2.1 - Disaggregating Child Welfare Data Collection for ACB Communities

Many participants have found that DEI benefits are overshadowed by gaps in multiple areas in the current implementation of DEI within child welfare for ACB communities. Participants articulated some incongruences as policy and legislation do not represent the identities and best interests of communities of African heritage. One primary concern is that DEI policies rely on research data, yet research practices rely on disaggregated data.

An important theme emerging from the interviews was concerning the participants’ views on reporting disparities for children of African heritage within child welfare. This is not surprising given that ACB communities have requested meaningful data for decades, which does more than accurately reflect the number of children, families, and communities involved in child welfare, including highlighting their experiences of child welfare practices and policies. From the participants' perspectives in this study, the overarching belief is that data collection methods are neither reliable nor accurate. For example, as the first child welfare participant shared:

“When we talk about the numbers of ACB children care, there are gaps around these categories of other, and unknown. And so, you really don't know if those [CPIN] numbers are even accurate.”

In addition, communities of African heritage have demanded the collection of disaggregated data due to multiple issues related to race-informed trauma, adverse outcomes for children in care, and racist ideologies which deny communities of African heritage. Although the Ford administration has legislated disaggregated data be collected and disseminated, participants discussed the problematic nature of this process, including the logistics of the collection process and how communities are categorized through this process. As the second child welfare participant shared:

“The data collection is a mess for Black communities, it’s a mess and I don’t know how it gets better using these strategies.”

Most research participants spoke to the need for oversight in collecting data for communities of African heritage. The participants acknowledged the need to create an ACB agency outside of the OACAS/child welfare in ACB communities as a way to address the disparities and oversight issues. Participants have explained that child welfare agencies practice of not collecting data on ACB children or placing children of African heritage in categories labeled other, unknown, and mixed race which are equivocal. The manufactured labels and practices have been observed by a child welfare manager who remarked:

“There are also issues with the collection of data on a whole for Black families.”

The cynicism is marred by a further distrust in government, OACAS, and child welfare with policies and practices which have continued issues of anti-Black racism through the accounting for children of African heritage in child welfare; a child welfare supervisor noted:

“The data collection issues are created outside of Black communities in the creation of the questions, how the questions are asked or not asked, who the questions are asked to, how that information is placed in CPIN and how the information is understood. You know there is no point in the data collection which is secure because there are issues with altering the data through the back door. We don’t talk about this, but it needs to be addressed in a way that facilitates ethics and integrity in the process.”

It appears that the participants questioned the practices associated with CPIN and child protection’s reaction to the mandated collection and dissemination of disaggregated data for ACB communities. Desultory data collection practices outlined by ACB child welfare employees were articulated as perfunctory discursive maneuvers which facilitate child welfare’s maintenance of the status quo. Participants spoke about the potential harms resulting from overreliance on the interpretation of statistics from CPIN and how that would impact political, policy, and resource responses to African, Caribbean, and Black communities in Ontario..

## Theme 3 - Concerns about the Effectiveness of DEI Practices

There are many practices within DEI, such as creating an ACB advisory committee which many child welfare agencies have implemented. Participants noted that some advisory committees or members were punished, pushed out, and silenced when they spoke honestly. The child welfare participant provided their perspective on the committee and noted:

“Black advisory committees are a great idea. These community members have great suggestions that have sort of helped to shift CAS but I believe they lack funding, power, and recognition to move their suggestions to implementation.”

Another critical theme participants felt was particularly important is the reality that even amid a DEI movement within child welfare, there continues to be an absence of any “real change.” The second child welfare supervisor reported:

“The data produces fear in workers.”

The first child protection manager concurred with the statement above, then cited:

“Although DEI practices has not resulted in a significant shift within Black senior leadership in the child welfare sector on a whole. But, diversity has resulted in the intentional hiring of Black staff, data collection but it is problematic, programs and intake strategies to reduce the number of ACB families coming into the care of child welfare… But no change for Black communities."

Of particular significance, the child welfare employees acknowledged children of African heritage continue to come into the care of the society and the need to continue work within child welfare led by African communities, and the necessity for an African community agency outside of child welfare. There were benefits cited when advisory committees have the power to make change. All participants noted that child welfare requires assistance and ACB community leadership to address issues about anti-Black racism, data collection, and actioning community voices. Participants in the study also noted multiple areas where improvements could be made within child welfare and ACB communities, as the participants spoke about Africentrism, Africentric practices, ways of knowing and being, and the importance of acknowledging Black people in all spaces respectfully. The child welfare lawyer noted:

“There are no real changes in the ACB communities with supports for families outside of child welfare… “Sometimes it [DEI] waters down what you really should be doing, as opposed to reflecting what the community really needs. So this is my struggle with DEI but it's better than nothing.”

It appears the participants are suggesting the need to create African, Caribbean, and Black community agencies outside of child welfare that are representative of the ACB communities as an alternative to implementing the current iteration of DEI within Child Welfare. Participants reported that there needs to be a change to the current DEI, as there are many gaps. Participants also recognized barriers to community member's ability to provide advocacy, resources, support, and services outside of child welfare recognized by governments, courts, police, hospitals, child welfare, and other organizations. Two participants noted barriers within the court process and reported:

“There are no Black experts on from African communities that I am aware of”

“Some lawyers talk about there being a high bar to be an expert in court but that is code for keep Black folk out”

Participants noted the existence of multiple legal, legislative, process, data, and systems issues on hospitals, community health centers, emergency departments, police, schools, companies, legal aid, and organizations, many of which have DEI departments. The concern noted by the first child welfare worker is that DEI departments create barriers to change and self-determination within ACB communities:

“Right now, that whole entire system covers up…They can literally get away with a crime.”

The participant noted that communities of African heritage are rendered voiceless when systems collude and keep quiet due to how power and accountability are leveraged with legislative requirements. If a child of African heritage is hurt by teachers in a school and the child cannot disclose who harmed the child, child welfare can not investigate or hold the school administration or school accountable. The participant noted that police have been reluctant to investigate harm towards Black children regarding anti-Black racism. The child welfare supervisor articulated that this is complicated as:

“Either the union protects the teacher, or somebody lawyers up.

And we’re none the wiser we have to deal with those things.”

Participants have suggested that community advocacy be funded for ACB communities, particularly due to child welfare, health care, education, criminal justice, and police disparities.

The child welfare manager felt there was a lack of transparency and honesty around interactions and referrals from referring agencies; in particular, one worker explained:

“In order to open a referral, and sort of bind our hands because it fits within our eligibility spectrum. So the schools will often weaponize families along with the police.”

Although participants noted some positive shifts with DEI. Numerous challenges were mentioned with the current policies and practices in child welfare. Multiple participants spoke to entities that assist in upholding intrinsic powers afforded through legislative mandates. Three participants connected the systemic challenges in child welfare and other systems to issues about a social economy predicated on African, Caribbean, and Black communities.

The participants have not expressed that DEI be terminated. Instead, they would like to re-imagine DEI so that the appropriate stakeholders are visible, and their voices are uplifted through the leadership of African heritage so this process can create policies and practices that are grounded in Africentric frameworks, led by African leaders, and reflective of the promises of DEI for communities of African heritage. In a DEI framework that is uniquely representing the distinctive experiences of families of African heritage. Emerging from the interviews was a sense that DEI policies and practices should be grounded in principles of self-determination from ACB communities. For example, the lawyer suggested the need for a DEI consultation and advisory process that centers and empowers the voices of community members of African heritage:

“So, again, it's listening to the community and if some things don't fit within your DEI, you should be open to that entirely too. So, to me it's listening to the community being open and being willing to scrap certain things”.

There are multiple themes around practices that are superimposed or have omitted Black people from decision-making tables. The implementation of DEI in child welfare is not a process grounded in African worldviews or consciousness. Although some mechanisms present to have shifted, participants overwhelmingly cite issues with attempts to control ACB communities through attempts to silence and transcend colonial power.

## Theme 4 - Enacting DEI

From the perspective of the participants of this research, some shifts have occurred stemming from current DEI efforts in child welfare, including the hiring of ACB staff, specific anti-Black racism training, and the use of culturally appropriate programs. As the first child welfare manager reported:

“We have decided to intentionally focus on Black youth within our care and Black families that we service by locating lead expert[s] deeming equity work to be an expertise designating a director to oversee equity work and designating and elevating, a staff from the collective bargaining unit playing them outside into more of a managerial role, but with direct service support. So that Black families can specifically have an ally for the one vision one voice template within our organization, as they are investigated as they receive service whatever their interaction is.”

This example demonstrates how elements of DEI are implemented into practice. However, although there are strong examples of DEI in practice, there continues to be cynicism about the policy due to historical and ongoing harms. A child welfare manager noted there had not been considerable changes in the area of child welfare over the past 20 years:

“I was fighting for equity, and we're still fighting for it.”

A child welfare worker reported that they are cynical, then reported:

“As I said before, some people are trying, but at the same time this is sort of a band aid so there's not enough in investigation or understanding.”

Participants agreed that change is required in child welfare. Yet, some of the participants noted the implementation is absent with people of African heritage with lived experience from ACB communities and professionals such as legal advocates, social workers, and ACB community members who are not child welfare workers at decision-making tables with power. It will be difficult for the re-design to move forwards for communities of African heritage without voices from the African communities. Particularly when child welfare employees are not trusting that this DEI process will be effective in absentia of communities of African heritage, there is a duality within the practice that needs to make consideration about the voices at the table, which needs to fund and create space for ACB advocates in a meaningful way. In order to address this cynicism, the first supervisor spoke to the importance of DEI having an Africentric worldview for communities of African heritage, which should be reconceptualized and grounded within African ways of knowing and being with African leaders, and the communities it proposes to serve:

“Bringing an Afrocentric view lens to our engagement and service delivery with our, our folk and the shift also means that it's not on only African People.”

This is particularly important as complicity is the worker’s complicity as the worker created the policy and practices. Communities of African heritage have a more significant role in defining their agency, on their terms. The second child welfare worker noted a gap where people of African heritage, when employed for child welfare, are making decisions from that lens. Then who is making decisions for the community to address child welfare proactively? There are gaps in communities of African heritage who can effectively work in communities to prevent ACB community members from being involved with child welfare.

The child protection manager articulated that if programs were funded separately from child welfare and placed in ACB communities, there would be a better chance to address issues proactively in substantive ways. The supervisor concluded by outlining the competing tensions between child protection and ACB communities which they outlined occur in multiple spaces. .

###  Subtheme 4.1 – Amplifying Asks of ACB Community Members

There are possibilities and recognition that some shifts are occurring, and it is challenging for participants to feel confident in the process. From the perspective of the participants of this research, there have been some shifts that have occurred stemming from current DEI efforts in child welfare, including the hiring of ACB staff, specific anti-Black racism training, and the use of culturally appropriate programs. As the first child welfare manager reported:

“We have decided to intentionally focus on Black youth within our care and Black families that we service by locating lead expert[s] deeming equity work to be an expertise designating a director to oversee equity work and designating and elevating, a staff from the collective bargaining unit playing them outside into more of a managerial role, but with direct service support. So that, so that Black families can specifically have an ally for the one vision one voice template within our organization, as they are investigated as they receive service whatever their interaction is.”

This example also demonstrates how elements of DEI are implemented into practice. However, although there are strong examples of DEI in practice, there continues to be cynicism about the policy due to historical and ongoing harms.

Participants agreed that change is required in child welfare. Yet, some of the participants noted the implementation is absent with people of African heritage with lived experience from ACB communities and professionals such as legal advocates, social workers, and ACB community members who are not child welfare workers at decision-making tables with power. It will be difficult for the re-design to move forwards for communities of African heritage without voices from the African communities. There is a duality within the practice that needs to make considerations for voices at the table, which needs to fund and create space for advocates in a meaningful way. In order to address this cynicism, one participant spoke to the importance of DEI having an Africentric worldview for communities of African heritage, which should be reconceptualized and grounded within African ways of knowing and being with African leaders, and the communities it proposes to serve:

“An Afrocentric lens allows us to just be heard and understood.

While acknowledging our histories, past and experiences.”

Communities of African heritage have a more significant role to define their agency, on their terms. The second child welfare worker noted a gap where people of African heritage, when employed for child welfare, are making decisions from an Africentric lens, then at other times from a mainstream lens as they seek advancement within the field. Then who is making decisions for ACB communities to address child welfare proactively? There are gaps in communities of African heritage who can effectively work in communities to prevent ACB community members from being involved with child welfare. If programs were funded and placed in ACB communities, there would be a better chance to provide efficient services and decrease the disparities. This is further evidenced in how individual child welfare engage African, Caribbean, and Black communities in Ontario. .

# **Ch. 6 Discussion**

The analysis of the interviews with the study participants and the themes that emerged through these interviews have highlighted several critical threads that have deepened the understanding of how DEI policies and practices are currently operationalized in child welfare. For families and communities of African heritage, the challenges with these processes are allowing Africentric worldviews to address disparities proactively in the community. As indicated in the findings, the themes are noted below.  This has alerted the urgency to revise DEI both in its conceptual development/framing and providing considerations to voices of African heritage. If DEI is to be used, questions should consider where DEI policies are going to be most effective in supporting ACB communities involved with child welfare and what needs to occur from an Africentric perspective for the revisioning to be supported and implemented.

Five research participants have identified vital issues on

1. capturing disaggregated data for ACB children and youth in child welfare as initially requested by the communities,
2. definitions, interpretations, and imposition of the meaning of diversity, equity, and inclusion within child welfare second to the incorporation of Africentric worldviews,
3. understanding how DEI is operationalized within child welfare, and
4. understanding the current and potential role of ACB communities outside of child welfare.

Although the research participants acknowledge the need to make space for communities of African heritage to take a leadership role in this area, research participants did not identify community agencies that could unilaterally assist in supporting communities of African heritage without specific government funding. The other concern is that some agencies of African heritage are losing trust in the community due:

1. their close working relations with child welfare agencies
2. lack of expertise resulting in being trained by child welfare resulting in interruptions to Africentric practices
3. ACB community agencies surveilling communities of African heritage due to the reporting and feedback mechanisms

All of these factors can erode trust in ACB community agencies and work to undermine the fabric of communities of African heritage.

## Understanding DEI

As made visible by the research participants, DEI is a confusing concept, partly because there appears to be more than one definition and partly due to people working in the child welfare field interpreting DEI policies in ways that make sense to them and the work they do. It should be acknowledged that as a settler nation-state Canada’s legislative history and practices are riddled with racist, discriminatory practices towards people of African heritage. These practices separated families and provided stressors in multiple domains (James & Davis, 2012). Child welfare’s understanding of DEI has acknowledged injustices, structural barriers, histories, and practices resulting in unfair treatment (Equity and anti-oppression in child welfare, 2022). While child welfare management, staff, and lawyers of African heritage purported to understand the need not to utilize bourgeois understandings of DEI but rather allow space for the incorporation of African ways of knowing and being, which provides leadership to address the disparities within the process.

Within the course of defining DEI, two of five research participants held divergent articulations, questions, tensions, and resistance to coloniality which have not been articulated based on the enforcement of the term and conception outside of communities of African heritage. The multiple definitions alluded to broader themes highlighted by the research participants pertaining to the rights and control, whereby DEI “presents" as allowing for equity, diversity, and inclusion within a child welfare system for communities of African heritage. Although participants can articulate definitions, they also produced responses that acknowledge the need to include and empower the communities of African heritage for answers that will assist in overhauling fundamental issues within child welfare as it pertains to Black families. ACB child welfare research participants alluded to challenges using mainstream, singular policies, practices, legislation, tools, and interpretations of DEI, which have excluded Africentric practices and people. Participants have explicated the resistance to center and fund programs services outside of child welfare in African communities. Tensions and resistance stem from the continuous use of allied terms and practices, which, when defined, speak to ownership of the DEI process and property of ACB children involved with child welfare in a provincial re-design system that failed to include African voices at the table.

Communities of African heritage have been calculatedly excluded from creating community-based services to protect and advocate for their respective communities as it pertains to the Ford administration’s child welfare re-design (MCCSS, 2022). The current resistance of 40% of the research participants to defining DEI is observed through interruptions and ownership of a DEI process meant to address relations and experiences specific to anti-Black racism, disparities, and inequities within child welfare. While simultaneous productions of anti-Blackness occurred in the Ford administration’s child welfare re-design, as people of African heritage were excluded from decision-making tables, funding, policy creation, and legislative shifts to address blatant anti-Black racism promoted within the ministry. The concept of ownership is predicated on the fact that child welfare participants have acknowledged CAS financially benefits from disproportionate apprehensions of Black children, the miscategorization of Black children in CPIN, and the placement of services for Black families predominantly in child welfare agencies. The ownership of a process is insufficient to address anti-Black racism through performative heterogeneity of DEI without substantive involvement from communities of African heritage. These are new research findings that have not been discussed in previous research, as there have been no public evaluations on CPIN, child welfare data collection practices, or an examination of current publications based on the data generally or specific to communities of African heritage. DEI can neither be realized nor actualized as long as African communities are silenced and marginalized within an OACAS child welfare DEI process. ACB research participants speak to the long-term disruptions towards communities of African heritage in multiple domains throughout their lifespan. The commodification of children of African heritage through the current DEI, disempowers ACB communities and has coopted a process that has gone unchallenged, as the OACAS and child welfare have not untethered themselves from their colonial past. As employees utilize their insider perspective, acknowledge and critique the discourse and politics of the DEI term..

## Challenges of Operationalized DEI on ACB Service Providers

The findings suggest that current child welfare DEI practices include service providers of African heritage who agree, question, resist, and are in conflict with DEI practices. Uncertainty has evolved around how DEI is operationalized, and concerns pertain to practice, protocol, and intersections with other systems such as policing, education, health care, and courts. Findings echo Henry and Tator's (2009) understanding that no singular understanding of DEI exists. Singular perspectives within DEI oppose concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion. As it posits a position of power that functions to minimalize and silence African world views, voices and perspectives through a failure to acknowledge multitudes of histories, knowledges, and understandings, which are critical if DEI is to be successful. The position taken by four of the five research participants is that if DEI is to be utilized, there must be concerted efforts to address power imbalances in ways that allow for multiple paths to achieve autonomy, safety, knowledge, and understanding within the space.

Child welfare employees spoke about the need to have Africentric agencies outside of child welfare and how Africentric worldviews or a more articulate DEI framework could respond to this issue. A hospital analogy was used to better understand child welfare's cost and service analysis, whereby not all injuries require a visit to the hospital.

Africentric community-led agencies can provide services specific to communities of African heritage at a fraction of the cost compared to child welfare. There may be possibilities for accountability and oversight with Africentric community members involved by providing administration over collecting data specific to ACB communities, which are owned and housed within African communities.

All ACB child welfare employees articulated tensions within practice, eligibility spectrum, tools, language, CPIN data collection, and understanding of various needs and gaps for African communities, which will be challenging to meet within child welfare. One issue with the legislation pertains to the continued omissions of the identification and protections for ACB children. During this research, there was no evidence of repeals to allow for creating an independent African agency to address the inequities left by their liberal predecessor. This resulted in increased inequitable power dynamics placed on ACB communities. As child welfare’s attempts at capturing disaggregated data in CPIN is flawed, presenting as resistance to ACB data collection efforts. Moving forwards, any reports on communities of African heritage should be generated from ACB communities outside of OACAS and Eurocentric academy research leadership. An argument could be made that funders, institutions, and partners are complicit in the continuance of Eurocentric social capitalist power relations, which inform policy, power, and financial discourses. The resulting impression is that DEI will be about improving the child welfare system, when there are troubling aspects. As the practices align with Derrick Bell’s notion of interest convergence where people of African heritage advance to promote White self-interests. As dehumanization practices continue through the omission of ACB ethical research practices within child welfare, the reluctance to fund research external to OACAS and academies initiatives, and the maintenance of research on Black participants by White researchers outside of an Africentric balance of power which nullifies stories and voices from African communities.

The intentional normalization of the misclassification practices in collecting disaggregated data for communities of African heritage presents as anti-Black racism and self-serving. Suppose current and past research has relied on the current categories of raw data collection generated from CPIN. In that case, an argument could be made that the number of African, Caribbean, and Black children in care is grossly underestimated. Oversight, leadership, and ownership issues regarding data collection are overshadowed by the intentional misplacement of ACB children in multiple other categories. Communities of African heritage require control, oversight, ownership over their specific data, and the ability to shift how the data is collected, whom the data is collected from, and who owns the data from African community members.

The multiple worries ACB child welfare employees shared in this study raise questions about the accounting practices that deflate issues with the disparities of African, Caribbean and Black children in care. At the same time, these practices increase monetary funding to child welfare and place stress on ACB employees to comply with moot practices. Findings from this research also suggest that the organizational structure and organizational charts within child welfare agencies are equally problematic, as there are DEI positions, but there are issues with how Africentric worldviews, anti-Black racism, and DEI flow throughout the organization. To address issues about structure, there were multiple suggestions about holistic inclusions of community in decision-making capacities and shared responsibilities which are recognized within all areas of Ontario. This is complicated as intersecting systems have legislative powers over child welfare to force child welfare to apprehend children through tactics such as laying charges against all family members (which are dropped later in court), using the medical model to form single mothers, or holding parents resulting in children of African heritage entering into the child welfare system, as no one can care for the child. The third area pertains to support provided to address systemic issues. However, there must be Africentric specific services for ACB children in care and aging out of care.

The problems exist when adoptive and legal guardians can receive up to $5,700 annually (Province of Ontario, 2022), while systemic structural issues such as housing and poverty, which have been noted as indicators contributing to child welfare involvement, are not addressed for ACB community members. There are numerous stressors noted by participants who articulate difficulties in singular notions adopted to address anti-Black racism and DEI while excluding Africentric ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies. The examples cited speak to the need for broader, holistic, interconnected solutions grounded in ACB communities and addressing systemic issues..

### Subtheme 6.1 – ACB Disaggregated Data Collection and CPIN

 Practices of inclusion work to actively address discriminatory, racist practices, and if done effectively within child welfare agencies, this may ensure that their work is grounded in connection to communities of African heritage. The collection of accurate and effective data for communities of African heritage is critical to understand needs and resources specific to their communities. Participants note issues with CPIN and the collection of data that informs studies on ACB children involved with child welfare. Research can contribute to implementing policies, procedures, funding initiatives, and targeted programs in key areas. However, with numerous collection issues noted in CPIN pertaining to;

1. the intentional categorizing of African, Caribbean, and Black children into groups labeled, other, unknown and mixed race,
2. the exclusion of collecting disaggregated data,
3. the manipulation of CPIN, which can allow for disaggregated data sections to be omitted,
4. the continued colonial hegemony over child welfare publications, data collection,
5. access to CPIN’s back door, which allows changes to be made and unaccounted for, needs to be addressed, and
6. publications with the knowledge that current and previous accounting practices are erroneous.

The current data collection practices present as cultural erasure. As data is intentionally miscategorized and omitted through practices of governmentality within research; and through the production of published materials.

The findings suggest that a substantial part of enacting DEI is addressing the concern over disaggregated data collection for African, Caribbean, and Black communities. Data analyses must go beyond merely accurately quantifying the number of children impacted by child welfare. Research participants voiced skepticism about the current data collection process that does not center communities of African heritage and flaws, gaps, and anti-Black sediments within the process, which prejudices the efforts. This research suggests that Africentric data collection practices could support the development of more effective and responsive to families of African heritage, which could shift the way CPIN data is collected, analyzed, and taken up.

An argument could be made that Africentric community-led knowledges should center ACB communities and actively resist normative reporting and data analysis while making a case for independent specific ACB community resources and services outside of child welfare. Within academia, ACB communities’ historical struggles with child welfare’s use of diversity, equity, and inclusion have not acknowledged people of African heritage outside Black/White binaries.

Africentricity facilitates more authentic understandings for people of African heritage and will assist in answering the research questions within an Africentric worldview allowing for Afrocentrist thought to be legitimized with African identity. For communities of African heritage, this is critical within research and data collection to allow Afrocentrism to guide the questions and interrogate diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in the current system while understanding Africentric practices. Then ask questions about Afrocentric practices that can be used to help eradicate or challenge discriminatory practices and create a safe space to heal and to understand the role and use of social work in the critique of and process of DEI for people of African heritage.

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### Subtheme 6.2 – Incorporating Africentric World Views

DEI within child welfare is complicated as multiple systems simultaneously contribute to disparities currently held within child welfare. Child welfare research must acknowledge the primary referral agencies (education, police, and health care) and how these systems contribute to the disparities. Each central referral agency subscribes to DEI in one form or another within their respective agencies. The issue is further convoluted when child protection agencies lack the infostructure to independently resolve the overrepresentation of ACB children involved with child welfare. The other presenting issue is the replacement of social workers with other professionals who lack social work training and do not have genuine relations with communities of African heritage. However, social workers are primarily employed in child protection. The rate at which staff of African heritage can be hired to assist their community has slowed due to the limited enrollment of ACB students in the field of social work practice at the bachelor's and master's levels.

Africentric worldviews and ways of knowing and being are not taught as a compulsory part of the curriculum within colleges or universities in schools of social work. In addition, practicum placements are not equipped to effectively address how to work within African communities. There are multiple DEI roles, perspectives, and positions where DEI professionals are formally educated through Western capitalist teachings, predicated in a history steeped in colonization. It then would be difficult for individuals with advanced degrees in business administration, public policy, social work, psychology, and human resources to rely on formal education, industry knowledge, and experience. Colonialism and coloniality have interrupted the validity of African ways of knowing and being, which are not substantially formally taught at an advanced level within multiple fields of study in Ontario. In addition, there are reoccurring themes on the disconnection and lack of leadership from provincial and federal levels of government, who have basically defunded advocacy.

The prescriptive nature of theoretical frameworks grounding Africentric research presents as being bound by normativity, privileging Eurocentric logic and sequencing assumptions that challenge the importance of African knowledge, spirituality, ways of being, and worldviews.

Current child welfare practices are reactive, on the premise that the child must be in care to obtain services. Removing children from their homes can establish a basis for continued ACB child apprehensions founded on the current legislation and applications made to courts. In the absence of legislation to stop the cultural genocide, the current administration has not committed to funding preventative work outside of child welfare directly to ACB communities.

It is important to note that although child welfare agencies and the OACAS hire staff of African heritage in strategic positions, the current legislation, policies, and procedures limit DEI to come to fruition under the current Ford administration. Due to the inherent power over structures of child welfare and their legislative duties through the Child, Youth and Family Services Act (CYFSA, 2017). It is almost infeasible that child welfare would be able to balance their legal authority and DEI towards ACB communities simultaneously due to conflicts within their role. This is due to the position of power mandated for child welfare by the province of Ontario.

Three of five participants have spoken about some positive shifts in child welfare. All participants have spoken about continuing the journey in community and child welfare. All participants explained that DEI has not translated to impacting ACB communities, as changes in child welfare have not impacted communities of African heritage. Black communities should be grounded in ACB communities without individuals having dual interests. Participants further questioned current provincial policy practices that excluded ACB community members from decision-making tables. The power to design, develop, and implement Africentric, African-focused, Black services has been reiterated as a critical part of this process. Participants have acknowledged child welfare’s efforts to implement support for African communities and challenges due to the marginalized role that ACB communities play. Participants observe DEI as silencing the truth and covering experiences for African, Caribbean, and Black children, families, and communities. There are some concerns that participants had around DEI, as the silencing and omission of ACB community members cause further harms, as evidenced in the current child welfare re-design.

## Learnings

In focusing on EDI, as a person of African heritage working with community members in child welfare, there continues to be an enormous amount of work to be accomplished in both community and child welfare. There were issues with the conception, mechanics, and implementation of DEI through administrative mechanisms. At times, people of African heritage were not provided consideration to be present and inform decisions that directly impact their communities. This must change. The concept of DEI in the current state is failing ACB communities due to the sanitization introduced through color-blind public discourse and legislative frameworks and OACAS oversight which applauds the current re-design without Africans being present. There are many learnings pertaining to research, ACB community involvement, ways for meaningful community involvement, which includes the formation of community agencies, policy generation from ACB communities to ministry without systemic interference, placing previous and future data collection on ACB communities into the community, practical implementation practices from policy creation to implementation, solution on how to address the accounting practices with CPIN and the data collection, the need for community advocates who are recognized by the courts, hospitals, police, and school, addressing gaps within legal aid, reviewing the voice of the child and allowing for the creation of a table for communities who have been historically underserved to come together to address these issues. Some people are working for the system and climbing the institutional ladder, which allows for a justification for the status quo; some challenge the system and realize they cannot get grant contracts, publishing requests, funding, and other opportunities. Structural racism requires members must be complicit to benefit from the system. Child welfare systems will continue to be because Ontario’s government has not considered funding any alternatives.

The lack of understanding DEI, the underdevelopment of DEI policies and procedures, the use of practices developed outside of Africentric ways of knowing and being, and the absence of substantial partnerships within ACB communities resulted in the absence of power and funding in ACB communities. There continues to be cynicism around the possibilities of DEI within child welfare as it pertains to ACB communities. In response, there are implications for social work.

# **Ch. 7 Implications**

## Sankofa: Understanding the Past to Move forward

The participants note how their contributions to this research have led to the importance of grounding DEI policy and practice in Africentric ways of knowing and being in order for DEI to effectively respond to the needs and experiences of Black families and workers within the context of child welfare. Participants note multiple threads were leading towards and away from DEI practice within child welfare which should be addressed. To focus on addressing the confusion within the practice. The exclusion of ACB community ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies and confusion due to inefficient processes, requires people of African heritage leading this process for their respective communities. As a result, the recommendations are to re-imagine and revise the acceptance of Africentric worldviews and develop Africentric approaches in child welfare.

## Implications for Developing and Operationalizing DEI in Ways that Work

Implications for Policy development

If DEI is to be utilized when working with communities of African heritage to revise or develop child welfare. Communities of African heritage must lead policy development to allow DEI policies to reflect lived experiences of Africentric ways of knowing and being. The government has taken the necessary first step in mandating disaggregated data collection. It is critical that the government now create a team at the ministry level outside of the OACAS, child welfare, and academia to;

1) Review the placement of ACB children in the categories labels other, mixed race, and unknown, ensure that Indigenous children and children from other groups are accounted for accurately,

2) Place monitoring and oversight practices on CPIN with the involvement of communities of African heritage. Due to the current issues, the OACAS or academies should not have oversight over CPIN,

3) Review the current data and their sources, which have been made public through media outlets and,

4) Fund activism and advocacy programs that are provided priority and recognition in the courts, health care, education, child welfare, and police services.

## Implications for Child Welfare Practice

Neoliberal value measurements are problematic. The quantification of measuring the number of children of African heritage in care does not purport how to address the disparities between ACB children and communities involved with child welfare. The analysis of neoliberal accounting practices should include interrogating the numbers and the values placed on the numbers. The current methods used to collect and report child welfare data for ACB communities are part of a more significant problem. The hyper-focus on outcomes measurement and the ways that measurement becomes an indicator of addressing disproportionality and disparities for ACB children and communities involved in child protection is problematic.

In reality, the term DEI should allow for self-determination, the balance of power, and acknowledgments that allow freedom to practice and choose. There are limits to this Master's thesis and answering the research questions. Due to this process's salient nature, there is an acknowledgment of this thesis's many contributions. There needs to be more ways for academia to include African knowledges in an authentic way that honors African ontologies, axiologies, spiritualities, and epistemologies and places ownership of ACB data in African communities.

1. In each of the recommendations for change, it should be noted that community members each spoke to the importance of having multiple strategies in communities of African heritage, child welfare, health care, education, and policing, allowing for strategic activism and leadership grounded in the ACB communities.
2. Three participants identified implications for how ACB family files are recording information in CPIN through the back door. Recording practices are fundamental as worker notes are relied on when going to court, but information placed into files through the back door does not have the required transparency as child welfare can ‘fix’ their notes.

## Legislation

The themes centered on multiple African, Caribbean, and Black histories, ceremonies, ways of knowing, and ways of being, which participants emphasized can not be mandated or regulated within colonial agencies with juridico-discursive power over ACB communities. Participants spoke about empowerment which is separate from state powers. One participant articulated the lack of trust and histories of harm:

“No white person has to be afraid to go out, no white child has to be afraid of being stopped or worse shot by the police. The one size fits all does not work for Black children. The justice system needs to know this and implement it.”

Since the Ford administration’s re-design initiatives did not include people of African heritage at the table. A separate process must be created to establish independent Africentric agencies, which will be recognized and funded by the CYFSA as having the legislative mandate to oversee the collection of disaggregated race-based data collection, resources, services, and advocacy for communities of African heritage separate from child welfare. These agencies will house all data collected from child welfare academies to date.

1. There should be a mechanism for academies to turn over ACB child welfare data collection materials to the appointed ACB organizations that the ministry will fund. It is necessary to review the voice of the child with an Africentric context which provides the return of children to their families when there are no child welfare concerns for the child.
2. For the legislation to recognize African, Caribbean, and Black children and families are distinct People.
3. ACB families involved with child welfare have the right to choose their supports and resources, which are recognized by the systems and held outside of child welfare.

“Bringing an Afrocentric view lens to our engagement and service delivery with our, our folk and the shift also means that it's not on only African People.”

MCYFS to fund the organization of leaders from ACB communities to work with Neoliberal value measurements are problematic. The quantification of measuring the number of children of African heritage in care does not purport how to address the disparities between ACB children and communities involved with child welfare. The analysis of neoliberal accounting practices should include interrogating the numbers and the values placed on the numbers. The current methods used to collect and report child welfare data for ACB communities are part of a more significant problem. The hyper-focus on outcomes measurement and the ways that measurement becomes an indicator of addressing disproportionality and disparities for ACB children and communities involved in child protection is problematic.

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1. MCYFS to fund the organization of leaders from ACB communities to work with child welfare to have power, and oversite to review the data collected to date and review all major past reports which articulate disaggregated data for communities of African heritage

## Community

“Black community separate from child welfare to stop the bleeding which will be issues to multiple other systems because we did not get it right.”

The following recommendations for ACB communities are:

1. For the proposed African, Caribbean, and Black agency to establish community leaders and ACB community members, legislated and recognized by the Ontario ministries, agencies, child welfare, and courts.
2. The ministry must pay for alternative dispute resolution practices specific to ACB communities. In addition to creating Africentric courts.
3. Work with the administrators of CPIN to better capture disaggregated data and follow up with child protection agencies that have not complied. A parallel oversight data system for ACB communities will provide an avenue for people of African heritage to have ownership over their data and over site on how the data is collected and maintained in CPIN using an Afrocentric and anti-Black racism lens.
4. For an ACB Leader or social worker outside of child welfare to review community advisory councils in active child welfare agencies that have been terminated and have had frequent turnovers.

## Who pays the piper, calls the tune (government funding)

The Ontario government can redirect funding to ACB communities to address the issues within data collection and provide oversight more efficiently.

“The systems are arranging services, paying for services, and monitoring services, so how can there really be any change. This is a business predicated on the disruption of Black bodies”.

1. Stop the interest convergence with ACB communities.
2. Proactively fund and mandate ACB communities to keep children in their homes where safe to do so.

## Policy Makers

A participant reported:

“When we are looking at things like anti-Black racism, physical harms, emotional harm and emotional harm caused by the school community, which happens all the time, but the spectrum doesn’t speak to that. The eligibility spectrum does not acknowledge the perpetuation of anti-Black racism or various levels of harms to the child, family, or communities…”

Policy creation must stop the tradition of excluding Black voices at decision-making tables. Space must be created to foster ACB communities to lead child welfare, police, education, courts, legal aid, and health care specific to the needs of African communities in the province.

1. Policy processes must include voices critical of child welfare to allow space for outsider perspectives that ask questions and practices to inform policy

## Implications for Research

Independent community-funded research is required to understand the current funding rate against successful program deliverables within child welfare and mainstream agencies specific to ACB communities. This research can help to elucidate if and how policies and practices within mainstream child welfare agencies can address disproportionalities of ACB children and families involved in the child welfare system are effectively achieving this goal. The critical issue here is the reluctance to fund an agency of African heritage located in the community with the ability to address the disparities proactively.

If an Africentric perspective was included in the solution proactively, would there be a change? The current lack of understanding and funding reluctance of ACB communities directly from child welfare, government, leadership, and policymakers needs to be interrogated based on the resistance to reducing children of African heritage in care. There is a gap in understanding how child welfare workers of African heritage resist colonial oppressive child welfare systems. These queries are foundational to this research and to communities of African heritage involved in child welfare. Does a larger haunting question pertain to neoliberalism and the promise of DEI? Alternatively, the current prevalence and understanding of service dependence on the child welfare systems can elevate the number of ACB community members in care.

This is further complicated as social controls afforded to the OACAS and academies emphasize decreased numbers of children of African descent involved with child welfare when ACB children continue to have an elevated presence in child welfare. An argument can be made that reports and strategies used in child welfare’s data collection practices, which alleged lower numbers of ACB children in care, have resulted in the continued funding of specific services in child welfare for ACB communities. Inaccurate ACB data results have also upended community-based prevention-focused services outside of child welfare in African communities.

Operationalized child protection techniques prevent ACB communities from obtaining services due to numerical manipulation, lowering the disparities for African, Caribbean, and Black children and youth involved with child welfare. Research in child welfare should not commodify Black bodies through collecting and owning African data. Analyzing the ACB data, where academies propose the research will be objective, but an anti-Black racism lens or Africentric worldview has not been utilized in the collection or research process. Academies' anti-Black racism and DEI practices are incongruent with their research practices which hold hostage ACB data. Then, ethics processes fail, which do not recognize that ACB people require protection, as predominantly white researchers have grants to complete research on Black bodies. Critical points must include;

1. Academies to incorporate African worldviews and anti-Black racism lens in analyzing ACB child welfare data, which facilitates objectivity and centers African, Caribbean, and Black lives.
2. Academic and government funded ACB child welfare research in communities of African heritage must be led by independent researchers of African, Caribbean, and Black heritage. ACB ownership of the current and previous data must be held in ACB communities separate from child welfare, OACAS, academies, and other systems. This can deter Academies from commodifying Black bodies to get into ACB communities without allowing for autonomy or ownership of the data.
3. More independent community-led research must be conducted on the current prevalence and understanding of service dependence on the child welfare systems, which can attribute to elevate the numbers of ACB community members in care. The funding formula for child welfare continues to be problematic as children’s and social services is the third largest expenditure of the province of Ontario, followed by interest rates (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2021). Further independent community funded research is required to understand the current rate of funding against successful program deliverables within child welfare and mainstream agencies specific to ACB communities. This research can help elucidate if and how policies and practices within mainstream child welfare agencies address disproportionalities of ACB children and families involved in the child welfare system effectively achieve this goal.

# **Strengths & Weaknesses**

This research has many strengths as the research was conducted by a member of the ACB community, which involved African worldviews, and ethical research practices grounded in communities of African heritage. The study included participants from various African communities to inform comprehensive search strategies to validate findings using an Africentric lens. Notably, themes identified in this research were consistent with community members of African heritage. There are some limitations: the number of participants who participated in the study, the impact and nuances about the geographical location within Ontario, which can impact services within their region, and contextual factors, as all participants were university educated and do not have open files with child welfare. No studies utilized an Africentric lens that evaluated child welfare, CPIN; this resulted in limited comparisons. Finally, there are incongruences between Africentric research practices and Western academic requirements to complete this thesis.

# **Conclusion**

Learnings from the research pertain to what drives the culture of fear in child welfare. The motivators are publicity and funding to have Black leaders who reflect the communities rather than supporting the neoliberal rhetoric. The participants overwhelmingly spoke about reimaging child welfare’s DEI for ACB communities through an Africentric lens and re-designing DEI through an Africentric worldview.

The dual interests of having child welfare legislative duties and acting in multiple roles for ACB community have resulted in devastating impacts on communities of African heritage. There are multiple ways in which preventative practices can assist ACB communities. Currently, the ACB communities have not been funded to complete this necessary work in ACB communities. Child welfare can hire ACB workers, but child welfare can not speak on behalf of communities of African heritage, as many do not trust them. Societies have been given legislative authority to intervene to protect children. However, there is a distinction between child welfare legislative duties vs. acting for ACB communities. The tension here is the dual roles and positioning to hold onto funding and research associated with ACB children involved with child welfare. The tension is evident when the OACAS advocates for ACB funding which should also be directed to communities of African heritage. In closing, African, Caribbean, and Black leadership must be involved in DEI in the context of child welfare, the revisioning and the re-imagining from an Africentric worldview.

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