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Beyond Kentes and Kwanzaa
Reconceptualizing the Africentric school and curriculum using the principles of anti-racism education

Introduction

In September 2009, the Toronto District School Board launched its innovative Africentric Alternative School. The school opened after much debate and to the point where it was even considered "controversial" and "segregationist" by mainstream media and politicians because of its focus on African-Canadian students and their culture and histories. This was despite the large body of research for decades that has identified the problem of the disproportionate number of African-Canadian students disengaging from learning, underachieving and eventually dropping out of school (Falconer Report, 2008; The Report of the Royal Commission on Learning, 1994; Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1995; James & Brathwaite, 1996; Toronto Board of Education, 1992; Four-Level Government Report, 1995; Stephen Lewis Report, 1995; Dei, 2003). More recently, research still shows that more than 40% of Black students of Caribbean background (in particular) in the Toronto District School Board continue to underachieve (Brown & Sinay, 2008). Today, it surprises me to see that much of the debate around Africentric education still centres simply on the rationale for or against establishing the Africentric school

and not on the curricular shift that needs to take place within the entire school system that still continues to fail to meet the needs of all its students. Much of the media discussion is caught up within circular debates of false dichotomies such as "segregation v. integration," "centric v. inclusive," "particularist v. pluralist," and "quality v. equality." Those false dichotomies are dispelled and explained by several authors in other chapters in this book. However, a lot of the focus of these debates has drawn our attention away from looking at issues that will help to move the discussion forward. I believe we have fallen asleep or become so distracted that we have lost sight of some key anti-racism principles that should be used to continue to support the development and evaluate the effectiveness of an Africentric program.

The Africentric movement in Canada owes much of its initial development to the Afrocentric ideas in education developed by Molefi Asante (1990) in the U.S. Asante argued also that Black student disengagement and underachievement in the U.S. necessitated a centric curriculum that helps them reinvent their African-ness in a Diasporic context. Borne out of some of the same principles, the Africentric Alternative School in Toronto proposes to offer alternative pedagogic, and communicative tools, resources and instructional approaches to reflect the lived experiences of and respond to the needs and interest of its students:

> The Africentric curriculum is a response to the Eurocentric curriculum in Canada as it acknowledges, questions and critically challenges the biases and misinformation in the current curriculum. The Africentric curriculum is a part of a broader inclusive or multi-centric approach to education with particular benefits for students of African descent in our Canadian classrooms. It helps to affirm African-Canadian students in the histories, contribution and value systems of African peoples. In that way, the Africentric curriculum aims to centre or locate students within the context of their own cultural and social frames of reference so that they become more connected to and grounded in the learning process (Allen, 2009: p.8-9).

However, both the Africentric school and curriculum have been designed and developed within traditional notions of schooling and curriculum. The school board has developed their

Africentric programs with the best of intentions; through established board procedures for developing curriculum guidelines and to reflect the standard Ontario Curriculum. Both were developed within the current or existing Eurocentric framework for thinking about schooling and curriculum. Consequently, the current model of the Africentric school may still employ the same values, cultural assumptions and practices as the mainstream school system. We may have lost sight of or have forgotten the meanings of some of the founding principles that were used to establish the Africentric school and curriculum in the first place.

I explore the following two questions in this article; how can the principles of anti-racism education be used to evaluate and inform the development of the Africentric school and curriculum? How can the Africentric curriculum be realized within the context of the current Eurocentric school system? I will discuss three of 10 principles of anti-racism education that have been over-looked in evaluating the Africentric school and curriculum and suggest ideas for reconceptualizing the Africentric curriculum. I offer an alternative model for thinking about the form and substance of the Africentric curriculum within the Africentric school. I propose a way of re-introducing and/or reinforcing some misplaced principles of anti-racist theory as a way of thinking about curriculum and schooling from an Africentric perspective. Finally, I suggest that the emerging model for the school and the lived curriculum of the school must be reconceptialized from the ground up based on anti-racist theoretical frames from which it was originally designed.

Anti-racism principles in Africentric education

Anti-racist education is proactive educational practice intended to address all forms of racism and the intersections of social difference. It is a way of understanding our students through the lens of race as a salient part of their myriad identities (Dei, 2003). Africentric discourse is indeed reinforced by theories and pedagogies like critical anti-racism aimed at progressive forms of scholarship (Dei, 1996). In an age of accountability and back- to-basics in recent years, we have seen a movement away from educational equity and social justice in education in Ontario (Solomon, Allen & Campbell, 2005). There is a tendency at times to disregard the importance of anti-racism policy and curriculum

despite clearly laid out policy documents. The major challenge I see for educators is that we may have deviated so far from the principles of anti-racism education that we may not fully realize the potential of the Africentric school and curriculum.

In his 1996 book *Anti-racism Education: Theory and Practice*, George Dei posits 10 basic and interrelated principles of anti-racism education. (For a full list and a discussion of the principles, see Dei, 1996). For the purposes of this article, I wish to focus on only three of these principles where I have seen much deviation from the original ideas that helped to develop the Africentric school and curriculum. Authors/ researchers like Dei, have used critical, equity, progressive or anti-racist theories and principles to develop the rationale and framework for the Africentric school and curriculum. Often times, the tenets of true anti-racism education continue to sit on the periphery and fail to find itself at the heart of our educational system. Anti-racist education is important to Africentric education because it brings the issue of race back into the dialogue and moves away from the colourblind and the politically correct efforts of trying to do the "right" thing or move away from what sounds "wrong," or discard race because it is meaningless or difficult (Dei, 2003). However, anti-racism is far more complex than just focusing on discourses of race alone. The following are three such principles of anti-racism education that I believe are just examples of ways anti-racism principles have not been fully realized in establishing the Africentric school and curriculum.

I begin with the second on the list of Dei's principles of anti-racism education that states that one cannot understand the full social effects of race without understanding the interrelated effects of other aspects of social oppression and how race is mediated with other forms of social difference (Dei, 1996). When applied to thinking about Africentric education, this principle of anti-racism suggests that we make more explicit the discussions around issues of gender, social class and sexuality as inseparable from issues of race. For example, the Africentric school is open to all students from across the city of Toronto and is essentially intended to serve a diverse group of students from different social class backgrounds. The population of Blacks in Toronto is quite diverse and the school should be prepared for this reality. The Africentric curriculum within the Africentric school

should be designed and developed for the needs of the full range of different social class backgrounds and not necessarily Black students from a "generic" Black community. The curriculum is and perhaps should be considered a multi-class curriculum; responsive to and congruent with the communities it serves. The curriculum needs to incorporate the constructs, values, knowledge, and ways of being of both middle-class and working-class students, how those have been informed by an African heritage in Canada, reshaped through a predominantly immigrant perspective in North American society, and sustained and reproduced in the diverse Toronto communities in which the students live (see Henry, 1998, 1992). Unless we consider the interrelated effects of race, gender, social class and sexuality, the well-intentioned model of the Africentric curriculum within the Africentric Alternative School may at times still be in conflict with the needs and concerns of the students, teachers, administrators and parents/communities.

Building on the above principle, the sixth principle on Dei's list of principles of anti-racism education is concerned with students' multiple or complex identities and the ways educators incorporate students' race, class, gender, ability and sexual identities affect and are affected by the schooling process and learning outcomes (Dei, 1996). Similarly, the eighth principle acknowledges the traditional role of education in the production and social reproduction of race, social class, gender and sexual inequalities in society (Dei, 1996). What these two principles remind us of is the need to account for students' personal and social identities and the collective effects of the parallel manifestations of oppression (race, class and gender, etc.) and how they contribute to help to maintain the status quo. Although, the term anti-racism acknowledges the primacy of race, it takes into account also that race is inseparable from and mediated with other forms of social difference and as such, anti-racism education implies activism as a challenge to oppression in all forms.

These two issues of identity and social reproduction are salient to the development of an Africentric program. For example, despite the many initiatives used by faculties of education and school boards across the province to attract and recruit more teachers from backgrounds under-represented in teaching and

teacher education (Allen, 2001), a majority of teachers continue to be from middle-class backgrounds and bring very different sensibilities about the schools than their working-class students. Regardless of their backgrounds, too, teachers are generally educated themselves in the same Eurocentric school systems, trained at Ontario faculties of education and they tend to reproduce the same structural barriers in their own teaching (Solomon, Allen, Campbell & Singer, forthcoming).

For the case of the Africentric school, the interrelation of teacher and students' backgrounds and identities is an important aspect of the school and one worthy of further research and investigation. The issue of the potential conflict between teachers and students' social class backgrounds in framing identity in the Africentric program is one aspect of a myriad of other interrelated factors that might offset the Africentric curriculum in the school. For example, the patterns of failure and/or disengagement may be different for different groups or sub-groups of students based on origins, ancestry, language, ethnicity, religion, history, etc. The Black or African-Canadian identity or identities and how these complex or multiple African identities have been reshaped through the immigrant experience here in Canada needs to be taken into account in planning curriculum for the students. More research is needed into the complexity of the issues of identity and its impact on teaching and learning in an Africentric program. In addition, pre-service teacher education programs and in-service professional development programs need to take the issue of identity into consideration when preparing teachers to work in schools in Ontario and perhaps particularly in the Africentric school. From admissions to teacher education curriculum to teacher induction, teachers could be taught to examine their own social locations and those of their students to identify possible areas of conflict.

Reconceptualizing Africentric school and curriculum

Closely related to identity and the social reproduction of knowledge is the form and content of the curriculum. In the US for example, Afrocentric models as applied in schools have meant using the mandated state curriculum and supplementing it with an African cultural component (Sadowski, 2001). In addition, specific instructional techniques (e.g., ancient mathematical

methods, Indigenous languages) and the principles of Kwanzaa are used to structure the lessons and the culture of the classroom (Durden, 2007). Most classrooms display artefacts like Kente cloths and African-centred posters and contain literature and learning materials that better represent the contributions of African peoples and other minoritized groups. Although all content areas are adaptable to an Africentric approach (Asante, 1991), and the current curriculum could be adapted to develop a viable Africentric curriculum, we should move beyond simply retrofitting and overhauling of the current curriculum. I am suggesting reconceptualizing the definition of curriculum and building the curriculum from the ground up starting with the local school communities; informed by research into the children and their backgrounds and identities.

One main issue is the ways in which curriculum is understood as a set material to cover and not the form and substance of a program of learning that takes place within a school. Assessment also is still narrowly defined based on the provincial test scores and on the scale of the four levels of achievement set out by the Ontario Curriculum. This idea suggests that curriculum is a predetermined route and establishes itself as a means to an end in itself and a narrow and specific conception of curriculum as the content of subject matter taught in school. This limits considerations around school policies and practice to just learning objectives, teaching methods, assessment procedures and classroom organizations (Carr, 1998), and, curricular materials, classroom experiences and outcomes (Connelly & Clandinin, 1992). At issue are the aims, content and methods of curriculum (Connelly & Clandinin, 1992; Carr, 1998; Jackson, 1992).

However, in contrast, the Africentric curriculum should be a process of individual becoming or as the experience of the process of coming to learn (Egan, 1978; Pinar & Grumet, 1976; Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery & Taubman,1995). This idea of curriculum is not new. In 1938, John Dewey identified ways in which educational theory has traditionally focused on the extremes or the "either/ or" debates:

> The history of educational theory is marked by opposition between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without; that it is based upon natural

> endowments and that education is a process of overcoming natural inclination and substituting in its place habits acquired under external pressure (Dewey, 1938: p.1).

Indeed today, it is the continued focus on false dichotomies in education that continue to impede the curricular shift that is needed to influence the thinking about curriculum in the Africentric program. From an Africenric perspective, curriculum is much broader than the formal agenda which outlines the specific subjects students are expected to learn (Fashola, 2005). Curriculum embodies the instructional practices, how school is structured, whose pictures are on the school walls and what types of books are in the library, what the teachers look like, the social class backgrounds of the students, who works in the cafeteria and caretaking services, and who occupies the highest position in the school (McIntosh, 2008). The curriculum goes beyond the "what" of the curriculum and impacts the "how" of curriculum implementation (Codjoe, 2001: Gay, 2002; Dei, 2003). Every element of school life tells students who and what is valued, and by extension, who and what is disposable (Dei, 2003; Fashola, 2005). Traditional notions of curriculum limit the possibilities for thinking beyond Eurocentric norms. I argue that reconceptualizing and redefining curriculum is essential to reclaiming some of the principles of anti-racism education in the Africentric program.

In reshaping the Africentric curriculum, a new image of curriculum should emerge. The Africentric curriculum should be considered as a living curriculum and, as such, it is a working document meant to become a major part of the way teachers will think about, and interpret the curriculum and it will influence their approach to teaching and learning. The content and objectives of the curriculum can and should be used by all teachers in all our classrooms with children from all backgrounds (Allen, 2009). Teachers need to see that social justice issues and equity perspectives are integrated into the practical dimensions of their classroom. In McLaren's (1989) conception of curriculum, he argues that curriculum must be considered as both the explicit nature of the written course of study while acknowledging the social and political process that inform and shape the curriculum; social reproduction and the "hidden" or unwritten curricu-

lum (Bobbit, 1918; Bourdieu, 1973). This approach to curriculum can speak to the issues associated with identity, social difference and the effects of various forms of oppression because it can help teachers locate, identify, name and address bias and injustice in their teaching.

Conclusion

We have much to learn by reclaiming and re-introducing the principles of anti-racism education back into the Africentic discourse. Anti-racism education helps us interrogate race, and understand the interrelated effects of other forms of oppression, how that informs our understanding of social and personal identity and how schools act as sites for the reproduction of societal inequalities. We recognize that the background, values, perspectives and identities of both students and teachers are implicated in the schooling and learning processes and that sometimes these can be in contrast to or even direct conflict with each other (Dei, 1994, 1995, 1996; James, 1995b; Solomon, 1995). The challenge for the Africentric school is that schools in general do not just simply mirror the dominant society, but that they also reproduce existing power relations subtly through the distribution of the dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1973). School knowledge and the curriculum are instrumental for the reproduction of Western cultural and intellectual traditions because it transmits the discourse of dominance (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1993). However, the most tacit and powerful effect of social reproduction is the way it conceals the social function it performs and so perform it more efficiently (McLaren, 1995; 1998). The Africentric school and curriculum are not outside of the larger structures that limit or shape the types of innovative programs that deviates from the norm.

Henry (1993) describes Africentrism or African-centred thought as a response to all forms of oppression. She sees Africentrism as a framework that can be used in schools to help students understand the complexities of being African-Canadian in relations to all aspects of society. Students' self awareness is important because, as she argues, people of African descent have inherited and readapted our current social and personal identities under various systems of political and economic oppression (Henry, 1993). At the same time, the

Africentric framework acknowledges the commonalities of experience of people of African descent, as well as various differences along such dimensions as religion, language background, sexuality, and so forth (Henry, 1996). She says that Africentric education is a form of liberatory practices for children of African descent in Canadian schools and that African-centredness represents a politics of self-representation poised against the hegemony of dominant groups.

Consequently, the study of all the anti-racism principles is integral to the Africentric program and has important implications for teacher education, teacher professional development, board hiring, curriculum development, etc. Teachers play a pivotal role in either reproducing the status quo, or transforming schools for inclusivity, diversity and social justice. For example, the critical intersection of the three principles of anti-racism education re-articulates the complexity of understanding the Africentric idea in Canadian education. An anti-racist approach to Africentrism speaks of the complexity of understanding race as inseparable from gender, social class and sexuality and understanding the complexity of personal and social identities of students and teachers. Anti-racism raises questions about power and knowledge and makes explicit the connections between other forms of oppression, particularly for working-class children. By making some of these issues central to the curriculum (goals, content, social and political agenda, etc.), the Africentric curriculum addresses issues around equity and social justice, particularly around social reproduction.

Equally important to the lives of Black or African-Canadian children, anti-racism education principles when applied to the Africentric curriculum involves social activism by both teachers and students. The curriculum opens up spaces for teachers to involve their students in discussions around race, social difference, identity and oppression. Students should be made aware of the status quo and to critique the established social order to work for change. Students in an Africentric program should be empowered to take social action to engage in ways of bringing about change in the existing social order. For example, students could be taught to critically examine all forms of media, examine how they come to know about their world and to critically examine or question information they are learning. The curriculum

should also help them to understand the discourses of race, class, gender and sexuality from a decolonized perspective. The curriculum should help them examine multiple histories and multiple perspectives to recorded history or events and particularly histories that are not readily available in their text books. Students should be a part of re-envisioning the future for African-Canadians in their communities. They should be made aware of the issues and problems facing their communities and given a chance to come up with their own constructive and productive strategies for bringing about change. Students can write letters to publishers and politicians to voice their own opinions. They can begin to draft their own action plans to address the issues they identify in their own communities and in society in general.

The Africentric curriculum must address all forms of oppression as integral to the identities of their students to have them work towards their own strategies for change. Students should be able to understand that they have an active role to play in the curriculum and they are not passive receivers of the curriculum. The Africentric curriculum is more than just posting images of peoples of African descent, including more African-centred content in lessons and activities, reading more stories, or highlighting the achievement of African Canadians and African Americans. The Africentric curriculum should engage students in thinking about their world and how they can make a difference.

For example, as anti-racism works towards equity and a socially just society, the Africentric curriculum should help students to understand who they are as African Canadians and particularly as working-class African Canadians. The Africentric curriculum should help students be better able to consider an African worldview form an African and Diasporic context in order to understand their roles towards equal participation in Canadian society. Students should see relevance to their own lives in the curriculum. The curriculum should help them understand how their education and life chances are mitigated through some of the same issues and problems they identify in their learning. In order for them to begin create possibilities and develop their own strategies that they see essential for change, the curriculum should help them understand who they are and what has to be done to improve their own lives.

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