

Africentric Schooling: What Next?

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Abstract

This article introduces the idea of Africentric schools to the Toronto School Board as a counter alternative to promote the idea of including the myriad identities of students in the learning process. The sociological and philosophical tenets of Africentric schooling are presented under the headings of: The Afrocentric Idea; Groundedness in the Community; Social Identities; Spirituality in Learning; and Racial Solidarity is not a Guarantor of Success. In conclusion the discussion highlights courses of action in moving forward to consider ways to strengthen Canadian schooling.

Keywords: Africentric education; transformative learning; cultural awareness; alternative education; minority youth identities; action research.

Introduction

Schools are established to educate, to impact knowledge onto learners. As an educational site the school must be a welcoming place for every learner. This means every learner must see themselves in terms of the curriculum, classroom instruction, representation of physical bodies in staff, faculty, and students, other aspects of both the social and the physical landscape (e.g., environment, culture, and social organizational lives of the school). Learning happens when students are able to identify with the process of educational delivery. Feeling a sense of disconnection, disaffection, isolation, and in effect not belonging, does not bode well for the education of learners. It is for this reason that many critical educators and researchers have argued strongly for inclusive schools; however, the problem is not just because of a lack of trying. There are many educators who have well-meaning intentions to educate all learners. Some of these educators we know will go the extra mile to ensure that their students feel a sense of welcome in their classrooms.

Inclusion is about equity, power, and knowledge. Inclusion is about sharing power and resources and it is also about engaging multiple knowledge systems in order to develop a complete understanding of the history of ideas, events, practices, and experiences that have shaped and have continued to shape our worlds. Inclusion cannot be lip service and an approach to 'feel good' about education. The liberal, seductive take on inclusion has depoliticized the concept and taken away the hard questions about responsibility, accountability, and transparency.

The experiences of learners contribute to the learning process. If a knowledge system fails to work with students' experiences, learners could feel a sense of disconnect. Similarly if classroom texts, school curriculum and teachers' pedagogical styles, strategies, and practices are not inclusive of the different learning styles that abound in the student population, we must expect some learners to have that sense of not belonging to the school.

The on-going push to develop counter-visions of schooling and to promote alternative educational outlets is a recognition that all is not working well for every student in our classrooms of today. This means that educators, school administrators, policy-makers, parents, students, and local communities and community advocates all need to come together to seriously think thorough the issues and map out effective strategies to ensure that success is not only broadly defined by it, it is also shared by all learners. We cannot be defensive when critiques of conventional schooling are offered in order to lay the groundwork to justify a need to rethinking and re-visioning schooling. Educators, for example, are trained to work with ideas. This means we must always welcome fresh ideas (sometimes critical, oppositional) and try them out as we continually search for ways to educate a complex, diverse student population. This necessitates thinking outside the proverbial conventional box.

As a parent, I am concerned that schools work for all youth. When students succeed we all succeed. The failure of some students should be a concern for all. We cannot afford to be complacent in the face of overwhelming evidence that what we are currently doing is not serving the needs of all our students. Local communities must be supported to think out solutions to their problems but we must do so with a sense of collective destiny and a desire to ensure that education is not restricted to particular groups. It used to be some shared understanding that conventional school systems were designed for a certain class of people and to uphold particular social class values. If this was the case, it must be subverted in the face of the growing diversity in our communities and the understanding that we are all part of multiple, diverse, contested and yet interconnected histories, experiences, and cultures. Our past, present, and future are intertwined. Our histories and experiences are part of a collective destiny. When certain segments of our communities raise concerns about the school system we need to hear the voices of concern, pain, and frustration and not be dismissive just because we do not share and feel their pain, anguish, and yearning for a better and different world.

We need a counter-vision to the neoliberal, corporate, colonial education (a counter paradigm for education of young learners today). Such counter-vision will be oppositional to the conventional ways of knowledge production, interrogation, validation, and dissemination. Such vision would welcome creating multiple centres of knowledge (not necessarily new, since knowledge has always existed, but as opposition to how knowledge from our diverse communities is currently perceived). Such counter-visioning of alternative and multiple educational sites would become a place to decolonize and reclaim or recapture the myriad identit(ies), knowledge(s), and experiences of our learners, as well as the varied teaching and pedagogical styles of educators. Considerations of such alternative educational sites should include the structural and institutional aspects (administration, funding), the research (for whom, by whom, for what purpose), the teaching (Where does the curriculum and pedagogy come from?, What is its genealogy?), and the learning (What is the purpose of having an education?,

What is the experience of the learner?). How is the curriculum structured so that there is a facilitated engagement with histories, identities, and embodied learning. The specific histories of the land on which these schools are situated should be front and centre of our discussions and constitute part of a broader comment about history, colonization, and imperialism. Decolonizing faith and spirituality in relation to the role of religion in conquest and ongoing colonization and imperialist discourses should be noted as well.

Schooling today is a battlefield. There are no guns being drawn but there is a fierce contestation of ideas and knowledge. Similarly there is an on-going contestation of futures as particularly marginalized communities are looking for easy-to-advance solutions to their own problems and to challenge the designing futures. We also witness a rethinking of liberal notions of inclusion and our conventional understandings of social justice. Currently, there is a domestication of culture and diversity which is more about celebrations and merry-making rather than responding concretely to the difficult questions of knowledge, power, and resources. Inclusion has become so benign that ideas of accountability and transparency are off the table. Even when equity issues are broached there is no discussion of accountability. There is also a failure to focus on the broader systemic dimensions of the problem. The result has been a de-politicization of inclusion. The school curriculum must be looked at critically to respond to the calls for representation in knowledge and power sharing (e.g., multi-centric knowledge, physical bodies in positions of power and influence). We need effective curricular and pedagogical initiatives that support anti-racism initiatives and to redirect and to place equity front and centre in our work as educators (e.g., centre race, speak on equity, ask for institutional accountability).

There is no universal subject; in fact, the universal learner is about a particularity. Schooling is as much about culture as about race, class, gender, sexuality, and [dis]ability. There is a place for affirming Indigeneity, and anti-colonial education in contemporary schooling and we must rethink Inclusion (e.g., the depoliticization; lack of centredness, accountability, and the neoliberal agenda).

In this paper, I reflect upon the question of Africentric schooling in Canada insisting upon the value of counter-visioning of schooling so as to uphold and foster the myriad identities of students in the learning process. The paper is informed by a key question: How can we have effective schools to foster individual innovation and creativity among youth and adults who have been traditionally marginalized in the school system? The education of youth in pluralistic contexts present us all with important challenges. How do we provide education for young learners that ensures a critical understanding of the history of all peoples and the contributions to science, arts, humanities, and academic scholarship in general?

I come into this discussion as someone who has been at the forefront of debates and discussions about the necessity of Africentric schooling in the Canadian context. I have had some personal struggles as a result of this leading role, including the backlash from those who have been misinformed about the basic tenets and ideas behind such schooling. The historical fact of long and collective community struggles for Black and minority education in Canadian contexts is often ignored when opponents of Africentric schooling argue it is separatist or feeds on segregation. In Dei and Kempf (2013) many of these charges have been rebutted. The fact still remains that the history of community activism around Black youth education laid grounds for Africentric schooling.

The idea of Africentric schooling locates Black and minority youth education in epistemological, cosmological, ontological, ethical, and aesthetic practices of African peoples. The reinvention of Africanness for youth education emerges from an understanding of the African human condition, as well as African peoples' encounter with Europeans who sought to impose an identity on Africans. African peoples have never defined themselves by the colour of their skin. Such understanding of Africa and African peoples in terms of a colour descriptor, has meant that we cannot dismiss the question of what it means to be

Black in an anti-black society. Black and Blackness only exists as a product of European construction.

Throughout human history education has served to reproduce the structure of coloniality through such dominant practices as the production, validation, interrogation, and dissemination of what is considered knowledge and what is being knowledgeable. While dominant knowledge have often been used to justify exclusionary practices we can use counter and oppositional knowledge also to challenge such dominance. As Marker (2004) notes "knowledge is powerful and potentially dangerous if one is not ready to receive it properly" (p. 106). Coloniality is about the structure of power and oppression emerging from colonial and re-colonial relations and systems of domination. Coloniality is also about power and subjugation of ideas, values, and practices, as well as the disciplining of bodies. Discourses of modernity have ensured the domination of European/Western perspectives, practices, and conditions.

All epistemologies are embedded within particular traditions and cultures (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 206; Gadamer, 2004). Dominant perspectives, ideologies, and orthodoxies are situated within Western European traditions and cultures, History, and Science as tools of colonization. In order to disrupt the dialectic of coloniality and modernity we need to position the production of critical and oppositional knowledge (e.g., counter perspectives) at the centre of educational practice. Such knowledge compels action.

Effective transformation of school systems cannot happen solely through dominant scholarship. In putting forward counter-visions of schooling we are also challenging the ways Western European modernity has "created an image of itself, ...[since]... the time of the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras, as *Western Civilization*, and presumed itself as the arrival point of human existence and as the point of reference of global history" (Kerr, 2-13, p. 24).

In her excellent work, Kerr (2013) shows that questions about the who and the where in teaching, and the learning and administration of education, have profound educational relevance. A Westcentric epistemological move that obscures the body and place of potential colonizing relations creates conditions for social inequity. Our anti-racist work must attend to the material conditions of

existence for student bodies, as well as the discourses that influence the opportunities and constraints that impact these bodies.

Sociological and philosophical tenets of Africentric schooling

A. The Afrocentric idea

Afrocentricity is a perspective that has roots in United States scholarship as advanced by its chief proponent, Molefi Asante. Africentricity, on the other hand, while borrowing from the ideas of Afrocentricity seeks a Canadian uniqueness by grounding its knowledge base from African culture and history. Africentric schooling is defined by the philosophical ideals of Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity as a perspective ensures the centrality of the African experience, as well as a centring of African peoples' cultures, identities, and agencies in schooling (Asante, 1991). Afrocentricity, as a paradigm shift, is not a thing or subject. Rather it constitutes a system of thought that seeks to centre African peoples in their histories, cultures, identities, and agencies. This perspective offers a counter-visioning of schooling and education in the sense that African learners are at the centre of their education. They begin to read the world from that centred position in relation to other experiences. This is important to give a sense of 'ownership and identification' with the learning process. Consequently, the Africentric school is not defined by the physical bodies present in the school. This is why it is erroneous to call the school a 'black school'.

All who share in the ideals espoused by the Afrocentric paradigm can find a place in the school as an educational/learning site. Furthermore, the school works with the Afrocentric ideals of community building, responsibility of learner and educators, a search for mutual interdependence of learners as a 'community of learners', a definition of success broadly to include social and academic success, a need to situate spirituality in schooling and education, a search for a link between culture and pedagogy, and a reading of African history as a totality of lived experiences of all African peoples constitute a cardinal knowledge base. The Afrocentric idea also argues that the politics of self-separation is a matter of survival as far as marginalized, oppressed, colonized, and Indigenous bodies are concerned. In addressing the education of minorities, schooling cannot be approached as simply a matter of choice or determination of markets. In other words, the school is not defined by market demands. Africentric schools then run contrary to dictates of the neoliberal educational agenda (e.g., definitions of success, excellence, competence, individualism, commodification, and corporatization of education). The Afrocentric idea also asks what and who gets to define Blackness. Afrocentricity challenges the Eurocentric conception of Blackness as homogenous (e.g., as in criminalization of Black youth) and instead forges an African-centred conception of Blackness in terms of its complexities and its collective and shared struggles of African peoples, which are not singular.

B. Groundedness in the community

The school is a community and schooling must be approached as community. The idea of situating the school within a community is to draw knowledge, representation, and relevance from a source. Every school must have a direct link with the local communities from which it draws the population of learners. This means educators, parents, Elders, and students know each other, as well as the community history, and there is a commitment to community building. Parents and Elders are fully integrated in the school as educators and they can be instructive on issues of morality, character building, social responsibility, and community mindedness. Education is also approached in the school as one of building communities of learners with collective implications and responsibilities to each other. The notion of community is about a social connection and a relation that can be understood within social, affinal, and fictive lines. The Africentric reading of community is about interdependence and connections. The community is as good as its members collectively work to make it. Schooling, as a community, demands that learners and educators become responsible for each other's success. Responsibilities are shared and while the individual creativity, hard-work, and resourcefulness must be noted and rewarded, it is enthused that such individual achievements reflect strong community connections and contributions. The individual is enriched by the community they are part of.

C. Social identities

Identity is about what one is, i.e., one's sense of self, whether determined authentically through the self or experienced as socially constructed and imposed -- read -- upon the body. An important distinction to be made is the tension between 'authentic' [as in what people see as themselves as opposed to imposed] and 'socially constructed' determinations of identity (e.g., experiences of the self-versus generalizations based on group politics and identities). Identity is important in schooling. We know 'identity' is very complicated, speaking to multiple selves, and also highlighting notions of fluidity given the constantly shifting nature of the subject identity and her/his identifications.

The education of a learner draws on the conceptual links of 'personal' and 'social' identities (Tajfel, 1978, 1981). Understanding one's identity brings a self-awareness and group consciousness and navigating around the myriad racial, class, gender, sexual identities. Through identity reinforcement/affirmation as a form of 'symbolic knowledge' and 'community capital' the learners come to know and act in their worlds (Dei, 2010). As noted elsewhere (Dei, 2010), the interface of the local, national, global, and transnational has brought forth new and emerging identities with implications for the categories we use in education. This is particularly profound for our youth today. The emerging new, complex [as in fluid and hybrid] identities call for discussions of representations (how we seek to represent ourselves) and identifications (what identities we chose to inhabit and the practices called for), [see also Wright, 2005]. We also know that our communities themselves are characterized by a remarkable degree of socio-cultural complexity that go beyond the traditional lines of difference, that include race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality. What does working with the notion of social identity mean for Africentric schooling? Clearly, the Africentric school would work with the myriad identities of learners. There is a recognition that the student is not simply a universal learner. Rather, learners are embodied beings with racial, ethnic, class, gender, sexual, [dis]ability, linguistic, and religious identities. Such identities are connected to schooling and knowledge production. Learners are supposed to speak from their embodied identities and are encouraged to come to know through such situatedness. Identities are not simply about knowing oneself; they are also about pursuing politics and the act of going to school is also to come to a broad social movement of politics that fights and advocates for equity and social justice. This is significant given that the history of a significant portion of learners and educators in our schools is about exclusion, marginalization, disempowerment, and resistance.

D. Spirituality in learning

In conventional schools, spirituality is a subject deemed not worthy of investigation. In fact, one runs the risk of being seen as 'anti-intellectual' when spirituality is affirmed in schooling and education. Yet we need a revised education that upholds a complex reading of the relevance of spirituality for schooling. For many Indigenous and local communities they uphold the idea that the spirit is within themselves. It is openly acknowledged that the self is made up of a body, mind, soul, and spirit. The splitting of body, mind, soul, and spirit is considered problematic and limited to knowing. A holistic learner embodies a spirit, a mind, a soul, and a body. Learning passes through these dimensions of the body. It is the spirit that ensures a high sense of morality and justice in the learner when it is affirmed. This emphasis on spirituality is a very distinguishing feature of the Africentric school. The Africentric school teaches that the spiritual is about relations between the inner and the outer environments. It is about the affirmation of a Creator/Supreme Being, Mother Earth, an understanding of communion or relations of self to the group/collective as well as a necessity of developing a sense of purpose and meaning in Life. Evoking the spiritual in schooling therefore, is to stress the relationship of learners and educators to the outer environments and the forces of Nature, Society, and Culture. It is in the interdependence of body, mind, soul, and spirit that makes the learner a complete being. Education cannot, therefore, be approached outside of the nexus of body, mind, soul, and spirit interactions. Working with both the physical and metaphysical forces of nature and affirming the relations of society, culture, and nature helps brings a sense of responsibility to communities, lands, environments, material and non-material worlds, we all inhabit. Conventional schools tend to dismiss emotions of learners as 'irrational' and not intellectual. Yet to many local communities, this is how they come to know about their worlds and develop a world sense

(Oyewumi, 1997). An Africentric school ensures we locate the spirit, spiritual, and the soul in coming to learn, know, and act in our everyday worlds. In advancing counter [and sometimes oppositional] discourses and discursive practices to disrupt Western rationalism the Africentric schools takes up the 'intellectual-emotional' binary. Which is to say, it argues and insists that the intellect[ual] is embedded in emotion[al] and vice versa and therefore, we must avoid continuing the splitting of the two. More to the point, what is 'intellectual activity' as we engage knowledge that works with embodied knowing? Embodiment as understood in the context of Africentric reading of Indigenous and Indigeneity is more than understanding knowledge as socially and discursively constructed. Embodiment is also seen as about "sentient perceptions and the search for a symbiotic relationship between physical, mental, emotional and spiritual experiences" (Batacharya, 2010; p. 6) and the 'intellectual' is as much about feelings, emotions, senses, and perceptions (see also Dei, 2012).

E. Race and schooling: Racial solidarity is not a guarantor of success

The Africentric school works with a positive (solution-oriented understanding of race). It notes that within the context of racism and white dominance there are possibilities of identity politics [however limited] for racialized bodies when it comes to resistance around issues of oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia). These oppressions are not only interconnected but are also collective struggles which may be defined by entry points of using particular identities to pursue [educational] politics. While race is significant for schooling, it does not necessarily follow that having solidarities around particular racial identities by themselves produce school success. Educational success is strived for beyond identity politics. In effect, the Africentric school offers no guarantees for success simply by affirming racial solidarity among learners. But this is not to say that race is not significant for schooling and education.

In fact, as already noted, schooling must come to terms with the racial identities of students as much as it recognizes their class, gender, sexual, [dis]ability, linguistic, and religious identities. These identities are all significant for schooling outcomes. The positive force of an Africentric school is that it affirms students' racial identities rather than deny their significance. Issues of race and racism are deemed necessary to address so that the learner does not feel any sense of racial inferiority among her or his counterparts. Given the historic denigration of Black and African identities and the equation of such identities with criminality, students must be encouraged to love their Blackness and Africanness. The African identity is not a colour descriptor. It is about land, place, and history. It is also about culture, language, politics, and spirituality. The African identity needs to be constructed outside of that identity imposed within Euro-American hegemony. Such identity is about a history of resistance and what it means to be called African in both the colonizing and the anti-colonial encounters. Black is a racial signifier, but it is also a political one. To claim a Black or African identity is to resist European colonization and oppression and to be proud of one's ancestry, heritage, and culture. There is much denial of race in the school system. Many educators do not want to talk about it. They feel that to speak about race is to stir trouble; however, race is itself not the problem. It is the interpretation that we must talk about our racial differences that is the problem. Racial hierarchies work with tropes of inferiority and superiority.

We can only deal with racism if we critically interrogate race and racial differences and what these mean. If we reclaim that race is about identity and politics, it offers new possibilities in working to resist oppression. It is simply wished away or placed in a closet as if by not speaking about it, we have peace and harmony. For most racially oppressed bodies, race is always the big elephant in the classroom space. We cannot simply address racism by remaining silent. Education must affirm that race is about Black, Asian, Indigeneity and White. These identities evoke different responses, some punishment, and for some, privilege, and power. Education should teach about the social construction of racial identities and how they are systemically paired with rewards and punishment. Notwithstanding good intentions we have a bankrupt educational system. The system needs overhauling as it is built on a rotten foundation, that can easily crumble (e.g., normalization of Whiteness; the cultural, emotional, and physical dislocation of learners; and the privilege of Western science as neutral, normal, objective, and the only valid knowledge required to be learned).

On moving forward

There are five key points that are outlined below that are needed to be discussed, researched, and/or planned to incorporate Africentric schools as part of the provincial school systems (see also Dei and Kempf, 2013):

(a) Going beyond one school – elementary/secondary grade level

- It is important to extend the concept of the Africentric school to other grades and jurisdictions in Ontario and Canada.
- Disengagement starts early so we need to catch students very early. Yet, we must also think of extending the school to later grades given that the current dropout rate of Black youth is 40% in Toronto District School Board.
- Today's (December 12, 2013) interview (The Evolution of Multiculturalism) with a Toronto Star reporter (Tara Walton) about a second focused secondary school in Toronto, Ontario, in line with the Black Historical Colleges of the U.S. helps to support going beyond the idea of only one school.

(b) The necessity for action research

There is also a need for action research on pilot projects.

- Action research is necessary to strengthen teaching and to ensure transferability of best practices to serve the needs of other students. Such research must involve teachers and school staff and be directed and used purposefully toward the future developments of the schools.
- Research should examine teaching practices, student assessment, student involvement, strategies for parental/community involvement.
- Action research provides best practices which can then be transferred to other schools, serving the needs of all students.

(c) Africentric curriculum and pedagogic initiatives

- As we consider Africentric curriculum and pedagogic initiatives, the fact that alternative schools must meet the expectations of the Ontario curriculum is non-negotiable. Yet, we must examine larger questions of how and what is taught in order to achieve excellence for all youth. This may, in fact, imply changes to the Ontario curriculum. The question is what do you include in the school curriculum.

To develop an Africentric curriculum the focus must be on all subjects, but to highlight and use the following as entry points:

- The Science and Technological achievements of Egypt and Nubia (pyramids, Science, Mathematics, Arts, and the Humanities);
- West African ancient kingdoms and contributions in Islamic and Western intellectualism, literary traditions, art, architecture, trading systems, and Economics;
- West African Kingdoms: Mossi, Yoruba, Dahomey, Asante, Bono, Kanem Bornu –Arts, Science and Architecture;
- South, East, and Central African History (e.g., Zimbabwe ruins);
- Trans Atlantic Slave Trade: History of Enslavement and resistance of African Peoples; and
- African traditional political systems.

To develop an Africentric pedagogy the focus must be on all subjects:

- Start with the rich intellectual traditions of African peoples in Science, Technology, and Mathematics;
- Teach about these knowledges as legitimate sources of knowledge;
- Show how these traditions have been integral in the construction of Science and Mathematics education in general;
- Research Land and Earth teachings: sanctity, stewardships, custodianship, nexus of society/culture and Nature; and
- Show Africans as making history.

(d) Role of parents, elders, and communities

- Parents and Elders provide a vision for the school. They are also in genuine partnership with the school. They are not there simply to rubber stamp decisions.
- They support the school staff and administration for accountability and transparency to the local community.
- Parents and Elders as teachers, teach about history, community struggles, respect, culture, and local experiences for students moral and spiritual development.
- Parents and Elders and the community ensure the gains of the School are protected.

(e) Partnership with Other Schools

We must also put effort toward developing partnerships between the Africentric schools and other schools, through exchanges among teachers, classroom interactions, sports, quizzes, debating society interactions and so on. The goal is not to isolate the students or the schools.

Concluding thoughts

In an era of “knowledge-based economies”, education that empowers youth to contribute to enriching their own lives and social well-being, as well as that of their families and communities is critical. We cannot underestimate the power of education if provided in ways that allow learners to grow their capabilities, skills, strengths, and talents. I see it as the responsibility of today’s educator to create the environment that will allow all youth to grow in their intellect to build their self-worth and sense of pride for their collective esteem. This means that educators must be on-deck not only thinking through solutions to everyday schooling problems, but they must also generate with new (and may be radical) ideas to ensure effective schooling outcomes for all learners. The responsibility does not rest with educators alone. School administrators, policy makers, researchers, parents, local communities, and organizations cooperate and put their heads together to devise an effective school system that meets the needs of a diverse student body. We can begin by learning from our successes. There are many successes we can all be proud of. Yet, there are mounting challenges that cannot be swept under the carpet. Educators must work with sometimes very difficult ideas to bring about educational change. This is particularly so when we know the status quo is not working. When facts are there we can only argue and debate to a point. We know that a good number of Black, Aboriginal/Indigenous, and other ethnic minority youth are disengaged from the current school system.

The question is, what are we going to do about it? We can no longer argue that we must continue to do what we have been doing and that somehow change will happen. We need a mental turn in the educational universe. This turn will help re-centre all youth and their identities and their cultures in schooling. We need to relearn how we think and how we take up our theoretical responsibilities as educators and critical scholars. It is important for us not to be consumed solely with critiques of the current school system. Such a narrow focus or preoccupation only serves to solidify unfounded charges of intellectual mediocrity. We must live with fresh ideas and frameworks that point us to counter directions for educational change. I believe that as we look to the future, transformative education should be rooted in the Land to help affirm a people’s history, culture, identity, and heritage. This will go a long way to connect learners to their learning; when that happens, success can no longer elude us.

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