

African Centered Schooling: Facilitating Holistic Excellence for Black Children

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Abstract

During the early 1970s, scholars, parents, and educators began a campaign for schooling experiences that were culturally affirming for Black children. This community of concerned individuals vested their energy and support in schools that subscribed to a worldview and ideology of education that focused on enriching the holistic development of children. The product of these efforts is known as the African centered school movement. To capture how African centered schooling has striven to awaken and invoke the natural genius of Black students, I focus my discussion on the history as well as the ideology and pedagogy of the African centered school movement. Additionally, I provide examples of exemplary African centered schools and present some challenges and threats to these types of schools.

Introduction

Since the early 1970s, there has been a vast number of inquiries and scholarly conversations about how to improve the educational experiences of racial minority student populations. These conversations were sparked by an increase in what is commonly described as minority student populations, the discontinuity between the experiences of the teaching force and students they teach (Swartz, 2003), and the disconnect between students' home and schooling experiences (Gay, 1993, 2000). Minority student populations are those who can be distinguished from mainstream society by any of the following: ethnicity, social class, and primary language. These multiple identities have played a key role in the quality of their schooling experience (Lippmann, Burns, & McArthur, 1996; National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006). For example, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) (2006), racial-based minority students are primarily low-income Black or Latino students. Also, NCES shows that in 2005, 48% of Black, 49% of Hispanic, and 36% of American Indian students were enrolled in schools with the highest measure of poverty.² Furthermore these students, particularly Blacks, lived and were schooled in urban areas.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), in its quest to measure academic achievement, has reported differences between the fourth and eight grade scores of Black students and those of White students. Those results showed that, on average, Whites had higher scores in reading and mathematics (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006). Specifi-

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²Highest measure of poverty refers to schools with more than 75% of students on free and reduced lunch (NCES, 2006).

cally in the area of reading 42% of Black fourth graders scored at or above basic skills level compared to 76% of White students on the NAEP (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, 2006a). Similar results were found in mathematics for twelfth graders on the NAEP assessment in which White students scored on average 30 points higher than Black students (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, 2006b).

Clearly some education scholars focus their discussion on differences between Black and White students (Ferguson, 1998; Lee, 2002; Rothstein, 2004). However, others have argued that the difference is actually between the current level of performance of Black students and their potential for holistic excellence (Gordon, 1994; Hillard, 2006; Lee, 2005). Proponents of this argument suggested that Black students should not be tracked towards a White benchmark for success; instead they should be immersed in an educational environment that supports their holistic development, which inevitably tracks them towards excellence in character, spirit, and intellect (Giddings, 2001; Hilliard, 1992; 1998; Hoover, 1992; Karenga, 1995). Moreover, to awaken the natural genius of Black children, researchers, parents, and educators have supported an effort known as the African Centered Education Movement (ACEM). According to Lomotey (1992).

African centered education enables ... students to look at the world with Africa as the center. It encompasses not only those instructional and curricular approaches that result in a shift in students' world view, but it engenders a reorientation of their values and actions as well.... It involves more than mere textbooks and other curricular materials; it encompasses a supportive, understanding, and encouraging school climate....it demands that children be viewed as educable and as descendants of a long line of scholars (pp. 456-457).

ACEM has provided a forum for discussion and development of African centered schools and curricula. African centered curriculum is essential according to Carruthers (1995), as it restores the truth to the curriculum, it is needed to develop a framework of cultural equality, and it is needed to provide leadership in educational reform. With this understanding, my goal is to discuss the potential for excellence in the context of African centered schooling. Specifically, I will focus on the history and ideology of African centered schools, provide some exemplary examples of those schools, and present perceived challenges and threats to their existence.

African Centered School Movement

History

Historically American public schools have failed to provide a quality education for Black students (Darling-Hammond, 2005). Educational scholars argued that this failure was an intentional means to mis-educate the masses of Blacks in order to prohibit cultural and intellectual liberation (Freire, 1973; Hilliard, 1998; King, 1991; Woodson, 1990). Since the 1700s, Blacks have designed independent schools to meet the cultural and intellectual needs of their children (Ratteray & Shujaa, 1987). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Black independent schools were replaced by public schools. As a result, by the mid 1900s a majority of Blacks were schooled in American public schools and thus socialized in the thought and reality of European culture (Ratteray & Shujaa, 1987; Woodson, 1990). Educational scholar and leader Carter G. Woodson (1990) argued that Black children were not reaching their potential because they were in schools that isolated them from African culture and traditions and valorized European culture. He therefore supported an educational experience that addressed the historical legacy and experiences of Africans and Black Americans.

Woodson's scholarship and support over 60 years for schooling experiences rich in Black history and culture echoes the mission and vision of scholars, educators, parents, and trailblazers who in the 1970s sought to protect Black children from the inequitable education experiences of American schooling. Such experiences included a lack of educational resources, dilapidated and hazardous school buildings, and poor educational instruction (Kozol, 1991, 2005). Black Americans throughout the United States began to voice their concerns about the poor educational opportunities by supporting a movement that holistically transformed and rebuilt the spirits and minds of young children. This movement was known as the African Centered School Movement—nostalgic of the Black independent schools of the 1700s. During this movement Black Americans demanded control of public schools or created independent institutions outside of public structures (Ratteray & Shujaa, 1987). The latter effort was known as the Independent African Centered School Movement, which stressed academic excellence as well as cultural relevance and character development (Lee, 1992). Additionally, this movement was in response to the dismal failure of public education for Black students and the heightened international movement for pan-African unity (Giddings, 2001). An African centered perspective and institutional autonomy were two premises behind the formation and maintenance of African centered schools. This African centered perspective subscribes to the spiritual and cultural ethos of African people, and it is situated in an African worldview which offers a "method of thought and practice rooted in the cultural image and human interests of African people" (Karenga, 1995, p. 45). To protect and maintain this Afro-centric reality, institutional autonomy served as the means for allowing this voice to emerge in the education of Black children (King & Wilson, 1994). Furthermore an independent status allowed for resources and vitality to come from the community which inevitably ensured the development of liberatory pedagogy and African centered perspectives (Lee, 1994, 2005).

In 1972, The Council for Independent Black Institutions (CIBI) (2006) was formed as the umbrella organization for African centered advocates and African centered schools (it remains in existence today). As members of this organization, school leaders and advocates engage in conversations on how to best implement and protect the values and vision of the African centered movement. Further this organization supports 16 independent African centered schools across the United States and in the United Kingdom and West Africa. Additionally, CIBI and these independent schools are charged with socializing and educating children to be the spiritual, economic, political, and intellectual leaders they are destined to become. Moreover, African centered schools embrace the traditional wisdom that "children are the reward of life" (The Council for Independent Black Institutions, 1994).

African Worldview

The African centered movement was not only nostalgic of Woodson's (1990) revelations of the fundamental problems of the "mis-education of the Negro," but also a result of the outcry among community groups in Black neighborhoods who were outraged at the poor educational experiences given to their children. They wanted educational culturally salient experiences that they believed would produce academic excellence. This cry for academic excellence and culturally relevant pedagogical practices was deeply rooted in a worldview that was in opposition to the Eurocentric ideology that is the basis for most schools in the United States (Grills, 2004). That ideology contradicts the ethos of African culture. Eurocentric education embraces individualism, competitiveness, and objectivism (Hale, 2001; Hilliard, 1998; King, 1991). Accordingly, advocates and leaders in African centered schools adhere to an African worldview that entails proclaiming that all phenomena are interrelated, interdependent, and interconnected to the whole. This whole is not exclusive to the self (Doumbia & Doumbia, 2004). As defined by

Azibo (1996), when operating from an African reality, the self is extended to children yet to be born, all living Africans, the living dead, ancestors, community of spirits, and the one God/Creator. The major components of the African worldview or reality are ontology, axiology, cosmology, epistemology, and praxis³ (Grills, 2004). These components offer a lens from which an individual can negotiate and navigate through life. Furthermore, within the African worldview people and communities adopt an orientation that attends to purposeful living and engagement. Additionally, the world is not limited to the physical senses or intellect. Instead, unlike the Eurocentric reality, heavy emphasis is placed on using emotional intelligence as a vehicle through life. For example, the ancient Kemites believed that using affective senses allows one to view reality outside of the perimeters of merely physical evidence, into the realms of the metaphysical. In the context of an African centered school culture, educators would emphasize the role of spirit and affective senses in decision making and problem solving, and in resolving personal, communal, societal, and intellectual conflicts (King, 2005; Lee, 2005). To authentically embrace an African centered paradigm entails first the adoption of an African reality that is consistent with the experiences and reality of Africans. Since the realities of African life are rarely acknowledged and addressed in schools in the U.S., proponents of African centered schooling are vested in uplifting and honoring the essence and reality of African people.

Ideology and Pedagogy

The essential principles of an African worldview are the prerequisites for the ideological cornerstones of an African centered paradigm. Grills (2004) noted that in order to efficiently apply an African centered paradigm, one must “examine or analyze the phenomena with a lens consistent with an African understanding of reality; African values; African logic; African methods of knowing; and African historical experiences” (p. 173). Among other key elements of African reality,⁴ Grills further noted that the African ideological premise is rooted in the concepts of Ma’at. According to the ancestors of ancient Kemet, Ma’at is the cardinal principles that govern human functioning and behavior (Nobles, 1990). These principles acknowledge that one is an extension to the divine and inevitably a spark of the divine. Humans are not only extensions to the divine but to others, to nature, and to their ancestors as well. Since one is created in the likeness of the divine, the aim for one’s life is to become Godlike or strive towards perfectibility (Fukiau & Lukondo, 2000; King, 2004). The seven cardinal virtues of Ma’at become the compass towards human perfectibility. These virtues are truth, justice, harmony, balance, order, reciprocity, and propriety. They are the essence and foundation of all experiences and engagement in an African centered school. Therefore, persons working in those schools believe that children are divine beings who bring with them gifts and talents from the Creator and ancestors. It is the moral obligation of children to therefore use these gifts and knowledge to uplift the community and family and strive towards being excellent or Godlike (Nobles, 1990).

To help children internalize their role and moral obligation, African centered schools infuse the principles of Nguzo Saba into their curriculum and school ethos. Conceived by Maulana Karenga (1995), Nguzo Saba is a system of seven principles that support the Black community. These principles include: (a) Umoga or unity, (b) Kujichagulia or self-determination, (c) Ujima

³Ontology refers to the belief about the essence of reality. Axiology defines the relationships between nature and humans. Cosmology defines the relationship with the divine. Epistemology refers to the revelation of truth and generation of knowledge. Lastly, praxis is the system of human conduct (Grills, 2004).

⁴Other elements include the maafa, veneration of the persons, spiritness, human authenticity, inclusive metaphysical epistemology, dynamic interdependence of community, nature and spirit, and Sankofa (Grills, 2004).

or collective work and responsibility, (d) Ujamma or cooperative economics, (e) Kuumba or creativity, (f) Nia or purpose, and (g) Imani or faith (Kifano, 1996, p. 214). Children are reminded daily of the importance of adhering to these seven principles as they strive towards displaying honorable character and intellect.

The beginning of the 21st century ushered in a period in which Eurocentric low performing schools were targeted for comprehensive reforms that focused on accountability through high stakes testing designed to raise achievement (The Comprehensive School Reform Quality Center, 2005; Darling-Hammonds, 2004; Datnow, Borman, Stringfield, Overman, & Castellano, 2003; Lee, 2002). These efforts impacted the promotion and/or demotion of teachers, students, and the schools themselves (Hursh, 2005). On the other hand, African Centered Schools focused on the holistic development of the students. In these schools African centered pedagogy emerged as an essential paradigm for educating Black children. It is not a multicultural approach which "in practice, is summarized and abbreviated in the interest of incorporating them in the curriculum. Simply being included in the faces, facts, and festivals approach to multicultural education turns out to be a fancier way of marginalizing [Black] children" (Murrell, 2002, p. 41). Instead, African centered pedagogy is rooted in the cultural identity of people of African descent. African centered pedagogy demands more than merely providing children with activities during Black History month or literature with characters that have brown faces (Derman-Sparks & ABC Task Force, 1989). Instead, it requires teachers to be active learners and knowledgeable about the basic components of African centered pedagogy.

In addition to operating within an African centered paradigm, persons working in African centered schools provide instruction that complements the learning styles of Black children. For example, from an early age, Black children are exposed to a high degree of stimuli from the creative arts and recognized as being visual, audible, and fashion oriented⁵ (Hale, 2001). According to Ellison, Boykin, Towns, and Stokes (2000), the average Black home environment is highly stimulated as well as being intense and dynamic. As a result of children's exposure to such a stimulated and active environment, Black children have an increased behavioral vibrancy and affinity for stimulus intensity and change (Hale, 2001). This stimulus is often characterized as movement, expressiveness, dance, and rhythm. Additionally Black children espouse an African ethos of communalism (Ellison *et al.*, 2000.) On the contrary schools have been characterized as places that are not stimulating and dynamic and that assert value on individualism and competition. Therefore, the schooling experiences of many Black students are not culturally sensitive or affirming (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Furthermore, scholars and advocates of African centered schools suggested that school experiences for children should be congruent with their level of expression, activity, and learning styles (Azibo, 1996; Fukiau & Lukondo, 2000; Hilliard, 1992; Somé, 1999). For example, generally, Black children are more kinesthetic and have higher levels of motor activity than White children. They thrive in environments that use multimedia and multimodal teaching strategies (Hale, 2001). Contrary to that, mainstream cultural themes found in North American society and schools are often not congruent with those of Black children. African centered schools are structured to nurture the holistic development of each child by offering pedagogical and instructional practices that complement the learning styles of those children.

⁵Examples of visual arts stimulus includes paintings, posters, and graffiti. Radio, tape recordings, and phonograph are considered audio arts. Video arts include films and television. Examples of fashion arts are creative hats, scarves, and hairstyles.

The primary aims of an African centered educational experience were not only to adhere to a particular ideology of African people but also to implement instructional practices that support the unique learning styles of Black students. These practices are then implemented using a curriculum rooted in the reality and history of African people. By embracing ancient and contemporary African culture, African centered schools counteract the hegemonic forces that trivialize the contributions of Africans and Blacks in America.

Exemplary African Centered Schools

One example of an African centered school is the New Concept Development Center in Chicago. There teachers help children understand the process of scientific investigation when they link the Nguzo Saba principles of Nia and Umoga to show part of a systematic way to view human relationships and the universe. Together, teachers and students explore the patterns and dynamic forces in nature as students are engaged in the human experience of scientific investigations (Lee, 1992). In another example, students at Mary McLeod Bethune Institute in Los Angeles were given instruction that facilitated the growth of their critical, analytical, creative, and higher order skills. Teachers at Bethune create geometry lessons using the designs of the Ndebele people of South Africa. The purpose of such instructional lessons is to make meaningful cultural connections and engage students in higher order and creative-thinking learning activities (Kifano, 1996). A third example of African centered instruction is practiced at Nairobi Day School in East Palo Alto, California. In that school teachers use African indigenous languages in drama, games, songs, poems, and speech events to help foster students' understanding of and respect for African culture and language (Hoover, 2005). Further, teachers reinforce reading skills by using African and Black historical and politically charged rhymes that focus on contributions and missions of Black leaders.

Late twentieth and early twenty-first century public schools defined excellence by using scores from minimum competency high stakes tests. This minimum competency is masked by the popular rhetoric of "closing the achievement gap;" it maintains a basic skills benchmark for Black children (Hilliard, 2006). On the other hand, the aim of the African centered experience is to emulate the holistic excellence of ancient and contemporary African ancestors. As such, the benchmarks for success are not limited to test scores but excellence in character and spirit. There are a number of examples of such excellence from African centered schools. For example, after graduating from New Concept Development Center in Chicago, IL students enrolled in prestigious universities and were among the highest ranking students in their schools (Lee, 1992). These students not only were distinguished academically but demonstrated their ability to be well-rounded creative thinkers and model students.

The African centered model has been successfully applied in public school settings as well. The launch and implementation of Chick Elementary School is one example. Chick Elementary was created as a local level effort in Missouri by parents and educators who rallied for an African centered school. As a result of their efforts, in 1991 J.S. Chick Elementary became an African centered school aimed at upholding and honoring the cultural and historical legacy of excellence among African people. A few years later Sanford B. Ladd was created in the image of Chick Elementary (Teicher, 2006). While similar to the communities that created African centered schools in the early 70s, both schools are public and use the state curriculum but supplement it with an African cultural component that requires students to model the higher order thinking of ancestors from ancient Kemet. For example, teachers took the state standards of education and added mathematical methods of Imhotep and other ancient African scholars to their instructional lessons. The purpose of designing such lessons was to situate concepts into a

cultural paradigm used to make children the subject rather than the object of their schooling experience (K. Bullard, personal communication, October 27, 2006).

As a result of the implementation of African centered schooling strategies, students at Chick Elementary and Sanford B. Ladd are among the top performing in the state of Missouri. A recent example of Chick's academic success was that 48% of Chick Elementary students, compared to 24% of Black students and 36% of White students statewide, scored at the proficient or advanced level on the Missouri Assessment Program's fourth grade math test in 2005 (as cited in Teicher, 2006). Because of the undisputable success of students at Chick, in 1995 there was a court ordered mandate to create Sanford B. Ladd in Chick's image. At Sanford's inception it was the lowest performing school in the district (48 of 48). Now, Sanford is recognized as the most improved school in the state and holds the title of being among the top ten highest performing schools in the state of Missouri. While the test scores of these students are impressive, what makes this experience for Black students a distinguished one is that they learn to see themselves as leaders, contributors to the community, and extensions to the divine. They are not defined by the labels of being an all Black school with 80% on free or reduced lunch, but rather defined by the excellent legacy of their ancestors (Teicher, 2006).

Chick Elementary, Sanford B. Ladd, Mary McLeod Bethune, New Concept Development Center, and Nairobi Day School are just five examples of how African centered schooling can nurture and support the holistic development of Black students. Schools across the country can benefit from what has been learned about Black child development and school achievement from these schools. African centered thought is clearly manifested and reflected in each of these examples as they:

1. legitimize African stores of knowledge;
2. positively exploit and scaffold productive community and cultural practices;
3. extend and build upon the indigenous language;
4. reinforce community ties and idealize [the concept of] service to one's family, community, nation, race and world;
5. promote positive social relationships;
6. impart a world view that idealizes a positive, self-sufficient future for one's people without denying the self-worth and right to self determination of others; [and]
7. support cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness. (Lee, Lomotey, & Shujaa, 1990, p. 50).

Despite the success of schools like New Concept Development Center, African centered schooling has not escaped criticism over the years. For example, the small class size and admission process for independent African centered schools arguably make their comparisons to public schools unfair. However, smaller class size does not necessarily equate to students' educational success, which is evidenced by the high academic achievement of Japanese students who learn in large classes (Wray, 1999). Also, admissions entities for independent schools have generally accepted every student that has registered to attend (Hoover, 1992; Lee, 1992).

Challenges and Threats

Since their early beginnings in the 1970s, independent African centered schools have worked towards safeguarding their values and goals. Inevitably there have been many challenges that threaten the operations of independent African centered schools. The first is the challenge of training a teacher and leadership workforce that is dedicated to becoming increasingly knowledgeable about the nature and importance of culture. For example, teachers must be well-in-

formed about African history and able to instruct in a way that is culturally salient and responsive to Black students (Lee, 2005). Without a dedicated and knowledgeable teaching staff and stable leadership, the essence of an African centered experience becomes fragmented (Lee, 1992).

Another significant challenge for African centered schooling is the absence of a complete kindergarten through 12th grade curriculum for teachers to use that would replace curricula currently used in public schools (Giddings, 2001). In other words, teachers in independent schools use the foundation of African culture and history to create curricula that are culturally affirming for children. Since there is not a curriculum to which teachers can refer, they have absolute autonomy to create their own; this can become a time-consuming and laborious challenge (Binder, 2000).

In addition to recruiting and retaining teachers and leaders who are dedicated to the principles that support African centered schooling, many of these independent schools have difficulty attracting students. In some instances, parents are not aware of the benefits offered by such schools. Even when they are, they may not be able to pay the tuition—as is often the case for parents who are working-class or in a lower socioeconomic group (Lee, 1992). Parents may also be reluctant to enroll their children because they believe that these schools represent ethnic separatism and an anti-American approach to teaching that undermines the goals of a democratic and multicultural society (Gordon, 1994). However, what is problematic about this argument is that Black students seldom get the opportunity to see themselves and their history accurately portrayed in American history. Perspectives and discourse are instead grounded in European history and culture (Asante, 1991). As cited in Gordon (1994), African history scholars such as Asa G. Hilliard III, Molefi K. Asante, Cheikh Anta Diop, and Joyce King have argued that studying the contributions of Blacks is likely to enhance Black students' desire to learn.

Finally, while those five African centered schools have shown impressive academic results for Black students, there is still resistance to infusing African centered thought into American schools. The aims and goals of African centered thought are in opposition to the goals of Eurocentric thought. Eurocentricity, as often reflected in practices in the United States, is based on notions of maintaining White privilege and advantage in politics, education, and economics (Hilliard, 2000). Therefore, an ideology and pedagogy that centers Black students inside African culture, science, and history challenges that privilege. Thus, an African centered school experience could educate students about their history and potential and liberate them from the White hegemony in education (Asante, 1991).

Schools were the number one vehicle for the mass education, mis-education, and socialization of students. Therefore, an intellectual, cultural, and community initiative such as African centered schooling threatens the power and very foundation of American society. So the question of why African centered schooling is not being implemented in American schools is not a question of its impact on student achievement but rather the threat it poses on maintaining systematic hegemony (Hilliard, 1998, 2000; Karenga, 1995; King, 2004).

Conclusion

In addressing achievement among Black students in the United States, educational researchers and scholars have begun to challenge and question the ideological and pedagogical constructs that threaten the holistic development of Black students (Cochran-Smith, 1997; Lee, 2005; Sleeter, 2001). For example, Schmoker (1999) cited examples of how low performing schools serving Black students have been transformed into top performing schools. These examples ranged from staff focusing on collaboration and goal-setting to schools implementing an inquiry-based ap-

proach to research projects. Other scholars (e.g., Comer, 2004; Sizemore, 1985; Taylor, 2005) further suggested that Black achievement is attained through strategic partnerships with parents, community, business and civic, and foundation resources. Comer (2004) developed a comprehensive school reform model that focused on establishing authentic relationships and communication among all stakeholders in the school. These scholars and activists have offered a diverse array of strategies and pedagogies for increasing student achievement.

As Ronald Edmonds proclaimed, "We can whenever, wherever we choose successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us" (as cited in Bell, 2001, p.1). The various methods and approaches to increasing academic achievement for Black students are limitless and diverse. Good teaching will inevitably produce good results, whereas immersing students in their culture and espousing excellent teaching produces leaders and critically conscious individuals (Freire, 1973).

African centered schooling is rooted in the cultural precepts, ideology, and pedagogy of African reality, and is designed to transform the experiences and performances of students to reflect their innate potential for excellence. As presented earlier, students who attend African centered schools are not only equipped with the tools to compete intellectually but also with cultural pride and honorable character (Lee, 1992; Teicher, 2006). Therefore, those who seek to assist Black children in achieving excellence in many aspects of their lives are urged to critically examine the literature regarding academic achievement and arguments designed to influence scholarly conversations in publications directed to an audience including a range of stakeholders. Then they are invited to give serious consideration to how an African centered schooling experience can become the prototype for schools across the United States that serve Black students.

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