

Afrocentric Curriculum



By "centering" their students of color, teachers can reduce feelings of dislocation engendered by our society's predominantly "white self-esteem curriculums."

MOLEFI KETE ASANTE

Recently I spoke about Afrocentric teaching at a gathering of thousands of teachers in a large urban district. After my speech, I was pleased that two teachers wanted to share their classroom experiences with the audience.

After a trip to Africa, one teacher said, he returned to his classroom of mostly African-American students and began identifying them with various ethnic groups. "You look like a Fulani boy I saw in Northern Nigeria," he commented to a young man. "You're definitely Ibo," he said to a female student. "Yes, I have seen that face in the Ibo region." Turning to another student, he said, "I see Mandinka features in your face." Soon, all the children were clamoring for identification: "Me, who do I look like?" "Tell me my ethnic group," each one asked the teacher.

The other teacher remarked that she asks her students to write about their family's genealogy. The best way to approach the subject of identity and connectiveness, she suggested, is to begin with the family, because students have both personal and collective identities.

I applauded both teachers for doing precisely what all teachers should do: place children, or center them, within the context of familiar cultural and social references from their own historical settings.

The Breakthrough

The discovery of the centric idea was a major breakthrough in my educational

Photo: Michael Leighton/Teaching Tolerance Magazine

conceptualization. It allowed me to explain what happens to white children who attend American schools, what happens to Asian children who are rooted in Asian culture and attend schools in their countries, what happens to children of the African continent who are grounded in their own culture and attend their own schools.

In my 17 journeys to Africa during the past 20 years, I have visited schools and colleges in all parts of the continent and been impressed with the eagerness of the children to learn. Back home in Philadelphia, I wanted to explore why children in Africa seemed more motivated than African-American children here. Why did Africans on the continent learn four and five languages, when in some schools African-American children were often not encouraged to take even one foreign language? To say the least, I have been disturbed by the lack of direction and confidence that plague many African-American children. I believe it is because they are not culturally centered and empowered in their classrooms.

Empowering Children Through Their Culture

One of the principal aspects of empowerment is respect. Students are empowered when information is presented in such a way that they can walk out of the classroom feeling that they are a part of the information.

The times I am able to relate a class topic to the background of a Native American, Chinese, Hispanic, or African child in a multicultural classroom make me very pleased, because I see the centering immediately register in the child's countenance. Self-perception and self-acceptance are the principle tools for communicating and

receiving communication. And teaching is preeminently a communicating profession.

Most teachers do not have to think about using the white child's culture to empower the white child. The white child's language is the language of the classroom. Information that is being conveyed is "white" cultural information in most cases; indeed, the curriculum in most schools is a "white self-esteem curriculum."

Teachers are empowered if they walk into class and there is an air of credibility. How do teachers empower themselves in a classroom with children of African-American or other heritages? They must use the same tools used to empower white children.

When I enter a classroom of white college students and demonstrate in the course of my lecture that I know not only the words of Ogotommeli, Seti, and Ptahhotep but also Shakespeare, Homer, and Stephen J. Gould, I am usually empowered as a teacher with my white students. They understand that I have no problem centering them within their cultural framework. The reason they understand it is simple: this is the language of the dominant culture.

The fact that an African-American or an Hispanic person—in order to master the white cultural information—has had to experience the death of his or her own culture does not register with most teachers. The true "centric" curriculum seeks for the African, Asian, and Hispanic child the same kind of experience that is provided for the white child.

Centering the African-American Child

The centric idea gave me some idea of what happened to African-American children whose culture has been

ravaged by racism, discrimination, harassment, and the Great Enslavement. These children, with cultural handicaps, are forced to compete with students whose ancestors have not suffered such devastation.

What centers the African-American child? I began working with this question many years ago when I observed what happened to the African-American child in the large school systems of northern urban communities. Being brought up in Valdosta, Georgia, during the era of segregation, I had been nourished and nurtured by teachers who had mastered the nuances and idiosyncrasies of my culture. This is something that teachers often seem unable to do in many urban schools.

Of course, segregation was legally and morally wrong, but something was given to black children in those schools that was just as important in some senses as the new books, better educated teachers, and improved buildings of this era. The children were centered in cultural ways that made learning interesting and intimate.

African-American children who have never heard the Spirituals; never heard the names of African ethnic groups; never read Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Phillis Wheatley nor the stories of High John de Conqueror, Anansi, and the Signifying Monkey are severely injured in the most fragile parts of their psyches. Lacking reinforcement in their own historical experiences, they become psychologically crippled, hobbling along in the margins of the European experiences of most of the curriculum.

While I am not nostalgic for the era of segregated schools, we should remember what was best in those schools and use that knowledge to assist in centering African-American children. Through observations, inquiry, and discussions, I've found

that children who are centered in their own cultural information are better students, more disciplined, and have greater motivation for schoolwork.

A neighbor of mine often speaks to elementary classes in one of the most economically devastated communities in Philadelphia. He tells the young children, "You're going to be somebody." Later, the children are often heard saying to their peers, "I am going to be somebody."

It sounds so ridiculously corny to say this, but many of these children have never been touched at their psychological centers, never been reached in their cultural homes. They see school as a foreign place because schools do foreign things. Of course, many students master the "alien" cultural information, but others have great difficulty getting beyond the margin in which they have been placed.

A Dislocated Culture

When it comes to facing the reality of social and cultural dislocation, teachers are on the front lines. They are among the first in the society to see the devastation that has occurred to the African-American child's spirit. If they've been teaching for more than 20 years, they have seen more and more students who seem to have been dislocated culturally, socially, and psychologically.

I contend that the movement of Africans from the continent of Africa was the first massive dislocation. The African person was physically separated from place, from culture, and from traditions. In the Americas, the African person was punished for remembering Africa. Drums were outlawed in most of the colonies soon after the arrival of large numbers of Africans. And since the drum was an instrument intimate to the cultural



At Hatch Middle School, Molefi Kete Asante, students, and a teacher celebrate Cultural Awareness Day.

transmission of values and traditions, its disappearance was one of the great losses in the African-American psyche. Physical movement became in reality a precursor to a more damaging dislocation and decentering.

Numerous educational, social, religious, and political structures and institutions have tried to minimize the dislocation. But the despair has intensified since the '60s, because of questions of equity and lack of economic opportunities. Schools are affected inasmuch as their students are filled with the emptiness of their own self-dislocation.

Indeed, schools have often contributed to the dilemma by encouraging African-American children to concentrate on mastering only information about the majority culture. These children may learn, but, without cultural grounding, the learning will have destroyed their sense of place. Increasing numbers of children abandon, in their minds, their own cultures in order to become like others culturally, hoping this will bring them closer to the white norms.

Schools also reinforce feelings of limited self-worth and cultural dislocation by ignoring the historical contributions of African Americans or devaluing their culture. The teacher who teaches American literature and does not refer to one African-American writer is doing a disservice to students of all cultural backgrounds. Equally so, the teacher who teaches music and does not mention one composition by an African American is de-centering the African-American child and misedu-

cating the rest of the children.

Certainly some schools and teachers do better than others. And, in some cases, the child will get a sense of the importance of African and African-American contributions to human knowledge. But, for the most part, the African-American child fails to find a sense of identification with the information being presented.

The rise of cultural manifestations in the clothing, concepts, and motifs of African Americans is a direct result of the Afrocentric movement. Growing from a sense of the necessity for relocation, the reawakening within the African-American community portends positive developments on the educational level.

Achieving Success Through Congruence

The role of the teacher is to make the student's world and the classroom congruent. Language, examples, and concepts must be relevant. As all teachers know, this is a risky maneuver because relating classroom experience to outside experience depends to a large degree on the teacher's ability to know the student's cultural location as well as the subject. One does not have to constantly maintain congruence to be successful, however; one needs only to have an openness to the possibility that the student who is not of European ancestry may need to be centered in a particular way. Such centering techniques as examples from history, from books, from real life situations may also be helpful to other students.

Of course, the choice of examples is as important as knowing that you should have some centering devices. I once knew a white teacher in California who thought that he was being aware of his Mexican-American students by referring to an incident with "wetbacks"

along the Texas-Mexico border. He thought the students would understand that he was trying to bring them into his discussion on the politics of the third world. When the students complained to him and the principal, the teacher was shocked and still could not see his mistake.

Therefore, teachers must read information from the cultures of their students. Should teachers have Cambodian students, then they must know something about Cambodians. Should teachers teach African-American students, then they must read information from African-American studies. This means that teachers must examine their lessons to see that they do not contain pejoratives about African Americans or other ethnic groups. Otherwise, they will not be empowered with the class.

Ideally, an Afrocentric program should be infused throughout the class period, not merely tagged on or added as a once-a-month feature. Resources for teaching with an Afrocentric approach are available from two major sources: Africa World Press of Trenton, New Jersey, and the GRIO publishing company of Philadelphia. Materials include books for all grades, informational packets, Afrocentric Kits, bibliographies, and sample lessons plans.¹

Toward Multicultural Classrooms

What do the principles of an Afrocentric approach look like in the classroom? In the Hatch Middle School in Camden, New Jersey, Principal Jan Gillespie and her teachers have organized the Molefi Asante Multicultural Academy. Utilizing the resources of the students' families, the academy's emphasis is on centering the children, treating each person's heritage with respect, and studying to learn about

each other as a way to knowledge about self and the world.

Beyond raising the level of self-confidence among its students, the academy has become a training ground for teachers interested in building respect for cultural diversity as a way to empower teachers. Students often do what they see their teachers doing and, consequently, as the best teachers soar like eagles, their students soar with them.

Our society is a composite of many ethnic and racial groups, and all students should be able to converse about the cultural diversity of the nation. Thus, both content and process are important in an Afrocentric approach to teaching. By combining the

best elements of the centering process reminiscent of the segregation era with the best of today's more sophisticated techniques and equipment, we might find a new synthesis in our ability to teach children.

For information on staff development, contact Don McNeely at the National Afrocentric Institute, Temple University. The institute prepares educational trainers to conduct inservice training on Afrocentric curriculum.

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