

Black learners in Canada

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Abstract: This article examines the movement for Africentric public schools in Canada, particularly in Montreal, and the controversy it has generated. It is also argued that Black youth would gain significantly from community-based educational programmes that root their learning more closely in the life, experiences and needs of their community.

Keywords: Africentric schools, community-based education, Montreal, public school system

In recent years, members of Black communities in several Canadian cities have been organising for Africentric schools that can offer students the opportunity to participate in inclusive and ethno-culturally-centred learning environments. Proposals for Africentric public schools in Toronto, Halifax and Montreal are considered controversial and have sparked heated debates, both in the general public and within Black communities themselves. Critics of Africentric schools accuse supporters of advocating a return to segregation and fear that such schools would cause Black students to become further marginalised and less able to integrate into wider society. Supporters of Africentric schools argue that Africentric schooling will engage learners and their families who have been marginalised by the mainstream education system. For them, a key reason for an Africentric alternative is the failure of the current public school systems and their Eurocentric curricula to engage many Black learners.

As well as discussing the development of Africentric schools, I will argue that Black youth would benefit significantly from community-based educational

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programmes that contextualise and inform their lived experiences and provide them with new ways of understanding and responding to the world around them. Community-based education involves all community members and creates spaces for intergenerational learning and the transmission of oral history. In this way, educational programming within Black communities can be pursued as a system for community development, as well as a philosophy of education that responds to the crisis in public school systems.

The 1990s

In 1990, the Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) was formed in Nova Scotia; its aim was to respond to the struggles of Black Nova Scotians to eliminate racism and gain equity in education. Four years later, the Committee published a study, entitled *BLAC Report on Education: redressing inequity, empowering Black learners*, which included forty-six recommendations for addressing systemic racism in the Nova Scotia education system. The following year, an Africentric school, Nelson Whynder Elementary, was opened in North Preston, Nova Scotia. As recommended in the report, the status of BLAC was modified in 1996 so that it became a provincial advisory council – the Council on African Canadian Education. In addition, an Africentric Learning Institute was created to, among other things, assist in the development of a curriculum, conduct research about issues relating to Black learners in Nova Scotia and assist in anti-racism teacher training.

Meanwhile in Ontario, similar concerns about racism and inequities in the education of Black learners led George Dei to begin working with his graduate students at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education on research projects examining the experiences of Black youth in Canadian schools and the challenge of developing an inclusive schooling environment. From 1992, Dei and his assistants began to study the narratives that Black students and school drop-outs constructed regarding their experiences in the public school system. In *Reconstructing 'Drop-Out': a critical ethnography of the dynamics of Black students' disengagement from school* (1997), one of the publications reporting their findings, Dei and his colleagues showed that experiences of racism were a constant source of pressure for Black students. The three primary concerns expressed in the students' narratives were: differential treatment because of their race, the lack of Black and African-Canadian history and culture in the curriculum, and the absence of Black teachers.

Dei's work coincided with research and recommendations relating to Africentric schools published by the African Canadian Working Group in 1992 and by the Royal Commission on Learning in 1994. And in 1993, the Department of Public Health's drug abuse prevention programme carried out a survey in Toronto which indicated that many African-Canadian secondary school students were dropping out of the system because they felt a sense of racial and cultural alienation and marginalisation. In response to these consistent findings and recommendations, the Nighana Afrocentric Transitional Programme, an Africentric

public school programme for 'at risk' African-Canadian students, was established in the fall of 1995.

Reports by Black students of feelings of alienation and of a lack of support were underscored by the fact that most teachers interviewed by Dei and his colleagues failed to recognise any problems in the educational system and, instead, identified factors within the students' characters, the characters of the students' families or the students' earlier educational experiences. A prominent feature of the teachers' responses was the construction of drop-outs as socially and academically deficient in their families, their values and their attitudes towards education. Far too many teachers in Canada viewed racism as a myth perpetuated by 'at risk' youth (or by 'limited' parents) who were seen as targeting innocent, well-meaning educators with false accusations. Black students were generally aware of this dynamic and understood the wider context and implications of their experiences. Youth interviewees in Dei's studies talked about the inherent problems of Canadian identity, specifically noting the superior status of White Canadians vis-à-vis their non-White counterparts, and expressing their desire to have their status as Canadians socially validated. Likewise, Solomon and Levine-Rasky found in their research that the comments of many teachers pointed to the suppression of social difference so as to enforce assimilation to a White, Eurocentric, middle-class Canadian norm.¹ Canadian claims to being colour-blind in education, and in other contexts, were closely related to an emphasis on homogeneity and the denial of the significance of ethno-cultural heritage and lived experiences of racism. In this context, 'multicultural education' uses White, western culture as its point of departure and, all too often, settles for superficial definitions of culture that focus on generalised, overt characteristics such as dress, food and holiday celebrations, while social equity and diversity are under-emphasised.

2000–2010: progress and backlash

Despite the efforts of the 1990s, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the situation for Black learners in Canada had not significantly improved. As a result, there were renewed calls for Africentric schools in Halifax, Montreal and, most notably, Toronto. In all three cities, such proposals were widely debated by the general public and within Black communities, with the media fuelling much of the discussion.

These debates intensified in 2006 when the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) announced its plan to test Africentric social studies and other programmes in its middle schools. The Canadian Association for Free Expression (CAFE), for example, responded in an online commentary entitled 'Hey, bro, coming to a school near you: Black victimology curriculum'. CAFE, a 'non-profit educational organization that was incorporated in the Province of Ontario in 1981, and later in Alberta', accused the TDSB of being 'punch drunk on minorityitis' and suggested that the cause of 'serious Negro underachievement in Toronto schools' is the 'demonstrably lower Negro IQ'. Regarding the Africentric social studies units, the CAFE writer noted:

The students may learn little of the European founder/settler people, but they'll be fed a hopped up roti stew of stories to make them feel good about being Black. I have nothing against people taking pride in their past, but as immigrants to Canada, these people have chosen *us* and must learn *our* history and *our* ways. It's interesting that Chinese and East Indian students, many of whom face a language barrier, do very well academically, *without* special ego-stroking courses high in self-esteem and low in academics.

CAFE's commentary speaks for itself. But, despite the outcry and both Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty and Minister of Education Kathleen Wynne openly speaking out against Africentric schools, Black community workers, parents, educators and academics continued to insist that the school board provide an Africentric option. Following several heated community consultations, in January 2008 the TDSB voted eleven to nine in favour of establishing an Africentric Alternative Elementary School.

On 18 February, the renowned Canadian daily newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, responded to the Toronto school board's decision with an overtly racist editorial cartoon entitled 'Afrocentric algebra'. The cartoon showed a Black man (with a disproportionately small head, large glasses, broad nose and toothy overbite) standing at a blackboard covered in maths equations and asking: 'S'up dog?' The cartoon and the accompanying piece on Africentrism ignited a renewed debate and drew letters of protest to the newspaper, including from Molefi Kete Asante, whose work on Afrocentricity strongly informed Dei's. Asante wrote that he was 'appalled to read the February 18th piece on Afrocentrism and to see the negative cartoons about Afrocentric education' and that, as one of the principal founders of the Afrocentric paradigm, he was struck by how little the article represented the current state of scholarship. He described the *Globe's* piece as an 'emotional, oppositional, and anti-African outburst with limited reflection on the central issue'.²

In Québec, Montreal's Black community had been following the situation in Toronto and began to talk about an Africentric school. As elsewhere in the country, many Black youth in Québec are not engaged in public schools, leaving them unable to make useful connections between the education they receive at school and their lived experiences - with the exception of the clear connection between the disenfranchisement and alienation they experience at school and that which they and their families experience in wider society. Even Black families who have been in Québec for multiple generations face an unemployment rate and a proportion of low-income households more than double those of the general population.³ Nearly half of Québec's Black youth drop out of high school. A 2004 study demonstrated that a group of Black students in Québec who started high school between 1994 and 1996 had a 51.8 per cent graduation rate, compared to 69 per cent for the population as a whole.⁴

The Steering Committee for an Afrocentric School in Montreal was formed early in 2008 by concerned members of the Black community. I was peripherally involved with the Steering Committee and was an active member of BLAC (Montreal) from the fall of 2008 until May 2009 and much of the following account

is based on my experiences. The Steering Committee organised panel discussions and consultations with parents, youth, teachers and community organisations in French- and English-speaking Black Communities across the city (Montreal's Black population of 150,000 is divided evenly between English and French speakers). Drawing on these discussions, the Committee prepared and submitted a *Proposal for the Creation of an Afrocentric Focus School in Montreal* in response to an invitation from the English Montreal School Board (EMSB). The proposal outlined a plan for an inclusive, Afrocentric Focus School that would 'not only serve to increase the self-esteem of the Black Canadian child and aid in decreasing the drop-out rate amongst Black children, but will also motivate and increase academic interest and achievement in all children'. Not surprisingly, the proposal was generally met with the familiar refrain that the Committee was proposing 'a return to segregation' in the form of 'Black schools' and the assertion that 'Brother Martin and Sister Rosa must be turning in their graves'.⁵

The Steering Committee borrowed the acronym of its predecessors in Nova Scotia and renamed itself BLAC, the Black Learners Advisory Coalition. A second proposal for an Africentric Alternative School was prepared as per the EMSB's alternative school proposal policy. This proposal was submitted in September 2008 and, in late November, BLAC was called to a meeting with the EMSB administrators where members were informed that it had been determined that there were not enough Black students in the EMSB area for the development of an Africentric School to be considered. The administrators suggested that the Coalition refocus on Africentric extra-curricular programming that might be offered in the schools with the largest Black student populations. BLAC proceeded with a proposal for several Africentric lunchtime programmes, which was submitted to the EMSB at the beginning of February 2009.

Around two weeks later, at a debate organised by the Canada Research Chair on Education and Ethnic Relations, there was continued opposition to the idea of Africentric education in Montreal and, specifically, resistance to the word 'Africentric'. And some of those at the debate suggested that Québec's Black population was *different* from that of Toronto and the US, so that African Quebecers were not regarded as needing the kind of ethno-cultural initiatives that appealed to Blacks elsewhere. While this suggestion reflected an attitude of racist paternalism, it is true that the attempts in Montreal to organise Africentric schooling have been marked by unique challenges.

First, Montreal's Black communities are, by and large, socially and geographically divided by language. The EMSB was chosen as a place to start organising for an Africentric school because it was thought to be more favourable to such an idea than its French-language counterpart, the Commission Scolaire de Montréal (CSDM). The language laws in Québec are such that the children of many English-speaking immigrants are forced to attend school in French and the double marginalisation of English-speaking Black learners is reflected in the 'no English' policies on the grounds of CSDM schools (which also apply to Anglophone parents). Black English-speaking parents consistently report that francophone teachers and school authorities quite openly express their disdain for Anglophones and intolerance for ethno-cultural difference.

The second difference in Montreal has been that, while senior community and religious leaders took the lead in the formation of the Steering Committee, in Montreal there has not been the same level of open public support from established educators, school administrators and academics as there was in Halifax and Toronto. On the contrary, several recognised Black educators in Montreal spoke out publicly *against* proposals for an Africentric school. This allowed opponents to argue that BLAC members were young, idealistic and misguided, and that they did not understand the hard work that was done in the past.

The space for community-based education

There is no such thing as a neutral education process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of generations into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.⁶

The reality of racism and other forms of oppression experienced by Black and other marginalised youth in Canadian societies causes many to develop fatalistic attitudes about themselves, their education and their future.⁷ As artist-educator David Trend has argued, fatalism in students is the result of being objectified. Being treated as passive and manipulable, rather than as active autonomous subjects, perpetuates in students the view that they can do little to alter the course of their own lives.⁸ Thus, any adequate response to the crisis in the public education of Black learners has to extend beyond the existing school system and seek to create spaces for emancipatory, community-based educational programming.

The movement for Africentric education in Canada has opened spaces for education initiatives rooted in Black communities, centred on the learners' own history and culture, and built on models of emancipatory education (what is also referred to as social justice and diversity education). Such models address individual emancipation, as the learner becomes an active subject in the learning process, and collective emancipation, as learners gain 'tools of critical dialogue, thought and action through which to transform themselves and their relationship to larger society'.⁹ This transformation occurs through learners and educators actively engaging in *dialogical action*, which, as Paulo Freire wrote, recognises 'the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing'. In this way, 'dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing'.¹⁰

Within the spaces created by community-based education initiatives, 'education' and 'learning' can be re-framed as an accessible, culturally relevant, life-long process which belongs, ultimately, to communities themselves. Community-based education, on this view, works to destabilise the perceived boundaries between the roles of the teacher, student, artist, social worker and community worker; and, among people who experience different forms of oppression, it

encourages deep coalitions at the intersection of their various cultural identities.¹¹ Community educators are personally engaged with learners and have a sophisticated understanding of race, racism and the contemporary contexts of schooling. Typically, these educators have gained this understanding as a result of living and working in the same under-resourced communities where students from diverse backgrounds live and go to school. Community-based learning is contextualised, in terms of community and individual issues, needs and interests; and the educator is always mindful of creating the meaningful connections between what is being learned and what is important to the lives, families and experiences of the learner.¹²

Community-based learning initiatives can facilitate the exploration of what Du Bois called the 'double consciousness' that Black community members have necessarily developed in order to navigate their way through the dominant and dominating Eurocentric Canadian 'mainstream'. Lived experiences of *world travel* between 'Black' and 'White', 'English' and 'French', 'African-hyphenated', 'Canadian' and 'Québécoise' ideally situate Black learners to unseat dominant discourses, such as those that assume that 'Canadian' means 'White'. Within learning environments rooted in their communities, Black learners are able to embrace their histories and cultural traditions, while drawing on the multiple cultural identifications that make them unique.

Rather than replacing proposals for Africentric schools, community-based education initiatives can support and enhance the movement for Africentric education in Canada. Community-based intergenerational learning and teaching has been a critical part of movements for social change – for example, in the US Civil Rights Movement and Caribbean struggles for national independence. In this tradition, community-based education is the practice of eliciting human potential and agency, engaging learners on a personal level, and promoting their overall intellectual and social development. For Black learners, particularly in Montreal, community-based education centred on the experiences of African Canadians can empower Black youth and their families, and better equip them to navigate public school systems and organise in their communities.

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