EXAMINING THE CASE FOR "AFRICAN-CENTRED" SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines the call for "African-centred" schools in Ontario, and identifies the challenges posed by such schools for Canadian students, parents, educators, and administrators. The author uses the narrative discourses of Black youths in a Canadian inner city relative to their experiences in the public school system as one means of exploring the need and relevance of an "African-centred" school. The establishment of such a school is proposed as an alternative form of schooling for those youths whose needs are not served by the mainstream school system. The author argues for the establishment of such schools on an experimental basis, in direct consultation and meaningful partnership with students, educators, administrators, and the wider "local community."

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article étudie l'appel à la création d'école "à caractère africain" en Ontario et identifie les défis que posent ces écoles aux étudiants, parents, enseignants et administrateurs canadiens. L'auteur se base sur les récits que des jeunes Noirs d'une ville canadienne font de leur expérience du système scolaire public pour étudier le besoin et la pertinence d'écoles "à caractère africain." La création d'une école de ce type est proposée pour les jeunes dont les besoins ne sont pas couverts par le système scolaire dominant. L'auteur défend la création d'écoles de ce type à titre expérimental, en consultation directe avec les étudiants, les enseignants, les administrateurs et l'ensemble communauté, moyennant l'établissement de partenariats.

Public schools are part of the normal, sanctioned institutions of society. Deviation within the school system comes in varied forms and under myriad conditions, and is usually not without huge cost or punishment to the perpetrators. Yet deviation within such school systems should be expected since social formations are not really designed to work to their full potential. A deviation often arises because of the nature of the school system itself, in terms of how it is run and by whom, what is taught and is not taught, who teaches what, how and why, and

also who is authorized to study in the institution. Historically, the culture of public schooling has tended to legitimize certain hegemonic ideas and practices in society. The public school has reinforced social differences in society through its dominant authority notions of what is **acceptable** and **unacceptable** in the school, and what constitutes **valid knowledge** and what is **not valid knowledge**. It is legitimate to ask whether, in a multi-ethnic society, one can use the "pulpit" of the public school system to call for a school that specifically meets the expressed concerns of an identifiable segment of the population. This paper explores the current debate in a Canadian multi-ethnic city for a "Black-focused" (or "African-centred") school.

Critical educators are engaging different ways of knowing at multiple academic and political sites in order to advance knowledge about ourselves and our societies. Such engagement is well positioned in a redefinition of the "why" and "how" of education. The critical educator cannot escape schools' ability to engage some students, while at the same time disengage others. Many students are caught in a struggle to escape social labels and categories which repeatedly oversimplify the complexities of their lived actualities. How can education and schooling move beyond a Euro-Canadian cultural grid to truly engage multiethnic student populations?

A PROPOSED ANTIRACIST APPROACH TO SCHOOLING

This paper employs an antiracist discursive framework to understand Black/African-Canadians'[1] concerns about public schooling in Canada, and to review the call for African-centred schools. Antiracism[2] acknowledges the reality of racism and other forms of social oppression (class, sexual orientation, gender oppression) in the organizational life of the school, and the potential for change (Dei, 1993a). Antiracism moves beyond acknowledgement of the material conditions that structure societal inequality to question White power and privilege and its accompanying rationale for dominance in the schooling and education process. It questions the marginalization of certain voices in society and the delegitimation of the knowledge and experience of subordinate groups in the educational system. The antiracist approach also questions pathological explanations of the Black/African-Canadian "family" or "home environment" as a source of the "problems" that Black youths face in the schools. It is argued that such explanations divert attention from a critical analysis of the institutional structures within which the delivery of education takes place in the schools.

An antiracist theoretical framework to understanding the processes of public schooling in Canada questions the role of the educational system in producing and reproducing racial, gender, and class-based inequalities in society. It also acknowledges the pedagogic need to confront the challenge of diversity and difference in Canadian society, and the urgency for an educational system that is more inclusive[3] and is capable of responding to minority concerns about public schooling. An antiracist political project to challenge definitions of what is valid knowledge, and how such knowledge should be produced and distributed, both nationally and internationally, is oppositional to established hegemonic social, economic, and political interests and forces. The public school system, as a state-sanctioned institutional structure, has historically served the material, political, and ideological interests of the state and the social formation of the *status quo*.

In November, 1992, a multilevel government task force, the African-Canadian Community Working Group, proposed, in a report titled *Towards a New Beginning*, that one predominantly Black junior high school should be set up in each of the six Metropolitan Toronto municipalities. The 15-member working group was appointed by the four levels of government: federal, provincial, City of Toronto, and Metro Toronto (see Working Group, 1992). The report suggested a five-year pilot scheme, establishing a Black-focused institution where Black history and culture would be taught. Such a school would have proportionately more Black/African-Canadian teachers and administrators on staff than in most "mainstream" public schools. The agenda would be to provide Black students with the choice of an alternative learning environment and to develop their sense of identity and belonging to a school. The hope was that, by teaching about Black/African-Canadian students' heritages, such a school would deal appropriately with the problems of isolation and frustration that many Black youths have in society. The report recommends that such a school should be set up on an experimental basis and that the students be kept together for at least three years. Students would come from a wide range of racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and immigrant backgrounds.

The Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, in their recently released report (1994), after an exhaustive study of the Ontario school system, took up this proposal. The report recommends that "school boards, academic authorities, faculties of education, and representatives of the Black community collaborate to establish demonstration schools. . ." in jurisdictions where there are large numbers of Black students (p.78). Clearly, this notion is rapidly gaining currency.

THE VOICES OF BLACK STUDENTS

It is not difficult to understand the conditions that have led to a suggestion for a "Black-focused" school or what is now appropriately termed "African-centred" school. Since early 1992, with the assistance of graduate students from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, this writer has conducted a research project that examines Black/African-Canadian students' experiences in the Ontario public school system. Students' voices have been least highlighted in the discourse on public schooling in Canada, so the initial and most significant phase of this research project foregrounded Black students' narratives of their school experiences. Students' perceptions are particularly helpful to the understanding of the "dropout" dilemma. Clearly, underneath the numbers frequenting the discussion about school "dropouts," the human experience of going through the educational system needs to be heard.

The project solicited individual and group responses from over 200 Black students to such questions as: What do you like/dislike about school? Why do you think some students drop out? Why do others stay on to complete their education? We asked students how the dynamics of social difference (race/ethnicity, class, gender) affect their schooling experiences and what changes they want to see effected in the school system. Over 150 of the students and actual school "dropouts" interviewed are youths who self-identify as Black, and being of African descent, from four selected Toronto high schools that are the primary focus of this project. In the schools, students were randomly selected to provide a representation of male and female students from general and advanced level programs, and to include Grades 10 and 12 students.[4] The criteria for selecting Grade 10 students at "high risk" of dropping out include below-average marks, poor attendance, or inadequate accumulation of credits (see Ziegler, 1989; Waterhouse, 1990). Grade 12 students were selected in order to provide information as to why they have stayed in school and how they see the school system working for them.[5]

Certain themes and concerns emerge from the analysis of the Black students' narratives (see Dei, 1993b, 1995a). While variation in responses occurs, by and large the consistency of narrative expression allows certain conclusions to be drawn. Exceptions generally reflect individualized notions of social agency and a mismatch between student experience and prevailing hegemonic discourses. For instance, many students describe differential treatment based on race, yet have been unable to find a place to voice or validate their suspicions in the

school, so have resigned themselves to silence. Students also assert a need for "our own school," embellishing this notion, then questioning the possibility of its implementation.

Three primary concerns pervade student narratives about school experiences: differential treatment by race, the absence of Black/African-Canadian teachers, and the absence of Black/African-Canadian history in the classroom. These concerns are pervasive to the extent that they emerge in response to seemingly unrelated questions or descriptions. Many students describe encounters with authority and power structures that are perceived not to work in their interest. Students describe struggles to construct self- and group-cultural-identities in a school environment that does not adequately highlight their cultural presence, heritage, and history in both the official and hidden school curriculum. They also describe attempts to excel in the face of unflattering teacher expectations. In spite of these concerns, many of the youth are succeeding, and they would like that to be recognized by society.

Although there is an interesting split in terms of a desire for intensified parental involvement, many students discuss their parents' assistance and sacrifices on their behalf. A number of students state that they persevere because they want to be like their parent(s) and conversely describe the school environment as bereft of role models.

In subsequent phases of the project, we talked to teachers, guidance counsellors, and parents, in part to cross-reference some of the students' narratives. School staff were selected from the four schools that are the focus of the research project. They are, for the most part, teachers of the students interviewed. We chose parents and guardians from the local communities, and a few of them are parents of the students interviewed. In interviewing Black/African-Canadian parents and community workers, the major learning objective was to hear their concerns and solutions to the problems of public schooling in Canada. There are interesting parallels, convergences, and divergences between Black/African-Canadian parents' narrative discourses and those of the youth (see Dei 1994a, 1995a).

The Black student population is not a homogenous group and students' concerns vary to some extent. For example, Continental African students[6] have concerns about the broad issues of language, religion, and culture. Students who have been schooled in the Caribbean complain about the "social labelling" of Black students as "trouble-makers." There are also complaints about the attempts by schools

to place students from the Caribbean in English skills development (ESD) classes. Questions of identity are raised by students born here in Canada and, particularly, those born to mixed parents. Students who speak with distinctly different accents and dialects point to intragroup discrimination and prejudices among their peers. However, it is noted that issues about differential treatment; the lack of representation of Black/African perspectives, histories, and experiences; the absence of Black teachers; and a prevailing culture of White, Eurocentric dominance in the mainstream school system are concerns shared by all Black youths.

When Black/African-Canadian students are asked what aspects of their school system they would like to see changed, they talk about having more Black teachers. In response to questions about what having more Black teachers means to students they tend to express a desire to see school environments they can identify with. It is within this discussion, rather than as responses to specific questions, that these students tend to make comments like "we want our own school". Such a clear articulation of the students' sense of disengagement from the present system and expression of a proposed solution demands attention.

These research findings are echoed in other studies. For example, concerns over the absence of Black teachers and top school administrators are expressed in studies by Board of Education (1988), Little (1992), and the Black Educators Working Group (1993). Other studies by Brathwaite (1989), James (1990, 1994), Canadian Alliance of Black Educators (CABE) (1992), and Henry (1994) have also touched on the Eurocentric school curriculum that historically has either distorted, omitted, or misrepresented the Black/African-Canadian presence in Canada. The oft repeated message is that Canadian schools should be more inclusive of the diverse experiences, ideas, and viewpoints that have shaped, and continue to shape, human growth and development.

Research that has been conducted within the United States must be viewed in the context of differing histories and social realities, yet it adds insight into the issue of African-centred schools. For example, some of the American research shows there is a tendency for African-American achievement in predominantly African-American schools to surpass that of their peers in integrated schools (Leake & Faltz, 1993). There is also some argument that urban public schools (regardless of school population) tend to reflect strong White middle-class biases in curricula and teacher attitudes (Witherspoon, 1987). Low teacher expectations, differential treatment, and testing/placement by race are problematic for Black students in situations where teachers/administra-

tors are White (International Institute for Advocacy for School Children [IIASC], 1993; North Carolina Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1991; Preudhomme, 1986; McFadden, 1992; Washington, 1982; Smith, 1989; Morgan & McPartland, 1981). Further, communities and researchers are proposing African-American immersion schools as one solution for the problems of differential expectations, treatment, and placement; a dearth of Black teachers/role-models; and an absence of African-American history and heritage in the schools (Leake & Faltz, 1993).

CHALLENGES TO AFRICAN-CENTRED SCHOOLS

The idea of an African-centred school presents challenges for advocates of inclusive learning environments. Can concerns about Black youths' sense of identification with, and connectedness to, the school be addressed through the current school system? What systemic changes and structural transformations are required? What assurances can educators and administrators give to the alienated youths that what the educational system and the larger society have so far failed to do in the past two to three decades would be carried out now? Should we find alternative strategies to fight for change in the conventional school system, or should we keep to existing strategies?

The proponents of African-centred schools emphatically state that they are not calling for Black/African-Canadian youths to be segregated from mainstream public schools. But it is important to stress that the arguments and the concerns of those, who either favour setting up African-centred schools, or those who advocate Black youths remaining in a structurally transformed public school system, cannot easily be dismissed. An African-centred school raises some legitimate questions. Do Black youths need a community-owned-and-controlled school to address problems of school disengagement and academic success? How can it be ensured that the existence of African-centred schools would not distract from the legitimate pressures emanating from some Black and non-Black educators, students, and community workers for mainstream schools to change their historical Eurocentric focus? How do we ensure that a Black-focused school, with an emphasis on African epistemologies and teachings, does not become the reverse of mainstream schools in their Eurocentric focus? Do all Black students share a sense of a common ancestral heritage? If they do not, how can it be ensured that teaching about Black heritage does not merely feed on Black students' sense of alienation in one way or another? How do we

ensure that a Black-focused school is not stigmatized in any manner by society? Recently Bancroft (1994) has raised other important questions. For example, he has asked what percentage of the student population will be enough to ensure that the majority of students are Black? And, what provision is to be made in such schools for the non-Black population?

As pointed out earlier, there are some legitimate concerns being expressed by many Black/African youths about the state of public schooling. The question is, how best can these concerns be addressed to meet the needs of all students? Given the concerns expressed about the state of public schooling and education, it could be argued that establishing African-centred schools on an experimental basis would not necessarily distract from the emerging pressures to transform mainstream schools in Canada. The call for African-centred schools is an outward manifestation of the larger problems facing the Canadian public school system. The idea of such a school questions the fundamental objectives of public schools, what they are supposed to teach and how, who graduates from the system and with what accreditation, and whose interests are reflected in both the official and the "hidden" curriculum (see Dei, 1995b).

Proponents of African-centred schools are understandably concerned with the problem of Black youth disengagement from school. It is still uncertain how African-centred schools could deliver on the many expectations. However, the idea has not been tried, and experimenting with the proposal may go a long way in answering some nagging questions. African-centred schools could be alternative schools serving students who cannot adjust to conventional schools, for a variety of reasons. The debate about the efficacy of such schools should not be conducted by an either-or argument. It is an issue of trying multiple strategies to address the problem of educating youth. The question is not whether Black/African-Canadian youths should continue to be mainstreamed or removed to ensure success. As Farrell (1994) argued, the concepts of "alternatives" and "choice" are significant in debates about African-centred schools. Students should have the right to be exposed to alternative learning environments and parents should have choices in the selection of schools for their children.

For those who argue that having such schools is going back to the days of segregation, it should be noted that there is a qualitative difference between "forced segregation" and "segregation by choice." If one examines the United States context, there are many influential African-Americans in American society who went through predominantly Black colleges. The argument that African-centred schools will pro-

duce graduates whose credentials may be challenged, and perhaps discriminated against in the search for employment, needs to be critically interrogated. If Black graduates are discriminated against in the job market, is it because they went to African-centred schools?

It is not too far-fetched to argue that making the choice to go to an African-centred school may have positive implications in terms of enhancing students' attitudes in the school environment. Students' learning can be enhanced in an educational setting with which they can identify. Students who choose to leave mainstream schools to attend African-centred schools obviously may have developed some sense of identification with the school.

African-centred schools could be established alongside conventional schools and both forms of schooling could work together to address the mutual concerns of parents, teachers, and community workers for the education of the youth. If African-centred schools are to succeed in reversing the historical inferiorization and marginalization of the Black youth in the public school system (see Oliver, 1986), then they have to be more than just schools for mainly one segment of the population. Non-Black/African students need to learn in such schools as much as Black students. Thus, the African-centred school project should strive to include a non-Black population.

While a large segment of the school may be of Black/African-Canadian heritage, the school must have White and other non-Black male and female students, teachers, and administrative staff. It is not convincing enough to argue that Black/African-Canadian students need Black role models in the schools. White and non-Black students also need to see Black role models (male and female) to counter racism and interlocking systems of discrimination in our society. African-centred schools could pursue teaching from an Afrocentric perspective, while emphasizing the relevance of a multiplicity of perspectives in students' learning. The school could be a site for students to imagine new forms of social justice and create new ways of organizing life by helping to dismantle discriminatory structures in society.

AFRICAN-CENTRED SCHOOLS: THEIR PHILOSOPHY

What then is an African-centred school? Such schools should originate from, and be sustained by, local communities. There are historical examples of schools, developed in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to meet the needs of Black youths, from which we can learn (see Castagna,

1994). However, answering this question in the contemporary context calls for imagining new forms of classroom teaching and pedagogy, new ways of fostering student-peer and student-teacher interactions, as well as developing new and alternative strategies for inclusiveness in the educational curriculum.

Students should be allowed to teach and educate in these schools. They can teach about their out-of-school cultures (street/home cultures). These cultures can be important pedagogic and communicative tools. Students should also be part of a team that actually runs the school. For example, students should sit on all school committees, including those that make major decisions affecting their school lives, staff hirings, retention and promotion, library acquisitions, curriculum reform, and school budgetary allocations. Students should be legitimate partners and regularly consulted on all equity issues. They should regularly be allowed to review the academic work of their teachers, as well as offer peer evaluations of themselves and their schools.

African-centred schools should be organized around communal principles and non-hierarchical structures, fostering the social and academic learning of students. They should also be avenues for broader definitions of students' success, to include measurements not strictly defined in the academic sense. For example, the performance of civic duty and social responsibility should factor in the evaluation of students' academic and school success. Schools would be guided by Afrocentric principles, and classroom pedagogical styles would stress holistic learning and teaching about African cultures as historically, ideologically, politically, and spiritually collective and communitarian (see Dei, 1994a).

The schools would place a high value on the teachings of parents, caregivers, community workers, and elders in the holistic education of the youth. The schools should create sites for parents, community elders, and workers to come in to teach and learn from students. This may require some form of adult education in that students would also be part of the process of teaching parents and community workers. The school would be structured around the African traditional values of community belongingness, group unity, and social responsibility. Although there have been varied definitions and expressions of Afrocentricity (see Asante, 1980, 1987; Karenga, 1986, 1988; Keto, 1990), they all share a centring of one's analysis and perceptions from the groundness of the African person (Asante, 1988, p. 6). Afrocentricity enjoins us to have a strong sense of identity, history, and culture in order to deal with some of the problems of our existence today and in

the future. Banks (1992) argues that African epistemological constructs speak to a people's sense of the ". . . meaning, and functioning of the Universe and the natural context of their own existence. . . (as well as) . . . values, principles, and standards of ethics and morality" (p. 266).

African knowledge is based on observing and experiencing the social and natural worlds. Such knowledge is socially and collectively created through interactive processes between individuals, groups, and the natural world. Social learning has to be personalized in order to develop the intuitive and analytical aspects of the human mind. African epistemological constructs also share a general understanding that the concept of the individual only makes sense in relation to the community of which he or she is part (see Dei, 1994a).

These constructs are drawn largely from common-sense ideas and highly structured indigenous knowledge systems of the local peoples of West Africa. These ideas have educational relevance for the pursuit of African-centred schools, particularly in terms of the different way of creating and validating knowledge in contrast to Eurocentric perspectives. Admittedly, there are local variations as to how these common-sense ideas are put into daily practice within societies. But it must be noted that such epistemological constructs form part of the shared cultural resource base of many African peoples. It is knowledge that can be distinguished from Western science knowledge. Furthermore, it is worth noting that these ideas/epistemological constructs can be found in variant forms among indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. There is a proverbial African saying that it takes a whole village to educate a child. Education is not the task of only one segment of the community. It does not take place solely in the four-walled classroom. It is a life-long process and through the processes of daily social interactions knowledge is created and disseminated. In other words, knowledge is created through dialogue; interactions among the young, old, men, women, individuals and groups, society, culture, and nature. Embedded in this process of African-centred knowledge-creation and sharing is a gerontological ideology. Parents, custodians of cultural history, by virtue of their adult status, are instrumental in this process of producing social knowledge and education of the youth.

It is commonly understood in many African cultures that there is an ancestral world of collective wisdom, and the closest approximation in the living world is the collective wisdom of the elders. This wisdom was shared with others through oration and the daily social practices of cultural production. Oral traditions assure the central role of commu-

nity elders in transformative learning and teaching. Storytelling, fables, folktales, and mythologies are culturally sanctioned channels for educating the youth and helping them develop strategies for dealing with contemporary and future social problems. As a basic pedagogic tool, community elders utilize their wisdom and old age to help the youth achieve a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural roots of all societal crises. Elders utilize the medium of storytelling to bring families together, to share historical and cultural information, and to transmit the values of social responsibility and community service to the youth (see also Boateng, 1980, pp. 111-8).

The idea of community is central to social teaching and learning. An African-centred school is a working community. There is a common understanding that nothing exists in isolation. Everything is either relative to everything else or every person is related to every other being. The notion of community is an identification with both kin and non-kin, as well as with the natural environment. The African-centred ideology of community stresses the values of cooperation, reciprocity, and mutual interdependence.[7] Dialogue, consensus, and cooperative and egalitarian interactions are encouraged among the community members. Community values single out cooperative and egalitarian interactions and the notions of community belongingness, social responsibility, group solidarity, and mutuality for emphasis and praise (see Dei, 1994a). Parent-child and teacher-student teachings, learning, and social interactions revolve around letting the child, adult, and community see the social and natural worlds from viewpoints which ensure that community issues are the primary concern of all.

The maintenance of such understanding of society is essential for the survival and enhancement of individual and collective identities. This way of knowing is inclusive of all reality. It allows youths to link issues of personal identity to their schooling and to their social and natural worlds, which are seen as deeply connected. The natural world is powerful as the source of the inner strength of human beings. Therefore, rather than humans striving to dominate nature, we should be learning to live in peaceful co-existence.

Historically, issues of minority education in Canada have moved uneasily from periods of assimilation policies through integrative approaches, highlighting tolerance of ethnic "cultures" and "minorities," to the multicultural education practices of entertaining diversity and difference, and to the current antiracist education posture. The antiracist

approach moves beyond the mere acknowledgement of diversity and difference in the schools to a rupturing and a radicalization of the notions of institutional power, education equity, and democratic principles of Canadian society.

THE CASE FOR AFRICAN-CENTRED SCHOOLS

For many Black/African-Canadian youths, there is a paradox in the principle of Canadian democracy. There is a promise of equality which cannot be delivered by the state. We are at a critical juncture in society where there is a conflict between professed egalitarian values and the reality of sharp inequities in society. Mainstream educational institutions are sites for the cultural transmission of hegemonic ideologies and knowledges in the structuring of society along race/ethnic, gender, and class lines. While it may be argued that state educational systems have historically reinforced social inequities, the scope for social transformation through progressive education is not clear. African-centred schools will have to embody structures that are radically different from that of contemporary mainstream schools, if they are to have transformative and liberatory potential. We need a radical transformation of the structures within which learning, teaching, and adminstration of education take place in the schools.

The call for African-centred schools is part of the trajectory of expanding expectations of the public school system in a swiftly changing world. It is not a call to nurture "ethnic particularities" at the public's expense. It is also more than an attempt to command the direction of change for Black youths. It is part of the on-going antiracist struggle in the schools to empower youth to assume their legitimate positions in society and to fulfil corresponding responsibilities. Debates about the efficacy of such a school, therefore, have to be contextualized and understood as part of the historical struggle of subordinate groups to rupture Anglo/Euro-Canadian hegemony of public schooling (see Collins, 1994; Henry, 1992, 1994). Black/African-Canadian parents and many educators want to stem the slippage of the youth in the educational system. Students need "free space" in school where they can engage in political dialogue with educators, community workers, and parents about the issues affecting them as participants in a predominately White society.

Students' narratives in the above-mentioned project reveal concerns about how an African-centred school would contend with charges of

segregation from some in society, how it would deal with stigmatization of the school, and address the questions of funding, economics of schooling, staff representation, curriculum, and pedagogies. It serves no useful purpose for anyone to simply dismiss these concerns, but it is significant to note that some students see African-centred schools through the eyes of mainstream society; that is, how the mainstream society thinks of such a school (see also Farrell, 1994). They are concerned about backlash, and an African-centred school would have to deal with that. Community support is vital in terms of sustaining African-centred schools. Community involvement and support are significant for the intellectual and emotional development of students. There are students at school today who appear to be there in body but not in spirit. These students are disengaged in many ways from the school system. It is important that the emotional, spiritual, and psychological aspects of teaching and learning be taken more seriously. Hopefully, this is an area of concern that an African-centred school, with its emphasis on schooling as a community, could address. An African-centred school could address this problem by demystifying the false separation between the school and the family-home, the workplace, and the wider community.

Black/African-Canadian students in mainstream schools worry about the extent of parental responsibility and involvement in their schooling. But there are serious financial implications if funding for such a school does not come from the local communities themselves. There are implications of community control of the school, the curriculum, and pedagogical approaches that have to be adopted in order to address the expressed concerns of the youth about the goals and purpose of their education. While it seems logical that the state has a responsibility to fund such schools, there are contradictions in terms of the objectives of an African-centred school and the reliance on the state for financial support. Historically, state financial support has been tied to rights of control, accountability, and governance. Community control and monitoring of such a school is vital and the question is whether the state is willing to relinquish its quest for control when "it is paying the piper". These questions and contradictions will have to be resolved if these schools are to be successful. Furthermore, the success of such schools speaks volumes about our mainstream schools, and one cannot easily discount the extent of opposition to these schools. An African-centred school must be prepared to deal with success and failure and opposition.

There are other concerns about African-centred schools that demand careful attention, one of them being the finding of the appropriate staff. The schools should be staffed by teachers who are extremely dedicated

to the cause of "uplifting" the youth. A history of demonstrated community involvement and strong commitment to the cause of social justice should be given equal weight with teaching expertise, in deciding whom to appoint as teachers and staff in such a school. Furthermore, the community should have a major input in decisions as to who is employed to teach in such a school.

At a theoretical level, an African-centred school also raises the question of how best can we, as a society, respond to the dictates of structural and cultural pluralism. How do we sustain institutions and social service infrastructures that reflect the plurality of our society? There is a cost to equity, just as there is to social inequity. Leaving aside questions of who should fund educational institutions like African-centred schools, we may well have to accept duplication of services as a trade-off in responding to the legitimate concerns of subordinated groups in society.

The experiences of many youth in the public school system suggest an unending struggle to identify with an alienating system. An African-centred school could end up exacerbating their frustrations and further alienating them from society, unless particular attention is paid to delimiting the issues that act as significant barriers to students' educational success. Educators and school administrators must devise more appropriate ways of measuring the outcome of such schools. Admittedly, in the Canadian educational setting, there is little evidence linking Black teachers and a Black Studies-based curriculum to the academic progress of the youth. This may be because opportunities do not exist for students or for such studies to be conducted and commented upon. We need to institute procedures to centre the experiences of students in the schooling process. Black youths, for example, should be able to come to terms with their lived contradictions by centring their experiences through a deconstruction of hegemonic knowledges.

CONCLUSION

In the coming years, students and educators will be grappling with a complex nexus of problems, whether in individual lives, families, or communities. We will need to transform the current processes of schooling and education. This will require that we have schools controlled by local community groups who can equip students with well-developed problem-solving skills. An antiracist approach to schooling and education means a deconstruction of the existing relationship between schooling, power, and knowledge in society. In this context, a Black-focused

school should nurture the different learning styles of the student population and develop in students a sense of pride and identification with their communities. Students should be taught good interpersonal skills by an emphasis on the interconnections between individuals and the social group. Such interconnections also call for developing a keen sense of responsibility to each other and to the wider community.

For educators, in an era marked by cultural fragmentation and a celebration of difference, questions about classroom instruction and pedagogies are going to be raised more than ever before. If African-centred schools are to be successful in meeting students' needs and concerns, then educators will have to allow students to take responsibility for their own learning by assisting them to control their own knowledges. We must involve students in the task of interrogating, producing, validating, and disseminating alternative knowledges. We must equip students with the requisite skills for self and peer evaluation so as to assess the impact of our collaborative knowledge production.

The idea of inclusion means making room for students' experiences in the schools' curriculum. But in bell hooks' language it also means bringing students from the margins to the centre. After all, one can be included and yet still be marginalized. In an African-centred school, curriculum must be tied inclusively to African-Canadian peoples' historical experiences of slavery and social oppression, and to the sociopolitical and physical responses to the contemporary reality of class, race, and gender oppression. African-centred schools must provide appropriate cultural foundations for learners. Learning and educative practices must move African epistemological constructs of community renewal, integrity, and social responsibility to the centre of communicative and pedagogical dialogue (see Asante, 1991; Dei, 1994a; Watkins, 1993). But there should always be room in the schools' pedagogical practices and curriculum development for other nonhegemonic ways of knowing. At a more general level, the curriculum for an African-centred school must promote "democratic learning," propagate ideas of "common schooling," encourage "emancipatory and liberatory thinking," and engender genuine social transformation.

NOTES

1. I use the term "African" synonymously with "Black" to refer to all people who trace some ancestral affinity to Continental Africa, i.e., peoples of African descent and all those who define themselves as Africans/Blacks.

2. Antiracism refers to an action-oriented educational strategy for institutional and systemic change which serves to address issues of racism and interlocking systems of social oppression.

3. Inclusive education refers to centrality for **all** students in their learning.

4. Until late 1993, students entering Grade 9 in the Ontario public school system were placed into three different course levels, based on "academic ability": the **basic** or vocational level, the **general** four-year level, and the **advanced** level, which included courses leading to university entrance. This is a process referred to as "streaming." Many Black/African-Canadian parents have complained about the practice since, it is argued, it limits the educational opportunities of many youths for higher education. Studies have shown that Black youths and students from working-class backgrounds are disproportionately streamed into basic and general programs (see Radwanski, 1987). Starting from September 1993, the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training abolished the practice and requested that all Grade 9 classes be destreamed.

5. Students for the survey in high schools were selected primarily (but not exclusively) through teacher referrals. In a few cases the difficulty of getting students from these two grades has led us to include students from other grades (e. g., Grades 9 and 11). But we have generally focused on the total credits accumulated as an important criterion in the grade selection of students.

6. The term Continental African students refers to those students who were born in Africa.

7. This discussion also recognizes that within traditional knowledge systems there are sites of disempowerment for ethnic minorities and particularly women.

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