

## **Foundations of African Centered Education**

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Continued discussions about school performance and education reform have again sparked an interest in alternative schools, curriculum, and instruction. One such discussion is the merit of African-centered education. "Once again," the debate is new. However, the call for African-centered education is rooted in a body of literature that, at least, spans the last 180 years, and the concept of African-centered education is based on traditions and practices that are millennia old.

### **RATIONALE**

One of the first written articulations of the need for people of African descent to re-examine their understanding of life based upon the accomplishment and teachings of African people was *David Walker's Appeal* (1830). Though Walker does not explicitly call for new educational alternatives for people of African descent, he is clearly suggesting that blacks must not succumb to the schooling provided by "the majority part of the white Americans," but find away to educate themselves in light of the:

retrospective view of the arts and sciences... by the sons of Africa or Ham among whom learning originated... enlightening the dark and benighted minds of men from then, down to this day. (p. 22)

At the turn of the nineteenth century, W. E. B. DuBois was becoming the most prolific scholar impacting the liberation and civil rights of African-Americans and Africans. One particular concern was the role that education must play in the African-American community. DuBois states in a speech published in 1903, that:

The Negro problem, it has often been said, is largely a problem of ignorance – not simply of literacy, but a deeper ignorance of the world and its ways, of the thought and experience of men;

and ignorance of self and the possibilities of human souls. This can be gotten rid of only by training; and primarily such training must take the form of that sort of social leadership, which we call education... The history of civilization seems to prove that no group or nation which seeks advancement and true development can despise or neglect the power of well-trained minds; and this power of intellectual leadership must be given to the talented tenth among American Negroes before this race can seriously be asked to assume the responsibility of dispelling its own ignorance. (pp. 132-133)

DuBois is describing a form of education that compels African-American students to become actively engaged in the development and advancement of the African-American community. The purpose of this education is not individual attainment, but to develop competent moral social leadership that would advocate for African-American communities.

However, it was Carter G. Woodson (1933) in *The Mis-Education of The Negro*, that most clearly articulates the need to reform education for African-Americans by including the contributions and philosophy of Africans into the curricula. Otherwise, those schooled would not likely act in the best interest of the African-American community.

Woodson states:

The “educated Negroes” have the attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as in their mixed schools Negroes are taught to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African... The thought of the inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters and in most every book he studies... The large majority of the Negroes who have put on the finishing touches of our best colleges are all but worthless in the development of their people... (pp. 1-2)

Woodson furthers his discussions on curricula:

How, then did the education of the Negro take such a trend? Their aim was to transform the Negroes, not to develop them... the traditional curricula of the times which did not take the Negro into consideration except to condemn or pity him... The philosophy in the African proverbs and in the rich folklore of that continent was ignored... In history, of course, the Negro

had no place in this curriculum... You would never hear Africa mentioned except in the negative... the Negro, according to this point of view, was an exception to the natural plan of things, and he had no such mission as that of an outstanding contribution to culture... The education of the Negroes, then, the most important thing in the uplift of the Negroes, is almost entirely in the hands of those who have enslaved them and now segregate them... Taught from books of the same bias, trained by Caucasians of the same prejudices or by Negroes of enslaved minds, one generation of Negro teachers after another have served for no higher purpose than to do what they are told to do... The Negro will never be able to show all of his originality as long as his efforts are directed from without by those who socially proscribe him. Such “friends” will unconsciously keep him in the ghetto... (pp. 17-28)

Woodson then warns:

It was well understood that if by teaching of history the white man could be further assured of his superiority and the Negro could be made to feel that he had always been a failure and that the subjection of his will to some other race is necessary the freedman, then, would still be a slave. If you can control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself with what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one. (pp. 84-85)

Woodson's *Mis-Education of the Negro* is still the most thorough articulation on the damage inflicted on the African-American sense of self (which includes esteem, efficacy, worth, consciousness, image, identity) by the American schooling system. Woodson lays the foundation and provides the rationale for African-centered education, and the need for a curricula centered on African heritage (i.e., philosophy, art, science, folklore, and history). Woodson furthers the argument that “true education” for African-Americans must compel and prepare students to assume moral social leadership, and that the educative process for members of the African-American community must be primarily controlled by the African-American community.

As the African independence, civil rights and Black power/liberation movements took form, the concern for curriculum and control become critical. Kwame Nkrumah in *Africa Must Unite* (1963) reflects on the education system in Ghana and the changes needed to secure independence:

Over and beyond this, we needed to plan an educational system that will be more in keeping with the requirements of the economic and social progress for which our new development plans are aiming. Our pattern of education has been aligned hitherto to the demands of British examination councils. Above all, it was formulated and administered by an alien administration desirous of extending its dominant ideas and thought processes to us. We are trained to be inferior copies of Englishmen, caricatures to be laughed at with our pretensions of British bourgeois gentility, our grammatical faultiness and distorted standards betraying us at every turn. We were neither fish nor fowl. We were denied the knowledge of our African past and informed that we had no present. What future could there be for us? We were taught to regard our culture and traditions as barbarous and primitive. Our text-books were English text-books, telling us about English history, English geography, English ways of living, English customs, English ideas, English weather. Many of these manuals had not been altered since 1895.

All this has to be changed. And it is a stupendous task. Even the ordering of text-books is an involved matter that makes the introduction of new ones with a Ghanaian character a prolonged affair. This is something at we are, however, getting on with, as it is vital that we should nurture our own culture and history if we are to develop the African personality which must provide the educational and intellectual foundations of our Pan-African future. (p. 49)

Along with Nkrumah in Ghana, the first European African Colony to gain independence in 1957, other newly independent nations were reconsidering the role of education. In doing so, Julius Nyerere (1967) of Tanzania define education as, “The process that prepares the young for their future membership and active participation in the maintenance or development of a society.” However, as Woodson (1993) pointed out, that the disposition towards “active maintenance and development” will largely be a function of the form and content of the education

received. When considering the new form of education in Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta (1962) suggests the Gikuyu system as a model. Kenyatta writes:

The first and most obvious principle of educational value which we see in the Gikuyu system of education is that the instruction is always applied to an individual's concrete situation; behavior is taught in relation to some particular person.... the African is taught how to behave to father or mother, grandparents, and to other members of the kinship group.... The striking thing in the Gikuyu system of education and the feature which most sharply distinguishes it from the European system of education is the primary place given to personal relations.... While the Westerner asserts that character formation is the chief thing, he forgets that character is formed primarily through relations with other people, and that there is no other way in which it can grow. (pp. 116 - 117)

During the sixties, as African countries were gaining independence, an examination of culture and institutions was taking place to determine what was authentic and what was colonial residue. Along with introspection, there was a Pan African initiative among countries to form alliances with other African countries and with people of African descent throughout the world. Kwame Nkrumah (1961) in *I Speak of Freedom*, discusses developing the "African Personality":

Addressing ourselves to the cultural aspects of our relationship, we must also examine ways and means to broaden and strengthen our association with one another through such means as the exchange of students and the visits of cultural, scientific and technical missions, both governmental and non-governmental, and the establishment of libraries specializing in various aspects of African history and culture which may become centers of research. There are no limits to ways in which we on this African continent can enrich our knowledge of our past civilizations and cultural heritage through our cooperative efforts and the pooling of our scientific and technical resources. (p. 129)

In 1971, Steve Biko presented a paper in Natal South Africa describing "African Culture."

Obviously the African culture has had to sustain severe blows and many have been battered nearly out of shape by the belligerent cultures it collided with, yet in essence even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the pure African culture in the present day African... One of the most fundamental aspects of our culture is the importance we attach to Man... A man-centered society... The capacity we have for talking to each other-not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake... We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life... Any suffering we experience was made much more real by song and rhythm. There is no doubt that the so called 'Negro Spirituals' sung by black slaves in the States as they tilled under oppression were indicative of their African heritage... African society had the village community as its basis... This obviously was a requirement to suite the needs of a community-based and man-centered society. Africans do not recognize any cleavage between the natural and supernatural. They experience a situation rather than face a problem... More as a response of the total personality to the situation that the result of some mental exercise... We thanked God through our ancestors before we drank beer, married, worked etc. We would obviously find it artificial to create special occasions for worship. God was always in communication with us and therefore merited attention everywhere and anywhere. (Biko, 1978, pp. 41-45)

As the African Personality was being identified and developed in Africa, there was a growing Black power and liberation movement in the United States. The Black power/liberation movement encouraged a shift from European or what was thought of as "white" standards to African (Motherland) or what was thought of as Black standards of ascetics, culture, literature and folklore. Though many African-Americans only superficially adopted "Blackness" or act out of a grossly distorted notion of Blackness, there were a growing number of scholars seriously reexamining the African experience. During the mid-sixties, Dr. Maulana Karenga developed the Kawiada (Kwanzaa) theory, based on his studies and travels to East Africa.

By the end of the sixties, Black Studies departments had been

established at many universities and colleges. Along with the scholarly examination of the “Black experience”, there were more scholars from other disciplines reexamining theories and assumptions from a perspective within the African cultural context. Thus, producing a different set of understandings about the human experience and specifically the African experience.

As Dr. Mario Fantini wrote in the *Black Manifesto for Education*:

Despite all the attention given to this problem, very little has actually been accomplished with the majority of Black learners. It is one of the major disasters facing American education, and this is due, in part, to the fact that many of the definitions, classifications, and assessments made on the problems of Blacks have been made by Whites. While this may have been understandable, and while many whites had good intentions, it is quite clear that enormous gasps in perception and sensitivity are apparent when Whites try to deal with Black experiences. Consequently, one of the important aspects of this book has to do with the fact that we are now beginning to have Black educators speak about Black issues. Especially those who are White, who have the privilege of reading this book, will see that perceptions of a prominent group of Black contributors to this volume will set a tone that is quite different from those that have been set conventionally, that is, by concerned White educators (of which I am a member). (p. xi)

It is these examinations and scholarship in disciplines such as History, Psychology, Sociology, Education, Philosophy, and Linguistics that a new “retrospective,” (as suggested by David Walker) and worldview emerges in the literature. In 1987, Molefi Asante’s *The Afrocentric Idea* organizes, bound, historically grounds the emerging African worldview into a formal theory and methodology.

I suggest three fundamental Afrocentric themes of transcendent discourse: (1) human relations, (2) humans’ relationship to the supernatural, and (3) humans’ relationships to their own being. (p. 168)

Asante’s book sparked further study and clarification of African-centered thought and practice. Therefore, when referring to African-centered Education

“we” refer a process that prepares students for the future membership and active participation in the maintenance and development of their community by providing a curriculum (activities, information/knowledge content, practice and environment) that familiarizes students with the art, history, science, folklore and philosophy of African people with the intent to (1) foster the development of “proper” relationships between the student and their family, community and Creator (2) generate solutions for issues and concerns facing Africa and African people throughout the diaspora and (3) develop moral social leadership skills in each student.

If the general definition of education is “process that prepares the young for their future membership and active participation in the maintenance or development of a society”, then African-centered education is the process by which individuals develop the mind set to and are prepared to meet their unique challenge to maintain and advance African communities. However, the maintenance and advancement must be rooted in the heritage (philosophies, arts, science, symbols) of African people.

Being African-centered is a commitment to a philosophy, a process of evaluation and action, not necessarily to objects or appearance. Though cultural heritage provides the lenses by which we view and the foundation on which we interpret the world, it does not limit the world that can be evaluated. Case in point, Ani’s *Yurgu* (1994) is an African-centered evaluation of European culture.

It is important to note that African-centered philosophy is one of many legitimate philosophies. Furthermore, there are a number of African-centered philosophies. Like the great diversity within the continent of Africa, there is room for diversity within the bounds of African-centered thought and practice. There are African-centered philosophies and practices based on Akan, Yuroba, Kemet, Dogon and other cultural groups, as well as, the works of Karenga, Asante, Nobles, Hilliard and other scholars. Moreover, like Africa and its people have a legitimate place in the world, African-centered thought and practice has a legitimate place amongst the world’s philosophies. Being African-centered is a commitment to use African heritage (experiences, folklore, philosophy, social structure, arts, science, psychology and economy) or what Nkrumah describes

as the African personality to form the lens/frame of reference/cognitive scheme to view, interpret and evaluate the world.

## **PRACTICE**

As pedagogy, the African-centered approach determines the way in which various academic tools are used and experiences are delivered. Activities that encourage students to:

1. Constructive criticism and critique of peers and current events/issues
2. Oral reports to class
3. Collaborative projects using peer proofing strategies
4. Individual Accountability
5. Find solutions to social/environmental development that drawn upon the resources available within the community
6. Authenticate learning by connecting the subject content to a lived experience
7. Identifying the social context that influences a phenomena
8. Identifying patterns in the social, historical, psychological and natural contexts and understanding how these patterns impacted other phenomena
9. Understand their place within the social, cultural and historical context by identifying a personal sense of purpose and responsibility within each learning experience.

In *Triple Quandary*, A. Wade Boykin (1986) provides a summary of West African ethos as:

1. Spirituality
2. Harmony
3. Movement
4. Verve/Energy
5. Affect
6. Communalism

7. Expressive Individualism
8. Oral Tradition
9. Social Time Perspective

Boykin's set of characteristics can be used as a basic "litmus test" of African-centeredness. It is a test that can be applied to all aspects of an educational experience (i.e. environment, attitude, expectations, games, the relationships parents, teachers, students, staff, principal, counselors and community, time, language, etc.). For example, consider the "math flash card game." Typically, one student is matched against another and fastest moves on with objective to defeat as many classmates as possible. The game ultimately sorts students from the best to the worst.

More African-centered approach would be to set a group goal to answer 30 questions in a minute (*Communalism*). Students would then rotate to answer questions (*Movement, Verve/Energy and Expressive Individualism*). This would still allow the teacher to identify to which students who need more help. Those students who did well would explain how they got the answer and help those who needed more help (*Communalism, Expressive Individualism, Oral Tradition*). Then set the goal again. By emphasizing the responsibility of each member to the group goal and the collective responsibility of the class to help each individual (*Harmony and Communalism*); and the teacher expressing that everybody can contribute to the goal (*Spirituality and Affect*), and that once the class have accomplished the goal they can move on the next objective/goal (*Social Time Perspective*).

Also, games like chess and team sports (baseball, soccer, football, basketball, etc.) teach individual competition and the complexities of group dynamics. Many of the strategies and techniques used in collaborative learning are consistent with African-centered practice. The combinations of sense of purpose and supportive educational social bonds are important factors in the development of responsible, ethical and problem-solving adults.

Furthermore, African-centered education seeks to develop the whole self (spiritual, physical, mental) and a sense of self, which includes:

Self-esteem	What one feels (good or bad) about oneself
Self-efficacy	What one believes he or she can do
Self-worth	The value one assigns to oneself
Self-acceptance	An acknowledgement of one's true nature and capabilities
Self-perception	An awareness of one's true characteristics
Self-respect	An understanding of one being worthy of esteem and dignity
Self-control	One's ability to control one's emotions, thoughts, and actions in order to fulfill a purpose.

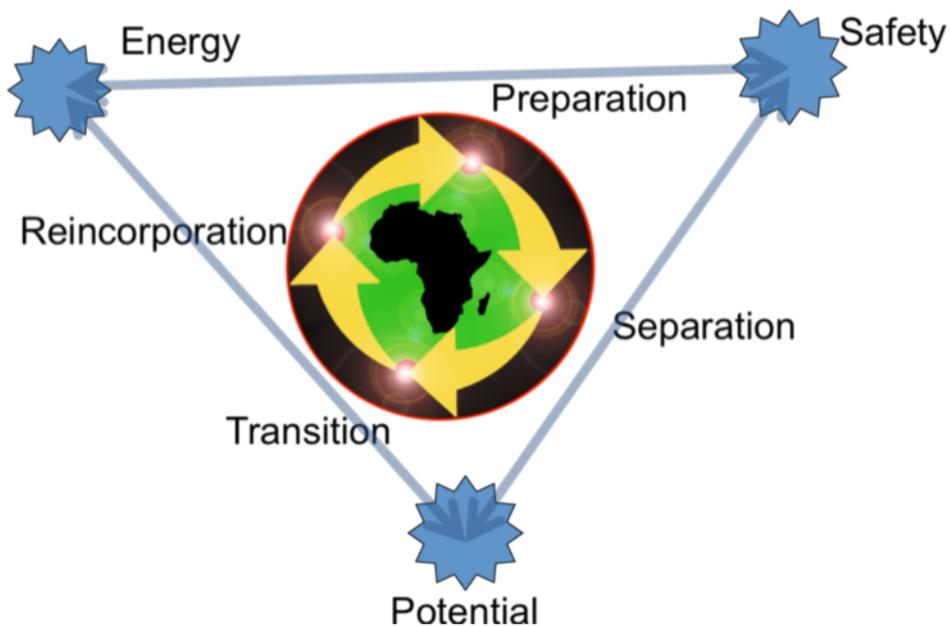
We often over emphasize the importance of good self-esteem. Since the concerns of “A Nation At-Risk,” many in child development professions (i.e. education, social work, psychology), along with community organizers, have emphasized the need for positive self-esteem. So much so, that positive self-esteem became a goal unto itself. Particularly, programs/interventions targeting African-American youth often state positive self-esteem as a goal. The prevailing idea (wish) is that if the African-American youth had positive self-esteem, then they would act positive; in a way that “becomes them.”

In contrast, those focused on the “total self” through the lenses of African-centered heritage understand that feeling good about one's self is not the goal of an educative/developmental experience. Feeling good about oneself should be the by-product of engaging in significant and purposeful activities. That is, when a person is connect to the reasons of one's creation and the intent of one's Creator and is actively engaged in fulfilling his or her intent, that person can feel a “legitimate” good towards oneself. Therefore, it is self-consciousness (i.e. a knowing of one's self) and self-efficacy (i.e. having the skills and ability to execute purpose) that should be the goal of any educative experience.

## Matrix/Rites of Passage

Often the rites of passage model is used in African-centered education. As aforementioned, Kenyatta's (1962) reference to the Gikuyu system is a reference to a family-based, community-linked rites of passage. The rites of passage process exists within a matrix of energy, potential and safety (Goggins, 1998).

### The Rites of Passage Model



The rites of passage process consists of preparation, separation, transition and reincorporation stages.

Preparation is the stage where the initiate learns what it is to be a member. The preparation stage starts with the recognition of the end in mind. Separation is the stage when the initiate is tested. It is in this stage that the initiate must demonstrate the ability to fulfill their responsibilities within the group and their particular stage of life. Transition is the stage in which the initiate

is transformed into a member. It is the between / betwixt. This is usually marked with a ceremony where the initiate enters as a non-member and exits as a member. (Ceremonies are visual representations of what happens as a result of the ritual. Thus the quality of the ritual is embedded in the intent of the ceremony. Therefore, purpose is the factor that contributes to the effectiveness of ritual.) Reincorporation is the stage where the new member is presented back to the community. This is also the point that the new member will be accountable for their new responsibilities.

When educative experiences are delivered within a family-based community-linked rites of passage, the factors significant for academic success such as, parental engagement, sense of self, and cultural synchronicity are engaged (Goggins 1998).

### **The Assumptions of an African-centered Education**

What drives African-centered education are the basic assumptions about humans and our relationship to the Cosmos. According to A. Mensah (1991), the basic assumptions of the African-centered rites of passage process are:

1. The Creator does not create for failure.
2. All humans are one with the Cosmos (the Creator and creation).
3. Every person has the capacity to succeed.
4. We are born with a driving “intent” (purpose) to express the capacity to succeed.
5. When the intent of the Creator is not met with appropriate content, a person’s potential for success is ruined.
6. Inappropriate content bring reaction, and not intellectual growth, and child’s ability to interact (use his or her intelligence) falls increasingly behind. Thus, the further one’s intelligence falls behind the more energy must go into compensation.
7. With the infusion of inappropriate content, the young person’s intelligence is still out there in the previous passage, trying to make functional [sense]

- the intent of the Creator.
8. He who does not cultivate his field will die of hunger.
  9. The rites of passage process in the child's education provides a meaningful response to the intent. The success of the Creator's plan hinges directly on the person (infant, child, adolescent, or adult) being provided with content proper for the intent of that person.
  10. All persons who experience this type of education will benefit from it.

Moreover, those who have accepted this perspective of human development and connection to the Cosmos become duty bound to providing an experience that facilitates students to develop in an nurturing environment with appropriate content and a teacher who is committed to their respective success.

### **The Duties of an African-centered Teacher**

1. Be personally committed to the "concept" of African-centered education
2. Know the subject matter and know each student
3. Pray, study and meditate (Be a life long learner)
4. Create a learning atmosphere: clean room, multimedia (books, pictures, maps, graphs, videos, computers, etc.), discuss various perspectives, seek understanding not just knowledge
5. Read "the lesson" several times until you are clear on six "w's"
  - Who is speaking/Who are the actors?
  - What is being said/done?
  - Where is it being said/done?
  - When is it being said/done?
  - To whom it is being spoken/done to?
  - Why is it being said/done?
6. Summarize and evaluate your teaching (if you taught the students learned)
7. Understand that as an educator you are working with a soul, which came from God, which belongs to God, and will eventually return to God.

(Adopted from M. Osborne)

### **An African-centered Education Must Provide**

1. Historical and cultural continuity
2. Development of meaning and purpose in student's life
3. The ability to transform and interpret information (active meaning making)
4. Development of fictive kinship bonds among members of the community
5. Community and parental expectations for development and maintenance of the society
6. Opportunities to practice what was learned
7. Approval from parents and community

While pedagogy changes in response to advancements in technology and understanding of human development, and as new issues arise, the fundamental goal of African-centered education has been and remains, equipping people with the knowledge, competencies, and dispositions to use African heritage to maintain and develop African communities through-out the African diaspora, in order for members of the African community to contribute solutions to the human experience. Succinctly, African-centered education is sankofa.

Foundation for African-centered education is well established and rooted in the literature of the last 180 years and clearly articulates the rationale and need for an education grounded in the philosophies, arts, sciences, and contributions of African people. The traditions and practices on which African-centered education is built has stand the test of time over thousands of years.

One remarkable insight from the literature is how the arguments made by David Walker (1830), W. E. B. DuBois (1903), Carter G. Woodson (1933), Kwame Nkrumah (1961), James Haskins (1973) currently hold true. The question one comes to is, will we use the wisdom of our ancestors to build a future where African communities are developed to their fullest potential and members of those communities are equipped to contribute to the human experience and development?

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