

BLACK-FOCUSED SCHOOLS A CALL FOR RE-VISIONING

GEORGE J. SEFA DEI

DESPITE ITS NOTABLE SUCCESSES, THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM FAILS many students, as evidenced by the disengagement, failure and high dropout rates for Black, Aboriginal, and other minority youths. African-Canadian parents and communities are continually being asked to take responsibility for solving the many problems affecting them; however, the blame does not rest entirely with these so-called 'problem students' or their families. We must address both individual and collective responsibility by asking: What are our responsibilities to each other? What are the responsibilities of the state to its citizens? How are we to explain the fact that in the last few years, provincial governments have repeatedly shirked their responsibilities (as evidenced, for example, by the Ontario government's gutting of educational programs under the Mike Harris government)? What about the complicities of our institutions in creating the street culture of youth violence today? What have been the effects of a zero tolerance policy and the associated acts of social exclusion, rising racialized and gendered poverty, and the everydayness of racisms that undergird our communities? Asking these questions does not mean searching for excuses.

We must find ways to offer a sense of direction, hope and purpose to many of our youth who today are failing and being failed by the current educational system. In order to address the systemic neglect, poverty, economic deprivation and 'culture of dead end existence' for many Black/African-Canadian youth, it behooves us to search for solutions in the same breath that we condemn youth violence and other transgressions. Calls for a 'revised schooling' in the form of an African-centred/Black-focused school have recently re-emerged from the deep frustration many members of the Black/African-Canadian community in Ontario feel about the inability of the current public school system to effectively educate students from diverse backgrounds.

I have vested interests in this issue on multiple levels. As a parent with a son in the public school system, I am a party to these discussions and like many others I want our public schools to work for all. As an educator, I have come to realize that the most dangerous of all delusions is to think that our own reality is the

only reality worth talking about. There is always a danger of intellectual apartheid when we close our minds to other reasoning. As a community member, I hold that all of us must begin to see that the success of all students should be a shared concern.

THE VISION

Supporters of the African-centred/Black-focused school proposal call for education and classroom teachings to centre learners in their own cultures, histories, personal locations and spiritual identities, as well as to provide them with the skills and knowledge to function in today's society. They call, too, for a school system that treats education as an expression of shared community responsibility, where teachers work collectively with students and parents, educating about academic and social success, and where community belonging, social responsibility, mutual interdependence and respect for oneself, peers and the wisdom of Elders are ideals to which everyone aspires. At the same time, they argue that educational success for youth will come about only if teachers set high expectations for every learner and work with the understanding that every student can succeed (academically and socially); in other words, failure is not an option.

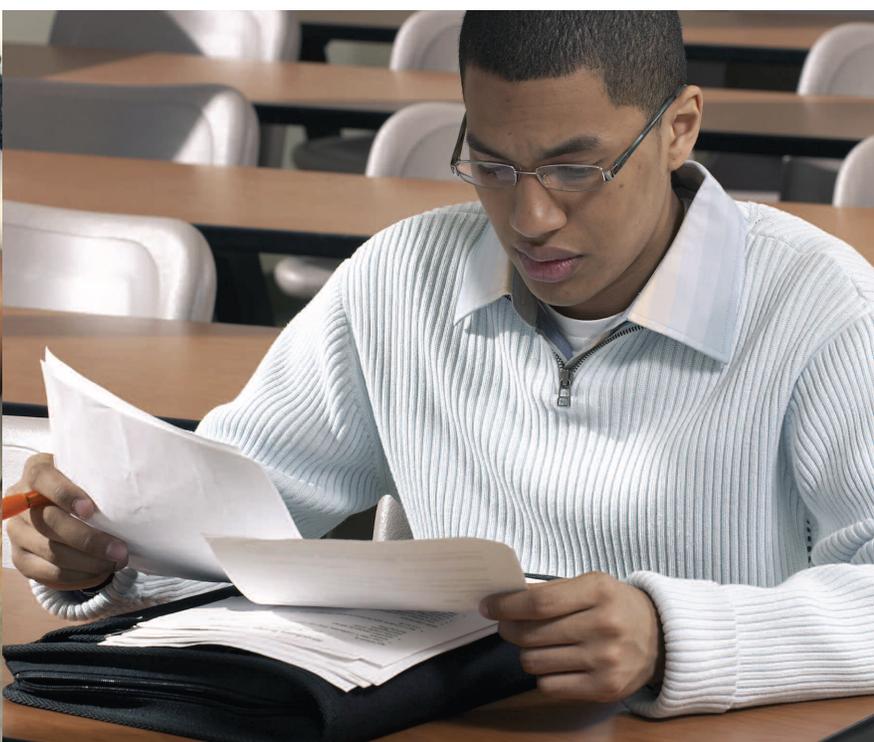
ties and myriad experiences by providing a more holistic education; schools in which both the curriculum (whether arts, science, mathematics, history, or technology) and classroom teaching emphasize, value and nurture the contributions of every member of our society; schools in which learners see positive images of themselves, in the visual culture and landscape of the school and in teacher representation, as well as through the presentation of multiple knowledges, histories and social experiences. We need a school in which controversial issues are not swept under the carpet, where there is an open, frank and critical engagement of the power questions of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression which characterize our communities. I believe that success for Black/African-Canadian students and our ability to root out all forms of violence (including those perpetrated by, and visited on, youths) will flow from this vision of education.

My objective in this short essay is to resuscitate, both through intellectual discussion and through concrete material realities, the different educational experiences of diverse Canadian youth in the public school system. If we are to define 'educational success' broadly, then we must recognize that alternative/counter visions of schooling may enhance learning for these young people. While my

THE CONCEPT OF FOCUSED SCHOOLING HAS EVOLVED TO IMPLY WORKING WITH KNOWLEDGE THAT ARISES FROM THE CONTINGENT HISTORIES, CULTURES AND EXPERIENCES OF RACIALIZED PEOPLES. HOWEVER, THESE IDEAS HAVE RELEVANCE FOR NON-BLACKS AS WELL.

In order to achieve both academic and social success, students need a school system that instils a sense of discipline by developing the learner's sense of self-worth, moral fibre and purpose within society. This new vision of education emphasizes the development of a culture of youth affirmation that fosters a sense of pride by helping to build strong personal, social and cultural identities. For example, such a culture can be achieved when teachers introduce alternative forms of school discipline to replace suspensions, expulsions or the summoning of law enforcement. Most importantly, say supporters of "revised schooling", we need schools that affirm learners in all of their identi-

enthusiasm for Black focussed/African-centred schooling is primarily based on its potential to address issues of Black and other minority youth disengagement and "push out" from the Canadian school system, the same fundamental principles may help to transform conventional schooling in Euro-Canadian/American contexts, as well. After all, education is not only about affirming cultures and their values; it is also about strengthening the myriad identities – including racial, class, gender, sexual, and more – that learners bring to the classroom. This approach recognizes that our racial identities are part and parcel of who we are and that they play into our educational experiences. I



believe perhaps the time has come for us to rethink inclusion, not simply in terms of adding to “what already exists” but also as an approach to change that entails a break with the existing order of things and beginning anew. I say this with the realization that “what already exists” may at many times be the root cause of the problem.

RACE AND THE COLOUR OF EDUCATION

The Black-focused/African-centred school initiative calls for an honest dialogue on race, racism and other forms of oppression and their impacts upon schooling and education, and in doing so it is part of a larger public debate about alternative visions of education that focuses on the key issues of race, representation and schooling.

The Black-focused school initiative promotes the concept of a school primarily (but not exclusively) for Black peoples of African descent. One of its many goals is to help Black/African-Canadian students reclaim/reinvent their Africanness in a diasporic context. “Black” is used here in the cultural sense, to include the diverse ethnicities that make up peoples of African descent. Hence, the concept of focused schooling has evolved to imply working with knowledge that arises from the contingent histories, cultures and experiences of racialized peoples. However, these ideas have relevance for non-Blacks as well.

In addition to the racialized definition, there is a political usage of “Black” that recognizes the bond shared by all peoples experiencing the European colonial encounter. We must view “Black and Blackness” as providing both the reason d’être for the proposed school and the connecting link among diverse group of learners. In other words, the Black-focused school concept embraces “Black and Blackness” in both the racialized and politicized senses of the term to allude to victimization, oppression and resistance. Consistent with this broader usage, the population of the proposed school would represent a range of students from diverse economic, sexual, racial and class backgrounds who identify with the school’s values, ideas and principles. As a result, the proposed school would be defined more by a set of guiding principles than by the racial or cultural background of its students or teachers.

Those principles would result in an educational experience that empowers learners to resist, politically and intel-

EN BREF Les partisans du projet d’écoles centrées sur la culture africaine ou noire veulent un système d’éducation qui situe l’élève dans sa propre culture, sa propre histoire, ses propres lieux et sa propre identité spirituelle, tout en lui fournissant les aptitudes et les connaissances dont il a besoin pour réussir dans la société d’aujourd’hui. Il s’agit là d’une approche qui reconnaît le fait que notre identité raciale fait partie intégrante de notre personne et qu’elle affecte notre expérience scolaire. L’accès à ces écoles ne se limiterait pas aux seuls élèves de race noire. En outre, leur fonctionnement serait défini par un ensemble de principes directeurs et non par l’appartenance raciale ou culturelle des élèves et du personnel enseignant. De façon concrète, le but du projet est d’établir une ou plusieurs écoles publiques centrées sur la culture africaine et affiliées à un établissement d’enseignement supérieur agréé.

lectually, the dominance of Eurocentric forms of knowing that masquerade as universal knowledge in our schools. It would centre individual learners in their own experiences and histories, appropriately informed by history, culture, spirituality, politics and the language of knowledge production. The Black-focused/African-centered school proposal is a radical educational revisioning, one that focuses on African and other racialized peoples’ discursive practices of resistance in the search for alternative visions of educational success. Ideas and practices associated with African-centred education would be presented as legitimate ways of knowing, affirming the epistemologies of all peoples of Black/African descent.

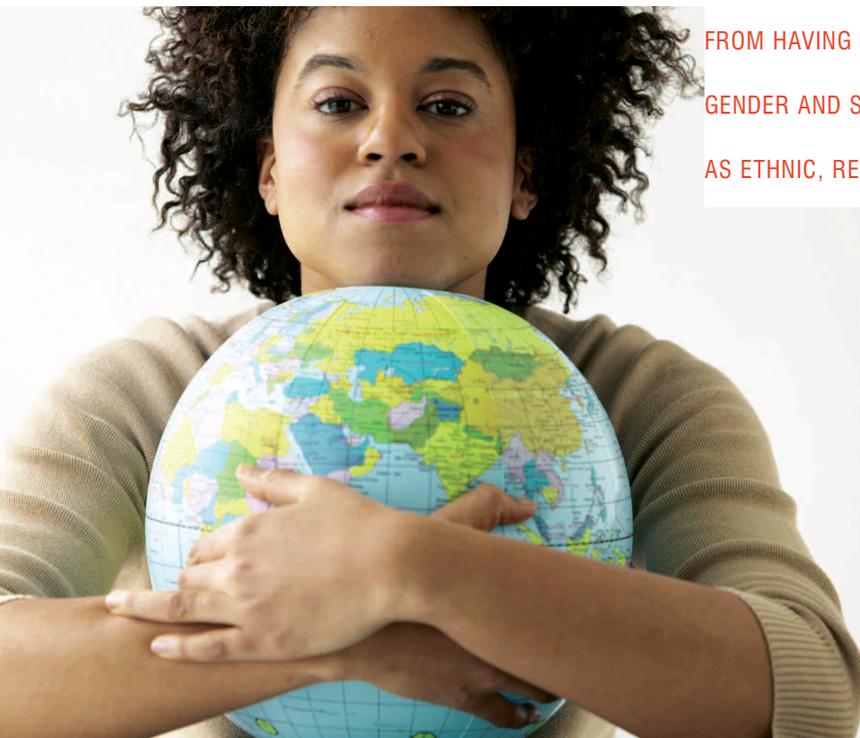
OPERATIONAL MODEL

In *Towards Equitable Education for Black/African-Canadian Students in Ontario Schools*, Dei, James, Lawson and Wood put forward a proposal to set up an African-centred school ‘from scratch.’¹ This idea marks an important departure from the current public school paradigm in that it places a great deal of emphasis on changing the culture, environment and socio-organizational life of the school.

Specifically, the proposal calls for one or more publicly funded African-centred/Black-focused schools in the Greater Toronto Area, independently affiliated with an accredited institution of higher learning (an Ontario Faculty of Education) and operating under the auspices of the Ontario Ministry of Education and a school board. In addition to focusing on educational outcomes for students, the school will



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serve as a model or laboratory school, where 'best/exemplary' practices for developing and implementing African-centred curricula to enhance the educational experience of Black and minority youth are perfected and implemented.

The affiliated Faculty of Education will create an Institute of African Learning (IAL) or Institute for Black Education (IBE), with its own director and a team of graduate and pre-service students who will be seconded to the Institute. Pre-service IAL/IBE students will be trained in the development and delivery of Afrocentric curricula and also in how to conduct ongoing action research that will not only enhance the educational experience of the proposed school's students, but, ideally, will also be transferable to other sectors of the school system. Educators within the affiliated Faculty of Education will provide training and support to the B.Ed. instructors associated with the IAL or IBE, in terms of bridging courses. The work of the Institute will be supported and guided by an Advisory Board, representing prominent educators and administrators, school boards, media, business and local community personnel, among others.

The politics of school funding will require that proper governance and agreements be put in place to operate the proposed school through the partner school board, in accordance with provincial guidelines. In this way the proposed African-centred/Black-focused school will access the normal per student funding from the Ministry, but with additional resources from the Ministry of Education in order to ensure access for all academically qualified applicants. More work will be required to agree to criteria for determining entrance eligibility to the school and how these criteria can best be implemented to serve a cross-section of the population.

While the school will target the Black/African-Canadian population, its strength will lie in the diversity that comes from having students with different socio-economic classes, gender and sexual backgrounds and academic abilities as well as ethnic, religious and linguistic differences. The school will not be simply for the so-called "academically under-achieving" or "at risk" students. We believe students who are academically and socially successful have a responsibility to help their peers facing academic and social difficulties. These are the ideas of community and responsibility to each other that the African-centred school will work with.

The proposed school is offered as a public undertaking, as opposed to a private charter school model. Initially, the implementation of this school model will require some sustained research, conferencing and visitations between Canadian educators and their US and British counterparts working with private/charter/independent as well as publicly-funded African-centred schools, in order to learn from successes and failures as we search for a Canadian approach to addressing the issues of Black and minority youth schooling.

The logistics, details and broad parameters of the relationship can be worked out if there is a shared vision and commitment on the part of all constituents – the African-centred/Black-focused school, the affiliated Faculty of Education/University, the affiliated school board, the Ministry of Education, Black/African-Canadian students, families and community – to the idea of a culturally-specific school as outlined in this discussion.

There are several key advantages to the model advocated here. An educational site under the direct auspices of a university is likely to generate respect and 'buy in' from Black/African-Canadian parents and the wider community, and will be viewed as both credible and a true departure from the past. Such a school will not have to contend with the so-called "old baggage" or any prior reputation of an existing school. There is a certain excitement, energy and vision surrounding the creation of a whole new entity. Parents and community members may be encouraged to send their children to the school and lend popular support. Teachers in the community may also want to come and work in this school. Finally, a laboratory focused school of the nature proposed here could come to set the standard of excellence for other public boards to follow. Together, all aspects of this proposed model add up to huge potential for achieving the main objective of a re-visioned school – helping students.

CONCLUSION

The African-centred/Black-focused school proposal is a work in progress. It is in need of further conceptualizing and refinement; however it must not be dismissed through the intellectually patronizing and colonizing practice of claiming that culturally-specific schooling is not supported by a valid social theory. The Black-focused school concept as put forward here is proposed as a pilot initiative on the grounds that Black/African-Canadian students, the African-Canadian community and the broader community at large have nothing more to lose and stand to make great gains by trying. The community has a right and responsibility to

advocate for these schools for their children. For the critics who ask how we know if the school will work, the answer is simple: We can only know if we try. We do have examples of success in the US context. If we are to accept that schooling is a public concern and that issues of youth disengagement, failure and dropping out are a collective concern, the debate for a culturally-specific school should be conducted within the public realm, rather than taken up as a private initiative. The African-centred/Black-focused school proposed here marks a first conceptual step towards addressing these issues. |

GEORGE J. SEFA DEI is Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. He has researched and written extensively on the issues of Black and minority education, inclusive schooling, anti-racism and anti-colonial education. His most current book, co-edited with Arlo Kempf, is: *Anti-Colonialism and Education: The Politics of Resistance* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2006).

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Note

- 1 G. J. S. Dei, C. James. E. Lawson, and M. Wood, "Towards Equitable Education for Black/African-Canadian Students in Ontario Schools". Paper prepared for the Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat, Ontario Ministry of Education, Toronto, 2005.

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