

Implementing Afrocentricity: Connecting Students of African Descent to Their Cultural Heritage

by

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Abstract

Historically, colonialism relied on a false sense of superiority to justify the domination of colonized people. What students of African descent confront today is that same false sense of superiority of European and American worldview and values and a denigration of the African. Akbar (1998) argued that a “legacy of competence” for students of African descent can liberate them from the shackles of Euro-centric history. For students in American schools, stereotypes, misperceptions and misinformation about Africa abound in the media and in the standard curriculum about Africa. Two studies inform this paper in which I argue for the power of reading to connect students of African descent to their African heritage, whether recently arrived or born in the United States. Students of African descent who are provided with access to materials written by African and African American authors find a direct connection to their history and culture that opens them to shared experiences that incite an eagerness to learn more. All students can benefit from reading about Africa and its peoples from those best positioned to tell the stories, African and African American authors.

Introduction

I am a white, middle class female who was changed forever by my experiences on the African continent. Having been born and raised in the United States, and educated in its parochial schools, I knew only what I was taught about Africa through my reading and my familiarity with media representations about the African continent and its people. My own education took a distinct turn when I became a Peace Corps volunteer in the Central African Republic. Direct experience confirmed for me that when the European historians compiled the story of Africa they told it from their own perspective, filtered through the lens of long-standing colonial domination of the African nations.

According to Eze, for example, among the titans of the Eurocentric grand synthesizers of world history, “Hegel himself had declared the African sub-human: the African lacked reason and therefore moral and ethical content” (Eze 1997: 9). In Enlightenment Britain, David Hume (1726/1777) held similar, but less prominent, notions about the superiority of Europeans.¹

History texts, as recorded by European authors, introduced a distorted version of the African worldview and all that is African. Only through close reading of some hard-to-find works by authors of African descent was I able to discover that for their own economic gain, and for the glorification of their own homelands, the colonizers demeaned and denigrated Africa and Africans in order to exploit the natural and human resources that were originally in abundance in Africa. Rodney, for instance, challenges one of the fallacies of the official Eurocentric version of history when he remarks that it is “an act of brazen fraud to weigh the paltry social amenities provided during the colonial epoch against the exploitation, and to arrive at the conclusion that the good outweighed the bad” (Rodney 1972: 206).

What I came personally to realize was that the Eurocentric lens that was the principal vehicle of my understanding about Africa had long since been clouded over with distortions, misrepresentations, and lies. I began to search for a new way of understanding that would encourage a more positive perspective about the people of Africa whom I had come to know and cherish for their humanity, grace, and endurance in the face of nearly global disregard. As a distinct theoretical perspective, Afrocentricity was a welcome anodyne. Afrocentricity has been an evolving way for revisionist theorists to deconstruct the Eurocentric version of the history of African people. For many years, thanks to the work of Akbar (1998a, 1998b); Asante (2007, 1991, 1990, 1988); Dei (1994); Hilliard (1998); Karenga and Carruthers (1986); Keto (2001, 1995, 1994); Madhubuti and Madhubuti (1994); Myers (1998); Nobles (1991); Shujaa (1994); and Tedla, (1995), Afrocentricity has been re-characterizing and re-contextualizing the history of people of African descent. These authors, among others, have argued for the efficacy of Afrocentricity on the basis of its benefits in explaining what heretofore has been referred to in Eurocentric research as “deviant” behavior among people of African descent. Through the lens of Afrocentricity, the very same behavior can be seen as a positive attribute, a hallmark of the unwillingness of persons of African descent to abandon their rich cultural heritage despite centuries of oppression through slavery, economic distress, and exploitation of the indigenous resources by the wealthier societies of Europe and America.

Even though many are beginning to recognize the importance of Africa, African philosophy and African history, “the fundamental antagonism of Whites toward Africans, be they on the continent or in the diaspora, has not altered over time” (Harris 1998: 17). Harris encourages research that will shed light on the history of Africans and African Americans such that they can redefine themselves in light of their true history. He argues that one can only be free in the Afrocentric context when one is knowledgeable about who one is, and from whence one has come. It is certain that mainstream media, today, is not the best history teacher of an Afrocentric perspective, nor, indeed, are many of our schools (Harris 1998: 15-25).

Afrocentricity as Competent Challenge to Eurocentricism

Beginning with DuBois (1886/1903), followed in close alignment by Woodson (1890/1933), writers have been building the theoretical foundation for the Afrocentric worldview compiled from the best of the traditional thought of African civilizations. They have relied on ancient texts and on the oral tradition of African cultures, which have existed since the beginning of civilization. Diop (1974) set the stage for the current blossoming of Afrocentricity in his groundbreaking work titled *The African Origins of Civilization: Myth or Reality*. Many others have argued for Afrocentricity on the basis of the existence of an African worldview, and Abarry (1990), Gyekye (1995/1987), Jahn (1989/1958), Kershaw (1998), Mbiti (1969), have helped to delineate the elements of an African worldview.

As a theoretical framework and methodology, Afrocentricity is crucial to understanding persons of African descent because it is primarily through the Afrocentric lens that the ideas, values and experiences of people of African descent can be understood. For most of history, Africa and Africans have been defined and presented through a Eurocentric lens. Most research conducted on Africa was European-centered. European values were used to evaluate Africans and Africa. As Asante has remarked, “Africa was seen as marginal, uncivilized and on the periphery of historical consciousness” (Asante 1990: 119). Europeans justified colonialism on the basis that Africans were savages who had not learned to conquer their environment. The missionaries helped promote the racist imagery of Africans as uncivilized and in need of salvation.

Co-existence predominates in the Afrocentric worldview in which men and women are meant to live in harmony with their environment, not willfully conquer or dominate it. An African worldview is rooted in the wisdom and spirit of the ancestors and committed to living in harmony with the earth and with every living creature. In contrast with the European view that the material and the spiritual can be separated, the African sees no distinction between these realms. One cannot exist without the other and should not be viewed in isolation. The colonial view that the world had to be conquered, dominated, controlled is antithetical to the African worldview. For the African, it is the responsibility of the entire community to respect nature and work together for the common good, not the individual’s gain. From this perspective, education is seen as a tool for community development, not personal enrichment.

Competing World Views in Action in American Schools

There are four elements to Afrocentric theory which clearly distinguish this approach from the Eurocentric perspective, and which, when properly implemented, could have a dramatic influence on the general climate of learning for children of African descent. These four elements are: 1) the general distinction between rugged individualism and the Afrocentric respect for community; 2) the distinction between the liberal democratic “all men are created equal” ethos, which has always been an aspirational myth more honored in the breach than practice, and the Afrocentric emphasis on respect for one’s elders in the community; 3) the valorization of “progress” in all things scientific and economic, as an inherited right of some redoubt, and the Afrocentric emphasis on the interconnections and interdependencies between all humans; and 4) the pragmatic, commonsense view of the cosmos as expressed in “humanism” as opposed to the Afrocentric’s reverence for the spiritual.

The clash between these competing worldviews about Africa was personified for me in the experience of some newly arrived students from the African continent who encountered strained relations with their peers at one predominantly African American high school in the United States. In this school, as in other American classrooms, students of African descent were inundated with insidious stereotypes of Africa and Africans, stereotypes that have been passed on from generation to generation through the media and the educational system (Traoré 2002). “The darkest thing about Africa is America’s ignorance of it” (Robinson 1979: 70). When asked what she would like Americans to know about Africans, one African student who had been enrolled in an urban public school in the United States remarked, “I’d like them to know that I am not from the jungle. Africa is civilized. We don’t live in trees. Africa is a beautiful continent” (Traoré and Lukens 2006: 2).

As part of my dissertation, I designed intervention activities to bring a group of African and African American students together. As a result of clearing away the myths, misperceptions and stereotypes between them, the students developed an eagerness to share their experiences with their peers. The students decided to produce a newsletter that could be a vehicle for them to begin to articulate their evolving relationship with each other and with African history and culture. I connected them to the African Students Association at a local university and the African college students came to tutor/mentor them. We also invited prominent speakers to share their experiences with the students. As a result of our work, the African American students also formed an association within the school. The two groups worked together to produce a Black History Month show for the school. We invited community leaders to come and meet with the students. We worked on college and scholarship applications together. As a coherent group, we worked on promoting a positive image of Africa.

I also worked with a few willing teachers who had some interest in learning more about Africa. They also had held many deep stereotypes. A teacher of African American Studies originally tried to convince me that his students would not be interested in learning more about Africa because there was nothing in the syllabus for his class that directly covered Africa. I was surprised to hear from this teacher that his reasoning for omitting Africa from his classroom discussions was because “Africans sold us into slavery, so I don’t cover it.” This teacher has continued to learn more about the African/American connection and now teaches the course with a wealth of newly gained information about African history and culture after participating in a workshop with Molefi Kete Asante. Sharing stories with each other is one way that African students can help American students become more educated about the world. Africa is not just animals or jungle or desert or the Nile River. It is so much more.

Developing a Legacy of Competence

Wilson (1999) suggests that “amnesia” best characterizes what has happened to Blacks over the last 500 years. He writes:

We could not be Afrikans and slaves at the same time; we could not hold onto our Afrikan identity, our Afrikan selves, knowledge of our Afrikan culture, and be enslaved – the subordinates of another people. It is only when that knowledge is removed, erased, degraded, stolen, taken and distorted that we lose our identity. It is then that an identity is placed upon us by another people and by external forces. Therefore, a lack of self-knowledge is a lack of self-awareness (Wilson 48).

Both Wilson (1999) and Akbar (1998) focus on the value of a knowledge of coping skills passed on from generation to generation, so well pursued by the Europeans in their design of their schools, but so missing for students of African descent. “In being forced to lose their past, Afrikans are, in effect, forced to lose the priceless wisdom and invaluable coping skills painstakingly accumulated over aeons of trial and error by their ancestors” (Wilson 1993: 123). Akbar suggests the need to develop a “legacy of competence” for students of African descent without which “young people do not manifest their power for accomplishment” (Akbar 1998: 9). Keto argues that “Africans are not and cannot be peripheral dwellers in somebody else’s unfolding historical panorama” (Keto 2001: 12). He reminds us that “the Africa centered perspective provides the type of history for people of African descent that makes sense of what they, rather than somebody else, went through first” (Keto 2001: 121).

It has been a long struggle to counteract the mindset of Eurocentricity, the dominant worldview. But from personal experience I have learned that African American students of all ages will read about their history and culture when provided interesting materials about Africa, African history and African American history and culture. However, they first need to be able to clear away the myths, misperceptions and stereotypes that keep them from seeking such information.

Reading Great African and African American Literature as Catalyst for Transformation

In a study that lasted the entire 2005-2006 school year, at two different low-income rural middle schools in Florida, with predominantly African American students, students were exposed to poetry, short stories, folk tales and books by African and African American authors. When I undertook this study, I knew that my first task was to uncover the students' perceptions about Africa. They had little to report about what they had learned about Africa. They indicated on a survey that their primary source for information was the media; very little had been learned in school. The key obstacles to reading anything about Africa included:

- Negative media images of Africa – Tarzan, jungle, animals, war, famine, poverty
- Negative media images of Africans – AIDS, starving children, war
- Little to no personal connection – one student knew someone who had once gone to Africa
- Overwhelmingly negative images from all sources including what they learn in school
- Lack of interesting materials
- No “need to know”

The sad truth about how little understood were the cultural and historical contributions made by people of African descent became all too clear to me one day when I asked a classroom of students, “Who would like to visit Africa some day?” and the room was silent. After a short while, one hand finally was raised; the student answered, “To see the animals.” In addition to a perceived lack of interest in Africa, the students had negative images of reading about the history of African Americans. The students' comments included:

- It's just about slavery
- The past is past
- It wasn't a good time
- I don't want to feel sad
- They didn't have anything
- It has nothing to do with me

To present a more honest portrayal of the realities of life on the African continent and African American history, I designed weekly activities to combat these misperceptions and present students with excellent materials written specifically for them at the middle school level. I began with the misperception that Africa is a country. Two books in particular, *Africa is Not a Country, It's a Continent!* and *Africa is Not a Country*, were helpful in addressing the overarching demeaning misperception of the African continent and its people. Another helpful tool was the map available from Teaching for Change that shows that the United States, China, and Europe all fit within the confines of the area on the map comprising Africa. The Peters projection map displays the size of the African continent more accurately. Most students are shocked when they see this map juxtaposed this way. They think of Africa as an insignificant part of our world. It is not insignificant in size, history, cultural influences, spirituality, or contributions to our world.

A second demeaning stereotype commonly expressed was that Africa is a land of wild animals and jungles. I realized that students needed to understand that there are many more people in countries on the African continent than live in the U.S., and that roaming animals are a very small proportion of the teeming life on the continent. Children's movies such as "Madagascar" and "The Wild" promote the image of a place ruled by untamed animals.

The persistent iconographic image of Tarzan in cartoons and film reinforces the mistaken impression that a white man and white woman are ruling the continent with their preternatural control over the animals. Nothing in the students' experiences portrayed Africa as a continent with many different countries, each with a long, rich history and cultures and languages worthy of study, critical to our understanding of humanity.

During my ten years on the continent and my study of Afrocentricity in graduate school, I have become transformed by my contact with Africa and Africans. Students today, however, are left with negative images of all things African from AIDS and other diseases, to war and poverty. When asked what they knew about Africa, the students wrote:

- It's a country
- They did slavery
- A lot of people with no home, clothes or food
- People are poor
- A lot of diseases
- AIDS everywhere
- Needs a lot of help
- Have harmful animals
- Not a good place to live

The responses from the 90 students who participated in this study were overwhelmingly negative initially. From this exploration of the prevailing consciousness of the students who revealed these various impressions about Africa, I soon realized that to engage students in reading about Africa and Africans required an intervention. Therefore, once a week for the entire school year, I led classroom activities designed to break down the stereotypes and encourage the students to read African and African American authors to get the information from those who know best.

I told the students that if they wanted to clear out the misinformation, they'd have to go to the source of more accurate information to be found in poetry, short stories, and books written by African and African American authors. I suspected that reading about Africa from a different perspective than the standardized version disseminated in many American textbooks could open whole vistas to these students which might provide them with just a small sample of the life-altering experience I had when I first encountered Africa for myself many years ago.

An introductory activity focused on Roland Tombekai Dempster's poem, "Africa's Plea," in which he decries the oppression and domination of colonial powers that seek to demean all things African. Although in context, the focus is on defying the influence of colonial domination, Dempster's final lines, "For God's sake, let me be me," rings true for students. Young people can identify with the central theme in this poem. They can relate, as middle school students, to wanting to be allowed to decide who they are without outside interference. This poem affords the opportunity to talk about colonialism and its long-lasting and continued effects in Africa and in the United States. The students can see themselves in this poem and want to know more about what it means to be African.

The next step was to introduce students to a wider range of African authors through poetry including David Diop's poem, *Africa*, short stories and folk tales such as *Nelson Mandela's Favorite Folk Tales* (which also offers the opportunity to learn about Nelson Mandela) but also to use stories by and about African Americans that start in Africa such as *Glory Field* by Walter Dean Myers and *Copper Sun* by Sharon Draper.

Glory Field weaves the story of Muhammad Bilal, brutally taken from the continent in 1753 and enslaved in America, and the thread of this ancestor's life is visible throughout this historic piece that takes the reader from Africa all the way to 1994. In *Copper Sun*, we follow Amari, a young girl ripped from her family and a happy childhood in Africa, and thrust into the depths of enslavement and the cruelty that follows. The reader is captivated by the young girl's spirit, her courage and her ability to find a reason to continue in the face of the despicable realities of slavery. Students cheer when she escapes. There is much to be learned about the power of the human soul in Sharon Draper's book.

There are many other books that make the African/American connection. A few that I used with my students included: *The Black Snowman*, *Circle Unbroken*, *Sweet Clara and the Quilt*, and *Lest We Forget: The Passage from Africa to Slavery and Emancipation: A Three-Dimensional Interactive Book with Photographs and Documents from the Black Holocaust Exhibit* (see Recommended Literature Resources list). One student who read Mary Lyons' book, *Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs*, said that she would never have read the book before our discussions about the value of learning about the history of people of African descent. She said, "I thought reading about slavery would be sad, but after reading this book I know that if she could overcome and survive, I can too." The works of Sylviane Diouf and Beverly Naidoo connect students to the African continent in ways that focus on the dignity of life and our shared history and humanity.

Revisionist Learning About Africa Can Educate All Children

The literature that has been produced by continental Africans and Africans in the Diaspora is rich in lessons for all human beings, not just for Africans or Afro- or Caribbean-Americans. Today, there is a vast array of history texts that tell a more accurate story of Africa and African peoples and a wide selection of both fiction and non-fiction that shares the wisdom of the continent. Teachers can access some of the untapped wealth of benefits by using more African-centered materials, telling a more African-centered story, making available the accomplishments of people of African descent, and learning more themselves about the continent and its people, not just its land masses and natural resources, but its human resources.

Learning about Africa and Africans benefits all students. White students in the school where I conducted the activities commented that they appreciated learning about Africa. "I didn't know" and "I'm glad to know" were frequent responses to what they learned and by the end of our time together, all the students said that they'd want to visit the continent and learn more. All of the students had read more.

Reading is an essential tool for learning more about Africa and the history of people of African descent. Traveling to the continent is the best teaching tool; but reading and direct interpersonal interactions are second best. Bringing students together in small groups and encouraging an exchange of values and experiences outside the United States can help all students become better students and citizens. Recently arrived students from countries on the continent of Africa can serve as a catalyst for examining the negative media images of Africa and Africans.

The Future Costs of Not Shifting Worldviews

In one study, a group of recently arrived students from various African countries were seriously disappointed with what they found to be the reality in America (Traoré and Lukens 2006). These youth from Africa had been led to believe that the United States had the best educational system in the world; but their experiences here left them with a sense of being excluded as young people with a rich cultural upbringing and with a wealth of experiences to share. They wondered how the best educational system in the world could promote such blatant negativity about an entire continent and its people. How can the U.S., which seems to aspire to such high moral ideals, still be relegating people to lower status based on their race? How can where you live, what school you attend and what jobs you can have, still be so influenced by one's race? How can having an accent be considered a detriment in a country founded by immigrants? How can the wealthiest nation still have people living on the streets and going through garbage cans to find food? Why are people killing each other on the streets where we live? These are some of the questions that the recently arrived African students asked. What, we might ask, do we have to learn from these students? They have lived different lives and view the world very differently. Some of the African students had left behind war-torn countries. Those who came from war-torn countries had known a life of peace before the outbreak of war and they were disconcerted to discover so much violence in the United States and wondered what could explain this antagonism in America. They understood war in their home country; but as one student from Sierra Leone asked, "What is it here that explains the hostility and apathy evinced by Americans?" (Traoré and Lukens 2006: 167).

In general, in most of the countries on the continent not directly impacted by the devastations of war, a person who was in distress or in need of support would be taken care of by the community. All of the African students who shared their experiences admitted that they knew more about America than any American they met knows about Africa. Although America may be considered the world leader and worthy of study, the students from the continent wondered how it was that Americans could be so ignorant about an entire continent. While America may be rich in material goods, the students from the continent found Americans "ignoring others, being too busy to take time to be together, disconnected from their families and friends, too materialistic and missing out on what is important in life – the connection to each other, to the ancestors and to the Creator" (Traoré and Lukens 2006:167).

Parents and educators must begin to think about ways to nurture our children. Children need opportunities to learn more about who they are and where they come from. As a community we must support them as they face the many challenges posed by our educational system. Our children need us to reassure them, protect them, nurture them, and provide a sense of history, culture and accomplishment for them, a place to stand that they can hold their heads high. Africa has everything to teach the world. The world has become fragmented, divided, cut off from our ancestors and our spiritual connectedness. Maintaining those roots is essential. We must not allow our children to become uprooted or disconnected from their roots.

We cannot force them to take an interest in African culture but we can show them the ways that their roots are nurturing. Julius Nyerere wrote: “African people cannot be read out of history. Not to know what one’s race has done in former times is to continue always as a child. The African himself expresses the thought in saying “knowing thyself is better than he who speaks of thee.” Not to know is bad; but not to wish to know is worse” (Stewart 1997: 15).

For true freedom to exist, people of African descent cannot rely on the interpretation of freedom that is generally accepted. People of African descent must go beyond the outward identifiers usually associated with freedom, such as the right to vote, work, and speak one’s mind, and focus on inner change. In order for true freedom to exist and be sustained, people of African descent must free themselves from a Eurocentric perspective and construct their identity based in African philosophical thought. As Asante has admonished, “know your history and you will always be wise” (Asante 1988: 51). Freedom and literacy for people of African descent must be based in an Afrocentric epistemology and a communal ontology; one that espouses the credo – “we are, therefore I exist” (Asante 1988: 18), as opposed to the Eurocentric thought “I think, therefore, I am” which has influenced civilization since the seventeenth century. “In African philosophy, there is a commitment to harmony that some might call spirituality. It is the manifest essence of a search for the resolution of cultural and human problems” (Asante 1998: 188). Helping children of African descent access reading materials about their history and culture can help them access a heritage rich in spiritual values. This approach will help to humanize the world and heal the damage done by colonialism, hegemony, and White supremacy.

Notes

¹ Hume's most troublesome remarks were relegated to one of his short essays, rather than his longer treatises, with the most notable being his footnote in "Of National Characters." There, Hume (1985/1777) remarked that "I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the Whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual, eminent either in action or in speculation. No ingenious manufacture among them, no arts, no sciences" (Hume 1985/1777: 208 n. 10).

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