

# Constructs and Dimensions of Afrocentric Education

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For decades, Afrocentric education has been mentioned as a potential resolution to the many academic and social problems being faced by Black children in U.S. public schools, but, ironically, it has rarely if ever been defined and assessed within mainstream discourses. This article explicates some of historical developments and dimensions of constructs that appear within the literature on cultural reattachment Afrocentric education. Cultural reattachment is a process whereby people of African descent begin to adopt (wholly or partially) aspects of an African culture. Afrocentric education is defined as the adoption of Afrocentric ideology and cultural relevancy for use within classrooms. Proponents of cultural reattachment Afrocentric education advance important “cultural constructs” that they believe should be part of any effort to educate Black children. As a result, educationists (teachers, administrators, researchers) who are familiar with the constructs are armed with the necessary tools to advocate for a more authentic education for Black children.

**Keywords:** *Afrocentric education; Black education; African-centered theory; Black socialization; Black children*

Do we truly have the *will* to educate all children?

*Asa Hilliard, 1991*

Hilliard’s (1991) provocative question is surely one of the most important ones that has ever been asked to educationists. If “will” includes the process of asserting one’s choice to do something, the education community must ask itself whether or not it has the *will* to teach all children. More specifically, in this instance we must ask if educators, researchers, and policy makers actually have the *will* to effectively teach Black children. From an Afrocentric perspective, historical and cultural studies of Blacks require deep engagements with African history and culture because Blacks’ roots are in Africa. Therefore, in order to fully grasp the history of Black education and

anything that is related to Blacks, the African roots must first be understood (Akoto, 1992; Akoto & Akoto, 1999; Asante, 1990; Hilliard, 1997; Shujaa, 1994). Directly after the periods of American chattel slavery and educational segregation, there was an inadequate review of the impact of such events onto Blacks as human beings. No major investigations of Black children's learning styles were conducted. Instead, after educational segregation Blacks were (and in many ways still are) expected to perform in school as if understanding who they are as cultural beings is a moot point (Anwisy, 2006; Hale-Benson, 1982; Hilliard, 1997). A result of such negligence is that Black children continue to suffer in U.S. public schools.

If we have the will to educate all children, we must ask ourselves why virtually no major investigations of how enslavement, segregation, rampant discrimination, and hate crimes against Blacks may have affected Black children and their learning. This very serious oversight has surely resulted in the proliferation of some of the demeaning theories about Black learners that have been developed ("Elementary DNA," 2007; Reed, 1969; W. Shockley, 1971). But more insidiously, those educationists who have spent much time studying what methods might be best suited for Black children have been marginalized and in most cases silenced. Afrocentric educationists attempt to offer methods, ideas, and concepts that are best suitable for reaching children of African descent.

Previous works have elucidated the literature and definitions of Afrocentric education (see K. Shockley, 2007). In this article the dimensions of Afrocentric education are presented, as we reduce some of the central claims and offerings of various Afrocentric educationists by producing a theoretical exploration of how Afrocentric theories shape Afrocentric research and practice in schools. Furthermore, in this article Afrocentric ideas and theories are explicated and illuminated to demonstrate how such offerings are translated into the creation of an education that is Afrocentric.

We begin by laying a backdrop for the importance of Afrocentric education. This is followed by an exploration of the literature highlighting seven fundamental constructs of Afrocentric education. The constructs are as follows: *identity*—the importance of identifying the Black child as an African; *pan-Africanism*—the idea that all Black people in the world are Africans; *African culture*—the long-standing tradition of Blacks using African culture to sustain themselves and bring order to their lives and communities; *African values adoption and transmission*—inclusion of an African ethos into educational process for Black children; *Black nationalism*—the idea that Blacks, regardless of their specific location, constitute a "nation"; *community control with institution building*—the ability to make important decisions about the

institutions that exist in one's community; and *education as opposed to schooling*—education is the process of imparting on children all things they need to provide leadership within their communities and within their nation, while schooling is a training process.

First, we discuss the rationale for identifying the seven constructs. Next, we provide a brief description of each construct. This is followed by implications for policy and practice.

## Background

The inability of the American educational system to properly address the cultural and educational needs of its constituency is one of the most perplexing problems in U.S. society today. Groups such as first-language Spanish speakers, Appalachians, and Asians continue their quests to make education in the United States relevant and meaningful for all children (Ali & McWhirter, 2006; Contreras & Valverde, 1994; S. Lee, 1996; Orfield & Eaton, 1997). Although the concerns of all groups are equally important, it is a consistent fact that as a composite group Black children in U.S. schools are experiencing extreme difficulties (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). In fact, Black children in the United States have experienced major difficulties since being allowed to be educated in the United States (J. Anderson, 1988).

Although many innovative programs and projects have been put into place to help Black children, such innovations have fallen short of affording an educational experience that empowers members of the Black community to “control the psychic and physical spaces that [Blacks] call their own” (Akoto, 1992, p. 3). Many scholars have pointed out that Blacks are miseducated because they are not the chief producers or manufacturers of any of the major goods they need for their own survival (Akoto, 1992; Akoto & Akoto, 1999; C. Anderson, 2001; Kunjufu, 2002; Wilson, 1993). That is, Blacks are miseducated because they have not been taught how to produce, own, and control the resources within their own communities.

Before chattel slavery, Black (African) adults did not have problems educating Black children because they educated the children in those communities with respect to the cultural ethos from whence they came (Akoto & Akoto, 1999; Fu-Kiau, 1988; Umeh, 1997). Now, postslavery, the education community in the United States appears befuddled about what to do regarding the inability to effectively educate Black children and prepare them to have a sense of agency over their own lives and communities. Ladson-Billings (2000) reports that “African American students

are suffering in our schools at an alarming rate. They continue to experience high drop-out, suspension, and expulsion rates” (p. 212). Prior to Ladson-Billings, Lomotey (1992) reported that “the academic achievement of a large number of Black children across the country—as measured by standardized achievement tests, suspension rates, special education placement rates, and dropout rates—has deteriorated considerably over the last twenty years” (p. 455). One useful yet contentious solution to the problems Black children are facing has been to do as the Africans did before chattel slavery, namely, to educate Black children with respect to the African cultural ethos from whence they came. The name for that type of education is Afrocentric (aka African centered, Africentric) education, an approach to educating Black children that requires educators to ideologically “center” themselves on the cultural past, present, and future of African people.

One of the reasons that Afrocentric education is contentious is because it singles out and focuses attention on Black children. Some nonspecialists believe it “disunites America” and presents pseudo-history to students (Schlesinger, 1992, p. 80). Others claim that Afrocentrism is an excuse to teach myths as facts (Lefkowitz, 1997, p. 10), still others have said that Afrocentric ideas engender a false consciousness in Blacks as proponents of it irresponsibly create “mythical pasts and imagined homes” for Blacks (Howe, 1998, p. 28), while others purport Afrocentric ideas as being overly simplistic and an attempt to “romanticize African history” (Appiah, 1993, p. 10).

Notwithstanding, the concept of African agency remains critically important for Black children. In the context of Afrocentric literature, a “sense of agency” is understood as a people’s ability, empowerment, and entitlement to control and mandate the arenas of life around them (Akoto, 1992; Asante, 1988). Afrocentric education is an attempt to provide a sense of agency, empowerment, and entitlement to the Black community in order to positively change the sociomaterial circumstances therein. Afrocentric education research provides continuous understandings of old and new methods that are being used to change the abhorrent realities being faced by Black children and communities (e.g., from disproportionate imprisonment rates to alarming homicide rates). Based on our read of the literature, Afrocentric education researchers focus on the aforementioned major “constructs” that create the substance of what these researchers have discovered as imperative for Black children and communities.

## **Problem Exploration: Defining Afrocentric Education**

Asante (1990) has coined “Africalogy” as the Afrocentric study of people of African descent. He explains that the “mere study of phenomena of Africa is not Africalogy but some other intellectual enterprise” (p. 14). Therefore, the most important element of Africalogical research is that it is “Afrocentric.” Afrocentricity (aka African centeredness) literally means “placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior” (Asante, 1998, p. 2). In other words, Africalogical researchers are able to view phenomena with crucial reference to African history, traditions, and culture—which informs analyses and interpretations of events and data. Furthermore, African centeredness is an approach to data that requires those who take it on to have an acute understanding of the history and culture of people of African descent (in Africa and abroad) and to see people of African descent as fully capable human agents who are able to “control the psychic and physical spaces around them” (Akoto, 1992, p. 3). Clearly, there are varying degrees to which those concerned about children of African descent around the globe (hereafter referred to as Black children) possess the aforementioned requirements; however, many who have researched and written with regard to the education of Black children have done so with great consideration for the elements that constitute Africalogy. Although their writings focus on a great many topics, their main arguments are often upheld by ostensible understandings—this review unearths those main arguments and labels them “constructs.” Thus, this article provides a useful framework that gives “teeth” to this literature on Black children by creating a dimensions typology of the major constructs that have been defined and assessed by scholars who are concerned about creating an African education for Black children.

## **Understanding and Defining Afrocentric Educational Constructs**

For the purposes of this work, that which is Afrocentric includes the works of scholars who advance one or more of the seven constructs as a way to advocate for Blacks to culturally reattach themselves to their African cultural heritage. Social activist Marcus Garvey and renowned anthropologist Cheikh Anta Diop (1955/1974) were pioneers in the movement toward building an understanding of the direct and seamless relationship between people of African descent and the classical African civilization of Ta Meri (ancient Egypt/Nubia during the time it was ruled by Blacks). Diop

(1955/1974, 1987, 1991) set the stage for what would become a full-fledged movement toward establishing the cultural unity of Africa (i.e., the striking sameness from one ethnic group to another on the African continent) and the anteriority of African academics, philosophy, and spirituality.

Other scholars and activists such as the former president of Senegal Leopold Senghor wished to assert that Africans (in Senegal) had African characteristics, values, and aesthetics that were distinctly different from their European conquerors. Molefi Kete Asante (1980) produced the first substantive account of “Afrocentricity” in his seminal book *Afrocentricity*. Kwame Nkrumah used the term *Afrocentric* during the 1960s. Asante (2003) is recognized as the major proponent of Afrocentricity—the notion of it being a Black self-respecting approach to data and human phenomena that is “distinct from a Eurocentric ideology, that allows African agency, that is, a sense of self actualizing based upon the best interests of African people” (prologue). In addition, scholars such as Dove (1998) and Welsh-Asante (1990) advanced Afrocentricity as a necessary innovative approach to understanding data and phenomena that relate to people of African descent. A number of other scholars, such as the renowned historian John Henrick Clarke (1991a, 1991b), advanced the term *African centered* to describe an approach to data and human phenomena that builds on Diop’s work and adds to it the crucial need for Blacks to nation build.

Educational psychologist and historian Asa Hilliard (1991, 1997, 2003) and the founders of Nationhouse Africentric School Kwame and Akua Akoto (Akoto, 1992; Akoto & Akoto, 1999) have advanced the African-centered movement and made the concepts developed by anthropologists, historians, and activists applicable within the field of education. In their later works, Hilliard and Akoto call for an “African education” (foregoing “centered”) for Black children, which they deem is possible through a process of Sankofa, which literally means that people of African descent should mentally and/or physically “return to the source” and retrieve their African culture; hence, they call for a “re-Africanized” education for children of African descent. In order for Black children to receive an African education, adults who teach Black children must “Africanize” themselves by becoming familiar with the culture, values, folkways, and mores of African groups through processes such as deep study, travel, and initiation.

In what follows, we explore the seven constructs, paying close attention to the dimensions. We begin by explaining our method.

## Method

In an attempt to gather literature, we adhered to the traditions set forth by Afrocentric educationists, which require “community involvement,” even in the creation of definitions such as what should be defined as “cultural reattachment.” We sought the advice of community icons such as Kwame and Akua Akoto, Asa Hilliard, Kofi Lomotey, and Marimba Ani (1994)—all of whom are self-labeled “re-Africanization” (i.e., cultural reattachment) experts. A list of references was provided by Lomotey to begin a search for articles on Afrocentric education. Hilliard’s (1997) book also provides a somewhat comprehensive list of Afrocentric educationists. We attended conferences such as the annual Council of Independent Black Institutions conference, the annual National Alliance of Black School Educators conference, and the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilization conference in order to understand how reattachment is viewed by various African-centered communities.

We searched the ERIC database using the keywords *Afrocentric education*, *African education*, *African centered education*, *nation building*, *cultural reattachment*, and *re-Africanization*. We also searched the Internet and digital dissertations to find sources on Afrocentric education. After compiling the articles, we read and reread them, trying to figure out if there were major differences and/or similarities among authors. To check our perceptions, we reread the articles and found some very helpful books (e.g., Hilliard, 1997; Shujaa, 1994) and began sorting the major concepts in the literature. After finding the imperative constructs in the literature, we were interested in knowing what the range of thought was within the literature. Afrocentric education research literature generally concentrates on what happens in classrooms (Murrell, 2002; Shujaa, 1994). In reference to this article’s major arguments, articles, books, and reports that did not focus on the inclusion of one of the seven constructs and the notion of “cultural reattachment” were omitted. In relation to Afrocentric argumentation, the articles, books, and reports that adhered to the definition of cultural reattachment Afrocentric education and focused on one of the seven constructs were included in this review.

In what follows, we delineate the seven constructs. In some cases, constructs are combined because they are closely related. For example, identity and pan-Africanism are talked about simultaneously. Threaded throughout is the dimension of African reattachment that permeates each of the constructs. Cultural reattachment can be thought about as a process that

includes Blacks becoming (re)familiarized with specific African cultural beliefs and practices for the purpose of readopting those beliefs and practices into their lives. We found cultural reattachment to be at the foundation of Afrocentric education.

## **Identity and Pan-Africanism**

W. E. B. Du Bois (1909) prophetically claimed that the problem of the 20th century would be the color line. The color line remains a major problem at the beginning of the 21st century, but in many ways the color line problem has brought on a new and distinct problem for Blacks. On the part of Blacks, one conditioned response to racial hatred has been to deny the locus of their identity, which is Africa (Akbar, 1984, 1992; Nobles, 1986). Scholars such as Wilson (1993) have demonstrated the unfortunate impacts of the countless negative propaganda that is directed toward Africa.

The unwarranted negative propaganda that has been directed toward Africa has created disdain toward that continent coming from all groups (Asante, 1988; Rodney, 1972), but what is most problematic is the disdain that Africans (in the Diaspora and on the continent) themselves have developed toward the continent because of the negative propaganda. The most unfortunate aspect of the negative propaganda has been that people of African descent have exacerbated their own culture and identity losses by refusing to meaningfully connect with the continent from whence they came (Akoto & Akoto, 2007). In refusing to connect with the continent from an Afrocentric standpoint, people of African descent inadvertently forfeit the most richly textured aspects of who they are as people. Asante (1998) argues,

The psychology of the African without Afrocentricity has become a matter of concern. Instead of looking out from one's own center, the non-Afrocentric person operates in a manner that is negatively predictable. The person's images, symbols, lifestyles, and manners are contradictory and thereby destructive to personal and collective growth and development. (p. 1)

Over the years many scholars of African descent have attempted to highlight facts over misleading propaganda about Africa in order to promote an understanding that being African is not an aberration but is neither negative nor positive—like being Asian, European, or of mixed heritage is neither negative or positive. Unfortunately, over the years many well-respected

academics have made unfounded extraordinarily negative claims about Africans that have made African people wish to deny the origins of their identity. For example, the famous philosopher and literarian David Hume (1753/2002) writes that Blacks have never had any “ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, [and] no sciences” (footnote). Although the historical record proves otherwise about Africa’s contributions to arts and sciences, mainstream academics consider Hume to be one of the greatest philosophical minds in history. Furthermore, Georges Curvier (1935), the founder of paleontology, botany, and comparative anatomy, followed Hume in his *Animal Kingdom* when he stated that “the African manifestly approaches the monkey tribe. The hordes of which this variety is composed have always remained in a state of complete barbarism” (p. 12). Curvier was by no means an inconsequential figure in history. Finally, the intellectual contemporary of Hume and Curvier is the famous psychologist Lewis Terman, who was one of the creators of intelligence tests such as the Stanford-9. Terman (1916) continued the debasement by asserting that

the fact that one meets [feeble-minded individuals] with such frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew and by experimental methods. Children of this group should be segregated in special classes and be given instruction which is concrete and practical. (p. 48)

Many people of African descent have responded to those negative diatribes by attempting to back away from being who they are culturally (Akbar, 1984, 1992; Wilson, 1993). This crisis began for Africans (Americans) as soon as the first ship left the African shore. That is, the Black identity crisis has its roots in the chattel slavery experience in America, and, as Lomotey (1978) has explained, in American public schools “information about African people is usually left out of textbooks, and when it is included, it usually starts discussing slavery, and leaves out any information that can help Black children gain a sense of responsibility and respect for self” (p. 25). Furthermore, Murrell (2002) points out that programs that are geared toward diversity and multiculturalism have eclipsed the critical identity work that Black children and communities so desperately need. Murrell states, “Knowing about diverse people and experiences should not supersede a child’s own understanding of self and culture when they are learning to read the world” (p. xxi). Added together, the impact of negative propaganda (e.g., Hume and Terman), plus the inadequate information received by people of African descent (e.g., as explained

by Lomotey and Murrell), create a “perfect storm” for miseducation and confusion on issues related to Black identity.

Afrocentric educationists attempt to quell this storm by emphasizing the cultural components of African identity and culture. Afrocentric educationists emphasize culture because the substance of it constitutes precisely what is left out of textbooks. Afrocentric educationists present useful information to Black students and communities and make Africans the subject of their own cultural and historical story. One of the most notable contributions to this process of reeducation and cultural reacquisition came from anthropologist Diop. In the midst of an onslaught of negative ideas flourishing about people of African descent, Diop developed an anthropological and scientific-based mechanism for determining the origins of the cultural identity of people African descent. Simultaneously, he developed anthropological and scientific evidence that refuted racist and hegemonic claims of European superiority and African inferiority. Diop developed a “melanin test” that was able to determine that the world’s first high-level civilization was developed by African people. Furthermore, Diop also proved that the continent of Africa was “culturally united,” in the sense that the various culturo-spiritual groups across the continent are more cosmologically, epistemologically, and ontologically alike than they are different. His work forever debunked the image of an animal-like, disorganized, culture-less people. Instead, Diop developed a virtually uncontested and uncontestable, radically different notion than those of Hume and Terman; that is, he developed the notion that Blacks were Africans, no matter where they happened to be on the planet, and that Africans themselves were the patriarchs and matriarchs or humankind. Later, author and professor George G. M. James (1976) advanced Diop’s and Woodson’s work by establishing that many of what were commonly believed to be European inventions had been stolen and were instead African inventions. Although James’s research created a firestorm, his findings have yet to be proven fallible.

Afrocentric educationists followed Woodson, Diop, and James’s lead to create an education for Black children where the focus could be on loving oneself and practicing one’s own culture, focusing on oneself as the subject of history instead of the object of someone else’s stories, accepting the anteriority of the early African civilizations, and attempting to construct a unified, pan-Africanist reality for people of African descent. Although Woodson, Diop, and James were not the only visionaries who sought to

rehumanize people of African descent by emphasizing their African identity (i.e., there were other leaders such as Garvey who did the same), their influences have made a major impact in the field of education. Their influences have led the way toward the acceptance of Africa as the true source and origin of “Black” people, and this acceptance has encouraged Afrocentric educationists to consider cultural re-Africanization.

## **African Culture and Values**

Afrocentric educationists stress appropriate cultural practice as the most important element for empowering and transforming Black communities. Within African culture are the values that Afrocentric educators believe are desperately necessary to bring about the necessary changes related to Black education. African cultural practice is understood as the answer to the plethora of challenges faced by Black children in education. The belief is that the current Eurocentric cultural order is debilitating and stifling of the growth, development, and life chances of Black children (Irvine, 1999). Therefore, Afrocentric educators call for Sankofa, which literally means to return and retrieve that which Africans lost during the periods of destruction. Karenga (1966) described culture as the way people define, create, celebrate, sustain, and develop themselves. Traditionally, the ancestors of people of African descent have used various cultural practices and beliefs as guides to define, create, celebrate, sustain, and develop themselves. Afrocentric educationists purport that this long-standing tradition of using African culture in such ways is threatened because Blacks are unaware of African cultures. According to Asante (1988), Blacks not knowing about cultures that have brought them thus far causes “their images, symbols, lifestyles, and manners [to be] contradictory and thereby destructive to personal and collective growth and development” (p. 1). According to Asante, such ignorance leads to self-annihilation. Furthermore, C. D. Lee’s (1992) study of Afrocentric schools indicated that when African and African American cultures are used as a means for educating Black children, they flourish.

Hales (1997) found that “African American children need to be part of an educational system that recognizes their abilities and culture, and draws upon these strengths and incorporates them into the [teaching and] learning process” (p. 4). Black educationists believe that knowledge of African cultures is important because without such knowledge Black children take part in an alien and alienating process of schooling (Anwisy, 2006; Hale-Benson, 1982; Lomotey, 1978; Ridley, 1971; Shujaa, 1993). Afrocentric

educationists advance definitions of culture that concretely tie people of African descent to unknown tribal designations on the continent of Africa.

Afrocentric educators believe that the dominant culture is Eurocentric, meaning that they believe it is centered on the needs and interests of people of European descent. Although Afrocentric educators recognize that the dominant culture exists, they do not hold the belief that the dominant culture is usable to all groups of people in the same ways that it is usable to people of European descent. Using the Afrocentric lens, no culture should be deemed as a subculture because the “sub” categorization is a matter of where one “stands” (Asante, 1988) in relation to the culture itself. Afrocentrics believe that the “European worldview” tends to mistakenly see things that are specific as being universal. That is, Eurocentrism has led many people of European descent to tend to believe that things that come from their own cultural paradigm are also applicable to the paradigm of others.

An important tool that Afrocentric educationists use to develop Black children through culture is incorporating African languages into the educational experiences of young people. Afrocentric schools have incorporated the use of kiswahili phrases such as “habari gani!” which means “what good news do you have?” Afrocentric schools such as Nation House in Washington, D.C., use aspects of specific African cultural groups to inform school practice. Nation House uses Akan to inform school practice, so it is common to hear words such as “maakye,” which means “good morning” in the Akan language of Twi. Teachers are referred to as “mama” and “baba,” which are kiswahili words that translate to “mother figure” and “father figure.” Several African language words replace English words to demonstrate the validity of African language, the power of self-determination, and the necessity to go back and fetch that which was lost during the period of African destruction.

## **Reattachment: Culture in Action**

Although the symbolic use of language exemplifies the Afrocentric imperative of using African culture, the deeper structures, meanings, and uses of culture are also apparent. Akoto and Akoto’s (1999) requirement for re-Africanization calls for people of African descent to reattach themselves to African cultures. The lessons learned by Afrocentric educationists such as Akoto and Anwisyse (both of whom are school leaders and researchers) include the dire need for Blacks to reattach to African culture for the

purposes of family and community building (Anwisy, 2006). Although African culture is understood as nonstatic, the traditional practices of continental Africans are viewed as proper cultural examples for people of African descent. Akoto and Akoto (1999) illuminated three broad overlapping stages of re-Africanization (rediscovery/historical recovery, redefinition/cultural reaffirmation, and revitalization/national liberation) that undergird the curricular focus of Afrocentric schools. The three stages indicate crucial aspects of what is considered to be a return to African cultural practice.

Akoto and Akoto (1999) explain that “during the rediscovery phase the person reconstructs the full history of the African world within an Afrocentric framework” (p. 9). The person establishes direct linkages with Africa, identifies the personal and collective self, studies, analyzes, and records African languages, and “identifies individuals who can/will support them on their re-Africanization journey” (p. 9). The redefinition phase involves the

development of a comprehensive and thorough analysis of Africa’s historic enemies in both internal and external manifestations, an elaboration of a comprehensive and detailed theory of Africa’s spiritual/material continuum, the development of an ideological tract that is concise in its objectives and principles, the reestablishment of appropriate moral codes and standards, the abandonment of non African cultural formations and an attempt to ground oneself in the communitarian traditions of Africa. (p. 10)

The last phase, revitalization, involves the “encouragement and facilitation of appropriate action on regional, national, and international levels.” Furthermore, a person in this phase begins to establish centers for joint coordination, establishes languages and icons that relate to re-Africanization, and identifies, establishes, and supports organizations that are attempting to return and retrieve African traditions, and as they facilitate in this process “they begin to acquire real property and establish financially viable enterprises, and develop a confederation of families” (p. 10).

Re-Africanization places Africans in a very different place in terms of their thinking, specifically the level of seriousness toward issues of the reclamation of African independence and sovereignty. African-centered thinkers such as Chancellor Williams (1987) offer that

when, if ever, Black people actually organize as a race in their various population centers, they will find that the basic and guiding ideology they now seek and so much need is embedded in their own traditional philosophy and constitutional system, simply waiting to be extracted and set forth. (p. 161)

Re-Africanization requires that Blacks view the events that involve them through the prism of African self-sufficiency. But self-sufficiency also has to be contextualized and “sifted through” an indigenous African cultural lens. Afrocentric theorists see that which is indigenous as that which has its roots in African cultural cosmology, not that which has been adapted and made palatable for European-derived culture. Akoto and Akoto offer the importance of African centrality as a way to get to which is indigenous. The ability to identify indigenous African cultural modes requires “deep study and deep thought, initiation and constant comparison” (Hilliard, 1997, p. 7). Coming to understand and practice indigenous African culture does not mean accepting all aspects of it. Afrocentric theorists recommend understanding African culture indigenously first (cosmologically speaking) and then “choosing from the best of African culture and refining and adopting those practices which advance our cause” (Madhubuti, 1973, p. 4).

Afrocentric educationists believe that educators should be equipped with knowledge that relates to an Afrocentric understanding of culture because within African culture lies the answer or answers to many of the challenges that Black people face. Afrocentric educationists see African cultural practice as an “entity” that must be traditionally and indigenously African but also fully able to ideologically adjust to the challenges presented by the modern world. That is, Afrocentric educationists advance our understanding of culture and how it works by presenting the notion of culture as steadfast and traditional yet able to protect African people from European, American, or any other universalism, supremacism, and hegemony. These cultural assertions undergird what Afrocentric educationists wish to transmit to students in Afrocentric schools.

## **Black Nationalism**

The contributions that scholars such as Woodson (1933), Diop (1955/1974, 1987, 1991), and James (1976) made related to Blacks reclaiming their African identity as well as the major contributions made by scholars such as Asante (1998), Hilliard (1991, 1997, 2002), Akoto (1992), and Akoto and Akoto (1999) have contributed to the creation of Black nationalism. Black nationalism is the sentiment that all people of African descent constitute a nation. Although the aforementioned scholars and other writers such as Lewis Woodson have made major contributions to the development of Black nationalism, Garvey is believed to be one of the most effective Black nationalists in history. Garvey believed that people of

African descent should consider repatriation back to Africa. His famous quote, "Africa for the Africans," is a rallying call for modern-day Black nationalists. Afrocentric educators believe that children of African descent should be taught to have a sense of loyalty to Africa.

Via Black nationalism, Black children must be the catalysts for helping to instill a sense of agency in the Black community because generations before them have been taught only how to consume and be dependent on outside entities (C. Anderson, 2001). Agency eventually leads toward nation building. Nation building refers to the conscious and focused application of African people's collective resources, energies, and knowledge to the task of "liberating and developing the psychic and physical space that is theirs" (Akoto, 1992, p. 3). When Blacks act as purposeful actors (agents) behaving in ways that are in concert with the overall interest of bettering the Black community, they are nation building.

The belief of Black nationalism, coupled with the belief that Blacks should liberate and build the psychic space that they call theirs, revolutionizes the current attitude that permeates Black communities. Lomotey (1978) explains that "the American educational system will never meet the needs of African American students because the successful accomplishment of that end is not in the best interest of those who are in power" (p. 11). Carter G. Woodson (1933) suggested that the education that Blacks receive teaches them only to serve in the system, which oppresses them; therefore, they participate in their own oppression. The preceding are very strong claims, yet they are simple to understand when you consider the principles of capitalism.

Afrocentric educationists are charged to operationalize Black nationalism in order to transition Black children from the "world's puppets and playthings" (Akoto, 1992) to "thinkers" who are able to build a nation (Akoto, 1992; Akoto & Akoto, 1999; Asante, 1999; Brookins, 1984; Doughty, 1973; Hilliard, 1997; Lomotey, 1978; Ridley, 1971).

## **Community Control and Institution Building**

Community control involves making important decisions about the institutions that exist in one's community. Institution building involves creating the necessary agencies that are designed to "impart knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary to survive and progress" (Doughty, 1973, p. 3). Independent Black institutions (IBIs) were designed for the purpose of creating the necessary agencies designed to serve the interests of the Black

community. According to Doughty (1973), “The belief can be maintained that the masses of Black children will show significantly higher achievement rates in separate, independent, Black schools, not in desegregated or integrated schools” (p. 111). An African-centered position calls for Blacks to organize to the point of being able to either control the resources needed for the Black community or be organized enough to make sure those resources are used appropriately for their communities. Doughty claims that power, ideology, relevant curriculum, and sound instructional practices are important concepts that are properly transmitted in IBIs.

Lomotey (1978) points out that there is some evidence that suggests that Black children in IBIs perform above the norm, and Ratteray (1990) found that Blacks in IBIs score higher on standardized achievement tests. C. D. Lee (2005) reports,

Garvey Africentric School is recognized nationally for the extraordinary achievement of its students on standardized tests. Garvey includes both elementary and high school programs. Sankofa Shule in Lansing, Michigan, the Betty Shabazz International Charter School of Chicago and Aisha Shule of Detroit [are] African-centered charter schools, another growing category of Afrocentric K-12 schools. All also boast high achievement on standardized measures. (p. 55)

These findings (among other observations and perceived cultural needs) lead Afrocentric educationists to believe that it is optimal for Blacks to attend IBIs.

The assumption made by Afrocentric educationists is that Black-owned and controlled education systems “will eliminate the injustices and mis-education of the present educational system, and create a strong basis for change in the lives of people of African descent” (Doughty, 1973, p. 3). Afrocentric educationists do not believe that education should be solely for personal gain. The goal is to change the entire community, but in order to do so Afrocentric scholars desire a generation of Africans that are taught from a perspective that is “self-centered.” Lomotey (1978) explains that “IBI’s are a vehicle for community development” (p. 35). Lomotey and others believe that if Black children are imbued with a sense of agency (which includes owning and controlling all of the institutions in one’s community), they will eventually take control of their own destiny—which adheres to the principle of *kujichagulia* (self-determination).

Afrocentrists hold that if other groups control the institutions in the Black community, then Blacks are at their whims (Akoto, 1992; Asante, 1980, 1999; Delpit, 2001; Hilliard, 1997; Lomotey, 1978, 1992; Madhubuti,

1973). African community control and institution building bring Blacks closer to being in control of their own destinies. Afrocentric education appears to be a fairly simple call for Africans to be taught to control their own lives. It follows though that because the adults in Black communities have been miseducated (Woodson, 1933), a process of reclaiming responsibility must take place in schools for generations to come. Afrocentric educators worry that because schools train, they do not educate.

## **Education, Not Schooling**

Afrocentric educators are concerned that the (mis)education that Black children receive is teaching them how to think (against their own interest), where to stand (in a culturally uncentered place), where to go (anywhere except an African place), and to go through the back door, that is, to think of themselves as second-class citizens. Afrocentric educationists believe that even Black students who perform well on measures such as standardized tests are often miseducated (C. D. Lee, 2005; Murrell, 2002). That is, those students still do not have a sense of who they are and how they can make a difference within their own communities. Afrocentric educationists do not call the daily process in which Black students attend U.S. schools “education”; instead, they call it “schooling” or “training.”

Afrocentric education researchers write much about the various ways that U.S. school systems do not educate but instead train Black children to be workers in the system, regardless of the fact that the system perpetuates a status quo, which often does not come down in Blacks’ favor. After completing his study of effective teachers of Black students, Hilliard (1997) found that schooling does not transform individuals. He states, “We can expect little more than schooling from America’s public institutions, we cannot expect education for our transformation” (p. 7). Hilliard’s (1997) finding aligns itself with Lomotey’s (1978) earlier finding from his study in Ohio. Lomotey claimed that “the purpose of schooling is to maintain the status quo.” Afrocentric educationists continue trying to advance the notion that what Black children need is a true education that imparts knowledge of self and African values. In a book, Shujaa (1994) skillfully explains the difference between education and schooling while also highlighting the detrimental effects when we mistake one for the other:

The schooling process is designed to provide an ample supply of people who are loyal to the nation-state and who have learned the skills needed to perform the

work that is necessary to maintain the dominance of the European-American elite in its social order. For African Americans, individual success in schooling is often simply a matter of demonstrating one's ability to represent the interests of the European American elite. Through such a process, African people as a group are able to derive little benefit from the schooling of our members and, even then, it is most likely to be in the interests of the European American elite for us to do so. (p. 10)

Shujaa's stance elaborates on Woodson's (1933) assertion that "[African Americans] have an attitude of contempt toward their own people because in their own as well as their mixed schools, they are taught to admire the Hebrew, Greek and Latin, and taught to despise the African" (p. 1). This behavior explains why Afrocentric educationists believe that Blacks must have an African-centered education.

## **Implications for Policy and Practice and Conclusions**

Education policy should reflect the need for local policy makers, administrators, and teachers to become culturally conscious of the groups they administer. Regardless of how daunting such a task is, there is no "general culture" to which education leaders can refer. That is, there is no basic or general "American" culture that is sufficient for education policy to advance. Education policy is created as if marginalizing entire groups of children will not have a devastating effect on the future of the United States. Specifically, the decision on the part of the education system as a whole to continue to ignore the offerings of Afrocentric researchers is having a deleterious effect on African Americans, but such behavior is also affecting America's ability to remain internationally competitive—because entire segments of the population are miseducated (Delpit, 2001; Hilliard, 1997; Shujaa, 1994).

Multicultural education in classrooms is a starting point because the principles within it recognize the pluralism within U.S. society; multicultural education also gives reason for teachers to focus on cultural items and topics (Banks, 2001). The overwhelming problems with multicultural education for Black children are threefold: (a) the long history of excluding Black people and the lack of recognition of Black cultural offerings in education textbooks and policy-making processes have made cultural multiple perspectives analysis a weak answer to a problem with a deep and troubling history—it is not enough (Murrell, 2002); (b) in order for pedagogy and policy to actually be multicultural, those engaged in the creation of it must,

themselves, be culturally literate, not just “sensitive” (Tillman, 2006); and (c) multicultural education perspectives and culturally centered perspectives are still seen as “debatable” among many educationists. That is, the offerings of cultural theorists are debatable, while Eurocentric canon writers are deemed more reliable (Asante, 1991).

Many people see the Afrocentric paradigm and education as being hostile toward people of European descent. But Afrocentric scholars such as Frederick (2004) call for educators to imagine a White teacher who works with Black students becoming familiar with the true offerings of Afrocentric education by engaging in some of the African activities and rituals over a period of time. That teacher’s ability to positively affect her or his Black students would be enhanced colossally, rather than if she or he were to superficially engage in diversity training or something to merely increase her or his mere sensitivities and tolerance.

Often, discussions about Afrocentric education raise the following question: What about other cultural groups that are not Black? The same kinds of policy and practice implications exist for other groups. Study, practice, engagement, and understanding are the key components for making multicultural education nonsuperficial. Teachers and policy makers should be required to become culturally literate to work with their population constituents. The U.S. Census Bureau (Iceland & Weinberg, 2000) reveals that the United States is hyper-segregated along racial lines anyway, so the notion of cultural separation for the purpose of learning (as in the case of Afrocentric private schools) can easily be supported. Afrocentric educationists may be the best prepared for training all teachers how to offer something of meaning to Black students.

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