THEORIES OF CULTURAL CENTEREDNESS:
MULTICULTURALISM & REALITIES

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THE MOVEMENT TOWARDS MULTICULTURALISM

A recent discussion in a braiding salon turned to the lack of understanding between different cultures on certain concepts that have different meanings. As a multiculturalist who is also African centered, I responded to the discussion on cultural realities from a centered perspective. The scenario was this way: A black man is admitted to the psychiatric ward in a local hospital because he was talking out of his mind. The nurses on the floor who were white, assessed his case; when asked what he was doing which resulted in him being placed on the ward the man said, "I can't understand it; I was just minding my business riding around on my hog; I was doing fine, and they say I'm crazy." The nurse said, "what do you mean you were riding on your hog, that doesn't seem right. The bewildered man repeated what he had said. The nurses decided that the man should be committed because he was "out of his head." My hair technician, the one black nurse who worked on this ward, came to work the day after the decision to commit; she was briefed on the patient who was 'not talking right'. After talking to the patient, she explained that he was not 'out of his head.' She explained that by riding on his hog, the patient had a cadillac that he rode around in, and he was therefore "living abundantly, or living high on the hog."   Her response closed a gap between white and black culture; her response proved that learning does not exist outside of culture. In black culture, a cadillac automobile is a sign of success---doing all right. Without the perspective of the black nurse the outcome for this patient could have been very different; this is the case in many situations, particularly for students of color. The relevance of culture, in situations at work, and particularly at schools demonstrates a need for cultural awareness; especially cultural competency for professionals who work primarily with other cultures .

Teachers working with black students need increased awareness that different cultures interpret important concepts differently. The teacher trained on concepts of cultural centers is more prepared to stimulate learning among her students; she is aware of another reality and armed with a tool to employ a more multicultural approach to learning. The multicultural movement affirms a need for more culturally consistent models of education.

On the movement, James A. Banks (1992) asks, "What does it mean to adopt a multicultural approach to American education?" It means, he

concludes, to debunk the myths of multiculturalism by asserting the fact that the multiculturalist wants to reformulate and transform the Western canon, not to purge the curriculum of the Western ideas. Western ideas are more traditional, i.e., if you teach a child mathematics, social studies, or English, his/her culture does not significantly impact his/her learning.. The traditionalist and multiculturalist must come together.

Banks lends support for a more multicultural or centered perspective in American education by affirming that education within a pluralistic society should help students create and maintain a civic community that works for the common good. Education in a democratic society should help students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they will need to participate in civic action to make society more equitable and just.

The debate on education is focused on the condition of urban education. The plight of Americans who seek public education suggests an alarming and ostensibly insurmountable problems: academic failure, high dropout rates, drugs and a recent rash of mysterious violence.   One reaction to the condition of urban education in America is the concept of centeredness, or the movement toward multiculturalism, the development of alternative perspectives for urban learners in particular, and all learners in general.

In large urban communities, some charter schools are becoming "centered schools." The concept of the centered school is about placing the student and his/her culture at the heart of the endeavor to educate. The "Centered School" is a concept based on humanistic values; it does not exist outside of culture, and places the needs of the community at the center of learning.   A centered school centers its students culturally by way of beliefs that are fundamental to the idea of liberation through learning.
A national response to academic deterioration, declining enrollment, low test scores, and parent contempt in major school districts was charter school legislation. The legislation helped to establish charter schools in various states. A charter school is an independent public school established and operated under a charter from the local board of school directors. To create alternative educational settings that reduce barriers to academic success, school districts in New York, Detroit, Portland and Philadelphia granted charters. Once granted a charter, schools were established to serve the community in which they were based.

THEORIES OF CENTEREDNESS

The conception of centeredness stems from the notion that students desire or need a concentration of study or reflection on human experience that is different---non-traditional. Traditionally, students learn from a monocultural view; they learn that the American culture as we know it today was basically bequeathed to the American public by one culture - European.

As America becomes increasingly diverse, the need to engage alternative views or cultural perspectives - a more pluralistic orientation, becomes obvious. This need becomes real to the educators who assume a more centered or multicultural perspective in the classroom. For that to happen, the teacher engages students in dialogues on race. It is the race issue that has precipitated discussion on multicultural matters. And it is culture which shapes the need for more pluralistic approaches to education. Ultimately, it is the cultural center of the messenger that determines the direction or orientation of the information presented.

The cultural center of the messenger or the curriculum writer can be determined by the content of the information presented. Therefore, one of our basic needs in American schools is for more culture-consciousness for teachers and other curriculum writers.   Teachers and curriculum writers who espouse values and beliefs that affirm only a European centered view of [reality] and American culture have truly miseducated our students. In turn, many students who seek public education do not see themselves or their experiences as part of the learning equation. The reality of seeing oneself as an actor in world history rather than as the acted upon is denied. For the African American student who studies American history in traditional schools, many times the role/experiences of his/her ancestor emerges during slavery. The student is taught that the contributions of his/her people amount to their roles as slaves.

Why not focus on the more "centered" term - 'enslavement' when examining American history? To do so would be an orientation toward ideas that enslavement as a process involved more than one actor. Rather than viewing slavery as amounting to the total contribution of African Americans during the embryonic stages of America, student's thinking instead would be encouraged toward their own cultural centers - the roles of their ancestors in human history. When the student is orientated in this manner, not only does it force the dialogue toward a study of a people's history from a subject rather than object position, but it affirms the concept/impression of truth.

In a multicultural endeavor, a centered perspective is employed because this professes the truth be taught. From a centered perspective, when we teach Thomas Jefferson, Columbus or Revere, we teach the truth about them. In an effort to undo years of misinformation, we need learners to know and trust that we will give them the truth. Teaching the truth about world history will ultimately elevate the self-esteem among African Americans. This is a goal of a centered perspective, but it is not the only goal. All students benefit by introducing ideas which affirm historical contributions of other cultures to world history. Research suggest that by affirming historical contributions to human civilization by non-white cultures, is to reduce the arrogance of white students who are taught to believe they are the only contributors to human civilization and culture.

RELEVANT RACE MATTERS

In a multicultural setting or environment, matters of race are significant issues. Multiculturalism which means many cultural perspectives, seeks to even the playing field for historically marginalized groups who have been placed and remain on the fringes of human history. For example, studies in multiculturalism seek to relocate or reposition the place of Africans on the world stage - to center the black race in world history. To study American history from the point of view of the African is African centered; it is to engage in multicultural studies. To assume that an African-centered perspective is not multiculturalism is inaccurate. Because multiculturalism is based on many perspectives, an African-centered perspective fits precisely into a multicultural project. To know that we are African-centered is to know and affirm a position in the best interest of Africans.

 In an African world view, education should begin with Africa. Since Africa is the beginning of all things, to begin there is to view education from the perspective of the African. Therefore, for education to be meaningful in the context of an American multicultural society, according to Woodson (1933), "it must first address the African's historical experiences, both in Africa and America."

Historically, African scholars recognized the necessity for the African to reconstruct his/her world which has been distorted by Europeans. Over fifty years ago, Woodson (1933) realized that the hegemony of European centered perspectives in education had succeeded in distorting, omitting, and degrading any and almost all references to Black consciousness and identity in Africa. Woodson not only examines the effects of European centered education on Americans, but he also analyzes its effects on its designers. He concludes that Europeans have certainly benefited both overtly and subtly from the education system only through the self-aggrandizement of their culture and the demeaning and negation of anything African. From a multicultural perspective, according to DuBois (1940) "Education has to do primarily with the souls of your own children and thus with the future of the Negro race in America." These philosophies promote and challenge the study of African Americans according to how African Americans rather than others experience and perceive African Americans.

According to DuBois, present day assumptions about Africa include that it [Africa] is removed from the realms, in fact "the center of our burning social problems and especially from our problem of world war." Therefore, in his work (1986), he seeks to remind readers of how critical a part Africa has played in human history, past and present, and how impossible it is to forget this and rightly explain the present plight of mankind.

Cheikh Anta Diop, the famous Senegalese scholar, was one of the premier African- centered warriors in the reconstruction of world history. He argues that ancient Egypt was a Black civilization, and that it was the Nubian civilization which "preceded and might even have given birth to that of Egypt. This is quite logical if one considers the likelihood that the Nile Valley was peopled by a progressive descent of the Black peoples from the region of the Great Lakes, the cradle of Homo sapiens." He attacks the supreme discourse of Western thought on the "race question of the Egyptians" which is the most tacit impression of Diop's argument. Diop's objectives, to set forth a body of knowledge from every thinkable endeavor and intellectual discourse was achieved anthropologically, linguistically, ontologically, mythically, culturally, and historically.

Contemporary African-centered ideas in education were further advanced by Asante (1991). "Multiculturalism in education is derived from several cultural perspectives; African centered is one of those perspectives, and it is one of the simplest and fastest growing ideas to have been developed in the African-American intellectual community." On why we must Afrocentricize and multiculturalize the curriculum, Asa G. Hilliard, a renowned African American social and political thinker asserts, "if the curriculum is centered in truth, it will be pluralistic." Finally, James A. Banks (1992) informs us that the multicultural education movement emerged out of Western democratic ideals of equality and justice. Therefore, its aim is to close the gap between those ideals and societal practices that contradict those ideals, such as discrimination based on race, gender, and social class.

CONTRASTING VIEWS

Opposition to multiculturalism stems from gross misinterpretations of the concept. These misinterpretations are conscious and unconscious intents to perpetuate racist ideologies, natural resistance to change, and also ignorance. A 1994 study by Ollie I. Manley on teachers perceptions of an African-centered curriculum revealed criticisms on the validity of *African-American Baseline Essays* (1988), a resource being used by several Afrocentric programs. Comments included that the essays were more Egyptocentric than Afrocentric. Asa G. Hilliard responds to this critique by saying, "Egypt is in Africa." Ravitch & Nicholson, (1990) oppose the idea of resolving African American low academic achievement through centered perspectives found in a multicultural approach.

Opposition to multiculturalism stems from the idea that it would be much more beneficial to society to stress assimilation rather than emphasize the culture of Africans and African Americans, because assimilation is almost synonymous with the melting pot theory which failed to recognize the cultural differences of ethnic groups. The opposition has little to do with claims of

unfounded knowledge, but rather more to do with the maintenance of white superiority.

In general, objections to multiculturalism are rooted in institutional racism in America. These objections more likely serve a need for acceptance and reward by the White establishment, a need which Toni Morrison (1993) regards as "this surrender to whiteness." The acceptance and reward sought is a need which Morrison says is a "bonus;" and this "bonus of whiteness" is so entrenched in American societies that the unspoken issue of race, the fight for jobs and space, demands that a hostile posture toward multicultural ideas be struck at the Americanizing door before it will open.

Current issues and enduring questions on culturally centered curricula pose more opportunities for educators to advance multicultural thinking. As educators, it's time to ask: "By whose standards are we judging this multiculturalism?" And we must be concerned about how material is presented, who presents it, and the sensitivity and understanding of the presenters. The way that curricula are delivered will either perpetuate the racial disharmony we find ourselves in - or begin to dissolve it. We must understand that the delivery of the curriculum might be more important than the curriculum itself.

I propose that institutions of teacher training and the federal government begin to address jointly our society's cultural and racial disharmony while preparing young people for the profession. Teacher preparation programs must be twofold in nature: (1) develop skills in pedagogy and (2) demonstrate cultural competencies. Doing so would reduce anxieties associated with discussing cultural particulars, i.e., matters of race.

I can recall lecturing on multiculturalism to a group of students seeking teacher certification at the University. Although the majority of the students would seek teaching jobs in urban education, most had little or no knowledge of African cultural realities. Actually, my 90 minute lecture was about the extent of training these future educators would receive on matters of race. Students of color make up the majority in most urban school systems; the reality is teachers are ill prepared to teach non-white students.

Students in general, and students of color in particular are disserviced in urban education. Parents who are also taxpayers continue to pay for this disservice which amounts to an injustice. This country was founded on the ideal of justice, however, until multiculturalism in education is truly adopted, urban learners in a free country will continue to be injured, rather than educated.

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