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Integrating Aesthetics: Transforming Continuing Education Through Africentric Practice

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to describe curricula used in three African centered educational institutions in Chicago. Goals of this Africentric qualitative case study were to analyze content and instructional strategies in order to design a continuing and professional education model for K-12 educators in traditional public schools.

Overview of the Research

K-12 practitioners in urban areas are faced with unique circumstances while serving racially marginalized students in public schools. As a response to this issue, the purpose of this study was to review and describe curricula used in three African centered institutions in Chicago, analyzing their content and instructional strategies. African centered schools are uniquely different in terms of the mission, educational philosophy, and vision, thus the need for research emerges in order to explore new ways to identify, describe, and disseminate knowledge for traditional public school practitioners. Expanding the use of Africentric Culturally Grounded Community Based Programming (Colin 1999) is essential in the field of continuing and professional education, to adequately prepare practitioners to instruct students of the African Diaspora. Goals of the research were to analyze and describe their content and process in order to design a continuing and professional education model based on their experiences for traditional public school practitioners.

The research design was an Africentric qualitative single case study that focused on the experiences of six educators in African centered schools. The Africentric Paradigm was utilized as the theoretical framework. Research questions that guided the study were as follows: 1) how are conceptual and theoretical elements of the Africentric Paradigm reflected in educational environments and incorporated into curriculum and instruction at an African centered institution, 2) how are the problems that result from sociocultural and intellectual racism addressed both cognitively and affectively through curriculum content, 3) what are the design and objectives of continuing education programs implemented at African centered institutions, and 4) what culturally grounded strategies can be transferred to a traditional continuing education model for K-12 practitioners?

Data collection instruments included document analysis, interviews as the primary source, site visits (observations), and photography. While visiting each institution, I witnessed a considerable amount of artwork in the hallways and classrooms representing Kemet, Ma'at and other African centered concepts and symbolism. Photographs taken during site visits were reflective of interview dialogue with participants. The focus on African centered aesthetic (aesthetic being defined as concern with beauty or the appreciation of beauty) visually reinforced positive selfethnic identity (Colin 1989) in these communities. The images were demonstrative of how curriculum and instruction at African centered schools integrates cognitive skills with creative efforts. Practitioners were using Kuumba (creativity) as a tool to facilitate culturally grounded dialogue and activities based on Imani (faith) and Nia (purpose). To analyze data in this case study, I used conceptual elements from the Africentric Paradigm including The Seven Principles of the Nguzo Saba (Colin 1989), Virtues of Ma'at (Karenga 2004), and the concepts of Twinness and Complementarity (Tolliver 2010). To interpret field notes that emerged from

observations during site visits, I completed a series of paintings to create a meaning context, which expressed the cognitive and affective impacts of instructional activities. In addition to visually enhancing the study, artwork expands the knowledge base to non-academic audiences and serves as a more creative place to begin discourse in academia.

Several important findings and conclusions emerged from the analysis. Each site had similar missions and the shared goal of building positive selfethnic image (Colin 1989). This was reflected in both curricula and artistic instructional strategies. African centered practice is grounded in the cognitive and affective domains. In addition to K-12 curriculum content, what makes African centered schools different is the focus on building positive selfethnic identity and the importance of community empowerment. Academic rigor and affective growth were developed through a consciousness of African centered ideas and positive selfethnic image (Colin 1989). These culturally grounded strategies were reflected in the continuing education model that emerged from analysis. If we look at how traditional public schools are affecting our communities, it is clear that our students are being cognitively and affectively marginalized. By employing an Africentric framework, continuing and professional education can play a role in adequately preparing traditional public school educators for success with students of this Diaspora.

The Seven Principles of the Nguzo Saba were incorporated into school culture and instructional strategies in unique ways. During the document analysis phase, it became apparent that Imani (faith) and Kujichagulia (self-determination) were reflected in the mission statement of each institution. The other principles (in Swahili followed by English translation) Umoja (unity), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), and Kuumba (creativity) (Colin 1989) were integrated in every subject matter. Furthermore, curriculum and instruction integrates cognitive skills with creative efforts; Kuumba (creativity) was used as a tool to facilitate culturally grounded dialogue and activities based on Imani (faith) and Nia (purpose). This approach to teaching reinforces a culturally grounded mindset and outlook based on accurate historical perspectives. The Seven Principles of the Nguzo Saba work in tandem to reinforce Ma'at (Deep Wisdom) while reflecting a true understanding of Classical African culture.

Ujima (collective work and responsibility) was an important component of African centered practice. During the analysis, community empowerment reoccurred as an important theme relative to the philosophy and purpose of each institution. In addition to the importance of community, building positive selfethnic image is also encouraged. Africentric communities foster students' cognitive abilities while developing creative spirits. Since before Ancient Kemet, artistic practice has been a way of knowing, understanding, and doing for people of this Diaspora. At each institution, culturally grounded instructional strategies are embedded in every program, ranging from Kwanzaa celebrations and ceremonious drumming, to jewelry and mask making. Each activity has a critical impact not only on school culture, but also on the development of a positive selfethnic image (Colin 1989). Adult education, more specifically continuing and professional education, can play a large part in preparing practitioners for success with students of this Diaspora. By changing the way we look at classroom instruction, we can increase social justice and equity in the field of adult education.

Employing an Africentric Lens to Address Oppression

As a member of this Diaspora the attainment of my professional and personal goals are impacted by racial oppression. Most thoughts, beliefs, and assumptions relative to education have been shaped by dominant culture; the Africentric Paradigm helps me reconceptualize my experiences and move toward more liberatory practice. We cannot be hesitant to address racial differences in our formal and informal learning experiences. Relative to mainstream education, “many are uncomfortable acknowledging any student differences and particularly racial differences...however, these attempts at colorblindness mask a ‘dysconscious racism,’ an ‘uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequality and exploitation’” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 31). Viewing education through the Africentric Paradigm can help the field move toward a reconceptualization of dominant culture.

As a global citizen, educator, avid lover of the arts and member of the African Diaspora, I find it impossible not to explore ways to facilitate social justice and equity in the field of adult and continuing education. Unfortunately, the education I received prior to my Masters studies failed to mention oppression, unfairly advantaged persons, or the fact that we are all participants in a damaged culture. By damaged, I mean a society where inequalities keep certain groups of people oppressed; the status quo, supported by many institutions in America, shows no signs of being eliminated. Practitioners are affected by failed education systems in many different ways. At times, the negative impact of racial and economic oppression is reflected in traditional classrooms. Curriculum and instruction is rooted in a Western body of knowledge, lacking culturally grounded strategies. The African centered continuing education model that emerged from analysis can assist K-12 practitioners with unique issues that urban students face as a result of intellectual racism.

In Western culture, racial marginalization often affects our experiences. Economic oppression relative to this group is a direct result of racial group membership. Issues like generational illiteracy, institutional oppression, and economic depression have created unique circumstances for marginalized communities. K-12 educators in traditional public schools often utilize instructional strategies that encourage diversity and inclusion as opposed to researching and addressing specific cultural needs of this Diaspora. With this approach, there is no consideration of the historical impact of sociocultural racism. To combat internalized oppression there must be discourse relative to our formal and informal learning experiences. The African centered paradigm is a more appropriate lens for reflecting on our authentic lived experiences. It is important to create a framework for dialogue to rationalize our experiences helping restore order and balance.

Exploring the Educational Utility of Africentrism in Continuing and Professional Education

Completing an undergraduate degree is not enough; whether tenured or first year, continuing and professional education needs to be required annually for K-12 practitioners. Programs should be available for adult learners to engage in African centered discourse to meet the needs of racially marginalized students. Educators in urban areas are affected by lack of empathy or their preconceived notions regarding communities of color, which heavily impacts student success. In the fight for social justice and equity in the field, Africentric Culturally Grounded Community Based Programming (Colin 1999) can be a key to saving our schools one at a time. Using an Africentric framework is critical to helping adult learners create more meaningful educational experiences through continuing and professional education.

Schools sometimes serve as a refuge from neighborhood perils for a lot of urban students. African

centered institutions are places where students are educated relative to their cultural identity. Traditional K-12 educators without an understanding of appropriate culturally grounded strategies and content do more harm than good in the classroom, continuing to disempower students. Mainstream education tends to ignore issues of sociocultural and intellectual racism in education therefore reinforcing the subtlest forms of racism. The continuing and professional education workshop I developed starts with an overview of conceptual and theoretical elements of the Africentric Paradigm. It also includes a demonstration of classroom curriculum models for any grade level and discipline. There are simple strategies that can assist with establishing culture and improving classroom management in addition to building selfethnic identity (Colin 1989) for students of this Diaspora. Employing these methods is critical to creating safe learning habitats and just distribution of resources in urban areas.

My research was focused on teaching K-12 educators to look at problems in new ways while practicing critical thinking skills to learn collaboration, cooperation and innovative solutions. Visual arts, dance and music should not be absent from learning, but valued as tools for success in communities of color. Data analysis reflected and indicated the benefits of multiple ways of knowing and doing; creative play, by definition, nurtures different aspects of child development. From a cultural center, these activities allow students to approach tasks visually and kinesthetically, coming up with new questions, and more innovative answers. Fostering cognitive as well as affective experiences for students is essential in African centered communities. The Africentric Paradigm and its conceptual elements are critical to helping educators understand ways we can uplift communities through creativity and positive selfethnic imagery (Colin 1989).

By applying an Africentric lens to continuing and professional education practice, we can positively impact K-12 public education. Culturally grounded curriculum is African centered, and as Veharen points out, "The African origin of civilization is important because it relates to the development of human approaches to culture and the survival of the human species," (Verharen, 2002, p. 70); it is critical to incorporate this knowledge base into mainstream education. If practitioners were equipped with culturally grounded curriculum, they could help students build positive selfethnic identity (Colin 1989). There are a few instructional strategies that can be taken from Africentric schools and used in traditional public school classrooms to help students be more successful. We must integrate African centered practice in adult education and community programs. Communities cannot heal themselves; teaching the importance of building character, integrity, and centrism can start with creative based, culturally grounded instruction.

Aesthetic Meets Rhetoric: Exploring Cultural Artifacts of the Diaspora

Since the goals of my research included expanding the knowledge base of Africentrism, and developing a workshop to facilitate its educational utility in CPE, it was critical to look at the historical impact that the Seven Principles of the Nguzo Saba have had on this Diaspora, in order to develop pedagogical practice for the future. Kuumba (creativity) has played a salient role in adult education since our displacement in America; it is used to convey Nia (purpose) and Imani (faith) through various forms of visual and creative arts. As Kelly Miller (1926) writes, "The Negro must learn to know his own story and to love it" (Miller, 1926, p. 5) and passing these stories to the next generation is a pivotal role of liberatory practice. Even during slavery there was an inherent aesthetic developing in the United States. Artists like Henry Ossawa Tanner and Edmonia Lewis depicted authentic lived experiences of the past, present and future. By integrating conceptual elements of the Africentric Paradigm, they cultivated a rich

history of creativity rooted in Africa. Art is a pivotal mode of instruction for people of the African Diaspora, literature being one of the most important forms of Kuumba (creativity). Alain Locke, adult educator and father of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote many essays relative to the importance of creative practice. Goals of this movement were transmission of culture and history within the community; it also helped the world appreciate the consummate talent of the African Diaspora. Artistic movements like the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement played a salient role in creating safe habitats for people of this Diaspora in addition to advocating for equitable distribution of resources.

Edmonia Lewis, born on the Canadian border, was sculptor and painter in the late nineteenth century. Bearden confirms, “Lewis was the first African American artist to advertise herself by name as a “colored artist.” In doing this, she took the slaveholders’ contention that black people were incapable of art and turned it on its head to her advantage, making it a reason to see her work” (Bearden, 1993, p. 69). This confrontation of racism was one of the earliest examples of Kujichagulia (self-determination), claiming the responsibility to define oneself, occurring even before the twentieth century. Powerful statements like these provided some of the first critiques of race and equity in a written form. From the work of Phyllis Wheatley in the eighteenth century to the contemporary work of Fred Wilson, Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, the inherent inclusion of the Seven Principles of the Nguzo Saba is clear. Relative to my analysis, examining these historical figures and events proves we can only move forward in pedagogical practice by building a foundation on innovations of the past. Creativity and art making can play a salient role in the re-education of our communities. We must confront change in a holistic fashion, addressing not only cognitive needs but spiritual and mental well-being. Art based learning is a critical part of identity and community development. We must continue to advocate for art and Africentrism as modes of anti-racist pedagogy.



Queen Hatshepsut: The First of Humanity © 2012 auburnaesthetic.com
To view artwork completed during the course of research visit auburnaesthetic.com

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