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THE AFROCENTRIC SCHOOL DEBATE

Not so “Black and White”

*An Examination of the Theoretical Perspectives & Empirical Research of
the Afrocentric School Debate*

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Abstract

This paper explores the public debate of "Afrocentric Schools", as an alternative education system. In an attempt to explain the relative underachievement of African-American students, various theoretical perspectives concerning the black-white achievement gap are presented. Furthermore, the author examines existing empirical evidence concerning the achievement/underachievement of African-American students, offering either support or disapproval for Afrocentric Schools. In addition, The Africentric Alternative School in Toronto is utilized as a case study to examine the efficacy of Afrocentric Schools. The examined empirical evidence illustrates that the Afrocentric School debate is not so "black and white". Rather, the black-white achievement gap depends on the specific cultural dispositions and context of the school. Therefore, the author recommends that decisions to implement race-based schools should reflect research conducted at the local level.

Introduction

As a major institution, education is recognized as serving a multitude of functions in society. From a functionalist perspective, the primary purpose of education and the school system is to serve as an agency for socialization (Parsons, 1959). That is, education aids in the transmission of values and knowledge, and allows individuals to be motivationally and technically trained to perform adult roles (Parsons, 1959). Further, education socializes individuals into specific roles, varying on the social order continuum (Akbar, 1984). Therefore, education and the school system plays an essential role in helping children learn who they are, what they are expected to do, and how they will achieve their goals and position in the social order.

Given its established importance and functions, education is a major public investment. Yet a prevalent conversation amongst scholars, educators, and parents is that the education system does not provide a uniform experience for all students. Statistics concerning high school dropout rates of minority students have brought this issue to the forefront. Research has demonstrated that academic underachievement and dropout rates among black youth remains high in comparison to their white counterparts (Agyepong,

2010). As a result, concerned parents and educators argue that the dropout rates of black youth can be attributed to the inability of the traditional education system to address the cultural and educational needs of these youth (Gordon & Zinga, 2012).

Stemming from this concern, a public debate has ensued. This debate centers on the concept of 'Afrocentric Schools', as an alternative education system. The objective of the Afrocentric School is to provide an atmosphere that is more culturally aligned with the experiences of black youth and free from racial and cultural biases, thus promoting student engagement (Dei, 2008). Both sides of the debate are rooted with theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence, offering either support or disapproval for Afrocentric Schools.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding this important public debate. Firstly, this paper will explore the various theoretical perspectives surrounding the black-white achievement gap, which attempt to explain the relative underachievement of black students. Following, this paper will examine existing empirical evidence concerning the achievement/underachievement of black students, offering support or refuting the various theories. Analyzing and discussing both theoretical perspectives and empirical research allows the context of the Afrocentric School debate to be better understood. In addition, the Africentric Alternative School opened by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in 2009 will be discussed, exploring its policies, curriculum, and effectiveness, as well as the opinions of black youth and parents on this school.

Theoretical Perspectives of Black Academic Achievement

Various theoretical perspectives of black achievement emphasize *cultural* explanations. That is, they attribute differences in academic achievement to differing ethnic and cultural values placed on education (Herman, 2009). John Ogbu's 'oppositional culture theory' (1998) illustrates this idea. Ogbu and Fordham (1986) argue that as a result of a history of discrimination in the United States, black adolescents value educational achievement differently than other groups. Particularly, blacks have come to associate academic success with "acting white" (Ogbu, 1995). As a result, Ogbu (1995) argues that adolescents may develop an oppositional culture and language frame of reference than that of their white counterparts. Subsequently, Ogbu (2003) introduced the concept of "the burden of acting white" to help explain why black students often reject excelling in school, as a means of preserving their cultural identities.

In discussing race and academic achievement Ogbu (1998) classifies different types of minority status. Rather than defining minority status in terms of numerical representation, Ogbu (1998) defines minority status on the basis of power relations between groups. For the purpose of explaining differences in academic achievement, Ogbu (1998) classifies minority groups into voluntary (immigrant), and involuntary (nonimmigrant) minorities.

The essential distinguishing features between the two groups is that voluntary minorities consist of people who voluntarily chose to move to the United States in hope of a better future, and do not interpret their presence as forced upon them (Ogbu, 1998). In contrast, involuntary minorities are those who have been "conquered, colonized, or

enslaved” (Ogbu, 1998, p. 165). In contrast to voluntary minorities, involuntary minorities have joined the United States society against their will (Ogbu, 1998).

In regard to academic achievement, Ogbu (1990) argued that voluntary minorities do better in school because they came to the United States *expecting* to improve their status through participation in the education system. In comparison, involuntary minorities are less successful as they were brought into society against their will, and had no such expectation (Ogbu, 1990). Essentially, the oppositional culture theory argues that identifying as an involuntary minority group would weaken academic performance, while identifying as a voluntary minority would improve academic performance (Ogbu & Davis, 2003).

Though Ogbu’s work has been influential in the study of race and academic achievement, it has not been met without criticism. O’Connor (2001) argued that Ogbu’s theory fails to account for within-group variation and achievement. Further, O’Connor (2001) contended that minority students’ interpretations of their racial identity are not uniform, and thus Ogbu’s oppositional culture theory ignores the complexities of racial identities. Also in contrast to Ogbu’s study of minorities, Oyserman et al. (2003) suggested that having a strong ethnic identity to one’s own culture is a *protective* factor for minority students in regard to academic achievement.

A psychological perspective that offers further insight on the underachievement of black students is the theory of ‘stereotype threat’. Steele and Aronson (1995) argued that minority students are particularly vulnerable to negative stereotypes regarding their group’s academic performance. Further, awareness of these stereotypes can psychologically threaten these students, a phenomenon known as “stereotype threat”

(Steele & Aronson, 1995). In turn, the fear of living down to these negative stereotypes can instigate negative responses, impairing their academic performance, and psychological engagement with school (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002).

Another theoretical perspective that can be utilized for the analysis of racial differences in academic achievement is the theory of cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) first introduced the concept of cultural capital, and defined it as the general background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next. Bourdieu (1977) argued that students from privileged families are socialized to a lifestyle that instills privilege and opportunity.

Further, Bourdieu (1977) maintained that the reproduction of these inequalities is accelerated in schools, as schools promote the cultural capital of the dominant class, rewarding students who possess such capital, and penalizing others who do not. Since socio-economic status (SES) is related to race, and blacks are likely to have lower SES than whites, what follows is that they are less likely to have cultural capital as well (Hallinan, 2011). Therefore, the school becomes an agent of social exclusion and reproduction, and black students who lack the resources and cultural capital are disadvantaged (Tzanakis, 2011).

Without undermining the importance of an individual's culture and background, the majority of sociologists have focused on the effects of social structure, and organizational processes in explaining racial disparities in academic achievement (Hallinan, 2011). These sociologists focus on how social class reproduces itself from one generation to the next, emphasizing the role that the education system plays in the transmission of social class and privilege (Hallinan, 2011). Two theories that have been

prominent in highlighting this perspective are the social reproduction theory, and resistance theory. Both theories suggest that the education system, and thus schools, are the primary agent for both social change and social reproduction, (Hallinan, 2011).

Bowles and Gintis' (1976) social reproduction theory proposes that the hierarchy system in schools mirrors the hierarchy structure of the labour market. Further, they argue that schools perpetuate a capitalist system by preparing students to adopt their place in the hierarchy. Depending on the ascribed and achieved characteristics of the students, schools offer different learning opportunities and outcomes (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Additionally, schools adopt the authority and control relations that are often found in the workplace (Bowles & Gintis, 2002).

Giroux's (1981) resistance theory focuses on students' *reactions* to the school's effort to reproduce the social order. Giroux (1983) examined the motivations and behaviours of students who consciously or unconsciously rejected a portion, or all of the social order they were subjected to. By emphasizing their nonconformity and resistance, Giroux (2001) argued, that in some cases, their responses to the school system were morally and politically justified.

Common to both the social reproduction theory and resistance theory, is the view that social class, *not race*, is the basis for social reproduction and change. These theories run contrary to perspectives such as Ogbu's (1998) oppositional culture theory, and Steele and Aronson's (1995) stereotype threat theory. Other theorists position themselves somewhat in the middle of the theoretical debate. For instance, Wilson (1978) argued that though race constrained social mobility in the past, social class is more relevant in explaining social disparity in contemporary society.

Evidently, there exists a lack of theoretical consistency in the discussion of racial disparities in academic achievement. Highlighting the various theoretical perspectives allows one to better understand the origin of the Afrocentric School debate. How can such a school be agreed upon and implemented with considerable ease if the theoretical perspectives arguing for or against its existence are so conflicted? Given the above discussion of the theoretical views, it is important to now turn to a discussion of the empirical research. Are the various theories supported by empirical evidence? Further, does the research conducted on the black-white achievement gap support or refute the case for Afrocentric Schools?

The Case For Afrocentric Schools

The support for Afrocentric Schools has come from a number of different sources, such as the public, academics, teachers, and students. In 1994, the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning (ORCL) supported the idea of black-focused schools stating:

In jurisdictions with large numbers of black students, school boards, academic authorities, faculties of education, and representatives of the black community must collaborate to establish demonstration schools and innovative programs based on best practices in bringing about academic success for black students (ORCL 1994, p. 9).

A vast amount of support for Afrocentric schools has come from Canadian academic, George Dei. Dei (1997) conducted a large study in which he interviewed both black students and parents regarding the traditional school system. Dei (1997) found that the participants of his study attributed the high dropout rate in schools to the disengagement and lack of representation of African-American role models in the school.

Further, he found that parents believed that the traditional education system fails to meet the needs of the children, and that an Afrocentric School would provide students with a better sense of identity and inclusion (Dei, 1997).

Furthermore, an ample amount of empirical evidence supports Ogbu's (1986) claims. In her study exploring the attitudes and achievement of black adolescents, Mickelson (1990) argued that race and class heavily influence school outcomes. Particularly, Mickelson (1990) found that a large proportion of the gap in white and black test scores was due to the different concrete beliefs the students held concerning education.

Consistent with Ogbu's (2003) concept of "the burden of acting white", Neal-Barnett (2001) conducted focus groups with black adolescents and found that high-achieving black students often encounter negative accusations of "acting white", and that students' responses to these charges often undermined their academic performance. Horvat and Lewis (2003) provided further evidence for Ogbu's theory, yet perhaps to a lesser extent. The researchers studied two urban high schools, one predominantly black, and one racially diverse. They found that two out of eight high-achieving black participants reported being accused of acting white. However, only in one instance was the accusation in direct response to academic behaviour, as opposed to speech or other behaviour (Horvat & Lewis, 2003).

Furthermore, Fryer and Torelli's (2010) study entitled, *An Empirical Analysis of "Acting White"* found that the phenomenon of 'acting white' had a statistically significant effect on black student achievement, *only* in the context of certain schools. In particular, a statistically significant effect was found in public schools with high

interracial contact among high achieving students, but little or no effect was found in predominantly black or private schools. These findings offer support in favour of Afrocentric Schools, as they demonstrate that students in interracial schools experience the “burden of acting white” to a greater extent than students in predominantly black schools.

A recent study by Durkee and Williams (2015) offered interesting insight to the “burden of acting white” concept. The researchers examined specific aspects of the “acting white” hypothesis amongst black college students, such as the frequency of occurrence, level of discomfort experienced by the students, racial/ethnic identity, and mental health (i.e. symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress).

Durkee and Williams (2015) concluded that there were no significant differences between individuals who did and did not report being accused of acting white. Rather, the *manner* in which the accusation was experienced produced meaningful results. Those who were accused of acting white more frequently reported lower racial and ethnic identification, and greater symptoms of mental health risk. Further, those with greater racial and ethnic identification experienced higher levels of discomfort. The findings suggest that the accusation of acting white is perceived and experienced differently by individual black students, and that the accusation carries substantial risks for psychological outcomes (Durkee & Williams, 2015). Though these results do not necessarily refute Ogbu’s theory, they certainly demonstrate that the relationship among black student’s perceptions and experiences with academic achievement is intricate and complicated by many factors.

The Case Against Afrocentric Schools

Similar to the support for Afrocentric Schools, arguments against Afrocentric schools have come from a number of sources, including the public, academics, and political figures. At the time of the 2008 TDSB vote in regard to opening the first race-based school in Canada, Dalton McGuinty, Premier of the Ontario Government, spoke outwardly about his opposition to the school (Patterson, 2011). McGuinty stated, "I continue to believe that the best way for us to educate our children is to bring them together so they can come together, learn together and grow together" (Macleans, 2008).

Many who oppose Afrocentric Schools, argue instead for an inclusive education system (Patterson, 2011). Lund (1998) describes the inclusive education system as one in which students "work and learn in classrooms together with their African-Canadian peers, united by a common desire to reveal and challenge discriminatory policies and practices, (p. 198). Further, inclusive education systems foster respect for diversity through co-operation, rather than separation (Lund, 1998).

Even Dei, a strong supporter and advocate for Afrocentric Schools, has found opposition to the school amongst his own research. Some students in Dei's (1996) interview-based study expressed a concern that Afrocentric schools would gain a poor reputation. Additionally, many students stated that separation was a bad idea, as segregating students away from each other would promote their cultural *differences*, instead of fostering inclusion (Dei, 1996).

An abundance of data casts doubt on the existence of an achievement gap between white and black students, as well negative attitudes and perceptions towards academic achievement, thus supporting the argument against Afrocentric Schools. For

instance, utilizing data from the National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS), Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) found that black students demonstrate better attitudes toward schooling than their white peers, believe that education is important, and are more optimistic about their futures.

Further, Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) suggested that the reason for black students' poorer performance in comparison to their white counterparts was because these students lacked the material conditions that allow for good study habits and successful school performance. This finding emphasizes that low achievement amongst black students can be attributed to economic and social forces, as opposed to placing responsibility on the culture of these students (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005).

Further advancing the argument against Afrocentric Schools is empirical data that has failed to find support for Ogbu's oppositional culture theory (1998), as well as "the burden of acting white" (2003). Using the NELS, Lundy (2003) examined specific components of the oppositional culture theory, such as peer relations and school resistance. Inconsistent with the oppositional culture theory, Lundy (2003) found that black students did not display greater resistance toward school, than did their white counterparts.

Also using data from the NELS, Cook and Ludwig (1998) examined whether black students experienced greater alienation towards school than whites, and if they incurred greater social penalties from their peers for succeeding academically. The researchers found little difference to the degree in which black and white students experienced alienation towards school. Further, the results suggested that high academic achievement for black students created more social benefits than costs (Cook & Ludwig,

1998). Similarly, in an 18-month study of eleven North Carolina schools, Tyson et al. (2005) concluded that white and black students shared the same attitudes about academic achievement, and that both groups wanted to succeed in school.

The Debate

An analysis of the literature concerning race and academic achievement reveals that the theoretical argument is ultimately divided. Further, the lack of consensus is replicated amongst the conflicting empirical evidence. While a large amount of empirical evidence suggests that Afrocentric Schools would be beneficial, an equal amount of empirical evidence suggests that these schools are unwarranted, and would only serve to isolate students from different backgrounds.

The discussed theoretical perspectives and empirical research explored issues such as the existence of a white-black achievement gap, black students' perceptions and attitudes towards school and academic achievement, and whether or not black students experience isolation from the curriculum, as well as their peers, in the traditional school. Essentially, the existing literature attempts to determine if there is justification for Afrocentric schools in the first place.

Notwithstanding these considerations, the heart of the Afrocentric School debate seems to be the issue of separation versus inclusion. However, while a large amount of data both supporting and opposing the *development* of Afrocentric Schools exists, literature regarding the effectiveness of Afrocentric Schools is scarce. The majority of the evidence concerning the effectiveness of Afrocentric Schools is based on qualitative and anecdotal evidence (Patterson, 2011). Nonetheless, an overview of the TDSB Africentric

Alternative School is presented below as a means of demonstrating the Afrocentric School debate in action.

Afrocentricity in Practice: Toronto's Africentric Alternative School

In 2009, the TDSB opened the first publically funded, voluntary, race-based school in Canada, primarily in response to the disproportionate dropout rate amongst black students (Patterson, 2011). The Afrocentric Alternative School offers an African-centered curriculum, incorporating the experiences and histories of African people into the provincially mandated curriculum. Furthermore, the majority of the teaching staff is of African descent ("Africentric Alternative School", n.d).

The school operates under the TDSB's "Alternative School Policy", and thus the same provincial standards and requirements of all publically funded schools apply, and are necessary for successful completion (Patterson, 2011). The Alternative School Policy defines Alternative Schools as "sites that are unique in pedagogy, forms of governance, and staff involvement, and have strong parental and/or student involvement ("Alternative Schools", 2007).

Patterson (2011) examined the extent to which the Toronto Africentric Alternative School adheres to the policies, values, and principles expressed throughout all three levels of policy: TDSB, Provincial, and Federal. Specifically, these policies include "a commitment to diversity, equality, fairness, equal opportunity and inclusion" (p. 24). Overall, Patterson (2011) found far more similarities in the stated principles and values than differences amongst the Africentric Alternative School. Further, she argued that the inconsistencies that do exist most likely result from the means by which the Africentric School recognizes and emphasizes differences.

As the Toronto Africentric Alternative School is still in its primacy, there is no conclusive evidence that this school, or Afrocentric schools in general, have been an effective practice for narrowing the achievement gap between black and white students. However, following the implementation of the Toronto Africentric Alternative School, research has examined the perspectives of African-Canadian parents and students on the issue. Though unable to demonstrate *empirical* achievement gains, recounting the lived experiences of these individuals is nonetheless important.

The Toronto Africentric School: What do African-Canadian Parents and Students Say?

In an attempt to explore black youth perspectives of Africentric schooling in Toronto, Sharma (2010) interviewed black youth in the Jane and Finch community of Toronto. Her participants consisted of five black males and five black females between ages 16 to 19. Sharma (2010) found that although all participants supported the tenets of the Toronto Africentric School, the participants reported mixed opinions regarding actually attending such a school. The participants pointed to issues such as stereotypes, intra-group politics, as well as family and media opinions, as reasons for their hesitancy to attend a race-based alternative school (Sharma, 2010).

In a more recent study, Gordon and Zinga (2012) explored the reactions of black youth in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to the Africentric Alternative School. The researchers conducted six separate focus groups, totalling 57 youth across the GTA. Similar to Sharma's (2010) study, the participants of the focus groups voiced their agreement with the values and principles of the school. However, the majority of the participants disagreed with the actual implementation of a separate school.

Specifically, the participants expressed a fear that the Africentric Alternative School would create a stigma associated with being “different”. In addition, some youth expressed concern that the school served as an example of racial segregation (Gordon & Zinga, 2012). The above findings illustrate the fact that though black youth agree with the underlying rationale and values of the Africentric School, they ultimately fear it will not be effective in practice.

Agyepong (2010) conducted in-depth interviews with twenty African-Canadian parents in Toronto. Agyepong found that seventeen out of the twenty parents interviewed supported the establishment of the Africentric School, as an alternative to the traditional public school. The parents indicated that the mainstream public school created challenges for their children, such as issues of discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping. Further, the parents argued that the Africentric Alternative School is a viable option to combat these issues experienced by black youth in traditional schools (Agyepong, 2010).

The fact that the perspectives of the youth and parents differed quite dramatically is an important consideration. Yet resembling the theoretical literature and empirical evidence, the perspectives of these African-Canadian youth and parents further demonstrates the complexity of the debate, and lack of consistency in opinion. Thus, future research must continue to explore these perspectives, in hope of providing evidence on the effectiveness of Africentric Schools.

Conclusion

An examination of the theoretical perspectives, empirical research, and opinions of black youth and parents themselves, demonstrated that the debate regarding Afrocentric Schools is not so “black and white”. It was illustrated that issues concerning

the black-white achievement gap, as well black students' attitudes towards school and academic achievement are unique depending on the specific cultural disposition and context of the school. Therefore the most meaningful future research would be locally driven. In turn, decisions to implement race-based schools would reflect the research conducted at the local level.

The debate concerning Afrocentric schools is undoubtedly divided. Examples of its efficacy, such as the Toronto Afrocentric Alternative School remain inconclusive. What can be said with certainty however is that both sides of the argument ultimately want the students to succeed. Future research must focus on quantifying the effectiveness, and determining whether schools separated by race are feasible, or even desirable.

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