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Independent Black Institutions: African-Centered Education Models

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INTRODUCTION

Many have argued that the academic achievement of a large number of African American 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 20 years. Several factors have been identified as contributing to this dilemma, including teacher attitudes (Fine, 1991) and inadequate facilities (The Council of the Great City Schools, 1987).

Of late, there has been much discussion about the potential benefits for African American students of African-centered curricula. Several urban school districts in the United States including Washington, DC, Dallas, Detroit, Buffalo, New York City, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Portland are using or considering using an African-centered approach to teaching. Indeed, Portland has gone quite far already in attempting to implement such a curriculum on a far-reaching scale. The African-centered approach has been the foundation of most of the members of the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI), based in Buffalo, New York, since 1972. Contrary to what some scholars say, it is not too early to judge the results of these curricula. While the dialogue about them is very interesting, much of it is unfortunately lacking in critical information, some of which I will share in the present article.

The focus on African-centered curricula has occurred partly because parents and educators are looking for new ways to improve the education of African American children. Mention is often made of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville (New York City) controversy of the 1960s. This conflict, which ensued when African American parents and other community members sought local control of the public schools in their neighborhoods, was, in part, the outcry of African Americans for culturally relevant curricula for their children (Weusi, 1973). Rarely is it mentioned in the current dialogue that largely out of such controversies across the country grew a network of independent, African-centered preschools, elementary schools, and high schools that to this day address these issues.

Others point out that low self-esteem is an obstacle to academic achievement for African American children. They assert that the African-

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centered approach (broadly defined to include an Africentric curricular focus as well as genuine love, concern, and respect between students, teachers, and parents [Asante, 1980]) can help improve African American students' self-esteem. This is what has been happening in CIBI schools for over 20 years. As a result, CIBI students have been shown to attain a high level of self-esteem and to perform better academically, as measured by standardized achievement tests (Institute for Independent Education, 1991; Lomotey & Brookins, 1988).

Although testing provides one indication of success, within CIBI schools success is more broadly defined to include, among other things, the students' attitudes toward school and the nature of the relationships between school personnel, students, and families. On these levels as well, African American children in CIBI schools have been shown to do better than their public school counterparts (Lomotey & Brookins, 1988). Most CIBI schools have been relatively successful academically, socially, and culturally with African American children (Institute for Independent Education, 1991; Lomotey & Brookins, 1988; Shujaa & Ratteray, 1988).

Several experts, including Hirsch (1987), warn against assuming that an African-centered curriculum is the complete answer for improving the academic achievement of African American children. Indeed, I would agree with them. Curriculum, in the narrow sense, is not all that matters. However, the curriculum is a critical element, and, in the absence of African-centered curriculum materials, large numbers of African American children will continue to be disenfranchised. Moreover, school districts that are considering utilizing some variation of an African-centered curriculum ought not try to "reinvent the wheel" because in most urban areas there exist independent African-centered schools that have used such a focus for years. These institutions can and should be studied and their expertise drawn upon to facilitate the development of African-centered curricula for public and private school use.

In this article I will share some information regarding these institutions. I will begin with a definition of African-centered education, followed by an overview of the history and philosophy of Independent Black Institutions (IBIs) and discussion of the academic, social, and cultural development aspects stressed within these schools. The article concludes with recommendations for educators working with African American children and African-centered curricula.

AFRICAN-CENTERED EDUCATION

African-centered education enables African American students to look at the world with Africa as the center. It encompasses not only those instructional and curricular approaches that result in a shift in students' worldview, but it engenders a reorientation of their values and actions as well. Correspondingly, an African-centered curriculum stresses that educators encourage African American children to look at the world through an African-centered set of lenses that provides them with vision that is more focused, has a wider periphery and more depth (Lomotey, in press). It involves more than mere textbooks and other curricular materials; it also encompasses a supportive, understanding,

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and encouraging school climate as the culture surrounding the curriculum. Notwithstanding the overwhelmingly Eurocentric training background and perceptual orientation of the majority of the nation's teachers, an African-centered curriculum demands that teachers look at African American children differently. That is, it demands that these children be viewed as educable and as descendants of a long line of scholars.

African-centered education is missing from the experiences of most African American children in public and private schools in the United States. Resultantly, African American children typically display little sense of identity, purpose, or direction; and little knowledge of the relationship between their schooling and what will occur in their later life (Fine, 1991; Karenga, 1984; Lomotey, 1989). Thus, African-centered education seeks to meet a set of cultural as well as academic and social goals. In this regard, it requires all educators to realize that academic achievement in and of itself is not enough. They must identify culturally with African American children to teach them about their culture, about life, and about where they fit in society and the world.

THE HISTORY OF INDEPENDENT BLACK INSTITUTIONS (IBIs)

The disenfranchisement of African American children in public schools in the United States has been persistent, pervasive, and disproportionate (Lomotey, 1990); yet, quality education has always been a priority for African American people (Woodson, 1933/1969). Since the 1700s, African Americans have established their own schools (independent Black institutions, or IBIs) designed to meet the particular needs of their children (Ratteray & Shujaa, 1987). Most IBIs presently in existence began operating within the past 20 years. They were developed, in part, as a consequence of African American parents' community control concerns and their (unsuccessful) efforts to have some say in their children's education in the public schools. As a result, many African American parents decided that their only solution was to begin their own schools, developed by African Americans for African American children (Weusi, 1973).

Most IBIs have enrollments of between 50 and 200 students, and their funding is usually derived solely or at least primarily from within the African American community. They include institutions such as The Afrikan People's Action School in Trenton, New Jersey; The New Concept Development Center in Chicago, Illinois; Nile Valley Shule[1] in Buffalo, New York; Aisha Shule in Detroit, Michigan; Shule Mandela in East Palo Alto, California; Each One Teach One in Columbus, Ohio; and NationHouse Watoto School in Washington, DC—all of which are members of CIBI.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF IBIs

There are three major components of the modern IBI philosophy. The first component is familyhood and the emphasis on creating a family-

[1]*Shule* is Kiswahili for "school."

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like atmosphere within IBIs. This is operationalized on at least two levels. On a practical level, teachers in IBIs are enjoined to treat their students as if they were their own children at all times and in all ways. Also, through their actions, teachers in IBIs are prompted to encourage students to love and respect their teachers as they love and respect their parents. This focus on two-way love and respect is made very clear; and while such atmospheres obviously cannot be created overnight, IBIs aim to foster them from within with sincerity and commitment. Parents participate in IBIs on all levels because educators in these schools understand that parents have a right and a responsibility to be involved in the education of their children (Ratteray & Shujaa, 1987). Parents thus serve in such capacities as teachers, teacher aides, administrative assistants, field trip chaperons, and curriculum developers.

The second component of the IBI philosophy is their value system. In the 1960s, Karenga (1980) created a doctrine called *Kawaida*, which put forth a set of values called the *Nguzo Saba* (Kiswahili for "The Seven Principles of Blackness"). Most IBIs have adopted these values as a part of their philosophy. The Nguzo Saba in Kiswahili and English are:

Umoja–Unity
Kujichagulia–Self-Determination
Ujima–Collective Work and Responsibility
Ujamaa–Cooperative Economics
Nia–Purpose
Kuumba–Creativity
Imani–Faith

IBIs attempt to incorporate these values into every aspect of the operation of their programs. Various African-centered curricular methods are used to transmit these values including holiday celebrations, field trips, community events, rituals and protocols, dress codes, and the use of African proverbs and stories.

The third aspect of the IBI philosophy could be termed Revolutionary Pan-African Nationalism (RPN). RPN contends that these institutions (a) are part of a new system of education to replace the existing "mainstream" system that is inappropriate for African Americans, (b) provide a means by which African Americans can identify with Africans around the world, and (c) acknowledge the view that African Americans make up a nation within a nation. African Americans who have created IBIs have observed the public schools and deemed them inadequate to meet the needs of African American children. They have gone one step further, however, with the creation of an alternative: the IBI (Nkrumah, 1970). Also, African Americans working within IBIs see themselves as a part of a worldwide community of African people. Finally, these institution builders characterize African American communities collectively as a cultural nation, and they understand the importance of developing institutions within the African American community (Madhubuti, 1978).

This description of the philosophy of the IBI is consistent with the data collected by Brookins (1984) in a study of 10 IBIs. Brookins found several commonalities in the philosophies of these institutions:

- an emphasis on high or superior academic achievement;
- an emphasis on the transmission of culture;

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- a sense of commitment to African American people;
- an emphasis on self-determination, including the necessity for the schools themselves to be independent;
- implementation of an educational process based on distinct and explicit values;
- an emphasis on developing a strong African American identity and self-concept;
- a commitment to the belief that African American people are an African people with a common ancestry, a common condition or experience, and a common destiny;
- the provision of political education through critical examination of current and historical events and how they relate to African American people.

Developmental Emphases at IBIs

One of the major determinants of how well a student will do academically is how well the teacher believes the student can do. On one level, it is understandable how so many educators can have such low expectations for their African American students; there are so few examples of African American students doing well in large numbers. The belief that all children can learn permeates the IBI, and academic excellence for all children is clearly the goal of these institutions (Lomotey & Brookins, 1988). IBI educators strive to enable every student to achieve at his or her maximum potential at all times by emphasizing high achievement and academic content beyond the traditional "basics." Self-expression is encouraged and students are constantly challenged to think analytically, critically, and independently.

It is a truism that children learn best in an environment in which their own culture is the focus of the curriculum. Therefore, within the IBI, whenever possible, children are given the opportunity to "see themselves in the curriculum"—in the texts and other curricular and instructional materials, on the classroom walls, on field trips, and so forth. Moreover, with a typically small class size, the IBI is well suited to individualizing the curriculum to meet the specific academic needs of each child.

IBIs also stress social development. Children are encouraged to develop a deep understanding of, respect for, and commitment to themselves and to their peers, teachers, parents, leaders, communities, and race. In addition, the students of IBIs are instilled with a commitment to serving the African American community and a willingness to establish and support African American businesses.

Every educational institution instills a cultural frame of reference in its students. At IBIs, that frame of reference is an African-centered one. Within IBIs, the culture of people of African descent permeates the curriculum. Students at IBIs see African people wherever they turn. White, Anglo–Saxon Protestant images—ever present in the media, in advertising, in holiday symbols, etc.—are not ignored; but within IBIs, children learn about Whites and others from an African-centered frame of reference. The focus of the IBI curriculum, particularly with reference

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to very young children, is African American culture, the African American experience, and how world events affect African American people. Educators within IBIs argue that this focus is particularly important for younger children because they are still forming their habits, personalities, self-concepts, and understandings of the world. Thus, if their early learning is put into a culturally relevant context, they are more likely to be motivated; to feel good about themselves; and, ultimately, to be successful academically, socially, and culturally.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In current discussions about African-centered curricula, educators are debating what the specific content should be and who should teach it. This is a much-needed dialogue if the quality of education afforded to African American children is to be improved and the ultimate survival of the African American community ensured. However, the historical and contemporary models of IBIs provide a ready-made model for those who desire to provide African-centered education for African American students. The IBI model is a useful one that provides inspiration for parents and teachers in the public schools because it (1) demonstrates that African Americans can effectively educate their own children, (2) illustrates African American institutional development and financial independence, and (3) provides a training ground for tomorrow's African American leadership. I have already mentioned some of these schools, but there are many more across the country—38 in CIBI alone. There are also many public school models that have been successful in working with African American students. Examples include the Phyllis Wheatley and Maynard Holbrook Jackson Vanguard elementary schools in Dallas, Texas; Bethune Elementary School in Fresno, California; Highland Elementary School in Inglewood, California; the 59th Street School in Los Angeles, California; and Rachel Jean Mitchell School in Brooklyn, New York. This list, of course, is not complete and merely represents a few examples of schools that have been successful in the public and private sectors over time in providing quality education to the African American children in their charge.

Several implications flow from this discussion of IBIs for educators concerned about the quality of education afforded African American children in whatever environment they may find themselves. First, educators must do all they can to ensure that increased emphasis is placed on the contributions of people of African descent in the American school curriculum. To facilitate this, teachers should be compensated for producing, sharing, and teaching this important information. By infusing the curriculum with African-centered cultural content, schools can provide an opportunity for all students to accept and acknowledge their own dignity and worth and that of others. Moreover, such curricular innovations aid schools in affirming the differences that children from various cultural groups bring to school. When the curriculum in classrooms predominated by African American students (as in many of the nation's urban school districts) reflects the culture of that group, the

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schools send the message that African American children and their cultural group are valued members of society.

For the same reason, efforts to create all-African American male schools should be seriously considered as a viable option by those who are concerned about the achievement and life chances of African American male students in particular and African American people in general. These settings are envisioned as providing an African-centered environment in which these male youth can make a connection between schooling and their life experiences. In all-male classrooms and schools already established (in Detroit, Milwaukee, and other cities), one key intent, according to Kenneth Holt, a principal in one such school in Milwaukee, is "to improve the self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence of the child so he will have the coping skills necessary to merge into the broader pluralistic society and to deal with racism and some of the things he will confront as a Black man" (cited in Dent, 1991, p. 90). While little "product" evidence is available on these relatively new models, all indications suggest that these institutions are achieving a high level of success.

Second, educators must understand the importance of culturally similar role models for all students and do all that they can to increase the number of African Americans within their ranks. Part of enabling students to see themselves in the curriculum is allowing them to observe at work those educators and other professionals who share their cultural background. This has long been shown to have a positive effect on children's self-concept and their sense of their own capacity to be successful.

The context in which African-centered education is most often discussed is extremely limited—and inappropriate. If the nation is serious about educating African American children, it must be equally serious about educating them from an African-centered perspective. If these children cannot see themselves in the curriculum, they will continue to be disenfranchised. Failing this, we will continue to perpetuate the vicious cycle of disenfranchisement that African American youth have experienced in the United States. Independent African-centered schools have a role to play in improving the educational experiences of African American children. They have met with much success in their efforts to incorporate an African-centered curriculum, and their success leads to the conclusion that aspects of this curriculum can be incorporated into public schools and other private schools. We need only to look at IBIs and borrow from their experiences.

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