Afrocentric Curriculum in Urban Schools

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This article discusses the representation of African-American students in advanced courses in urban schools and their self-perspectives on being enrolled in academic classes with predominantly white peers. This article will show how African-American students who are enrolled in these classes, which are typically highly populated with white students, may find themselves existing within two societies, that which is established in the black community, and that of the imposed dominant European culture. Since the majority of African-American students are educated in Western academia, under Western influence, this dual existence can cause African-American students to develop a perception of themselves in which they measure their value and success in school through the lens of Western standards and principles, in addition to the lens in which they are measured by black society (DuBois, 1903/1994).

Keywords: African-American students, Afrocentricity, advanced placement, Eurocentric

Advanced placement high school classes offer accelerated, vigorous coursework that helps place students on paths towards enrollment in college programs that can lead to empowering career opportunities. Placement in these courses does not ensure success in higher education or beyond. They do, however, provide students the chance to become academically acquainted with advanced concepts and knowledge that can empower them to better themselves and their community (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). The African-Americans' general lack of understanding of African culture and history, combined with living in a society under an

imposed Eurocentric culture, creates misinterpretations of interpretive academic content

(Asante, 1998). African-American students who are enrolled in advanced courses may develop

an awareness of upholding a dual set of standards and values. This impact creates a lessened

desire among African-American students in wanting to enroll in advanced placement courses.

This limited acquisition of knowledge in particular fields of study can create the restriction of

some African-Americans from entering into positions of power within society's labor force.

This restriction of education systematically perpetuates the oppression of African-Americans.

According to DuBois (1903/1994), in analyzing how African-Americans develop an

identity of double consciousness through a Eurocentric perspective, the perspective of African-

American students enrolled in advanced courses exemplifies the development of a dual

consciousness, as well as how Eurocentric ideology in schools, with the integration of culturally

interpretive literature and arts into the curriculum, create limitations and barriers to performance

(DuBois, 1903/1994). Simultaneously seeking acceptance from peers and society, along with

seeking means of success within school, may be problematic for many African-American

students as the acknowledgement of this dual consciousness can deter worthy students of

pursuing the pathway of advanced coursework. African-American students find themselves

existing within two societies, that which is established in the black community, and that of the

imposed dominant European culture.

In seeking to provide liberation to African-Americans within the confines of

Eurocentric, Western culture, Asante (1998) recognized an outside critique of the dominant

society as necessary in enlightening those whose view is limited, forming a reality of what is

only *presented* as reality through the Eurocentric perspective, one which negates the history and

culture of Africans. In addressing criticisms of society, he presented the theoretical framework

of Afrocentricity, as "placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture or ideas" (Asante, 1998, p. 2).

In forming an Afrocentric method, Asante (1998) sought to establish a world view that presented and concentrated on the speaking and writing of the oppressed, since Eurocentric writers "write from their own Europeanness" (p. 177) and sought to "undermine African agency by artificially constructing, the elements of Africanity" (p. 177). Asante (1998) goes on to state that African-Americans who partake in only the views of the European culture, stand to become anti-Black, and suffer from a type of identity crisis in which an African-American sees him or herself as actually serving academic value to European intellect. Asante (1998) asserts that Afrocentric teachings must start with the history of Africans from the beginning. In addition, "it is combative, antagonistic, and wholly committed to the propagation of a more humanistic view of the world" (Asante, 1998, p. 186). He goes on to describe how Afrocentric rhetoric and the acquisition of knowledge is a circular system of thought with several components "united in a grand movement toward freedom of the mind, the irrepressible will to harmony" (p. 186).

Literature Review

Acting White

In a study of what it "whiteness" among black Americans, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005), examined acting white and how it relates to high achievement. "Acting white" refers to "blacks who…display attitudes, behaviors, or preferences, or engage in activities considered to be white cultural norms" (p. 583). They go on to explain that the term "acting white" can also be used in regards to academic performance, including placement in honor classes and use of standard English. Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) interviewed 40 black high school students from different public schools across North Carolina, all of whom have placement in advanced courses. One black student described the reaction of her black peers to her being in

honors classes. She reported having some black friends who "say that I am too smart, I'm trying to act White, or whatever, because I'm in such hard classes" (p. 594). This student went on to describe her transition into all-white advanced courses as very difficult. She described "being called 'white girl' and 'Oreo' by fellow blacks" (p. 594). Another black student describes how she was told by peers she was not black because she took honors classes and spoke proper English (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005).

The effect of the double consciousness (DuBois, 1903/1994) and the struggle to merge both identities of these black students in advanced placement classes was reflected in a survey of students of color in advanced courses, conducted by the school's counselor (Tyson, Darity, & Castellino, 2005). The survey revealed the black students did not like being in these classes and felt social and racial isolation by being in these advanced course. In relating the perceptions of the black student as described in the surveys, the counselor revealed black kids look at them as if they are acting white, not recognizing that you could be smart and black. A lot of white kids looked at them, basically, 'You're not supposed to be smart and black, so why are you here?' (Tyson, et. al, 2005, p. 594). The feelings expressed by these Black students partially explains the underrepresentation of black students in these advanced placement courses. To avoid the internal conflict of self-identity and the external struggle of being an outcast to peers, both black and white, these African-American students who are academically capable defer the track of advanced academics.

Double Consciousness

In understanding the impact of the separation in society between blacks and whites in America, described by DuBois (1903/1994) as the color line, the theoretical framework on race must be studied within the critical race analysis. DuBois' critical race analysis of the *Negro*'s two-mindedness expounds the identity crisis of the *Negro*'s as one in which his identity or

consciousness sets in two parts. Within double consciousness, one identity reflects that of the black culture, bred from systems of racism and discrimination; the other identity reflects the values and ideologies imposed by whites. In a society in which systems and institutions of racism and degradation are ordered and controlled by the oppressor, a division is created among blacks and whites in America. This color line creates two cultures in which blacks exist on a daily basis. Throughout the history of the blacks in America, and though free from the physical chains and bondage of slavery, blacks have been confined under the strategic, systematic institution of slavery through legal oversights and societal constructs designed to oppress, persecute, and disenfranchise blacks (DuBois, 1903/1994).

Many blacks fail to understand their true history and apply to their own lives the African values and ideals of their African ancestors, but instead live under the practices forced onto their American slave ancestors by their European masters. In turn, it becomes difficult for blacks to merge the two identities, both which are developed from the dominant culture's imposed perspective of the African. As blacks assimilate and adapt for themselves the values, standards, and ideologies of the dominant culture, they begin to measure their individual worth and form an opinion of themselves based on the perception of their oppressor's view of blacks. The image blacks perceive of themselves is contrived by institutions of society as a means of creating a false reality. This illustrates the veil, in that the European values and ideology instilled into blacks creates a mental haze of lies, masked as truth laden in racism and hatred.

In establishing systems of education for blacks in the South following the end of slavery, freedmen lacked the knowledge of workingmen that was necessary in securing labor. Because blacks were regarded as a material resource and a means of profit, Whites saw that a common school system and higher education was necessary in teaching the freedmen basic reading and writing skills, and in teaching the teacher, so that they may obtain employment in

manufacturing product for the employers' profit. Schools also sought to "furnish the black world with adequate standards of human culture and lofty ideals of life" (DuBois, 1903/1994, p. 60). The training that the freedmen received did not expand their mind to be versed in intellectual content, but rather taught them skills in crafts and trades to be able to function within the dominant society. Blacks were to be skilled enough of produce capital and supply gains for the economy and disciplined enough to accept Western ideology.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum

Ideas that emerge from Western consciousness should not be applied in understanding and analyzing African behavior and culture, instead issues should be approached and evaluated through African values and ideals, which focus on commitment to harmony, spirituality (Asante, 1998). In empowering African-American students to achieve academic success, which can lead to economic, cultural, and societal success, a culturally relevant curriculum is essential. According to Gloria Ladson-Billings, as cited in Moore and Lewis (2012), culturally relevant pedagogy "uses students' culture to help them understand the world", (p. 147). Within the institution of a culturally relevant pedagogy, "teachers develop skills to understand the complexities of students' cultural ways of experiencing the world…students develop a critical consciousness." (Moore & Lewis, 2012, p. 147).

Majority of African-American students are educated in systematic institutions of racism, learning Eurocentric academia under Western influence and African history is told through the eyes of the oppressor. When the Eurocentric ideologies of the education system fail to provide true history, Africans' contributions and value are disregarding and further minimized. Textbook publisher McGraw-Hill apologized for referring to millions of African slaves simply as workers in its' World Geography textbook, further minimalizing the forced labor role of Africans in America and writing history to lessen the true horrors of American slavery. Mc-

Graw-Hill offered options to correct the inaccurate description in the already distributed

textbooks to schools that *requested* them (Finley, 2015). Without true background knowledge of

American slavery, years from now if these textbooks stay uncorrected and in circulation,

students, African-Americans in particular, will misunderstand the true history of America

hundreds of years before slavery and beyond.

The perspective of African values and ideology is necessary in understanding the

behavior and culture of African-Americans students in urban schools. When applied to the

African world, Asante (1998) describes how Eurocentric concepts of universalism and

objectivity, which lack conceptual and historical legitimacy, are restrictive and narrow-minded.

The concept of universality, in which one culture presents and sets the standard of values in

society for all cultures as a whole, by excluding African thought implies and preserves the view

that one culture is better than others and what's best for one is best for all. To illustrate the

concept of universality in education, Asante (1998) explains how romance and drama are

European genres of literature. For example, in some cultures ideas such as romance are

*non*existent. These ideas written about within European novels are imposed onto other cultures

as universal notions. As learned by Charles Larson during his time teaching in Nigeria, "culture

shapes the interpretation of literature; culture itself is shaped by the constant demands of society

and the environment" (Asante, 1998, p. 3). Asante (1998) asserts that from the African

perspective, concepts of Afrocentricity can reposition the world's view of blacks.

Data

In comparison to their overall representation within the general population, data from

the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) shows that African-American students are

underrepresented in advanced academic courses in the two largest urban schools in North

Carolina, Wake County Schools and Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. According to the CRDR

(n.d.), in 2011 in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Black students accounted for 42 percent of the district's entire enrollment, yet represented only 11.6 percent of all students enrolled in gifted and talented programs, 22.2 percent of students enrolled in 7th or 8th Algebra I, 23.3 percent of students enrolled in Physics, and 31.6 percent of students enrolled in Calculus. The CRDC (2016) reports similar trends in data from Wake County public schools, as well. In 2011, Black students represented 24.7 percent of the district's total population, however they represented 7.7 percent of students enrolled in gifted and talented programs (Figure 1), 16.7 percent of students enrolled in 7th or 8th grade Algebra I, 14.8 percent of students enrolled in Chemistry, 7.3 percent of students enrolled in Physics, and 5.8 percent of students enrolled in Calculus. This underrepresentation reflects a lack of African-American students who, based on performance results, are deemed as college or career ready.
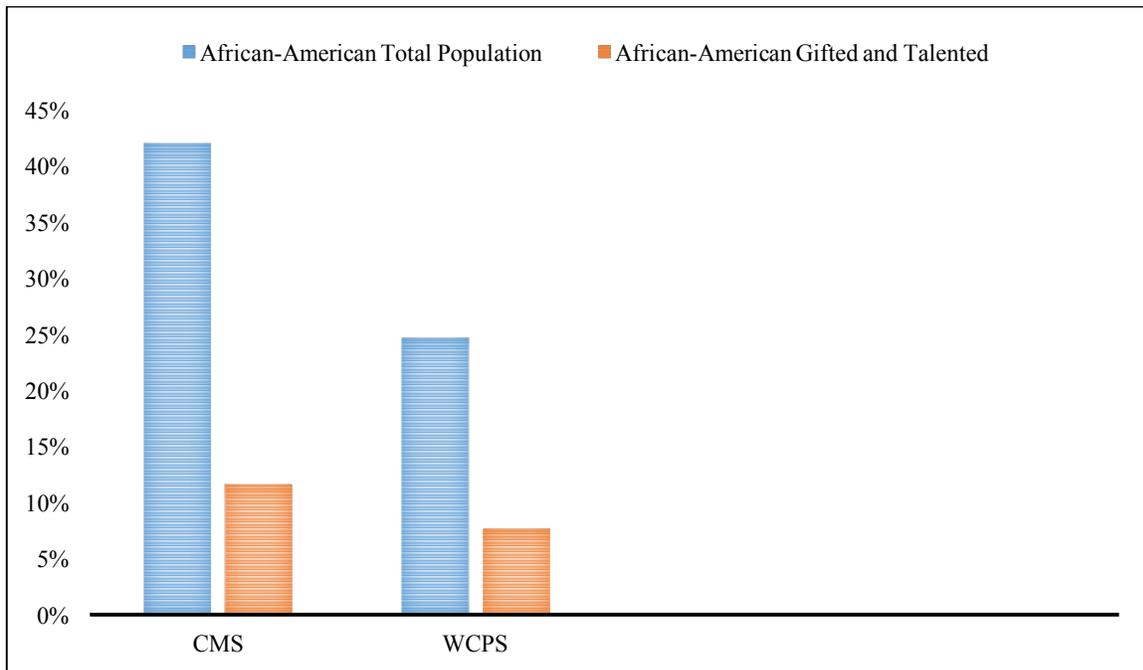

Figure 1. 2011 enrollment data for African-American students in urban school districts Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and Wake County Public Schools, North Carolina (Civil Rights Data Collection, n.d.).

Discussions/Findings

In seeking to find understanding of the Eurocentric curriculum, Black students must understand the European culture. Asante's (1998) theory of Afrocentricity begins the perspective of the African in understanding the African's behavior and culture. This cultural understanding is crucial in comprehending and analyzing interpretive studies, such as literature and art. African-Americans who do not have full understanding of the European culture may lack the ability to interpret an inferred meaning. This lack of proper cultural interpretation can be seen as a sign of lesser intelligence, as opposed to a lack of the effectiveness of universality in educating African-Americans.

Using culturally biased IQ test and various interpretive matters to academically tracking students, African-Americans are often excluded from being placed in advanced courses and programs. Though math and science are subject matters based in fact and are considered academically universal, many schools use a curriculum that integrates math and science with Eurocentric literature and arts. This integration takes knowledge based in fact and truth and inundates and it with European language, ideals, and perspectives, leading to farther disconnect for some African-Americans in comprehending the content as it becomes lost in the culturally interpreted message. A curriculum designed in Afrocentric methods may create an increase of African-American students in advanced courses based on the African perspective.

Recommendations

Developing an Afrocentric curriculum for students of African descent, and training educators of urban schools in African ideology is recommended to address and improve academic and behavior issues among African-American students in urban schools today. Urban schools with a high population of African-American students should adopt a more culturally relevant curriculum for its students. An Afrocentric curriculum could be utilized in

educating African-American students in urban schools. An Afrocentric curriculum would eliminate the obstacles African-American students may face in trying to interpret and master a Eurocentric culture and curriculum.

Educators that work at schools that adopt and implement an Afrocentric curriculum would require specialized licensure indicating that they have completed additional, extensive training through coursework and field experiences, and therefore are "prepared" to effectively teach an Afrocentric curriculum. Colleges, universities, and teacher educators need to develop rigorous programs of study in alignment with best strategies in developing and implementing an Afrocentric curriculum in urban education.

Only teachers with a specialized license in the Afrocentric curriculum would be employed in schools with the adopted curriculum. In accordance with each state's salary guidelines, teachers who have completed the Afrocentric curriculum training will be compensated for their specialization or certification, as would a speech pathologist or school psychologist, or a teacher with a Master's degree or National Board Certification. The urban program will require a minimum of a five-year commitment from teachers. Upon completion of the standard four-year college or university-based education program, teachers in the Afrocentric curriculum training initiative will be required to complete two additional years of schooling in an accredited college or university. Once a teacher completes the two-year certification, any student loans accrued as a result of completing the program will be forgiven, upon employment in any identified urban school. In addition to the two years given to complete the additional accreditation, teachers must make a three-year commitment to work in any identified urban school. At the end of the three-year commitment, the specialized teachers will undergo an evaluation process to examine and review the teacher's effectiveness. If a teacher is rated as effective according to given measures, and commits to additional years, *all* undergrad

student loans will also be forgiven and as a continuous measure, as long as the Proficient in Afrocentric curriculum status is maintained, the teacher will be given a 10-15% tax break. Beyond the initial Afrocentric curriculum training certification, teachers would be expected to stay abreast of best practices in urban education and must earn a certain amount of Continuing Education Units to have the specialized license renewed.

Guiding principles need to be established in determining and identifying which schools will operate under the new licensure guidelines. Once schools have been determined, teachers who are currently employed at these schools will not initially be displaced, or lose their jobs. They will be given the opportunity to return to school to complete the conditions required to gain specialized certification to teach in Afrocentric curriculum schools. Non-specialized teachers in these Afrocentric curriculum schools will remain in place until they can be replaced by adequately certified staff. As more teachers become Afrocentric curriculum certified, teachers in those identified schools who chose not to pursue specialized licensure, will be displaced and replaced as the teachers do become available. To help eliminate teachers leaving schools because of the new policy, inner-district transfers may need to be suspended while these certified urban teachers are being produced and developed.

In order to provide valid educational experiences and lessons to those in which they train, university staff who instruct and facilitate these programs would be required to have completed this program themselves. In addition to having highly qualified staff who run teacher preparation in urban education programs, preservice teachers would have the support of highly qualified mentors who have also completed the training. The support of a mentor would continue beyond completion of the program, extending into the urban teacher's first three years in the identified urban school.

Conclusion

The system of Eurocentric education perpetuates the oppression of African-Americans and is designed to train them enough so that they may supply the capitalist with labor, product, and profit. By limiting their perspective through an imposed, biased curriculum, African-American students find it hard to function successfully in subjects that require a higher-level of interpretive thinking, despite their true intellectual capability. The denial of access to the academic content and knowledge gained from these courses, often necessary for securing positions of power within the labor force, minimizes the roles of blacks in America as hand-laborers worthy of and suited for manual work. In efforts to remove themselves from roles of manual labor, African-Americans seek means to increase their capital, a Eurocentric ideology and way of life. This increase in capital is typically achieved by receiving a proper education, and since this proper education is often denied to African-American students, many African-Americans seek to obtain resources of survival and desire capital, often by any means necessary, creating a state of anomie. Afrocentricity involves the analysis of African culture through an African lens. African culture is based on harmony with nature, unlike Eurocentric ideologies, many of which are founded on the constructs of man. Proper cultural perspective for African-Americans can lead to academic achievement for students that can create the empowerment and understanding necessary to breaking societal confines, leading to true liberation, existing within a connectedness to spirituality and harmony.

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