

Meeting the People Where They Are: The Promises and Perils of Attempting an African Centered Institution in a Public School System

by

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Abstract

This article presents reflections on the work of an African centered principal and teacher who have committed to transforming a traditional Midwestern public school into an African-centered public institution. The focus of the principal and teacher is to meet the cultural-educational needs of children within the community. This work records their efforts toward creating an African-centered school. The article also highlights African centered principal leadership and the critical need for African centered personal transformation as a prerequisite for African centered teaching.

Keywords: Education, African-centered, leadership, transformative, teacher.

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Introduction

African-centered schools orient students toward having an African worldview (Shujaa, 1991) and involves them in a process of cultural reattachment (Shockley, 2010). Many scholars have argued that African centered schooling is the only form of schooling that can address the academic failure and cultural needs of Black children (Shockley, 2010, Akoto, 1999). Scholars have noted that within African centered schools, the factors that often contribute to the academic failure of Black children are eliminated. Those factors include high rates of suspension and dropout, lower scores on standardized tests and the problem of overrepresentation of Black children receiving special education services.

Given the glaring issues that traditional public schools are having with the aforementioned factors, it is no wonder why communities across America are demanding alternative educational models such as African-centered schools. While the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI) asserts that in order for a school to be African centered it must be independent, educators and communities throughout the country are attempting to adopt the African centered model into the public domain. For example, in states such as Missouri, New York, Florida, Oklahoma and the District of Colombia, charter and public African-centered school have been attempted.

The increase in the number of African centered schools has created the need for more research. Currently, numerous researchers (Shockley, 2015; Lomotey, 1992; Shujja, 1991) have written articles on African centered education; however, there is a lack of available research on charter and public schools attempting to implement a version of African centered schooling. To address this gap, we conducted a qualitative research study at a public school that was allowed by the superintendent and board to become an African centered school. The research site is a school named African centered Public School (ACPS). At ACPS we (the researchers) explore the school using this research question: “what are the experiences of an African-centered principal and teacher with transforming a school from a regular public school to an African centered institution?”

Purpose and Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of an African centered principal and teacher with transforming a school from a regular public school to an African centered public school. We focused on the principal and the teacher because they self-identify as being African centered, and they are leading the school in their work with non-Afrocentric educators. The principal and the teacher have pseudonyms “Principal Obenga” and “Baba Baye”. They understand the conceptual and theoretical tenets of African-centered education and serve as the vital supports for other educators, many of whom are having their first experience in an African-centered environment.

The research question emerged in part from literature indicating the need for additional research on African-centered educators (Hilliard, 1998; Shockley, 2010). While there is literature on the important pedagogical practices that are necessary for reaching Black children (Asante, 2017), there is a lack of literature that focuses on public schools that use an African centered model. According to CIBI, African-centered schools by definition must be independent, and the newly conceived ideas that African centered schools can be charter or public has come under intense scrutiny by stalwarts. Thus, by exploring the experiences of an African centered principal and teacher who are transforming a school from a regular public school to an African-centered public school we will provide insight into experiences of these leaders as they attempt to graft an institution that can work for children. The study was conducted in the State of Missouri at ACPS. ACPS is a public urban institution that is located in a metropolitan area. Currently 500 students are enrolled in the school and nearly 100% are Black; 85% of the teaching force at ACPS is Black.

Background

Missouri is a state known for its history of racially fueled court decisions. Decisions such as the Missouri Compromise allowed the state to enter the union as a chattel slavery state. More recently, a large Missouri school district operated under a court-supervised desegregation order. After seventeen years, local control was restored (Smith, 2009). However, during the aforementioned school desegregation plan and afterwards, Black students continued to fail at alarming rates (Smith, 2009). According to Trent,

[A]fter controlling for student background, prior test scores made little difference. One might infer from this that the effect of race on student test scores is fairly constant. The addition of school poverty level, by contrast, eliminates more of the racial disparity. After controlling for all the independent variables, the race effect remained substantially meaningful, suggesting that the treatment of African American students in school is sufficiently different to cause their lower scores on achievement tests in both reading and mathematics. (p. 324)

Trent's (1997) assertion is in contrast to the work of poverty scholars (Lewis, 1971; Payne, 1996) and highlights that race overwhelmingly influenced student achievement in this large Missouri School District. Such districtwide failures are not an aberration and have prompted social justice and transformative education scholars (Shields, 2011) alike to continually demand that districts critically analyze their cultural and academic processes, and investigate how race hinders or facilitates the academic success of children. It is important to note that in 2015 the ACPS' school district was fully reaccredited for the first time in more than twenty years.

However, during that same year the academic performance of Black children on the state's annual MAP test were abysmal. For example, more than 70% of students in grades 3-8 scored basic or below basic on their grade level mathematics exam and more than 60% scored at the same level in science (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Schools, 2017). Thus, more than thirty years after court mandated desegregation, Black students are still scoring in the bottom tier in this district.

African Centered Theory and Literature

African centered education is a complex endeavor that involves reorienting one's approach to data so that the concerns and interests of people of African descent become 'center stage.' For some people, intentionally reorienting thinking is a very unnatural process because it often requires an intentional re-thinking of data. To African centered thinkers, it seems that most people might prefer to think of themselves as being unencumbered by culturo-political ideology. African centered thinkers have been somewhat successful at popularizing the notion that neither 'a-political' nor 'a-cultural' actually exist (Akoto and Akoto, 1999; Hilliard, 2003). That is, they believe that all people are impacted by culture, and the dominant European American culture becomes default thinking in almost all cases. One of the central problems of African centered thinkers relates to their belief that European American culture does not work for children (or people) of African descent. That belief comes from their analyses of the conditions under which Black people now find themselves within all areas of human endeavor in the US (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, etc.). In all of the aforementioned areas of human endeavor, Blacks are suffering more than any other group, and African centered thinkers believe that the solution to such suffering is not in addressing each issue as separate baffling phenomena, but instead by changing the cultural practice to match the cosmology and/or worldviews of the people. Hence, they believe that European American culture is a mismatch with the natural foundational ontology of African descendants.

Since African centered theorists believe that the mismatch is harmful to African (American) people, their strongest desire is to make sure that future generations of African children do not have to suffer through schooling processes that do not meet the needs of people of African descent. African centered education was conceptualized to match African people's cultural needs and interests with what needs to happen in order to educate those same people. In their quests to provide meaningful and relevant educational opportunities for children of African descent, a number of private African centered schools were first instituted in the 1960's. While most African centered schools are private, a number of charter schools began opening in the late 1990's, and there have been a few instances of public schools attempting to create African centered institutions such as ACPS (Shockley, Burbanks and McPherson, 2015).

The same organizing principles and theoretical basis for private African centered schools was used to support the creation of ACPS. The main goal of all of these efforts is nationbuilding, which is:

The conscious and focused application of African people's collective resources, energies, and knowledge to the task of liberating and developing the psychic and physical space that we identify as ours. It involves the development of behaviors, values, language, institutions, and physical structures that elucidate our history and culture, concretize and protect the present, and insure the future identity and independence of the nation. Nationbuilding is the deliberate, keenly directed, focused, and energetic projection of the national culture, and the collective identity (Akoto, 1992, p. 3).

African centered education scholars and practitioners advance several concepts that constitute the cultural imperatives of African centered ideas in education. The cultural imperatives are the “main ingredients” of these ideas in education. In other words, certain concepts provide the ideological basis for creating an African centered experience. The concepts include having a focus on the African identity of the Black child, accepting Pan Africanism (the oneness of all people of African descent globally), African cultural reattachment, the adoption and transmission of African values, and acceptance of Black Nationalism – the notion that Black people represent “a nation”. African centered experiences also engender a key focus on community control/institution building and the concept of education as opposed to schooling. All of those concepts are part and parcel of the reAfricanization process. African centered educators and scholars believe that children of African descent must be taught their African cultural heritage for the purpose of reAfricanization.

ReAfricanization is literally the process of studying, observing, and eventually practicing an indigenous African culture. In the process of working with children and communities, African centered educationists incessantly use those concepts—they are the baseline stated and ostensible “material” of African centeredness in education (For a fuller description of these constructs, see Shockley, 2010; Shockley and Frederick, 2008). In relation to the constructs, this study sought to understand the experiences of a principal and a teacher as they attempted to use those African centered constructs to transform a regular public school to become an African centered institution.

Data Collection and Methodology

Data were collected from multiple sources (e.g., interviews, observations, the state website, and historical documents). We conducted multiple face-to-face, in-depth interviews with each participant and other stakeholders. Each interview ranged from 30-90 minutes in length. Participants completed informed consent forms prior to being interviewed. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and observation notes were taken for further analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality.

All interviews were conducted using semi-structured interview protocols. Those protocols enable interviews to be more conversational and for researchers to share relevant information and experiences with interviewees, which encourages interviewees to speak freely about topics. Observation notes in relation to the way interviewees behaved while responding to questions were recorded throughout the process.

Two major informants were used throughout the data collection. The first informant is given the name “Baba Baye”; he has been a teacher at ACPS since it opened, and Principal Obenga is the founding principal of ACPS. Our two informants were formally and informally interviewed over ten times over a two-year period. We conducted member checks on numerous occasions throughout the duration of data collection process in order to ensure that data were accurately interpreted.

Since the purpose of this study is to investigate the broad practices and experiences of a principal and a teacher who are using African centered ideals to transform a regular public school into an African centered institution, the study is enhanced and supported by the Africological ethnographic case study methodology. Asante (1990) defined Africalogy as: “the Afrocentric study of phenomena, events, ideas, and personalities related to Africa” (p. 14). Asante provides insight into the shape of the discipline of Africalogy: “Centrism, the groundedness of observation and behavior in one’s own historical experiences, shapes the concepts, paradigms, theories, and methods of Africalogy. In this way Africalogy secures its place along-side other centric pluralisms without hierarchy and without seeking hegemony. As a discipline, Africalogy is sustained by a commitment to centering the study of African phenomena and events in the particular cultural voice of the composite African people. Furthermore, it opens the door for interpretations of reality based in evidence secured by reference to the African world voice” (p. 12).

Both ethnography and Africalogy require that researchers become familiar with the phenomena being studied. Cultural and social immersion are preferred over scientific distance. Asante explains that “this [immersion] process in itself is extremely difficult because it means that the researcher must have some familiarity with the history, language, philosophy, and myths of the people under study” (p. 27). In addition, ethnography requires prolonged engagement with participants in the study.

We have spent two years tracking Baba Baye and Principal Obenga in their roles as teachers, leaders and in relation to their work in the community. In this research we advocate for what we identify as the imperatives of African centered theory and education as a basis for examining African centered education practice. In addition to our observations inside the school, we were also able to participate in various cultural activities that gave us a great deal of insight into the case. And the study was guided by the following central question: what are the experiences of an African-centered principal and teacher with transforming a school from a regular public school to an African centered public school?”

Participant Selection

After a brief conversation with Principal Obenga about what is happening at ACPS, we decided that it was an appropriate site for our work. We wanted to know what efforts are being made to genuinely change the dismal realities that Black children are facing in the system of public education. African centered education is the only attempt being made that considers the culture, history, heritage and present-day circumstances in the Black community. We became highly interested in the fact that ACPS features an administrator and a teacher who are dedicated to providing an African based education. In the aforementioned sense, ACPS was an optimal site for our work.

Data Analysis

Baba Baye and Principal Obenga provide mounds of data because they are both very energetic and full of ideas. To document their philosophies, practices, and community outreach, they first agreed to participate in both formal and informal interviews as well as inside classroom and outside-of-classroom observations. During the interview phase, we asked questions such as the following: What is an African centered principal/teacher and do you self-identify with all of the precepts of being Afrocentric? What kinds of things do you do in your classroom/school to create an African centered learning experience? Why do you teach/administer from an Afrocentric perspective? How do you describe the way you are? How do you become the way you are? How do you think ACPS students see you? What do you think about Africa? Why do you think the way you think about Africa? What can you say to help me to understand the person you are? Observations were conducted over a 2-year period with 10 visits to Missouri. Data were secure in an electronic notebook, audio interviews and visual productions were also secured, and NVIVO was used to assist with coding and data management.

Findings

Conducting African centered research is not an easy task because it involves having to understand both conventional (non African centered) as well as the non-conventional (African centered) ways of thinking. After careful analysis of the data and the application of an African centered lens, we organized the findings around two themes: African centered principals lead from among the people, and being an African centered educator requires personal transformation.

African Centered Principals Lead from Among the People

Principal Obenga is in his late 40's. He is full of energy. During the school day he hardly ever stays in one place. Shadowing him presents two challenges – mentally, he is well learned in African centered theory, so he is aware of why he is doing what he is doing so one is constantly learning from him; but physically, he can get around the enormous building in seconds. The building has four floors and is quite an expansive edifice featuring Preschool through 8th grade. The walkie talkie on his hip is as active as he is throughout the day. With his cell phone on the other hip, he manages calls directly from parents, school district leaders, community leaders, and sometimes from other building administrators who might have been unable to reach him on the walkie talkie. On one occasion, as we were leaving a meeting of the ACPS leadership team, the walkie talkie blared out, “Principal Obenga!” After he replied, the person on the other end said, “Ms. Smith is here!” When we got to the office, Mrs. Smith’s face told the story of an angry parent. We sat down in the conference area of his office. I wondered if she would ask who I was and then demand that I get out. Principal Obenga must have been thinking the same thing because after greeting her, the first thing he said was, “Dr. Shockley is here doing research on our school, so he is just here to observe.” She said “ok.” I felt relieved. Principal Obenga pulled in his assistant principal, a woman who has a look of toughness to herself. I wondered if the reason he asked her to come in was to involve someone with whom the parent could relate. Later I asked him the question and he said, “Not really, as you saw, I was able to relate to her myself.” He was. After a few greetings, the meeting began.

Principal Obenga: I can't have students at my school being threatened.

Ms. Smith: But what about what was said to my son?

Principal Obenga: But the thing is, we're like at the airport, if you threaten us we have to take action. Those [other] boys came to me for help. They were trying to prevent something from happening.

Ms. Smith: But the part I'm concerned about is them saying “before we have to hurt him.” What are you doing about that?

Principal Obenga: Again, those boys were not threatening your son. Students at this school have options...

I felt a lot of tension in the room. I found out that a few boys had intervened in a situation that involved Ms. Smith's son, and upon intervention, Ms. Smith's son threatened the boys. The boys then went to Principal Obenga and said, “you better get him before we have to hurt him.” Ms. Smith's son had been involved in a number of incidents where he had been blamed for bullying other students. As Principal Obenga and I were walking to his office on the day of this meeting, we saw Ms. Smith's son in the hallway without permission (he had left the classroom without permission and was buying a snack when we saw him). Principal Obenga said to him, “oh no, no snacks for you, let's go.”

Ms. Smith's son said "leave me alone." But he did not get a snack. Once we rounded the corner and entered the office, I saw Ms. Smith hand her son a snack, but Principal Obenga did not see that because he had become momentarily distracted by the school secretary. As Principal Obenga continued discussing the options available for students at the school, Ms. Smith interrupted,

Ms. Smith: I wanna know about MY son.

Principal Obenga: He's gonna have to finish out the year near Flourissant. Right now the kids are testing. I have one kid who comes, takes the test, but then he leaves right after he takes the test.

Ms. Smith's voice started to quiver and she went from looking angry to looking sad. She said that she was worried that she might not be able to be around to take care of her children. She also said that her children might be stressed because they saw their mother go from 180 pounds to 124 pounds. Ms. Smith mentioned that her financial situation is awful. She mentioned that her health is awful. She also mentioned that she might not be around by the end of the year. She told Principal Obenga that she had her son in several programs including a big brother program, she also mentioned that she had him in a program to help juveniles. When Ms. Smith first came into the room, it appeared that she was uneducated and all but too ready to argue, but as the meeting progressed it began to appear that she was in an extremely difficult circumstance. Principal Obenga said, "I feel something from what you just said Ms. Smith. You know you've seen me around here, out in the neighborhood, and you know I love your son." Ms. Smith shook her head affirmatively. He continued with a look of deep concern on his face, "I tell you what, we know he's had a lot of trouble this year, but let's let him take the test and then go home each day after testing. You and I will reconvene in a few weeks." Mrs. Smith nodded affirmatively and said, "Thank you. I didn't mean to put any of this on you, but..." Principal Obenga interrupted saying "You didn't put anything on me. We are all in this together, ok?" Ms. Smith responded affirmatively and the meeting ended with the assistant principal hugging Mrs. Smith and smiles around the table.

In that meeting, Principal Obenga demonstrated both management and leadership skills. The meeting itself was a management challenge in that everyone entered the room with their own concerns and worries and on different pages about the nature of the problem. Principal Obenga also demonstrated leadership skills in that he was able to not allow the policies of the district to take over him in his role, and when it was important, he became empathetic to the needs of the parent. Perhaps most importantly are the reasons why he approached the meeting the way that he did. When I asked him about it, he responded, "brother it takes courage to do this. You have to be willing to make parents, community comfortable. Many of our people are destroyed. You have to think about how the world we live in thinks about Black people. This can't be that same kind of space. It just can't be. No."

The next day, while shadowing Principal Obenga, he entered into a classroom at ACPS at the request of a teacher who wanted him to become involved in a situation with a student. It was not a highly stressful situation. A student named Safisha (pseudonym) had thrown a desk and a chair the day before, and the teacher asked for Principal Obenga's involvement in relation to what should be done about the problem. Principal Obenga said, "Well, the people deserve to know who's holding us back. So we're bringing this to the entire school. But right now I want to ask you all... this is your village. Should Safisha be allowed to stay in the village?" Students made comments and a discussion ensued. After the discussion, students voted 100% for her to stay, and instead of being suspended, Safisha received a different punishment for throwing the furniture. In that example, Principal Obenga demonstrated democratic values, an understanding of African centered ethos, and he left students with the impression that they are responsible to their village (their community).

Principal Obenga usually brings some aspect of something African into his interactions with people in the school. It can be a reference to "the village", "our people", or an African proverb or adage; he often maintains the connection to ACPS' overall purpose and theme of attempting to create an African centered institution. Even in passing conversation there is a focus on doing something African. As Baba Baye was discussing with some students in the hallway their decision to carry man bags (which look similar to purses), Principal Obenga approached them and asked a few questions about the man bag. One young man's was purple with a red stripe on it. It was not something that I had ever seen before. During the conversation about the man bag, Baba Baye said to Principal Obenga, "You know what they use these for?" Principal Obenga was not sure. Baba Baye said, "they carry heat in them so they can walk through their neighborhoods. They don't have anything like that in them now, but that's why they have them." The eighth-grade students stood there silently. Principal Obenga's remark was, "We are going to have to learn how to solve problems in our community better than that. Fellas, at least if you're going to carry one, carry an African-looking one. A Kente cloth or something." Baba Baye agreed. They dismissed the boys and Principal Obenga, Baba Baye and I proceeded to the professional development that was scheduled for that day.

In my experience, most principals observe professional development (PD). Principal Obenga conducts much of the PD himself. He often shares that work with Baba Baye. The PD begins with African drumming. As I waited and watched the music teacher playing the drums and I watched the teachers file in for the PD, I happened to glance just beyond the music teacher and noticed Principal Obenga playing the drums himself. The rhythm was captivating as they performed Kiswahili Blues. I wondered what teachers thought about the scene – the principal of the school with his statistical data and test scores displayed on the powerpoint as they entered while wearing a dashiki and playing African rhythms on the drums. I wondered how the PD would unfold.

Baba Baye and Principal Obenga handed out an article entitled, “Where are the Black educators who are educated Blackly?” which appears in author Haki Madhubuti’s book entitled “*From Plan to Planet*.” Every teacher in the room had something to say about the article. None of the comments were negative assessments of the article. The longest part of the discussion that ensued had to do with why most of them had never heard the kinds of things that Madhubuti put into the article. Principal Obenga said, “Because you are part of a system that does not want you to know these things. And that’s what makes our school special. We discuss these things right out in the open.” Shortly after the article discussion, we watched the video entitled, “*Thomas Sankara the Upright Man*”. Prior to watching the video, Principal Obenga said, “We are showing you this video because the more you train and educate yourself, the more you see it in your watoto (the children).” The video demonstrates the independent minded and independent work of Thomas Sankara, the famous president of Burkina Faso who was assassinated by European and American intelligence forces.

The PD lasted about three hours. I did not see anyone looking at their watches or the clock. Every teacher in the PD was speaking about what they saw in the readings and the video. Once the video ended, Principal Obenga gave them a break and then switched gears to begin speaking about the test scores. He said, “Ok, our test scores went up. Let me tell you something, we need to challenge the curriculum. This isn’t the curriculum that our community wants for our children. Let me tell you something, what they care about is whether or not our kids are at proficient and beyond. If you can get our kids to proficient and beyond, I’m not gonna let them mess with you.” Once the data/testing conversation was introduced, I noticed teachers begin to ask questions that demonstrated anxiety, such as what one teacher said, “If you have a student who has to work after school, even though it’s against the law, and they get off work at 3 in the morning and then come to school, how is that person expected to pass this test? I got students that have real life problems.” Principal Obenga responded by saying, “That is real. I know we have students doing all sorts of things, but as far as they are concerned, I can’t accept any excuses, that’s the way it is. I can fight for you [in relation to] curriculum, but I can’t fight for you when it comes to teaching our watoto. People blame children, but the world is not accommodating people who blame children anymore. The superintendent is about data. He’s about track record. If he knows it’s working, he’s gonna leave let it be...”

After the PD, Baba Baye, Principal Obenga and I went to eat. They are both vegans, so we went to the local vegan restaurant. While there, Baba Baye and Principal Obenga greeted various members of the community and introduced me to some. Most people asked how things were at the school and a few wanted to know how they were being treated by the school system. We left the restaurant and then visited the local bookstore (both the restaurant and the bookstore are Black owned and are close to ACPS). The specific area where the bookstore is located is being developed. Principal Obenga pointed out to me that the area is being developed by a Howard University graduate who received money from the Obama administration to fund “shovel ready projects.” When we entered the bookstore, Principal Obenga and Baba Baye were greeted with hugs from the bookstore staff.

They asked about what was happening at ACPS, and the gentleman who was working in the bookstore said, “Man, thank God for that school. I had a few of the kids from there in here the other day.” Principal Obenga jokingly said, “Yea, well I hope it wasn’t while they were supposed to be over there with me at the school!” The bookstore employee chuckled and reassured him that it was not during school hours. After introducing me, Principal Obenga repeated all of the information about the development of the area, which made the bookstore staff very proud. The lady who was working there said, “Thanks [Principal Obenga], yes, we are working very hard here to make this a place where everybody in the community knows that they can come.”

Principal Obenga is connected to his students, the parents, and the community. In all of his dealings, he promotes the African centered ideals of the school and he encourages the people in the community to get involved in what is happening at the school. In order to do this work successfully, one must know the basic written and unwritten education rules, policies and politics. But to lead an African centered school, one must also know the rules, policies and politics of community building, one must understand what has happened to impact Black identity, one must be connected to Pan Africanism, and one must be in a process of personal transformation toward reAfricanization. It is not enough for a principal to wear a suit and be a rule follower, for there is nothing in that for Black children. Principal Obenga clarifies that transforming a school to meet the needs of Black students requires a leader who is deeply conscious of African centered knowledge and African traditions; it requires a leader who is down-to-earth and can relate to the people and their issues, and it requires a leader who sees him/herself as being intricately tied to the fate of the children and the community. While those may be seen as a heavy set of requirements for a school leader, it is arguable that being an effective African centered teacher requires even more.

African Centered Personal Transformation is a Prerequisite for African Centered Teaching

Baba Baye is in his early 60’s. He, like other African centered teachers that I have studied, is very energetic and seems to not tire. His way of relating to students is with the sense that there must be respect in order for there to be anything else. Teachers may have difficulty with some students, but Baba Baye has little to no difficulty with any of the students. He uses an African centered method in his classroom when a student raises his/her hand to speak. For example, on several occasions I witnessed the following interaction between Baba Baye and his students:

Ayanna: [raising her hand in the air]

Baba Baye: Yeabo Ayanna (yes, Ayanna)

Ayanna: Baba, May I speak?

Baba Baye: Yes, go ahead.

As the student proceeds with their comment, Baba listens intently. An example of the way a dialogue typically goes is illustrated here as he and Ayanna continue their dialogue:

Ayana: Thank You. I wanted to answer the question. They wanted...

Baba Baye: [interrupting Ayanna] now, when you say “they”, you gotta be clear on who you’re speaking of.

Ayanna: Oh ok, they meaning the Europeans. They wanted to control the Africans.

On several occasions, I observed Baba Baye wait for students to finish their sentences with respect. To illustrate, I observed the following dialogue, which was typical –

Baba Baye: Kwasi, didn’t I ask you to take out your pencil?

Kwasi: Yea. Ok I’m about to.

Baba Baye: Yea what?

Kwasi (chuckles apologetically) Yes sir. Yes sir, I’m about to.

I asked Baba Baye why he has success with those same young people that others struggle with. He replied, “You have to use the culture. They respond to it.” He continued, “A lot of the problems teachers have is they don’t want to change their personality. You wanna be the same person you are all the time, but you can’t do that with our kids. You may have to be more of a drill sergeant, you might not always get to be their favorite person, but they will appreciate you because truth be told, they really love discipline. It’s just that adults don’t always want to be an adult and give out the discipline.” I asked Baba Baye to help me understand more. He said, “A lot of it is acting. But not in a negative or a fake way. But if you are too caught up in just being you, then you can’t do it, and they pick up on your personality and these are middle schoolers, they are gonna try you. If you respond through your normal personality, that probably isn’t gonna work.” I have noticed on several occasions that when Baba Baye wants his classroom quiet, it is pin-drop quiet. I asked how he is able to do that and he responded, “Most of the teachers that I know that have trouble with discipline also have trouble with teaching and relating to the children. If you make a big deal out of someone not having a pencil, or whispering when you say no talking at all, then that person will sure enough know that you’re not going to put up with more than that. Like I said, it’s kind of related to acting. Our children are not taught discipline because our adults oftentimes don’t have any discipline.”

Baba Baye demonstrated one of his main areas of concern related to discipline later that day in a discussion with his students’ diet. He said, “I want to discuss food with you. You’re really not going to live very long if you don’t change what you’re doing.” He asked a few questions to the students about what they eat and he discussed electromagnetism. Then, with his ipad in his hand, he went up to the TV that sits in the front of the classroom. He said, “...does anyone know what a testimonial is?”

Before students responded, he said, “we’re going to look at about 10 minutes of this; this is the first DVD I watched that impacted me to change my diet.” He reminded the students about a lecture they saw of Dr. Seba (a famous nutritionist). The film focused on the importance of eating a plant based diet and encouraged viewers to eat less meat. After watching the film, he quizzed students on things discussed in the video. Students responded verbally to the list of problems caused by unhealthy dieting. The list was enormous, including cancers, high blood pressure, diabetes and so forth. He gave them a handout to read about healthy eating, then discussed the fact that one of the reasons Mao Tse Tung cut the West off from having any influence or even visiting China at one point is because he did not want his people to be impacted by the poor Western diet. He said that the Chinese had very few illnesses from eating poor diet and they were mostly fit. He said, “When they re-opened China to the West and allowed Western influence into China, you saw an influx of McDonalds and other restaurants like it. Now China is having the same diseases that you see in the US such as cancer and other diseases.” He closed out his unit on diet by saying that, “Most people die not from eating too little food, but from eating too much it.”

I asked Baba Baye if the things that he is teaching are being taught by other teachers. He said he was not sure, but he believes that many teachers may not have begun a process of personally transforming toward becoming African centered. He challenged me to speak to some of the teachers and see what kind of responses I would get. Next, I report data from interviews that I had with two of the teachers (Mama Rita and Mama Celeste).

I asked Mama Rita, “What is an African centered focus and how can having it do anything for Black kids?”

Mama Rita said, “There was an epiphany when I arrived. All my life my work has been about civil rights and things of that nature. Here [at ACPS] things have been interesting, but working with Baba Baye I find that really a lot of what we have been doing in Civil Rights is trying to get something that was never meant for us to work for us. Here we have been working to cause interventions and now my epiphany causes me to wonder whether that can even be done. And I’m not here by happenstance, this school was listed among several that had an available position, because of technology, I just pushed the button. I wasn’t sure what African centered meant. I thought, ok we are going to talk about African American history in the United States. I had no idea. I was interviewed by Principal Obenga. Baba Baye was part of the interviewing process. Baba and I understand a lot of things similarly. How you deal with learning so much? I’m beginning to think about it differently.”

I asked her, “What is an African Centered education?” She responded, “It has to be the essence of who we are as people, we didn’t begin as slaves. Even Banks [Multiculturalist James Banks] out in Seattle was really talking about infusing, because we know that unless children see themselves in a positive light, we know we need to make education relevant and meaningful for them.

This is the most powerful attempt at education I've ever seen in my life and I have been in education for over 30 years, including I worked as a superintendent of a district. Here I see kids learning that things have been pilfered, and resold back to us. And the only people that are going to share that message with us is us."

She continued, "Now you have to be an open person to work in this environment. Takes a person who knows they are African, but I'm also a lot of other stuff. I've probably operated more in middle class America more than anybody else in this school. But I'm like maybe it's a different fight now. Maybe it's not about having lunch at the Ritz Carlton where the luncheon is more about the luncheon that it is about the children. Now I think those organizations are important, there are lessons, but we need to make it work for the children. It's about helping our children. People expect me to be another way because of how I present and things like that. We even need to be honest about how many of us have become very 'middle class.'"

Both Baba Baye and Principal Obenga believe that Mama Rita is one of the more informed teachers in the building with regard to understanding African centered education and seeing herself as being in a process of personal transformation. By contrast, I spoke with Mama Celeste, a teacher who does not see herself as being in process of personal transformation toward becoming African centered, but remains interested in working at ACPS. I asked mama Celeste, "What is African Centered Education?" She responded, "it's a learning experience for me"... they threw me in a classroom and I didn't know anything about it. So I'm learning as they learn, but I'm like a student because I'm learning as they learn. So I appreciate African centered school because it's teaching me some things that I didn't know, some things I already knew because of my parents and grandparents, you know, village raise child and all that, because around here we have to pull each other, help each other." She continued, I see this as becoming your own person." I pushed her a bit to see if she would develop a more coherent definition and she responded, "Being a person of African descent, not even descent, because all of us come from there, so we need know about our culture. We stopped learning about our culture when we went into the European schools. We only learn so much by our grandparents. Griots are storytellers, and I'm like ok, because my grandparents taught me some things."

After my conversations with the two teachers and my interactions with Baba Baye, I began to understand that one of the immense challenges that Black children face is that Black adults believe the training they have received in college is sufficient for preparing them for working with Black children. That training is insufficient, and at this point, since no one can force a teacher to become African centered, public schools will struggle vehemently to become African centered institutions. That is, Principal Obenga is not able to fire a teacher for not understanding and/or delivering an African centered education, so the institution is limited in its ability to be what Principal Obenga and Baba Baye want it to be because of the ways that teacher hiring and firing works and additionally because the society (such as Schools of Education) are not "producing" enough African Centered teachers.

Implications

Since the commencement of the United States there has been a focus on making sure that Blacks would not receive an education. At the foremost inception of the country, educating Blacks was against both policy and practice. As early as the mid 1700's, laws such as the South Carolina Act of 1740, which forbade educating Blacks on anything except religious instruction, were in place. Following the period of enslavement, there was debate about the kind of instruction that Blacks should receive. The Hampton-Tuskegee model argued for industrial education, while opponents argued in favor of a more academic model. Hence, there was a lack of clarity in regard to what should be the way forward. During segregation, Black schools received inadequate funding and resources, but Blacks were largely in charge of the education of their children. Many who were around during that time are now questioning whether it would have been better to maintain segregated schooling since Blacks could have had more say over what was taught and learned in their schools. But instead of whites giving African Americans what they demanded, which was desegregation (which would lead to sharing of wealth and resources in the same way that the burden of paying taxes is shared by both groups), whites instead gave them integration, which brought people into the same spaces, but did nothing about disparities in economics and all of the other areas of human activity. Thus, the integration era failed to create equitable opportunities for Blacks. The post integration era features Blacks being taught by mostly white teachers, learning little to nothing about who they are in schools, and being highlighted as the group of children who are the greatest academic failures in the nation.

The programs and projects that have been tried on Black (and other) children have failed to produce different outcomes. The so-called achievement gap persists, and it is beginning to appear as though regardless of the competitive nature of the system, and regardless of the fact that none of the mainstream programs and projects have worked while African centered education *has* worked, Blacks intend to maintain confidence that things will get better. Few Blacks in the field of education study African centered education as their mainline research. At the major education conferences, hardly anyone is presenting work on the topic. Instead of seeing the dearth of work on the topic as an important void that must be filled, some scholars wait for funding opportunities and/or affirmation from the mainstream as guidance toward deciding on their temporary research interest. Meanwhile, Black children are forced to wait on Black adults to understand the benefits of an education that is culturally centered, unapologetic in its African-ness, and poised to prepare them for leadership not just "consumer-ship".

In order for a state legislature to advocate for African centered education, they would perhaps have to see the Black community as a group of Africans who were intentionally displaced and stripped of their culture, and they would have to believe that major resources should be deployed to make them whole again.

State departments of education would have to agree with the legislature, and state departments of education would have to have a superintendent, board, and a litany of administrators in place who were going to be sure that policies supporting African centered education were being effectively deployed. At the local level, it would require African centered superintendents and principals hiring teachers who were in a process of personal transformation toward African cultural reattachment. The reason it would require those arrangements is because of what is currently in place, namely, the vicissitudes of white supremacy are entrenched into the very fabric of every person in the system, with no exceptions.

The likelihood (or lack thereof) of a system such as what is detailed above working in favor of the Black community creates a clarion call for Black (and other) administrators, teachers, researchers and policy makers to understand the nature of the system that Black children are up against. In the end, Baba Baye and Principal Obenga are actors in a larger system, and while it is surprising that a superintendent and board (no other system actors such as legislators) have allowed this space, it is like two deer surrounded by a pride of lion – maybe the only way out is if more deer show up. But regardless of the improbabilities, a small group of children in a relatively large school district have access to two people who are willing to fight for them against the odds.

Conclusion

African centered education is the only type of education that considers the culture, history, heritage and the needs and preferences of the Black community. Each day, Black children are being trained in a system that does not serve the interests of the Black community, yet no state of emergency has been issued, and many African Americans see African centered education as an *option*. It will be difficult or impossible for public and charter African centered schools to be successful because they are part of a larger system that, in the end, is demanding the maintenance of the status quo; therefore, those who are concerned about the plight of Black children should monetarily support private African centered schools, and provide other forms of assistance (such as volunteering) at public and charter African centered schools. While currently it appears that support will only increase when the majority approves of such institutions, some African centered schools are currently experiencing larger enrollments than usual, and many Black parents (such as at ACPS) are beginning to demand that the district increase the kind of culturally centered and affirming experience that their children are having at ACPS. What African centered schools are doing is largely commonsensical. The success and commonsense nature of what they are doing leads one to wonder why such schools are not more supported.

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