

A Teacher's Look at Afrocentrism

Rosalind Johnson

A society must impart rules, rituals, and beliefs to its youth if it intends to survive for more than a single generation. How our society fulfills this mission is now at the center of heated debate: whose rules? whose rituals? whose beliefs? As our country moves away from the 19th century's cookie-cutter conception of mass schooling and heads toward the high-tech and multiethnic 21st century, we must redefine our educational goals. We still intend to deliver an education to all of our country's children, but how we do it remains an open question.

The education debate never really goes away; it just changes topics. Many years ago, controversy swirled around compulsory attendance and teaching evolution theory. Today, the arguments rage over multicultural and Afrocentric curricula. At stake is the ultimate cultural prize: the education of our children.

Virtually all of us can agree that American schools desperately needed systemic change yesterday. But as a practicing teacher for 26 years, I know that the curricular combatants have had little to no effect on America's classrooms. In order to achieve desirable change, we must calmly focus ourselves on a handful of basic principles that most Americans will find acceptable. We must convey a proper sense of the United States, its history, and its place in the world. A school curriculum that ignores the diverse peoples of the world cannot produce a tolerant or learned citizenry for the next century's toughest challenges.

The United States is the only country both fortunate and plagued at the same time to have citizens who hail from nearly every ethnic stock on the globe. The survival of the American experiment requires that we continue to balance the delicate demands of this fragile pluralism. Many educators now suggest that black children, who face a unique set of obstacles, retreat into the racial enclave of Afrocentrism. But Afrocentrism is no magic bullet. It risks balkanizing our children—and ultimately our nation.

I'm the child of many ethnicities. My mother is a Choctaw Indian from Oklahoma. My great-grandmother is the child of a black slave and a white slave owner. What curriculum is best for me? I was educated in the public schools of Prince George's County, Maryland. We used the hand-me-down textbooks of white students. I read the European classics of Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, Bacon, and Cervantes. I read the American classics of Hawthorne, Dickinson, and Whitman. My textbooks taught me next to nothing about African Americans, aside from the institution of slavery.

While in college, I gained a broader view of black people and their significant role in the world. I also acquired a greater knowledge of other cultures. I don't claim to have a deep academic understanding of my many heritages, but neither do I condemn my early education as invalid. I still make use of what I learned in those old textbooks. As a woman of African heritage, I feel revulsion over slavery and its sordid legacy. But I can't revile my own existence. I'm an American. I'm proud of my citizenship. My Eurocentric education, as it's called these days, made me literate and tolerant of new ideas and human differences. This is the type of education I strive to give my students.

I've observed several Afrocentric programs and read about many more. Most have flopped, but a few have prospered. Whenever the children succeed in these programs, it's typically because the classes are smaller, the parents are more involved, and the teachers have aides. The children are gently prodded to explore the unknown. They don't fear failure. Any child would soar in this type of environment.

But Afrocentrism tries to do more than provide a safe learning environment. Some of the children will graduate from these programs with a lousy education. They might come away thinking that the continent of Africa was and is a monolithic society, rather than a place where millions of people speak thousands of dialects and live in both conflict and harmony.

I worry that Afrocentric curricula promote fantasy as fact. I worry that its children learn to feel self-worth by denying any worth to other cultural groups. I worry that these children won't value the cultural diversity of their own country, let alone the world. I worry that they will feel no comfort living and working outside of the black experience. I worry that they will grow up intolerant.

Many Afrocentrists argue that black children learn differently than white, Hispanic, or Asian children, and that they need a different kind of education for this reason. But if this is the basis of Afrocentrism then I think it's seriously flawed. I've never seen any empirical evidence to suggest that the children of different races learn differently. When I began my teaching career in Prince George's County in 1968, 99 percent of my students were white. Today, 89 percent are African American. They do not learn differently.

What I see in my students are the effects of economic stress, a lack of family stability, and little or no parental involvement. I see students who don't have hopes or a vision for the future. They have no expectations beyond instant gratification.

My students need to believe that they can achieve. My students must learn to function well enough to survive and prosper in a bustling world economy. My students must see themselves as members of a global village—not an African village. As their teacher, I must help them learn to read, write, and compute, to understand the country and world they will inherit, and to have goals to aim for and conquer.

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