AN ABSENCE OF AFROCENTRICITY

"Current practices in Canadian schools do not address satisfactorily the problem of students' disengagement and dropping out," George J. Sefa Dei alleges, adding: This problem may be alleviated by the development of an inclusive curriculum that promotes alternative, non-hegemonic ways of knowing and understanding our world," namely "Afrocentrocity," defined as "the study of phenomena grounded in the perspectives and epistemological constructs of peoples of African descent."[1] Dei recalls a panel session at a 1992 conference on "African Studies in Canada: Problems and Prospects in the Coming Decades," during which "one student of African descent" presented a paper titled "We Would Rather Be Reading Wole Soyinka," from which Dei concludes that the "title not only highlighted current overemphasis on the work of White, male, heterosexual literary scholars, but also indicated a yearning to study non-European literary scholars."[2] Dei claims there is – at the time of writing in the mid-1990s – a "dearth of critical educational research specifically about the inclusive curriculum in Canadian schools," as researchers have failed to study "how minority students define or articulate issues linked to inclusivity, nor have they identified the curricular and pedagogic practices on which an inclusive curriculum depends."[3]

Interviewing one-hundred fifty Black students in Toronto, Dei discovered "three primary concerns," the first being that many have suffered "differential treatment according to race," the second the "absence of Black teachers," and third, the "absence of Black and African-Canadian history in the classroom."[4] Indeed, the students Dei and his team interviewed "described encounters with authority and power structures they perceived not to work in their interest," and "they also discussed difficulties in constructing personal and group cultural identities in a school environment that did not adequately highlight their cultural presence, heritage, and history."[5] "In subsequent phases of the project, in part to cross-reference the students' narratives," his "researchers talked to 41 teachers (including some administrators and guidance counsellors), 59 non-Black students, and 55 Black/African-Canadian parents."[6] These were followed by "interviews with Black parents and community workers" concerning issues with and possible "solutions" to "problems of public schooling in Canada."[7] Dei discovered "interesting parallels, convergences, and divergences arose between Black/African-Canadian parents' and teachers' narrative discourses and those of the youth."[8] The "final message," however, was simple: "Black youth experience exclusion and racism on many levels."[9]

One interviewee complained "I only know about Canadian history, which is White history," adding: "I did not learn anything about Black people," even though, "probably in the past two years, I would say we have improved in our geography, but we don't really learn about the cultural background," nothing about "the people, but

just the city or the country."[10] Another interviewee reported that "the teacher could always say, well, this came from the Caribbean and this came from Africa and just, or this came from Germany and kind of add everyone's input," but overall the "school system that I know . . . focused on just White European and that's it, nothing more, and they don't tell you about great African stuff."[11] Dei concluded that: "It is no exaggeration to say that minority students are generally critical of fact that not all world experiences are represented in classroom discourse texts - the fact of being Black, a Black woman, poor, or any form of a minority living in Canadian society is rarely discussed."[12] Moreover, students noticed the absence of Black persons "in power," so they saw no "role models," and "you might say, well, you know Blacks can't do that … Blacks can't make it far so why am I bothering."[13] Dei concludes: "When students talked about the possibility of a Black teacher having a perspective that they can identify with, they were making communicative and pedagogic reference to the teacher's sharing in their personal and cultural knowledge, and the possibility of challenging dominant viewpoints at school. Students' narratives thus moved beyond questions of culture to questions of power."[14]

There may be a "dearth of critical educational research specifically about the inclusive curriculum in Canadian schools," an allegation Dei made earlier and which now he contradicts, reporting that "our research findings are echoed in other studies," citing a 1988 study conducted by the Toronto Board of Education, and 1993 finding by the Black Working Group.[15] He also mentions efforts made by "parents, community workers, teachers, care-givers, and students" in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and British Columbia, concluding that "some recognition of the need for inclusive schooling has been achieved at provincial level," singling out Nova Scotia's government funding of the "development of a curriculum that will include courses on Black history, culture, and traditions" and New Brunswick's Ministry of Education :new policy on relations that will encompass curriculum and teacher-training."[16] Dei judges these as "laudable," but notes that "policies are not easily translated into specific plans for action," especially "implementation is often left to the discretion of either individual school boards or school principals, who often complain about the lack of resources to effect government policies."[17]

From an absence of Afrocentricity in the curriculum Dei returns to the larger issue with which he started: inclusivity. "Within the school system," he writes, "inclusivity means dealing foremost with equity: the qualitative value of justice," but inclusivity "also means ensuring representation: a multiplicity of perspectives in academic discourse, knowledge, and texts."[18] It also "requires pedagogies that respond to the social construction of difference in the school system, and also in society at large (issues of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and ability)," and, finally, "inclusivity requires spaces for alternative, and sometimes oppositional, paradigms to flourish in the schools."[19] Again Dei references "questions of power and the construction of social difference," noting that each plays "an important part in both

the official and the hidden aspects of school curricula - the so-called 'deep curriculum'," that latter term denoting not only stipulated and hidden school rules but also regulations that influence student and staff activities, behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, expectations, and outcomes."[20] What is necessary, Dei, concludes, is a "multi-centric" curriculum, one that "locates students within their own cultural frame of reference so that they can connect socially, politically, ideologically, spiritually, and emotionally to the learning process ," a curriculum that "consequently refutes hegemonic education."[21] Apparently such "multi-centric" curriculum isn't so "multi-centric," as it excludes European-descent students "own cultural frame of reference," Dei decrying "the current dominance of Eurocentricity" while demanding the curricular inclusion of "other forms of 'centric knowledge' that emphasize the contributions of other peoples to knowledge production and world history."[22]

And, it turns out, by "the contributions of other peoples to knowledge production and world history," Dei means African peoples, and by "other forms of 'centric knowledge" he means "Afrocentric knowledge."[23] He catches his contradiction quickly, allowing that a "focus on Afrocentricity is designed not to exclude other "centric" knowledge but to contribute to a plurality of perspectives and knowledge about schooling in the Euro-Canadian context," adding: "curriculum in Canadian schools is diversified when programming is culture-specific without marginalizing other cultures. Questions surrounding Afrocentric education could equally be asked about First Nations, Asiacentric, and other forms of education."[24] But Dei is not going to ask about these: "Although I recognize the multiple and collective origins of knowledge the need for a synthesis of different world-views in Canadian education consider only the case of Afrocentric knowledge." [25] Not only "Afrocentric knowledge," but "non-hegemonic Afrocentric knowledge," wondering how such knowledge could "be incorporated school teachings for the benefit of everyone, and particularly for African Canadian students," as "Euro-Canadian/American schools need a form of education that will assist Black youth particularly to re-invent their Africanness within a Diasporic context, and to create a way of being and thinking congruent with positive African traditions." [26] So Dei wants schools to ignore "negative" African traditions? Would Dei want "Euro-Canadian/American schools" to ignore "negative" European traditions?

Next Dei turns not to issues of truth-telling and critique but of culture, decrying a "superficial definition of cultures" that focuses on foods-and-festivals, defining culture instead as "multi-faceted, a dynamic force shaped and reshaped" through political and social struggle.[27] Then he moves to modes of knowledge acquisition, asserting that "Afrocentric discourse offers alternative 'ways of knowing,' informed by the histories and cultural experiences of all peoples of African descent."[28] "Knowledge acquisition," he continues, "is not attributed simply to individual talent or to the capacities of one's own senses: it comes from individual, family, and communal interactions, as well as from the interaction with nature," Afrocentricity conveying a

"world-view [that] can be contrasted with those that privilege the individual over the community, rights over responsibilities, and objective over subjective ways of knowing."[29] Afrocentric curriculum constitutes "a pedagogic and communicative tool" as it "grounds analysis and investigations of African and Black issues in this perspective," aimed at moving Africans from the margins of history to its centre.[30] The "Afrocentric paradigm critiques a 'liberal' ideology that effects social change, disrupting current power relations in school settings."[31]

Despite these expansive claims and earlier demands to displace ""Euro-Canadian/American" curriculum, Dei determines that the "task for Canadian educators is to integrate Afrocentric teachings with other systems of thought, particularly in the education of Black youth."[32] Then he appears to reject the integration idea, asserting that "Afrocentric values and ideas can form the cornerstone of classroom pedagogy," values and ideas that enable "teachers and administrators can recognize their mutual interdependence with other social learners," as the "Afrocentric educator" shows "an awareness of personal location, authority, experience, and history is the foundation of successful teaching practice."[33] In "Afrocentric teachings," Dei reports "education is organized around communitarian and non-hierarchical structures," exhibiting a "holistic, integrated view" to be "adopted in curricula development and classroom instructional practice," as "students' cultures, histories, and personal knowledge are at the centre of the learning process."[34] That said, we learn that "classroom instructional practices extol the virtues of community bonding, individual sharing, mutuality, and the matching of individual rights with social responsibility use of students' home language and dialect are effective pedagogical tools."[35] Indeed, "students teach about their out-of-school cultures, and parents, community workers, and elders come to school to teach about respect, authority, and communal responsibility," as "student success is evaluated in social terms performance of civic duty as well as academic terms."[36]

Dei then tells us that "Afroceducation (curriculum and pedagogy) proceeds from an understanding that individual stakeholder has something to offer and that diverse viewpoints, experiences, and perspectives strengthen the collective bonds of the school," and that, moreover, an "emphasis on the spiritual aspect of teaching creates in schools a safe environment in which all students may make connections between their material essence and a spiritual order of their choice."[37] While "Afrocentricity is a world-view embraced in opposition to the subjugation of non-White peoples by Eurocentrism, it is not an attempt to replace one form of hegemony with another," although it sounds that way in his next sentence: "Knowledge of indigenous African cultural values is important for the personal development and schooling of all students."[38] It "cannot seek to recapture a fossilized past," nor can it be "strictly self-referential," as Afrocentric education "can thrive only by cultivating alliance with other theories and pedagogies aimed at progressive forms of scholarship (e.g., radical feminism and critical antiracism)."[39]

Dei's logical whip-sawing is dizzying, as are the utopian claims Dei makes for Afrocentricity. Like the noun "Indigeneity," the term "Afrocentricity" threatens to reduce the diversity of African and African-descent peoples into an unintended reinscription of earlier racist reductions of cultural diversity into stereotyping: "Indian" in the case of the former, "Negro" (and its "n-word" predecessor) in the case of the latter. No doubt African histories and cultures – including their diasporic forms in the Americas – have been underemphasized in Canadian curriculum and, specifically, in Toronto schools, the location of Dei's interview data, from which he generalizes about all "Euro-Canadian/American schools." Dei's critique and claims risk being, as Kester puts it, "so consistently structured through a reified understanding of inside and outside, heretic and true believer, purity and impurity, [that it] is destined to devolve into the very thing it seeks to replace."[40] Dei is hardly alone in allowing his outrage and enthusiasm to overtake his reasoning, but certainly, in this instance, this article is a textbook example of it.

References

Dei, George J. Sefa. 1996. The Role of Afrocentricity in the inclusive curriculum in Canadian schools. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne De L'éducation*, *21*(2), 170. https://doi.org/10.2307/1495088

Kester, Grant H. 2023. *The Sovereign Self: Aesthetic Autonomy from the Enlightenment to the Avant-Garde*. Duke University Press.

Miller, John P. 2019. *The Holistic Curriculum*. (3rd edition). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

ENDNOTES

[1] 1996, 170.
[2] 1996, 171.
[3] Ibid.
[4] 1996, 172.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] 1996, 173.

[10] Quoted in 1996, 173.

[11] Ibid.

[12] 196, 174.

[13] Quoted in 1996, 175.

[14] 1996, 175.

[15] Ibid.

[16] 1996, 176.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid. As Dei's article testifies, such inclusivity – at least in conceptual terms – is, if not appreciated, then obviously tolerated in universities and the academic publishing industry.

[20] 1996, 177. I wonder what's "hidden" about "behaviors."

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid. Again – those "other forms" apparently do not include European and European-descent "forms of education," the very forms that, albeit conveying racism but also institutionalizing criticism of racism.

[25] 1996, 178.

[26] Ibid.

[27] 1996, 179.

[28] Ibid.

[29] 1996, 180.

[30] 1996, 179.

[31] Ibid.

[32] 1996, 180.

[33] Ibid.

[34] 1996, 181. No mention here of Dei's colleague John P. Miller, perhaps the major figure in "holistic education."

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] 1996, 182-183.

[40] 2023, 72.