(RE)CONCEPTUALIZING BLACK STUDIES IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS

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The paper discusses the importance of African Studies in the Canadian public school system and the challenges facing teachers and educators. In recent years, the concern about issues of race, identity, and representation in education has added some impetus to the call from African-Canadian students, educators, parents, and community groups for the development of African Studies in the schools. This paper explores the significance of developing African Studies in the public schools, making linkages between the diverse concerns of Continental Africa and Africans in the Diaspora. In the discussion, the author makes reference to some personal challenges which have to be encountered in the pursuit of African-centred education. The discussion is situated in the need to transform the existing structures, within which learning, teaching, and administration of education take place in Canadian schools.

Cet article traite de l'importance des études sur l'Afrique dans le système d'éducation publique au Canada et le défi que doivent faire face les instituteurs, les professeurs et les éducateurs. Dans les dernières années, l'intérêt porté aux questions de race, d'identité et de représentation dans le domaine de l'éducation a renforcé l'impulsion des étudiants, éducateurs, parents et groupes communautaires afro-canadiens, vers le développement des études sur l'Afrique dans les écoles. Cet article explore la portée de ce développement des études sur l'Afrique dans les écoles publiques en faisant ressortir les liens d'intérêts entre le continent africain et la diaspora africaine. Dans cette exploration, l'auteur réfère à quelques défis personnels que l'on rencontrera dans la poursuite d'une éducation centrée sur l'Afrique. L'article se place dans la nécessité de transformer les structures existantes où se trouvent la formation, l'enseignement et l'administration de l'éducation dans les écoles canadiennes.

INTRODUCTION

"I only know about Canadian history, which is White history. I did not learn anything about Black people. And then, 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, we just learned about the.... not even the people, but just the city or the country. Basics, nothing deep. Is it tough? I mean, I would like to know more about my history, yes. A lot more. I think I need to know a lot more than I know." (November 15, 1992).

The above is a transcript of a taped interview with Michael, a nineteen-year-old general-level student, who came to Canada from Jamaica nearly nine years ago. He was responding to a question about the school curriculum. Since May 1992, with the assistance of graduate students, I have been examining African-Canadian youth experiences in the inner city public school system, focusing on the issues of student engagement and disengagement from school.¹ More than 200 high school students, including two dozen 'dropouts,' have been interviewed, both individually and in focus groups, about their school experiences and for their views and perceptions on the 'dropout' problem. The three-year project has been exploring how the school and home experiences of these students may inform our understanding of the 'dropout' dilemma. Teachers, school administrators, parent and community groups, and a small sample of non-Black/African students have also been interviewed as part of the research project. Research data reflect the influence of race/ethnicity, class, gender, and school culture on fading out of school. The complex personal stories of Black youths show how the dynamics of social difference shape the processes and experiences of public schooling (see Dei 1993a, b).

The narratives of African-Canadian students suggest that they would like their schools to reflect the communities in which they live. They do not want the schools to ghettoize African and Black experiences, rather than main-streaming such experiences in the official curriculum. Students would like the schools to teach about their ancestral histories and cultural heritages. Students are engaged in a constant struggle to maintain their individual selves and group cultural identities. They attribute the struggle to a very narrow school curriculum which, historically, has minimized their cultural and ancestral backgrounds, and the contributions of peoples of African descent to Canadian society and to world civilization.

Marlo, a participant in a provincial summer jobs program at the time he was interviewed, echoes Michael's frustrations with the deprivileging of African peoples' history and contributions to society throughout his public schooling. From him, one also learns how the official school curriculum can be very

disempowering to the minority student, leading to the point of being disengaged from the classroom.

"...when I was going to school the teachers focused on European history, European this ... Alexander Graham Bell discovered this and when you sit in a classroom full of 12 White people and all you hear is White this, White that, you think, so what am I here for. Right? A lot of times you think it's a lot of shit you know, a lot of bullshit so you don't find it that interesting - you just sit down and you ok Alexander this and George Washington this but at the same time the teacher could always say well this came from the Caribbean and this came from Africa....." (June 8, 1992)

Generally, African-Canadian youth are critical in their reflections on the school system, particularly the fact that not all world experiences are represented in classroom discourses and texts. The youth talk about the fact that classroom discourses only occasionally speak to their lived experiences, the fact of being Black, a Black woman, poor or any form of minority living in Canadian society. Students interviewed so far want to see more Black and other minority teachers in the school system. Even for the few students who are quick to add that having Black teachers would not necessarily make a major difference, they feel it is important to have a teacher who has the interests of all students at heart and who would encourage them to do well at school. While many students see the Black teacher as an important role model, others like Mary, who was born in Montreal, speak about the likelihood of the teacher having a social perspective they can identify with:

"Maybe the student will relate to the teacher better, because maybe they are from the same background or they [inaudible]. I find if I had a teacher who was Black and it was easier for me to talk to her, because my other teacher I couldn't do it....I guess it makes a lot of difference, like, especially if you have a counsellor come from your own country, religion and everything, it's good, because they, like, if it's like a White counsellor and a Black kid, the White counsellor is going to try to put himself in the kid's place, but it's impossible, she's not Black. If you have a Black teacher, it's more easier for her -- a Black counsellor, it's more easier for her to put her in her kid, in her situation and try to solve it and give me some ideas as related to us..." (July 30, 1992).

Brenda, a Grade 12 student activist, in the advanced program, carefully expands on the difference it would make to her to have a Black teacher:

"...I think if my teachers aren't Black I mean - I can even take it so far...I've never had a Black teacher and I've been able to make it. But I think it would really help, on perhaps not the educational level, because I'm sure that a person who is White or a person who is Black I mean they are both able to learn the same amount and teach the same amount to students and they can both teach very well or whatever. But I think just having someone who's Black up there who can share like some of my experiences with me. Like a lot of White teachers I don't think I would be able to share more personal things like you know, oh if I have a trip, my family's from Guyana, so I went down to Guyana and you know came back and started talking about all the things that I did down there, I think a Black teacher would more understand than a White teacher, depending on, you know, where the Black person is from also....(February 5, 1993)

I have provided these students' narratives as a backdrop to discussing the problems and challenges of African Studies in the Canadian public school system. My concern in this paper is with the pursuit of African Studies in Canadian public schools and how, as educators, we can assist in sustaining scholarship which will empower, particularly, (but not exclusively) students of African descent to have a greater knowledge of themselves and increase their self-worth. By African Studies, I refer to scholarship dealing with the histories, cultures, knowledges and epistemologies of peoples of African descent, from a perspective grounded in indigenous ways of knowing and dealing with the social and natural worlds. While I focus on African Studies, I do not negate or devalue the relevance of, and necessity for, other studies (e.g., Asian, European or Native Education). In fact, as I have argued elsewhere (Dei, 1994a), I see it more as a challenge for educators to grapple with the same issues for other studies, which the promotion of African Studies entails. The goal of an inclusive education means educators must find ways to incorporate different ways of knowing in the education of Canadian children.

The Political and Academic Challenge of African Studies and Research:

My political and intellectual project here is specifically to use knowledge of Continental Africa as a starting point for a discussion about making schooling and education in Canada more inclusive of the varied experiences, ideas, events, knowledges that have shaped human growth and development. In effect, my interest here is to use knowledge of Africa and African peoples as a launching pad to articulate and foster a project of Canadian education rooted in some of the values and epistemologies of African peoples (see Dei, 1994b).

The problems and challenges confronting anyone committed to developing African Studies in Canadian schools are many: e.g., relevance of African Studies

programs, sustaining student interest in African affairs and Black issues, and the availability of resource materials, particularly in the current atmosphere of reduced funding for education in Canada. There is also the issue of having teachers in the school system who are of African heritage. This is extremely important in sending a positive message to the youth. While being Black does not necessarily make an educator a role model for Black students, there is undeniable pressure for a Black educator to be a source of educational inspiration to Black youths, particularly, in a school system with so few Black teachers.

Canadian educators, sympathetic to issues about Africa, also now (more so than ever before) have to spend their energies responding to often misguided assertions that contemporary Africa is as politically irrelevant to the rest of the world as it is economically. At a parallel level, there is the emerging penetrating critique of totalizing discourses about a homogenous 'Africa' and the intellectual questioning of what 'Blackness' or 'Africanness' means. West (1991) has pointed to the 'new cultural politics of difference,' with its emphasis on the importance and contributions of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity of ideas, while rejecting the homogenous and monolithic. Admittedly, existing variations in African histories and cultures raise credible questions as to whose histories and cultures do we teach in the schools.

However, these concerns must be seen in the context that, in the Canadian (and for that matter in the Euro-American) scene, the rise in the self-consciousness, and cultural and racial pride of peoples of African descent has been accompanied by a resurgence in the demand for African Studies as an important component in the schools' curricula and pedagogies. The recognition of differences among the African-Canadian population along gender, racial, ethnic and class lines does not, in itself, negate the value and importance of teaching African Studies in the schools. The terms 'African' and 'Black' have important social and political meanings. It behooves educators and the schools to interrogate what 'African' and 'Black' mean in the Canadian context.

The fundamental issue is to interrogate the role of African Studies and research in Canadian schools in a contemporary epoch, one which is remarkably different in its celebration of cultural fragmentation and pluralism, as against "...the universalizing, homogenizing effects of rationality and scientism" (Lash and Urry, 1987:4; Smith, 1991:7). My concern with African Studies goes well beyond questions of how many programs or centres of African/Black Studies should exist in Canadian schools, and who should be teaching or running these programs. In talking about African Studies and research, the focus is on the study and research of phenomena, grounded in the perspectives of African peoples. I am talking about a project of intellectual decolonization, by which I mean educators staking out a position on Africa and examining African issues and concerns outside the identity which has been, and continues to be, constructed in Western ideology

(see Muteshi, 1991). I am talking about schooling and education in Canada that seeks to resurrect the subjugated knowledge and viewpoints of our minority students. For example, I contend that, through the focus on African peoples' perspectives, schools could be provided with a body of knowledge to assist in empowering students, to interrogate the role of education in Canadian society, to help in transforming existing social inequities and injustices, and to promote positive African values in our youth.

A strong commitment to African Studies in Canada is essential today, given the long history of Euro-American dominance of what constitutes valid knowledge, and how such knowledge should be produced and disseminated internally and internationally, as well as the historical distortion and misappropriation of African peoples' lives and experiences. The push for African Studies in Canadian schools is, therefore, situated in the feminist and postmodernist calls for the introduction, validation, and interrogation of 'other' voices and ways of knowing, in order to provide a more complete account of the history of ideas and events that have shaped human growth and development.

Teaching African Studies in Canadian public schools would necessitate a paradigm shift, in the sense of developing an alternative non-hegemonic way of knowing, informed by all peoples' histories and experiences. Speaking from my vantage point as an African-Canadian educator, I call on Canadian educators to engage in a critical investigation of African issues from a perspective grounded in African epistemological constructs. Educators, writing on Africa and teaching about African experiences in Canada, are urged to centre their analysis and perceptions from the groundness of African values and subjectivities (Henry, 1991). As Asante (1991) and others have argued, this is the most effective way to 'move' or 'bring' peoples of African descent from the margins to the centre of post-modern history. For Euro-Canadian educators, the challenge is to allow the African youth to see, understand and interpret the world from their own eyes, rather than that of the European. This means that they must critique the ideas and practices within the schools and the wider society that establish, promote and perpetuate White hegemony over African and non-White peoples.

But perhaps much more importantly, the challenge of developing African Studies in Canadian schools is for the educator to make the necessary connections between the diverse concerns of Continental Africans and those of the Diaspora, in a way that allows African Studies in Canadian schools to deal with issues concerning race and other forms of social oppression. For example, teaching about African Studies in Canadian schools would encompass the examination of the contradictions lived out in the situation of being Black and African in a White-dominated, hetero-patriarchal society. (Henry, 1991; Steady, 1990:26-41; Butler, 1981).

The education of the human mind in a manner that recognizes the variety of human experiences and the achievements of all peoples is a goal that an inclusive school curriculum should strive for. In order to develop an inclusive school environment, where there is room to promote African Studies, educators should start by problematizing how we get to know and what is counted as valid knowledge. Within the Canadian context, the call for diverse and alternative perspectives, emanating from African-Canadian educators, students, parents and community groups, is partly informed by the realization that the Euro-American school system has not succeeded in educating the African-Canadian child. This is evident by the fact that a large number of the youth lack a sense of connectedness and identification with their schools (Dei, 1993a). As already pointed out, individual and group narratives of African-Canadian youths show a deep concern about the neglect of their experiences, culture and history in the official and hidden school curriculum. African-Canadian youths complain that the schools rarely teach about the African experience in Canada (see also Dei, 1993a; b).

Certain questions have to be asked about educational texts on Africa and African peoples, and the messages being conveyed by the texts and instructors in the schools. For example, how can Canadian schools introduce African Studies as part of a broader strategy of developing an inclusive school environment? How can African Studies be instituted in the schools to facilitate and enhance the development of a counter-hegemonic knowledge? How much about Africa and the achievements and contributions of peoples of African descent is taught in the schools? Do the schools teach about African peoples' histories and cultures in their own right? And, given current economic constraints, how much are Canadian educators and researchers on African issues actively engaged in the creation of analytical systems, based on indigenous African concepts and their interrelationships?

One of the challenges of developing African Studies in Canadian schools lies in the area of curriculum reform and development. Educators should be aware of the critical role of teaching materials in effective learning, and work for a comprehensive curriculum reform at all levels of the school system. The objective should be to ensure that education serves the needs of local peoples by addressing issues of social justice, rather than perpetuating social inequities by glossing over the implications of the dynamics of social difference.

The challenge for developing an inclusive curriculum requires that we address issues of educational equity and ensure that the educational representation, in terms of human and material resources, reflects the diversity of Canadian society. An inclusive curriculum requires that subject matters dealing with peoples of African descent be discussed from the African perspective. It also requires that, as educators of diverse student bodies, our pedagogies and classroom discourses

integrate the issues of social difference and discuss the implications, in terms of the racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and class positionalities in society.

Curriculum reform should involve the entire spectrum of planned school experiences that influence African students' sense of identification and connectedness to the school system. It should include making changes to the "...stipulated practices and procedures" that govern the delivery of education, as well as the "...unwritten practices that influence student activities, behaviours, perceptions and outcomes" (Mukherjee and Thomas, n.d.: 7). With regards to teaching guides and the use of resource materials, an attempt should be made to have materials on African peoples' contributions to, and achievements in, Canada available and easily accessible to students, as well as the teaching staff. Educators should be knowledgeable about how to use these materials to discuss structural inequities in society. Educators should also be aware of the dangers of privileging and hierarchalizing issues of race, particularly in the discussion of the African experience in Canada, while overlooking the embedded inequalities which flow from class, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexuality, religious and language disparities.

Concerns about cultural pluralism should be matched with serious attempts to address the fundamental questions of structural pluralism in the schools. As McCarthy (1990) pointed out, schools should be seen as "...sites of power and contestation in which differential interests, resources and capacities determine the manoeuvrability of competing racial groups and the possibility and pace of change" (p. 56). What this means is that, to address concerns about the alienation of African and other minority students and their lack of identification with the school system, there have to be structural changes at the level of power relations in the schools. The promotion of African Studies in the schools would be enhanced by the recruitment of African-Canadian teachers and staff. Arguably, being Black or African does not necessarily make the educator an authority on Black or African culture and history. But educators, like students, do not come to school as 'disembodied' persons. Our racial, ethnic, class and gender identities implicate our ways of knowing and understanding society. The realization of this fact is significant if Canadian schools are to succeed in the search and development of alternative knowledge or educational perspectives. It is important that African-Canadian teachers be placed in positions where they can influence the politics of schooling and also assist students and other educators in conceptualizing African Studies as an alternative way of knowing.

Conceptualizing and Teaching African Studies as an Alternative Way of Knowing:

As already pointed out, the pursuit of African Studies in Canada involves more than the institution of courses on the African experience in Canada. The pursuit of African Studies should include a rupturing of hegemonic ways of

knowing in the schools. Schools should make room for oppositional discourses. Schools should nurture a multiplicity of perspectives in the education of the youth. It is in this context that I see the relevance of African ways of knowing in Canadian schools. The question then is, "Which ideas and principles that organize traditional African societies are relevant in the education of Canadian youth?"

While I recognize the ethnic and cultural diversity of African peoples, I hold the view that beyond such diversity lie some common themes (see Dei, 1993c; 1994b). I also acknowledge that the broad themes underlying African epistemological constructs can be found in diverse or variant forms among indigenous peoples of the world. But the important point to note is that traditional African cultures have never claimed ownership of ideas or knowledge. I recognize too that traditional African epistemologies contain sources and spaces of cultural disempowerment for certain groups in society, for example, women and ethnic/cultural minorities. But tradition is not frozen in time and space. Tradition informs modernity and therefore tradition itself is inescapable. We look to the past and make connections to the present.

As educators, it is our responsibility to critically interrogate the past of our societies and reclaim educationally relevant aspects for their sources of social empowerment for our students. In the context of promoting African Studies in Canada, I believe we can do this without necessarily romanticizing or over-mythicizing the African past and its contributions to world development and the advancement of knowledge. The call for a renewal and a revitalization of indigenous knowledges and traditions for social development begins with a process of reclamation, bearing in mind that what is to be reclaimed is not a fossilized past.

A study of the cultural traditions of African peoples, their values, belief systems, and world views reveals an emphasis on ideas of community membership, social responsibility, social cohesiveness and the commonality of all peoples. African knowledge systems stress the fact that all humans are learners of the social and natural world, and that social learning has to be personalized in order to develop the intuitive and analytical aspects of the human mind. The popular axiom is that one always knows from that which is experienced and lived. Indigenous African knowledge systems also emphasize that knowledge about society is accumulated knowledge, based on observing and experiencing the social and natural worlds. There is no marketplace for ideas in the Eurocentric sense of buying and selling social knowledge. Every knowledge is socially and collectively created through the interactive processes between individuals, groups and the natural world. A basic tenet is that humans are part of the natural world and that we do not stand apart and neither are we above the natural world. Thus, to understand reality is to have a holistic view of reality. The acquisition of

knowledge is a process of interaction between the body, mind and the human spirit. The action of thought itself is a causal factor in social action.

The African humanness, as a value system, speaks to the importance of relating to, rather than mastery over nature and the environment. This humanness stresses points of conciliation, rather than presenting the universe as a world to be studied and dominated. It is recognized that our social and natural worlds are full of uncertainties. There is no certainty in any knowledge. Every way of knowing is clouded by some doubt about our world. Humans, therefore, do not need to attempt to explain everything about the world. Learning and daily human survival go hand in hand. It should be inculcated in every youth that the concept of the individual only makes sense in relation to the community of which she or he is part, and that the collective spirit is stronger than the individual mind.

Implications for Educating Canadian Youth:

I believe these ideas and principles of African knowledge systems can be incorporated in the Canadian school system to contribute to the education of the youth. The question is, how can these principles empower Canadian youths to interrogate the role of education in transforming society? At both theoretical and practical levels, Canadian educators can examine what the critical interrogation of Africa's past, culture, and traditions has to offer the rest of humanity in general, and peoples of African descent in particular. As well as teaching these ideals and principles, the institution of African Studies in the public schools could provide space for students and researchers to acquire the cultural and intellectual capital and political commitment to critically interrogate the structures within which the delivery of education takes place in Canada.

In recent years some African-Canadian educators, parents and community workers have called for the use of African-centred pedagogical strategies in the education of African youth (Board of Education, 1988: 148-149; Brathwaite 1989; Henry 1991; Calliste 1994). Teaching African-centred education as non-hegemonic knowledge can contribute to on-going anti-racist work in the schools by aiming to develop African youths' sense of connectedness to, and identification with, the school. African-centred pedagogy could foster a state of independence and self-reliance on the part of the youth. It could focus on developing the human spirit and individual and group identities of our students. By teaching the values of human co-existence with nature, group unity, mutuality, collective work and responsibility, the student would be able to perceive the interest of his or her social group as more important than the individual self-interest (see also Oliver 1986: 29). This is essential if we are to build a community atmosphere in the schools where there is mutual respect for all members. Every educator should place emphasis on teaching the youth to learn to live co-operatively with others in society. The goal of academic excellence might be easier to achieve if the task of

education were seen foremost as promoting the social and emotional growth of students.

Teaching African Studies means placing the idea of community and social responsibility at the centre of Canadian schooling. It also means that the task of educating the youth transcends beyond the school to the community. It means breaking the false separation between the school and the community. It also means instilling in students the knowledge that, while individual rights are significant, meeting one's social responsibilities is fundamentally important. Emphasizing the notion of collective responsibility in the education of the youth calls for making the necessary interconnections between groups and individuals, and also subordinating individual interests and wishes in favour of the common good.

Arguably, critical learning through oppositional discourses like African-centred pedagogy can be pursued in our schools to challenge Eurocentric knowledge as the only legitimate way of knowing about our world. Through the pursuit of African-centred pedagogy as an anti-racist educational strategy, Canadian schools can help African-Canadian youths, particularly, reinvent their Africanness within a Diasporic context, and create a way of being and thinking that is congruent with positive African traditions and values.

Transformative learning is only possible if students are provided opportunities to learn about the values, beliefs and traditions of their various community cultures. Through such education, students will be able to strengthen their social and psychological well-being as individuals. Alternative pedagogies, like African-centred education, which emphasize moral and holistic learning, could teach students to associate themselves spiritually with their culture, language and community. Students would be connected to a spiritual and moral foundation in the process of learning, which would cultivate a sense of self-esteem and also respect for others.

Our students need new and alternative learning styles to help them understand and affirm their 'home and community cultures,' and to draw on the interconnections between other cultures. Alternative pedagogies, like Aboriginal, Asian and African-centred education, can be promoted to emphasize the rich and diverse historicities of the various constituents of the school body. The acquisition of such alternative forms of education would be a source of knowledge and power to the various stakeholders in the school system, and could assist particularly in the struggle to transform the mainstream culture of our schools to address the "... experiences, histories, struggles, and victories....(as well as)...voices, visions and perspectives..." of marginalized groups (Banks, 1992: 33).

It has been argued that the ideology of public schooling represented in official school curricula and academic discourses supports the dominant power relations (see Giroux 1983; Giroux and McLaren 1986; Apple 1989:207), which subjugate and alienate many students in the school system. Arguably, one of the

ultimate goals of transformative education is to make visible those marginal cultures and voices that have traditionally been suppressed in the school system (Giroux 1992:206). Can African-centred knowledge be used as a transformative pedagogy to answer practical questions in minority education and bring about social change? As I have argued elsewhere (Dei 1994), an African-centred discourse is forged in the dialectic of critique of existing practices of exclusion and marginalization in dominant Euro-American schooling, as well as in the possibility for reforming the school system for the transformation of society. To teach African-centred values in the school system is to commit to a pedagogy that is political education, which works towards the transformation of structural conditions that have provided an unequal educational outcome for minority youths.

The ideology of individualism within the Canadian public school system undermines group solidarity and a collective struggle for social justice. If education is to transform society then it should be about making certain that learners and educators work collaboratively and to "...think critically, struggle against social injustices, and develop relations of community, based on the principles of equality, freedom and justice" (Giroux 1992:200). African-centred pedagogy also calls for making a critical linkage with other progressive forms of education (anti-racist, feminist, liberatory pedagogy) as a weapon of liberation, and as counter-knowledge in combatting Euro-American ideological domination in the schools. African-centred education, however, must be more than 'emancipatory' or 'liberatory' pedagogy (Friere and Shor 1987), imbued with self-reflection, critique and social action (Gordon 1990:102; Giroux and McLaren 1986:237; Ellesworth 1989:300).

Writing in a different context, Giroux (1992:200) suggests an educational perspective which would make "...visible the social problems and conditions that affect those students who are at risk in our society, while recognizing that such problems need to be addressed in both pedagogical and political terms, inside and outside the schools." It is in this regard that I believe African-centred education can make a contribution in the struggle for social transformation. For the African youth, African-centred education, as a discursive practice, can offer 'a language of possibility,' (Giroux 1988; Simon 1987, 1988) through which to deconstruct and reclaim, not only new forms of knowledge, "...but also provide new ways of reading history through the reconstruction of suppressed memories that offer identities with which to challenge and contest the very conditions through which history, desire, voice and place are experienced and lived" (Giroux 1992:204). The pursuit of an African-centred education, hopefully, would allow students to become active generators of their own knowledge.

As an intellectual paradigm, African-centred education must focus on addressing structural impediments to education by engaging students to identify with their history, heritage and culture. However, it should be clear to everyone

that designing one education model for all students will ultimately fail, as this would disallow the particular histories of various groups of students. Students are historically placed in vastly different positions through the mechanics of social oppression. Therefore, what ought to be encouraged is the nurturing of an inclusive form of education which recognizes "...the validity of other non-hegemonic perspectives, Asia-centred, America-centred and even Europe-centred, in its non-hegemonic form" (Oyebade 1990:234). Indeed, I believe the cause of African-centred education is properly served by a recognition of the validity of knowledges, centred on the cultures and historical experiences of other subordinated groups in Canadian society.

Situating the call for African-centred pedagogy within an anti-racist education framework raises some personal challenges for me. As an African-Canadian educator, a basic challenge for me, in pursuing anti-racist work, is to present the histories and cultures of African peoples in a positive light, while, at the same time, not idealizing or romanticizing the past. In other words, the challenge is to present the various truths about the past contributions of African peoples to world civilization and, in doing so, not to gloss over some unpleasant aspects of Africa's cultural histories and experiences (e.g., political repression, slavery, gender exploitation, and ethnic conflicts).

Another personal challenge for me has to do with the emerging role and place of subjectivity in the academic discourse on African Studies, and the urgency for educators to define and develop their politics within the academy. I received much of my graduate academic training and education in Canada. I am currently teaching in a Canadian post-secondary institution located in an urban, multi-ethnic geographical setting. I strongly identify with, and relate to, concerns being expressed by other racial minority educators and students about the Eurocentric and hetero-patriarchal nature of Euro-American education. I share feminist, and to some extent, postmodernist calls to introduce, validate, and interrogate different 'voices' and ways of knowing about our world (see also hooks 1988; Collins 1990; Mohanty, et al., 1991; Buck 1991:23). Like some of my colleagues, who are becoming politically conscious, I also realize that I am at a crossroads, in the sense of struggling to operate away from the mainstream, Eurocentric and patriarchal academy. For me, the challenge is to situate my educational politics in the context of the on-going struggles by many scholars to change the Eurocentric nature of Canadian education. In doing so, I have to guard against replacing Eurocentric teaching with another exclusionary pedagogical practice - for example, hetero-patriarchal. I also have to realize that there are other Canadian colleagues who share similar concerns, and that I have to be able to link up and work with them on a common front.

I agree with Henry (1991) that in teaching one cannot, and should not, step outside of his or her "cultural and historical memory" in dealing with

students. I have to relate to past historical and subjective experiences, not in a nostalgic or romantic manner, but in the spirit of informed and experiential knowledge. The problem, though, is that minority scholars have to legitimize such subjective experiences in order for these to be credible to students. At issue here is the intellectual validity of African ways of knowing. To a large extent, this has been a source of uneasiness and scepticism for many White Canadian scholars when faced with discussions about Afrocentric knowledge.

Henry (1991) has posed some pertinent questions. For example, she has asked: what does it mean to be a teacher of African descent in a contemporary Canadian university or institution of higher learning? Personally, it means being a voice of difference. This, in turn, raises another question: what are the challenges of being a voice of difference? To me, being a Canadian educator of African descent means having and pursuing a political agenda and conducting my teaching, research and community involvement as a form of activism, revisionism and alternative pedagogy. As a social anthropologist, I see the urgency to re-write some of the racist and ethnocentric anthropological writings on African peoples by early European scholars.

As an educator, I have to be aware of the obstacles in pursuing an African-centred pedagogy, and the political, communicative and academic limitations to 'empowering' the youth. For example, would the teaching of African Studies in Canadian public schools help students cope with the myriad forms of racism and discrimination that they have to face daily, whether in the schools or within the wider society? As an African-Canadian educator, how do you mobilize, define and develop an African-centred pedagogical and communicative agenda in a way that will be understood as non-exclusionary, non-dogmatic, and reflective of varied human experiences and accounts? Also, paraphrasing West (1991), how can the educator utilize the best that mainstream knowledge offers, through its paradigms, viewpoints and methods, as a basis to critique contemporary society on issues of social justice, and race and gender exploitation?

Arguably, the traditional approach to African Studies in Canadian educational institutions has not always fully articulated the daily realities of African-Canadians to mainstream society. This is because, for the most part, the experiences of peoples of African descent have been objectified, and at times rarefied. There has not been due recognition of the fact that African peoples have culturally constructed ways of reflecting on their daily lives. African-Canadian students, for example, can give their own accounts of what is happening to them, and what they are doing, can do, and intend to do about it.

As one of its objectives, a critical African Studies research agenda could help address local needs and concerns, as determined and defined by African-Canadians themselves. It would reclaim the cultural histories of African peoples and learn from past solutions to basic human problems. It would also recognize

that the sources and uses of data are not apolitical. To conduct African Studies research, therefore, is to develop a sensitivity to the context of data gathering in a way that acknowledges and contributes to the resolution of tensions and needs. It involves creating an academic atmosphere where ideas can be sensitized to environmental demands in a creative, adaptive and productive way. It also involves sensitizing mainstream Canadian educators and researchers to the plight of colleagues who are struggling not to lose their basic individual freedom because of their political activism for social justice, and professional involvement in democratic issues and processes (Lawuyi, 1991).

As one of the strategies for African Studies research, Canadian scholars could assist African-Canadian peoples (in their various communities) develop and maintain their own internal structures of research with the available resources at their disposal, in order to reduce any dependence on 'external' sources. African Studies research could also contribute to a strategy of social development in Canada that would seek to break out of the system of oppression and exploitation of minority groups by the more dominant forces in society. The pursuit of African Studies in Canadian schools could also assist in creating a new, just social order in which every Canadian could fulfil his or her potential. African Studies research could help demystify the myths about African cultures and societies, and help restore the African youth's sense of pride.

Directions for African Studies in the Canadian Context:

At the highest political level, the state must commit material and other logistical support for African Studies research to inform teaching in the schools. There is a need for more in-depth studies of how the current national and global economic restructuring is having an impact on the schooling of African-Canadian youth: specifically, the examination of the impact on schooling for African-Canadian youth, regarding such economic measures as the retrenchment of workers, restraints on wages and government expenditures, reduction of budgetary deficits through cutbacks on social services and transfer payments to schools, school fee increases, privatization of state enterprises and the general rationalization of the public sector economy.

Another research agenda could also be finding ways for African-Canadian parents and community groups to have a more meaningful role in the running of the schools. For example, research should be carried out to examine the appropriate roles of African-Canadian parents and community groups in the on-going attempts to redesign schooling to include learning and other pedagogical styles not typical of the ideas and thoughts of the dominant groups who define the institutional practices of society. The views of African-Canadian students, parents, caregivers and community workers on educational matters should be sought, as

Canadian schools grapple with many of the challenges of an inclusive school environment.

Given the concern for Afrocentric education (Asante 1991, Karenga 1986, Henry 1991), a research focus could also explore what should be included in an African-centred curriculum and how it should be integrated into the schools' overall educational goals in a manner that would benefit all Canadian students. There should be research into appropriate teaching strategies for the incorporation of African-centred knowledge in the schools, in a manner that does not lead to replacing one form of hegemonic knowledge with another. African-centred knowledge should not be pursued in the schools as a reverse form of Eurocentricity. Rather, research should be carried out to find ways of promoting African-centred knowledge alongside other knowledge bases, in the context of Canadian schooling (e.g., Aboriginal, Asian, European Studies).

The issue of student disengagement and fading out of high school has significant implication and relevance for educators who are interested in African-centred perspectives in the schools and in the whole issue of educational equity. It is important that research be directed towards eliciting the views and experiences of the students themselves on the problem of school disengagement, to see if there are other issues involved, of which the schools may not be aware. One research question that can be explored is, how do students define and articulate their sense of connectedness and belonging in the schools.

I will conclude by indicating two other areas that could be pursued as part of the general strategy of developing African Studies research and African-centred pedagogy in Canadian schools. First is working towards a meaningful community involvement and participation in the research projects of educators studying issues affecting the African-Canadian community. Second is the formation of study groups among educators, students, parents and community workers interested in the varied concerns of the African-Canadian community (e.g., education, employment). Linkages with the community can help bridge the gulf of mistrust between researchers and the communities they deal with. Canadian researchers could explore varied ways to involve the African-Canadian community in their projects. Such involvement could go beyond merely asking permission to gain entry into the community to research and publish findings. Educators can provide local peoples with a meaningful role in the designing, implementation and assessment of research projects affecting African-Canadians.

Community workers, parents and caregivers can also play a pivotal role in the education of the youth. Educators should provide space in their classrooms to concretely engage parents and community workers in the process of collaborative teaching and learning in the schools. By promoting community, and particularly parental, involvement in the education of the youth, Canadian educators would be developing a more holistic approach to education. Everyone

who has knowledge to offer should be encouraged to be part of the education process.

The idea of forming study groups among educators, researchers, students and parents to deal with pressing issues affecting the African-Canadian community is one way of ensuring a meaningful partnership between schools and communities. Such study groups could meet regularly in the schools and in the communities to discuss issues of mutual concern, and to strategize how to deal with the broader issues of social justice and educational equity in Canadian schools. Study groups could explore alternative pedagogic and communicative styles and practices which the schools could adopt in the educational process. Study groups could encourage peer tutoring to assist all learners, and also develop strategies to place students at the centre of the learning process. Hopefully, some of the issues raised in this paper can be tackled while we await the institutionalization of specific programs in African/Black Studies in the schools.

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NOTE

1. The project has defined African-Canadian youths as Black youths of African descent and who identify themselves as such. Consequently, in this paper I will use 'African' synonymously with 'Black' to refer to all peoples who trace some ancestral affinity to Africa, and who define themselves as such.

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