

Multiculturalism in a colour-blind society and the education of Black students

TRYING SOMETHING DIFFERENT: AN AFRICENTRIC ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL

Despite widespread opposition, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) went ahead to establish an Africentric Alternative School for elementary students, starting September 2009. The timing of the school has much to do with the recent TDSB research finding that shows a 40 percent drop-out rate among black students, most of them males. However, this high drop-out rate, and the related high failure and expulsion rates for black students, is not new. In fact, the *Every Student Survey* reports (1970–1993) of the former Toronto School Board (as well as occasional studies by other Toronto area school boards) have consistently shown that black students do less well academically than their non-black counterparts.

In the 1970s, this educational situation of black students was explained as lack of familiarity with the education system, a result of the fact that most of the students and their parents were new Caribbean immigrants to Canada. Today, the majority of the “dropping-out” students are second- and third-generation Canadians. Insofar as this generation of Canadian-born students is experiencing limited academic success in the established education system, it seems reasonable for the TDSB to try something different in an effort to address the schooling and educational situation of black students. Why then the opposition to the Africentric Alternative School?

The reaction of many Canadians to the recommendations—including the reactions of the premier of Ontario, the minister of education, school administrators, educators, and African Canadians—was disappointment with the trustees. The premier told newspaper reporters: “I don’t think that it is a good idea. I think our shared responsibility is to look for ways to bring people together. One of

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those most powerful agents of social cohesion is publically funded education”; and he encouraged Torontonians, if “they really feel strongly about this . . . [to] speak to their duly elected representatives and tell them how strongly they are opposed to this proposal.” The opposition leader also condemned the recommendation, as did the minister of education, who said: “We don’t want to see kids separated from each other. We don’t think the board should be moving in this direction” (*Toronto Star*, “McGuinty turns up the heat on trustees,” February 1, 2008, p. A1).

Media reports and commentaries branded the program “segregationist.” According to the *Toronto Star*, “the idea smacks of segregation, which is contrary to the values of the school system and Canadian society as a whole.” The *Globe and Mail* referred to the recommendations concerning the school as being “as insulting as they are ridiculous”; and the *National Post* commented that the “con-

cept of special schools for black students is one of those terrible ideas that refuses to die” (Andrew Wallace, in *This Magazine*, 2009, p. 5).

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND INTERESTS

But the establishment of a school with a program geared to meeting the educational needs and interests of a particular group of students is not without precedent. There are public or government-funded religious schools and same-sex schools; and the TDSB has nearly 40 alternative schools, including “specialized schools” that focus on visual and performing arts, and technology, as well as specialized programs for gifted students and high performing athletes. And there are the annual Black/African History Month “celebrations” in schools. The existence of such schools and programs indicates an awareness to me, a recognition that things such as religion, gender, sexuality, and students’ interests in arts, drama, technology, history and athletics play a role in their experiences and schooling needs, interests, aspirations, performance, and outcomes. On the basis of similar principles, therefore, the establishment of a school that is responsive to the cultural values and schooling needs of black students does not seem illogical.

So why the particular concern about the Africentric Alternative School for kindergarten to grade 5 students? Why object to a school with a program that aims, as the trustees’ motion indicates, to integrate “the histories, cultures, experiences, and contributions of people of African descent and other racialized groups into the curriculum, teaching methodologies, and social environment of the schools” (Toronto District School Board, Report, 2008)? Why is the establishment of such a school not in keeping with the aims of multiculturalism? What does it mean to “celebrate” Black/Afri-

can History if having a school that makes central the histories and experiences of Black/African peoples is considered a form of segregation?

WORKING AGAINST THE IDEALS OF MULTICULTURALISM

The concerns seem to be premised on the notion that such a school is segregationist and hence works against the ideals of multiculturalism and multicultural education (introduced in Canadian schools in the mid-1970s), which hold schools to be culturally neutral, accommodative of cultural differences, and able to educate students in ways that affirm their “cultures.” Within this context, the failure of students is seen as more a product of their individual efforts, choices, values, and aspirations than of the system of education. That parents’ and community members’ support for the proposed school was summarily dismissed by political and educational leaders suggests that the parents’ important insights into the schooling and educational needs of black students have little or no sway in summoning recognition of the need for a particular education program for students whose needs are not being met.

To support the establishment of an Africentric school, then, would call into question the commitment of governments and educators to equal opportunity for all students. Furthermore, the failure or refusal to grant that an Africentric schooling program would serve students the same as any alternative schools or specialized program is, in part, based on individuals’ reluctance to admit that race matters in Canada and therefore plays a role in the experiences of students. Such an admission would mean acknowledging that racism operates as a barrier to students’ participation in education and to their achievements. Indeed, in response to Stephen Lewis’s report on *Race Relations in Ontario*, the *Globe and Mail* claimed in 1992 (June 11, p. A16) that “Canada is not a deeply racist society;” and again in 2007, in its editorial critical of the establishment of the Africentric Alternative School, the

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Globe called on Canadians to reject the proposed “school by skin colour,” insisting that it would be better to focus on the “real causes” of the poor achievement of black students (November 20, p. A20).

THE DREAM BECOMES A CONUNDRUM

The timing of the school is also significant; for it is being established in the wake of riots and bombings in Europe and when, according to Allan Gregg, “Canadians, like their brethren in Eur-

ope, Australia, and elsewhere, have their fill of multiculturalism and hyphenated citizenship” (p. 41). At the same time, while 80 percent of Canadians think that European immigrants make positive contributions to Canada, only 33 percent think the same of Caribbean immigrants’ contributions. Therefore, Gregg concludes, in his essay “Multiculturalism: A twentieth-century dream becomes a twenty-first century conundrum,” that to avoid problems, immigrants (read non-white Canadians) must “demonstrate a willingness to join mainstream society by adopting the fundamental mores and values of the prevailing culture. There must also be cross-fertilization between ethnic groups” (*The Walrus*, March 2006).

The evidence suggests that multiculturalism in practice provides little support for a program of schooling and education that fosters awareness of, respect for, and accommodation of cultural differences—particularly those with a racial component. Such support is necessary if black students are to be integrated into the schooling structure and equitably served. This non-support for an Africentric Alternative School means that Canadians do not wish to make colour visible—such a wish would be “un-Canadian.”

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