

## **Black only, but don't use the 'S' word**

*Children are thriving in Afrocentric schools south of the border. Advocates argue that progressive segregation is the only way to reach troubled students*

Toronto Star - November 10 2007

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In Ontario, it would be a first. But across the United States, dozens, possibly more than 100 black-focused schools have existed for decades and get rave reviews from students and teachers.

From junior kindergarten to Grade 12, African-centred schools with black teachers, Swahili rituals and an African-based curriculum have become a popular and seemingly successful way to boost marks and morale among urban black children often left behind by mainstream public education.

"Public schools have failed African-American students, which is shown in lower graduation rates and lower achievement," says education professor Carol Lee of Northwestern University, founder of the Betty Shabazz charter school in Chicago, whose three campuses boast 825 students from kindergarten to Grade 12.

Another African-centred school is run by Chicago's public school board and a new private African-centred school will open next year.

"More than 77 per cent of our students achieve at or above normal on Illinois state tests," Lee said.

"We've had grads go on to Princeton, Stanford and in international relations at The Hague. They all work very effectively in their professional lives because they assume the world is open to them."

A group of Toronto parents is pushing for an African-centred grade school in Toronto that would seek to bolster black children's attitudes and achievement.

While it is not clear if a racially segregated type of school designed for a society with a history of slavery would translate to Canada, a country built largely on immigration, many Canadian eyes are turning south of the border to see how such schools work.

And it's not just about learning that one of the atomic bomb scientists was black.

It's not just about Milwaukee students building papier maché statues for a provocative Black Hall of Fame in their school; with murdered rap icon Tupac, black Hannibal on his elephant and Emmett Till, the Mississippi teen whose brutal murder by whites in 1955 helped ignite the civil rights drive.

It's not even about black Chicago children learning that the fall of Napoleon can be fully understood only in light of the Haitian slave revolt.

Black-focused schools, say those who run them, are about more than black studies.

Whether private, public or the independent "charter schools" so popular in the United States, the goal of an African-centred school is to create a black community of positive adult role models; a kind of urban village that feels like family, say educators, where children are guided to look past the negative caricatures of blacks in pop culture and see their future as players in the wider world.

Then, and only then, are black children ready to learn, says Taki Raton, founder of the African-centred Blyden-Delany Academy in Milwaukee, an elementary school in a poor neighbourhood where student scores approach the national average.

To start, Raton says, teachers must be black.

"The model has to be black; a black child has to connect to a black role model – a multicultural curriculum misses the point.

"Given the condition of the urban landscape, our children need to be culturally centred to learn, and they're not," said Raton, whose school begins each day with a black history fact, a pledge of pride and a message based in "black old-school values" of courtesy and respect for elders.

While Raton does have a white educator on staff – a cherished reading specialist – the staff otherwise is African-American.

"As a white person, you can't do this for me. How a child sees himself in a cultural context has to be done `in-house.' No other group turns their children over to another group for education and expects them to do well. Why should we?"

Sound like segregation?

"You can't use that word," fires Raton.

"We have the right to be among ourselves; that's our cultural right. As a black man, I cannot go into a Cherokee Indian group and be a role model, and you cannot be a model for me."

Like others, Raton links gang violence and despair in many poor black neighbourhoods to a lack of male role models.

It's the same at Betty Shabazz International School in downtown Chicago, named after the late wife of Malcolm X.

Teachers are African-American and the first priority is to build a sense of community – children address teachers as Mama and Baba, Swahili for mother and father – and curriculum is taught in an African light.

Each day begins with children pledging to do positive things; each day ends with them reporting on whether they did.

"African-centred schools have sprung from the belief that African-American students living in a society with a history of racism and stereotypes need a form of socialization that provides them with sociological buffers," Lee said. "Our point simply is: We can view the world through the perspective of the people of Africa. Africa is the mother of civilization."

Shabazz business manager Anthony Daniels went to an African-centred school himself and rejects charges that they are a form of reverse racism. He says they're value-added learning.

"People call these schools racist as a tactic to keep the status quo, but the status quo doesn't teach the whole diverse story," said Daniels. "People can say public school curriculum is multicultural, but it's not – it's a melting pot where cultures get lost. We like the idea of a cultural salad bowl instead, where every ingredient keeps its flavour."

When kids understand they come from a line of ancestors who have done great things, added Daniels, they feel good about themselves, and that shows up in better behaviour.

"We simply don't have discipline problems," said Daniels, even though the school is located in a low-income, high crime area.