

Education Or Segregation?

African-centred school showing the way

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Natalie Alcoba

Brent Foster, a teacher who has run a private school called Umoja Learning Circle for the past 13 years, says the regular public school system is not for every student, and that immersing students in their native culture is better for some children.

TORONTO -For a class project about their ancestors, students at Umoja Learning Circle have picked from a list of people who have made social contributions worth remembering -- Rosa Parks, Mary McLeod Bethune and Frederick Douglas. Their faces, and those of other Africans or African descendents, can be found on posters affixed to the walls of the school that occupies a converted house overlooking a ravine in Rexdale.

The children display assignments in the Zulu language they are learning, and are starting to understand the value of a dollar through an African saving system called Susu.

One day this week, the nine black students scurried down two flights of stairs and took seats behind djembe drums for their musical morning routine. In no time, their palms pounded in rhythmic unison. Then they joined hands in a circle and gave thanks -- for each other, for their health and for having arrived safely.

Toronto has been engaged in a heated debate about the merits of opening up an Africentric public school --a concept that already exists on a small scale here, at the privately run Umoja Learning Circle. A Rastafarian grandmother who goes by the moniker Tafari started the school 13 years ago after she lost faith in a public education system she says failed her son. Like those currently advocating for an Africentric public school, she says diversity in the Toronto District School Board stops at the student population.

“There are kids who can go through the public school system just tops, but that's not for everybody,” said Tafari, a trained teacher who was educated at York University. “For the ones who can't fit in that, I think if you immerse them in their own, when they leave as adults they will be better equipped to contribute to society.”

The sentiment appears to be at the core of the Africentric school question, which has already been the focus of lively public meetings pitting supporters of the concept against those who are wary.

Are our children better off with their own? Or is this concept less about who will attend and more about what is taught and who is doing the teaching? The concept is to put more black teachers in the classrooms, and to take an African-centred approach to the curriculum that although designed to welcome everyone, would surely attract more students from the black community, at least at the outset.

Critics say the idea goes down a dangerous, divisive path that separates blacks from the rest and will do more harm than good.

Zanana Akande, the first black woman to be elected to the Ontario legislature and the first to serve as a Cabinet minister, said she understands the frustration of blacks who feel unwelcome in public schools, who feel like the curriculum does not include them and almost denies, by omission, that their ancestors made any positive contributions.

She does not support an Africentric school, but sees value in a “demonstration” project. “I would prefer that we begin immediately to change the system in ways that we can,” she said. “The curriculum needs to be more inclusive.”

African-centred schools have been operating for years in the United States, often in cities with an overwhelmingly black population. The curriculum also exists in Nova Scotia and has been tested in schools across Toronto.

The proposal now is to open a pilot Africentric alternative school that meets the curriculum requirements set out by the Ontario government.

At public meetings held recently in Toronto, black parents complained that their children had been let down by a public system that relegates them to the role of outsider. The few who spoke out against the school said it was segregationist, and called for changes to the board's entire curriculum.

"Just pick it up, get a copy of it, look at it," said Ms. Akande. "It's a very Eurocentric curriculum. I'm not saying that you leave the European culture out -- I'm saying, let's not lie to our kids through omission."

School should teach children a "more truthful" view of what everyone has done and what everyone can do, she said.

Vernon Farrell, a retired principal and member of the school board's Africentric Advisory Committee, said that what is delivered now is "an incomplete education."

"Where Africentrism improves the dialogue or the engagement is in its inclusivity, as it recognizes and teaches about other centres," said Mr. Farrell. He sees Africentrism as a liberating process that develops a sense of self and empowers.

"I refuse to get into a debate which says we are replacing one centrism, called Eurocentrism, with another centrism, called Africentrism. I think that's abhorrent to me."

He believes an Africentric program, with clearly defined parameters could attract anyone who feels like an outsider in the current model. "It would cater to everyone who believes in inclusive education."

Indeed, the pilot project being proposed for Toronto would officially welcome all students. Still, it is being clearly marketed as a way to address the

disproportionate number of black youths, especially males, who are dropping out or not graduating from the public system.

The African community in Nova Scotia struggles with that reality, too, said Ken Fells, who ran an Africentric school for five years in North Preston and points to class upon class of graduates as proof of its success.

He said adopting an Africentric curriculum in communities with a significant black population makes common sense. He dismissed segregationist suggestions as paranoia.

"We still have segregated school systems, there's no doubt about it. If you want your child to be away from people, you put him away in a French immersion program, you put him in a private school program," he said.

But opponents of the plan, such as Courtney Betty, a prominent Toronto lawyer, are suspicious of the Toronto board's sudden eagerness to respond the community's concerns about black youth who are failing in the system. "They have recognized that there has been a problem for so long and they have done absolutely nothing," said Mr. Betty. "Why weren't all of these things happening before?"

He said the Africentric solution is designed to "pacify the community.

"People are frustrated. The frustration is built up, so they are willing to grasp at any potential solution. But putting kids in a segregated school is not going to solve all of the other issues, such as parenting, such as homework, such as making sure the young person is going to have enough to eat." He said "simple solutions," such as setting up a tutoring program that provides the kind of support some students may not get at home, has been proven to make a difference.

But he does not diminish the fact that the current education system is not equitable--a sentiment that seems to ring true on either side of the debate.

The Toronto school board has recognized as much, and last year commissioned a student census that asked students to categorize themselves according to race, religion, sexual orientation and other factors in an effort to track academic progress in specific communities.

"People shouldn't have to have extra classes at night to find out who they really are," said Ms. Akande. "Schools need to change."