

African-Centered Education: Theory and Practice

reviewed by Lasana D. Kazembe, PhD – June 4, 2021

Flowing from his many decades of writing, teaching, research, and enormous scholarly contributions, late historian and renown Master Teacher John Henrik Clarke's perennial admonishment was for us to recognize that it is the obligation; the moral task of each generation to introduce its children to their history, culture, and heritage knowledge. Responding to that Ancestral challenge, African-centered scholars Kmt G. Shockley and Kofi Lomotey have assembled an impressive roster of contributors to levy fresh interrogations into the theoretical and practical underpinnings of contemporary African-centered education (ACE). The authors offer nuanced, grounded perspectives on the history, methods, successes, and challenges of ACE and situate it as a critical and viable educational imperative for Black children and communities.

As many know, ancestral reverence is a central, sentient aspect within diverse Africana cultures. Lomotey and Shockley's text commences with a dedication to three giants (Kasisi Jitu Weusi, Hannibal Tirus Afrik, and Kwame Agyei Akoto) whose names are, of course, well-known within the global village of African-centered Education. In her foreword, Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings (inadvertently channeling the aforementioned charge laid down by Clarke) shares intimate remembrances of her early experiences with diverse expressions of ACE ranging from community-based grassroots practitioners on the east coast (1960s-1980s) to professional scholars and researchers in formal academic spaces (1980s-onward) in the west and Midwest. From there, Shockley and Lomotey's introduction provides a brief survey of persistent educational inequities (ex. disproportionate suspensions, special education placement rates, dropout rates) that continue to harm the academic achievement and prosocial development of

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Black children. As they iterate, such problems are well-known and obsessively diagnosed and, in reality, are the educational variant of broader, systemic issues that have persisted across long centuries. Shockley and Lomotey's call for ACE as a "comprehensive solution to the miseducation of Blacks" (p. xxiii) echoes forerunners and contemporaries in the field and leverages ACE as a practical pedagogical orientation to imbue Black children (first and finally) with African agency.

The book is parsed into three sections that explore ACE from praxeological, theoretical, and hybrid (philo-praxis) perspectives. Authors within each of the sections share their critical experiences, articulate ACE's relevance for Black students and stakeholders in education, and expound on the diverse ways that ACE is operationalized within their respective spheres of practice. Across its ten chapters, the book provides researchers and educators with insights into current ACE theory and practice and emphasizes the critical premise that Black children's educational achievement is a cultural concept "rooted in cultural alignment and approach" (p. xiv). As noted by the editors, the book's audience includes parents, teachers, urban school leaders, and policymakers in search of effective ways to improve educational outcomes for Black children attending U.S. public schools. African-centered researchers, scholars, and critical theorists will also draw theoretical and practical value from the book.

The first three chapters discuss Afrocentric instructional practices, a self-report from African-centered parents in a non-African-centered learning environment, and the recruitment of African-centered teachers within a context of African-centered pedagogical excellence. Locating Afrocentricity's philosophical roots in Black nationalism and Pan-Africanism, Chapter 1 insists on a new language to elevate Africana people and culture and articulates several critical assumptions that simultaneously function as organizing principles for Afrocentricity. Later in the

chapter, the author names and describes five specific Afrocentric instructional practices and discusses them in relationship to teachers and teaching.

In Chapter 2 (curiously the shortest of all at a mere six pages), a self-described African-centered couple shares their personal story of having enrolled their children in non-ACE educational settings. Predictably, while the parents recounted a less-than stellar experience for their children in the “mismatched environment” (p. 22), they also emphasized the cultural significance of home-teaching, as well as teacher-parent engagement. This chapter was surprisingly brief and may have been enhanced by including the voices/subjective experiences of other families thereby providing stronger, more grounded connections to the book’s central theme.

Chapter 3 profiles three African-centered teachers who (in their distinctive ways) contributed to the author’s cultural and psychosocial development. For the author, educators such as those highlighted embody the pedagogical role of Jegna (Master Teacher), a cultural concept/practice articulated by late scholar Asa G. Hilliard (aka Nana Baffour Amankwatia, II). By Hilliard’s framing, a Jegna (Master Teacher) is one who is committed to excellence in all areas of pedagogy, and who “addresses the pedagogical and cultural challenge of restoring excellence in African education” by connecting students/teachers/researchers to culture, and connecting culture to learning (Toure, 2012). By extension, Chapter 3 examines methods for cultivating successive generations of African-centered Master Teachers.

Late historian Carter G. Woodson interpreted *real education* as that which inspired people to live more abundantly; to begin with life as they found it, and commit themselves to making it better. Building on this premise, Chapter 4 is an institutional profile of the African-centered educational and social model developed and utilized by a Washington, D. C.-based

African-centered independent school. The chapter surveys the school's African-centered methodological components, highlights a typical instructional day at the school, and shares an ethnographic case study that was authored by third-party observer.

Chapter 5 discusses the necessity of de/re-programming the Black mind and the intellectual evolutionary shift [for African-centered educators and researchers] from critical pedagogy to revolutionary pedagogy. Six key characteristics of revolutionary pedagogy are shared alongside an explication of how they align with and influence the five distinct characteristics of the Afrocentric idea (Asante, 1997; 2007; 2017). While emphasizing the cultural and pedagogical limitations of [traditional] critical pedagogy for ACE, the author defines revolutionary pedagogy as an educational philosophy “that seeks to overturn ordinary thinking, methods, and practices of creating and delivering knowledge to children by employing Africological, Kemetological, and rhetorical techniques to reset the instructional focus for children” (p. 68).

Chapter 6 channels the work of renown historians Cheikh Anta Diop and Chancellor Williams (as well as contemporary researchers) whose scholarly work situates Africa as the anthropological, cultural, scientific, and technological cradle of civilization. That initial analysis is bracketed by a determined and deliberate call for an ACE-rooted paradigm to “reclaim African ideals in STEM fields in order to advocate for nation building among people of African descent” (p. 87). As this text moves purposefully between theoretical and practical applications of ACE, the reasons for such a determined call align with traditional rationale seeking improved life outcomes and futures for Black children. Chapter 6 describes the reductive nature of mainstream approaches to STEM education geared toward Black children, and rather, articulates an approach to STEM teaching based on an African-centered paradigm. Given the persistent tendency of

under-reporting and/or mis-reporting Black K12 educational achievement (particularly within STEM), this chapter could have been strengthened by linking to the important (and woefully under-utilized) work of Dr. Ivory Toldson (2019).

In a unique turn, the focus in Chapter 7 intersects scholarly dialogue between genetics, education and learning to posit the biological necessity of creating supportive academic environments for Black students within the context of an African-centered educational paradigm. This compelling premise draws on research from the social sciences that addresses endemic existential threats, social precarity, and psychic violence that has bracketed Black life in the U.S. since the days of their forced arrival. In attempting to locate and isolate potential health-harming environmental factors and link the same to genetic predispositions in people of African ancestry, this chapter—while perhaps charting unfamiliar waters—also simultaneously ascends the slippery slope present in conversations about Black intelligence and ability constructed within the contested context of genetics and collective analyses.

Chapter 8 (repurposed from an earlier publication) elaborates on the broad context of African-centered Pedagogy (spelled *Afrikan* by the author) in tandem with a reexamination of the field and practice of pedagogy from an African nationalist perspective. Contextually, this chapter calls for a prescriptive, culturally-derived pedagogical model that dynamically functions to “stimulate and nourish the creative and critical consciousness” (p. 131) of Black teachers (referred to in Swahili as *mwalimu*) and their students (*mwanafunzi*). Similarly, Chapter 9 is a new visit to an earlier published work and offers a reflection on and recapitulation of the author’s five decades of providing African-centered education to children, families, and communities (NOTE: chief among that work was the development of four African-centered institutions). Recounting foundational ACE work (ex., teaching, theorizing, publishing, institution-building) in

the Midwest, this chapter provides a brief survey of formative 19th and 20th century Black educational achievements and later examines contemporary theoretical foundations that have directly and/or indirectly contributed to ACEs development.

The tenth and final chapter of *African-Centered Education: Theory and Practice* synthesizes the important cultural impulses, people, institutions, and historical traditions of academic excellence that have animated and nourished ACE across long years of educational development. Beyond its prescriptive forewarnings against cognitively and spiritually harmful phenomena (ex., *cultural identity theft*, *miseducation*, and *diseducation*), this chapter situates ACE as more than just a “reaction to oppressive educational practices” (p. 170). Espying traditional efforts to frame culturally biased educational standards as universal, this chapter conceptualizes 13 interdisciplinary standards of Afrocentric education to help support and “guide curriculum development, classroom instruction, teacher evaluation, and leadership” (p. 172). The chapter concludes by relating examples of how educators can leverage African-centered principles to positively transform classroom practices.

All areas of Black life (ex. health care, life expectancy, education, employment, housing) are affected by the comorbidity of historic, ongoing racial abuse, as well as by the COVID-19 pandemic. While Black children do experience successes and progress within U.S. K12 education, there is obviously much that still requires serious attention. In the U.S., the Black struggle for freedom has been largely mediated through education in/through formal and informal contexts. That salient point aligns with another posited by Shockley and Lomotey (via Akoto, 1992): “only African-centered schools have attempted to imbue a sense of agency in Black children via African culture” (p. xxiii). This critical text is a fresh reminder of what has been accomplished and the work yet remaining.

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