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## Afrocentricity: Will This New Approach to Education Provide the Answers to a System Plagued with Inequalities - Chalk Talk

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# Chalk Talk

## AFROCENTRICITY: WILL THIS NEW APPROACH TO EDUCATION PROVIDE THE ANSWERS TO A SYSTEM PLAGUED WITH INEQUALITIES?

A new approach to educating society's black youth is taking hold in many cities across the nation. This approach, commonly referred to as "Afrocentricity," arose in response to the public outcry denouncing the educational inequalities confronting African-Americans, especially those in the inner cities where lack of funding has contributed to the disparity of educational opportunities afforded black schoolchildren. The debate over the merits of an Afrocentric approach to education is heating up as the boundary lines between its supporters and its critics are beginning to form. The primary focus of this article is the concept of Afrocentricity and the potential legal issues that an Afrocentric approach to education is likely to face. Part I defines and describes the concept of Afrocentricity from a theoretical perspective as developed by one of its major advocates. Part II builds upon this framework and examines the arguments of both the supporters and the critics of this new educational theory. Finally, Part III discusses some of the legal issues that are likely to confront both Afrocentrists' and educators' attempts to implement an Afrocentric curriculum as a new framework for educating our society's black youth.

### **I. Afrocentricity: A new way of educating our black youth.**

Professor Molefi Kete Asante, chair of the Department of African-American Studies at Temple University, is a chief Afrocentric theorist and advocate of the Afrocentric approach to educating our black youth. One of Asante's writings, *The Afrocentric Idea in Education*, will serve as the primary source for defining and describing this new concept in the field of education. See generally, Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea in Education*, 60 J. Negro Educ. 170-80 (1991).

Afrocentricity is an educational theory of teaching black schoolchildren from a perspective that uses Africa and the societal contributions of African-Americans as its reference point. According to Afrocentric theorists, African-Americans historically have been educated away from their own culture due to the predominance of a Eurocentric (white, male

perspective) form of education in America. *Id.* at 170. Therefore, for education to be meaningful within the context of American society, it must address the traditions, customs, and historical experiences of Africans and African-Americans, in both Africa and America. *Id.* at 170.

The term "centricity" refers to a perspective that locates students within the context of their own cultural references. This enables students to relate both socially and psychologically to the many other cultural perspectives which combine to form and shape our society. *Id.* at 171. Hence, Afrocentricity is a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of African-Americans in order to educate black children to a better understanding of their historical backgrounds. *Id.* at 171. This approach, Afrocentrists contend, will lead blacks to a better understanding of other cultural backgrounds. *Id.* at 171. In essence, to better understand the world around them and maximize the benefits of the educational experience, blacks must first understand their own heritage. Only such understanding can give them a proper perspective of who they are and how they fit in the sum total of human experience.

Afrocentrism is the stepping-stone to the ultimate goal of Multiculturalism. *Id.* at 172. In short, Multiculturalism denotes the theory that education, to have integrity, must first recognize that *all* humans have contributed to world development and the flow of knowledge, and, as a result, human achievements consist of the efforts of many peoples and cultures. *Id.* at 172. Multiculturalism, Afrocentrists contend, cannot ultimately be reached without first undertaking an Afrocentric approach to education. *Id.* at 172. This follows because Multiculturalism can neither be achieved nor defined by the current Eurocentric view of education until an Afrocentric approach to education is implemented. *Id.* at 172.

## II. Afrocentricity: Advocates and critics share their views.

The debate over Afrocentricity is just a part of the larger movement toward Multiculturalism in education. Marriott, *Afrocentrism: Balancing or Skewing History?*, N.Y. Times, Aug. 11, 1991, § 1, at 18. Educators, parents, professors, and various others have started to voice their opinions as to the necessity and merits of the Afrocentric approach to education. As with other controversial subjects, the battle lines are being formed, and the discussion around Afrocentricity is likely to become more and more of a political topic, rather than an educational issue.

Advocates of this theory contend that the implementation of an Afrocentric curriculum would not only improve the educational achievements of black children, but would also heighten their self-esteem and self-confidence. Jarvis, *Brown and the Afrocentric Curriculum*, 101 Yale L.J. 1285, 1294 (1992). Schools in Atlanta which have instituted this program

already report higher standardized test scores, higher attendance rates, and an increased interest among the students participating in the program. Putka, *Curricula of Color: Course Work Stressing Blacks' Role Has Critics but Appears Effective*, Wall St. J., July 1, 1991, at A1-A2. In addition, proponents argue the adoption of an Afrocentric program would strengthen community control over the black public schools, something that historically has been weak in the black inner cities. Jarvis, *supra*, at 1295.

Further support for the adoption of Afrocentrism, advocates contend, is the failure of the present educational system to meet the needs of African-Americans. Afrocentrists argue this failure is due to centering education solely on the perspective of white Europeans (Eurocentric approach) who rely on Greece as the focal point for learning about civilization. Jarvis, *supra*, at 1294; *see also* Asante, *supra*, at 171. Instead, the emphasis should be shifted to Egypt as the focal point for the study of civilization because Afrocentrists contend that Egypt was the birthplace of our present-day civilization. Jarvis, *supra*, at 1294. In short, the current educational system which has been developed and controlled by whites with a Eurocentric background is insufficient to meet the needs of black schoolchildren who are unable to identify themselves under a Eurocentric system.

Opponents contend that an Afrocentric approach would further separate the races and handicap students' performances on standardized tests. *Id.* at 1295. They argue the emphasis should not be on an Africa-centered perspective, but should be directed towards basic courses such as math, science, and English, which are essential to succeeding in any society. *Id.* at 1295. In addition, some critics perceive the adoption of Afrocentrism as being a political movement conceived solely for the purpose of expressing anti-White and anti-American messages. Kantrowitz, *A is for Ashanti, B is for Black . . . and C is for Curriculum Which Is Starting to Change*, Newsweek, Sept. 23, 1991, at 45, 46.

One of the chief criticisms of the Afrocentric approach is that many of its findings and beliefs are neither historically correct nor scientifically justifiable. Marriott, *As a Discipline Advances, A Debate on Scholarship*, N.Y. Times, Aug. 11, 1991, § 1, at 18. Also, those espousing such theories have been criticized for not possessing adequate academic credentials in the areas of study they are purporting to represent as truthful accounts of the roles that Africans and African-Americans played in shaping our society. *Id.* at 18. Many of the current Afrocentric schools base their teaching guidelines on the *African-American Baseline Essays*, published by the Portland, Oregon, public schools in the mid 1980's. Putka, *Texts Credit Blacks for Math, Science, and the Pyramids*, Wall St. J., July 1, 1991, at A2. These essays have been the subject of constant attack by

numerous scholars for their substantive contents, which allegedly contain numerous inaccuracies and distortions about the role of Africans and the importance Egyptian society played in shaping our history. *Id.* at A2. Finally, extremists contend that Afrocentrists are somewhat like a religious cult, the purpose of which is to advocate the achievements of blacks and downplay the roles of whites in the development of society. Marriott, *supra*, at 18. Some even go as far as to say that an Afrocentric approach to education will bring about the tribalization of America because the underlying purpose of the movement is to promote racism and further divide the lines between the black and white communities. Asante, *supra*, at 174.

### III. Afrocentricity: The legal issues confronting Afrocentrism.

The primary purpose of implementing an Afrocentric approach to education is to enhance the educational experience of society's black youth. Afrocentricity can simply be perceived as a viable alternative for educating black schoolchildren under an educational system that is perceived as favoring whites and disfavoring blacks because of the persistence of racism and the existing financial imbalance between the black and white races. As a new educational theory, Afrocentricity is being developed and practiced primarily in the large inner-city schools which are composed predominately of black children. Putka, *Curricula of Color: Course Work Stressing Blacks' Role Has Critics but Appears Effective*, Wall St. J., July 1, 1991, at A1. The potential legal issues that arise from this set of circumstances are twofold. First, to what extent can an Afrocentric approach to education be viewed as a remedial measure to help blacks in inner-city schools achieve educational equality with white children? A second, but related, question is, to what extent does a state have the freedom to choose the content of a course curriculum in educating our youth? A recent law review article will serve as the primary guide in addressing the issues raised by such questions in the discussion that follows. See generally Jarvis, *Brown and the Afrocentric Curriculum*, 101 Yale L.J. 1285 (1992).

Assuming that the resulting inner-city schools are not the result of intentional segregation, schools are free to develop remedial measures to ensure the equal educational opportunity of their student populations. *Liddell v. Missouri*, 731 F.2d 1294, 1313 (8th Cir. 1984), *cert. denied*, 469 U.S. 816 (1984). Therefore, it appears these predominately black inner-city schools should be free to adopt an Afrocentric approach so long as it comports with the general themes espoused in the famous decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* and its progeny, namely that the implementation of such a program would help to remove the "badge of inferiority" — the

“separate but equal” doctrine stamped on Blacks. *Brown v. Board of Educ. of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954). So long as the Afrocentric approach can increase the black child’s self-worth and educational achievement, inner-city schools should be free to adopt such programs. *Jarvis, supra*, at 1296. However, the idea that black children should be taught by a different standard than white children seems to represent a “separatist” type notion that is contrary to another theme implicit in *Brown*: the idea that blacks and whites should be integrated and thus benefit from exposure to each another in the classroom.

The biggest concern seems to be how the adoption of an Afrocentric approach is considered by a school system that has a more than de minimis population of nonblacks. *Id.* at 1302. On its face, it appears that adopting an Afrocentric curriculum under such circumstances would allow nonblacks to assert an Equal Protection claim on the same footing as an Equal Protection claim by a black in a school system being taught from the present, Eurocentric perspective. *Id.* at 1302. Ultimately, the answer to this dilemma lies in whether the stigma and educational achievement of both blacks and nonblacks can be objectively measured in order to determine the benefits of adopting such programs. *Id.* at 1302. At present, the lack of empirical studies demonstrating the effects of the implementation of an Afrocentric curriculum on black children forecloses any meaningful discussion as to the answers to such questions.

Related to the issue of the use of Afrocentrism as a means of equalizing the educational opportunities between blacks and whites is the extent to which states can control the content of materials taught in public schools, thus implicating First Amendment concerns. *Id.* at 1297. Historically, the Supreme Court has been reluctant to intervene in school authorities’ handling of school operations. *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97 (1965). On the one hand, educators must be given the right to determine what should be taught in the public schools. On the other hand, such unfettered discretion is in conflict with the First Amendment principle that “no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion.” *West Virginia Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).

The only Supreme Court case to deal with these conflicting principles concerned the right of school authorities to remove books from a school library. *Board of Educ., Island Trees Union Free Sch. Dist. 26 v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982). The Court held that while a school board has wide authority in determining what books to remove from a library, it may not remove books for the sole purpose of denying access to ideas for political or partisan reasons. *Id.* at 872. It is probable that the courts will adopt this standard to select the curriculum and required textbooks for public schools. Therefore, if Afrocentrism were denied for purely political

reasons, it appears that a teacher's right to academic freedom and the student's freedom of belief and right to be exposed to diverse viewpoints would be implicated. Jarvis, *supra*, at 1298.

Finally, if the Afrocentric approach is shown to inadequately prepare black children for standardized tests (as opponents contend), black parents are likely to argue that the "stigma" recognized in *Brown* would be enhanced and that their children have been denied equal access to the educational opportunities available to the children exposed to the traditional, Eurocentric curriculum. *Id.* at 1300. As with the first issue, only time will tell as to the actual impact the Afrocentric approach will have on black children's performances and feelings of self-worth. Until such results are obtained, the legal issues confronting Afrocentricity will continually be the subject of heated debates among educators, parents, and the public at large.

### CONCLUSION

Whether an Afrocentric approach to education will better educate black children has yet to be decided. Only time will tell whether this revolutionary approach will enhance the performance of black students as Afrocentrists stongly contend. Of course, until such results are obtained, the debate will continue over the merits of instituting this controversial approach to education in our nation's schools.

Whether it be Afrocentricity or Eurocentricity, ANY approach to education should keep in mind one primary goal: providing the best possible education to all children. In order to achieve this, any approach to education should encompass a holistic approach (i.e., Multiculturalism) that recognizes the contributions not only of blacks and whites, but of all races that have formed, shaped and impacted our society.

If the adoption of an Afrocentric approach can increase a student's self-esteem, thereby enhancing the quality of his/her educational experience, there is no reason why it should not be implemented. Legally, states should be free to adopt such programs provided that it can be shown that they enhance the educational opportunities of all children and avoid placing a "badge of inferiority" on black children. Nevertheless, even if an Afrocentric approach is proven to help black children (and white children as well), is not the adoption of Afrocentricity just the opposite of the alleged/current Eurocentric approach to education? Are we not, in effect, trading one "prejudicial" view (Eurocentricity) for another "prejudicial" view (Afrocentricity)? In other words, both Eurocentricity and Afrocentricity focus on teaching from one perspective (white and black, respectively) to the exclusion of the other perspective (black and white, respec-

tively). Further still, does one need to implement an Afrocentric approach as a means of obtaining Multiculturalism in education?

It is precisely at this point where Afrocentrists take a “leap of faith” by assuming that an Afrocentric approach must be the first step toward achieving the ultimate goal of Multiculturalism in education. It seems that, with proper supervision and planning, a Multicultural approach can be achieved without having first to undertake an Afrocentric approach to education. Therefore, it is time that Eurocentrists and Afrocentrists work together to develop a Multicultural approach benefiting all children, instead of embarking on a collision course of legal uncertainties that is likely to become a political topic, rather than an educational issue.

BEN COOKSEY