Separate and connected: A portrait of perspectives and pedagogy at an African-centered shule

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Abstract
Intentionally separate schools continue to educate African American students in spite of the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision, revealing the value of and continued need for such institutions. Little is known about the practices of these schools, the kind of education that they provide for African American students, and the potential implications these institutions might have for our broader educational system. Interviews, classroom observations, and document analyses, conducted over a period of nine months, result in a portrait of a separate school that reveals the very explicit ways in which teachers help students to develop a positive Black identity and understand the connection between their success and the success of their community.

Keywords: portraiture; African centered education; Afrocentric education; anti-colonial pedagogy

1 Shule is KiSwahili for school
Introduction

As I board the train to visit The Freedom School (TFS), a small African-centered school in Tamery, a metro area in the Middle Atlantic region of the U.S., I think about the variety of life experiences that have inspired my interest in the pedagogy of educators in African-centered schools.\(^2\) One experience sticks out in particular. During a read-aloud with my all-Black class of second grade students, a student asked me why Black people were called African-Americans.\(^3\) I explained the components of the term and my own understanding of my African identity.\(^4\) Several of the students’ eyes opened widely as I told them that they had some connection to Africa. One student raised her hand and vehemently assured me that Africa had nothing to do with her even though I could see Africa in her face. With her beautiful brown skin, proud nose, full lips, almond shaped eyes and intricately cornrowed hair, she told me that there had never been any Africans in her family tree.

In my student’s adamant refusal to embrace the first half of her hyphenated identity, I recognized the seeds of “colonial alienation” and disconnection—seeds planted by constant exposure to curriculum that, through omission, has denied African humanity and African contributions to modernity (wa Thiong’o, 1986, p. 28). The colonial includes, “all forms of dominating and oppressive relationships that emerge from structures of power and privilege inherent and embedded in our contemporary social relations” (Dei and Asgharzedeh, 2001, p. 308). wa Thiong’o (1986) explains that, “colonial alienation takes two interlinked forms: an active (or passive) distancing of oneself from the reality around; and an active (or passive) identification with that which is most external to one’s environment” (p. 28). My student, at age seven, had already learned to cope with the reality of being African American by denying part of her hyphenated self and deriding anything that had to do with Africa or Africans. Sociologist Charles Payne’s (2008) description of the unique reality faced by young Black learners places this student’s experience in larger context. Payne explains that Black learners, faced with the task of navigating a landscape shaped by past and contemporary notions of Black inferiority and inhumanity, are in need of a pedagogy of connectedness. A pedagogy of connectedness actively connects students with their past so that they can have more confidence in themselves and their place in the future. While I would do my best that school year to meet the unique needs of my

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\(^2\) The United States Census Bureau (2013) assigns metro area status to urban areas with a population of 50,000 or more.

\(^3\) The terms “Black” and “African American” are used interchangeably throughout this article to describe individuals who are predominantly of African descent.

\(^4\) As an American born person of Afro-Caribbean descent, I fully recognize the creolized nature of my identity. It is best captured in historian Kamau Brathwaite’s description of Caribbean people. Brathwaite posits that the people of the Caribbean are made of “something Caribbean, but something nevertheless recognizably African” (as cited in Mintz and Price, 1992, p. xi.) The concept of “something nevertheless recognizably African” in Haitian culture has been explored in the literature on Haitian art (LeGrace Benson, 1999), identity (Trefzer, 2000), religion (Michel, 1996) and language (Prou, 2005). When I refer to my or an African identity throughout this piece, I am employing Marzui’s (2004) concept of American Africans, recognizing my present location as an American citizen while simultaneously reflecting African continuity, through Haitian Indigenous knowledge, language and culture.
Separate and connected

Black students through my curriculum, I knew that my efforts were a mere drop in the bucket. They would experience some form of colonial alienation throughout their educational experience and possibly for the rest of their lives. I realized then that it was imperative that I find and write about those educational experiences that exist for Black children that aim to counter the alienation that connected so many of my students. I look for and write about these spaces in the hopes of adding to our understanding of what education can be.

As the train pulls into the station, I notice empty factories with faded signs and cloudy, broken windows—these are relics of a once booming industrial past. Much later, Mama Ma’at, who teaches science and language arts at TFS, explains that these dilapidated factories are monuments to the riots that occurred right after Dr. King’s assassination. Leaving the train station, I walk towards the end of the block and see that a red, black, and green flag, calling to mind Marcus Garvey and the early work of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, is draped over a salmon colored door.

After seeing several children walk in the door, I am convinced that this is TFS. Pushing the door open, I find myself in a narrow hallway that is adorned with a variety of objects, including framed and laminated photographs of teachers and former students. Colored-in pictures of the sankofa symbol are interspersed among other representations of Ghanaian adinkra symbols and empty calabashes. Recent newspaper and magazine articles written about the young school are placed next to spelling tests, which are crowned with the words “Nzuri Sana” or “very good” in Swahili. Outside of a classroom door, pictures of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Huey P. Newton, and Bob Marley greet me. Brightly colored bulletin board lettering above the pictures spells out, “Wall to our Ancestors (Egun)”. Below the pictures are students’ written reports on deceased family members. Several of the reports have funeral programs stapled to them. My eyes follow the last of the typed reports to what I recognize, from my own Haitian upbringing, as offerings.

On a white plate there are tall red and black wax candles. This is an offering to Papa Legba, the Haitian guardian of the crossroads and intercom between the deities and mankind. There is also a large piece of iron symbolizing Ogun, the deity of iron, war, and work. Later, Sipho, the founder of the school and a priest in the Yoruba tradition, teaches me the names of these deities in the Yoruba pantheon: Eshu and Ogun. In return, I tell him the names that Haitians have come to call them, names that my grandmother taught me. Next to these offerings to the ancestors, a large red, black, and green wooden ankh, the Kemetic symbol for eternal life, sits on top of a brightly colored wax cloth fabric. Several colored pictures of the sankofa symbol adorn the classroom door in front of me. The juxtaposition of offerings to the ancestors and the symbol for eternal life is not lost on me. I have been made to understand, through long conversations with my grandmother, how intertwined the past and the future are and how dependent our future is upon our relationship to, understanding of, and respect for our ancestors.

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5 The Sankofa is an adinkra symbol, or ideogram representing proverbs, of the Asante people of Ghana, which urges us to look to the past and bring what is useful to the present so that we may make progress. It is often drawn as a bird reaching to it’s back. (Mitchem, 2000)
and our past. It is apparent here that there is a similar understanding among educators at TFS, a sense of commitment to connecting these students to their past as they move towards their future. Sankofa, pictures of deceased heroes, offerings to the deities, the ankh—all of these objects and images are each a stone in the bridge that is TFS, a bridge for African American students that links the past and the future. This focus on helping students to understand the importance of a connection to their past, in order to guarantee their future, speaks to a different approach to education, one that educators have overlooked. It is not this school’s focus on an intentionally separate education that sets it apart, it is its understanding of the importance of connection for African American students.

The need for connection

I was a senior in an elite and predominantly white high school when I purchased Dead Prez’s ‘Let’s Get Free’ (Gavin, Alford, Williams & Mair, 2000) album. There was one particular song that remained on repeat on my cd player: “They [sic] School”. Referring to the plight of African Americans in American schools and society, the refrain of the song states: “They [sic] school ain’t teachin’ us, what we need to know to survive…They [sic] school don’t educate, all they teach the people is lies…” In their lyrics, the artists M1 and Stic.man, suggest that there is something particular to the African American experience, which makes the standard curriculum and current methods of schooling inappropriate for the Black child. Audre Lorde (1984) helps us to understand that, “raising Black children—female and male—in the mouth of a racist, sexist, suicidal dragon is perilous and chancy. If they cannot live and resist at the same time, they will probably not survive” (p. 74). She adds, “Black children in America must be raised to be warriors” (p. 75). The use of the words survival and resistance intimate the symbolic and physical violence that characterizes African American life. Surprisingly, analyses of the threat posed by racism and the resulting unique psychological demands placed on African American children as a result of living with racism (e.g., Davis & Stevenson, 2006; Neblett et. al., 2012; Seaton, Sellers & Yip, 2009) remain conspicuously absent from policy discussions about the academic performance of Black students.

Instead, discussions about African American educational outcomes occur within an achievement gap or comparison paradigm. The core idea of this framework is that there is a persistent gap in achievement between Black students and their white and Asian peers. The difference between the scores of Black students and white and Asian students on measures of academic achievement are often provided to support the notion of an achievement gap (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). The particularly trenchant “problem” posed by African American underachievement is often couched in what Fabian (1983) terms allochronistic discourse. This language is characterized by such widely accepted concepts as the “inner city” and “urban” schools, which have little to do with the spatial properties of these institutions and more to do with the populations inhabiting them (Duncan, 2005). These concepts serve a unique discursive function in conversations about the educational crisis facing African Americans,
normalizing the racially stratified nature of achievement without ever highlighting structural racism and the extra competencies required of Black children to navigate such a hostile environment. Lack of substantive discussion focused on the social and material significance of race, as it relates to the educational experiences of African Americans, compromises any real attempts at educational reform and prevents us from reading outcomes as indicators of inequity. Tragically, as Payne (2008) points out, we only reproduce race and its consequences by ignoring the very real impact that it has on the lived experiences of African American students. However, there are models for changing the way we talk and think about the education of African American students.

Research on the teaching practices and philosophies of Black teachers reveals a rich and long history, dating back to the reconstruction era, of an awareness of the realities of race among teachers and an understanding that, “African American students face challenges unique to them as students in American schools at all levels by virtue of their social identity as African Americans and of the way that identity can be a source of devaluation in contemporary American society” (Perry, 2003, p. 9). Historian Robert Butchart’s (1988) analysis of the biographies of Black teachers during reconstruction unveils a common understanding among teachers that they were best suited to teaching Black students given their very intimate knowledge of the needs of the population. Siddle-Walker’s (1996; 2000) work illustrates the ways in which some segregated schools in the South, prior to the Brown decision, tailored education to fit the needs of African American students. In her descriptions of segregated schooling in the South, prior to Brown, Siddle-Walker (1996; 2000) paints a portrait that has never really been seen. While she does not gloss over the gross inequalities that characterized segregated schools in the south, Siddle-Walker makes a point of highlighting the conscious efforts among teachers and parents to impart the kind of cultural capital that would prepare their children to succeed, in spite of the decrepit structures of the schools themselves, which were billboards for Black inferiority. Despite the inequalities, Siddle-Walker (2000) asserts, “many African Americans valued the cultural form of teaching that developed in the segregated schools” (p. 254). In fact, Siddle-Walker refers to the pedagogy used within segregated schools as “valued segregated education” (White, 2004, p. 270). Students were explicitly taught to develop achievement ideologies, or belief systems about achievement, that were grounded in a positive racial identity and a critical understanding of the structural limitations posed by their pigment (Bush, 1997; Kelly, 2010; Shircliffe, 2001).

This orientation is markedly different from mainstream American achievement ideology, which maintains that sheer hard work and persistence will guarantee success and denies the impact of structural factors, like racism, on students’ chances of achieving their goals (MacLeod, 1987). Scholars and former educators in segregated settings have bemoaned the loss of institutional and communal support and directed attention to the development of a Black achievement ideology, or conceptualization of achievement rooted in the realities of the African American experience, that Black communities have suffered since Brown (Asante, 1988; Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)).
Hilliard, 1995; Karenga, 1993; Shujaa, 1994). They argue that today, Black students are largely left unsupported (Dixson, 2003; Foster, 1992; King, 2014; Murrell, 2002; Ware, 2002).

Despite the disruption of these intentional communities by Brown, valued, segregated schools, albeit in a different form, continue to exist. Today’s Black segregated schools, which are a part of an African-centered education movement, are descendants of the kind of education described by Siddle-Walker (1996). The framework for African-centered education is based on a world-view and “ideological perspective that places Africa at the center of African American identity” (Asante, 1988, p. 17). This paradigm comes out of an intimate knowledge of the way that the texts that are examined in school work to silence many populations and assign positions to those populations according to how closely they approximate the dominant culture, language and knowledge. The idea is to move students from the margins to the center to dismantle the well-worn sites of disempowerment that they inhabit. From this location, it is hoped, that students will be better equipped to “interrogate institutionalized power, privilege and the accompanying rationale for dominant production of what is considered ‘legitimate’ knowledge, culture and language” (Kempf, 2006, p. 140). The African-centered framework links racial and cultural identity to academic performance and has been employed in an attempt to improve the educational experiences of African Americans (Delpit, 2006; Hilliard, 2003; King, 2014; Leake & Leake, 1992; Lee, 1992; Shockley & Cleveland, 2011). African-centered or Afrocentric education can be observed in independent (day and boarding) schools, public schools and charter schools, as well as in smaller community based programs, like rites of passage programs (Lee, 2005). Within the school context, “Afrocentric curriculum is a systematic study of the multidimensional aspects of Black thought and practice centered around the contribution and heritage of people of African descent” (Asante, 1980, p. 17). According to the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI), those utilizing African-centered curriculum:

> Are characterized by their unwavering commitment to…developing among our people an increasing number of children and adults who possess the spiritual-moral direction, academic intellectual fervor, cultural-political allegiance, psycho-emotional-physical wellness, collective and commitment necessary to bring about our people’s return to righteous living and sovereignty. (CIBI, 2009)

Lee (1992, p. 165) adds that a school espousing an African-centered pedagogy should:

1. Legitimize African stores of knowledge
2. Positively exploit and scaffold productive community and cultural practices
3. Extend and build upon indigenous language
4. Reinforce community ties and idealize [the concept of] service to one’s family, community, nation, race and world
5. Promote positive relationships

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7 These schools differ from de facto segregated schools. Intentionally separate schools are purposeful communities constructed to devote careful attention to the education of African American students.
6. Impart a world-view that idealizes a positive, self-sufficient future for one’s people without denying cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness
7. Promote the vision of individuals and communities as producers rather than as simply consumers

In the midst of competing perspectives about what is best for African American children, some parents have been seeking out African centered schools (Raterray, 1992; Durden, 2007). In Delpit’s (2003) seminal work, she highlights the successes of a number of African centered schools. Byndloss (2001) opines Black communities have actually been experiencing a paradigm shift, moving from demanding integration to engineering schools with segregation, as it is defined by the work of Siddle-Walker (1996; 2000), as a part of their mission.

Absent from the literature both past and present, is a very clear explanation of what this unique pedagogy for African American students looks like in practice. What exactly do Black students need to overcome the alienation that I observed and experienced as both a teacher and a student? Despite a shared understanding of the unique nature of the educational task for African Americans, there doesn’t seem to be agreement on how best to provide students with the counternarratives that they need. An African-centered school provides the opportunity to observe “valued segregated education” in action. That morning, as I entered the narrow blue hallway, I wondered: ‘What does this pedagogy look like at the classroom level?’

Building connections

I made the trip to TFS many more times over the course of nine months. Each day I stayed for the duration of the school day. Over the course of my time at the school, I was given the opportunity to visit and observe classes, sit with students at snack, accompany students on school trips and help chaperone the youngest students on their weekly trips to the park while the weather was still warm.

Opening its doors in 2003, this very small co-ed, independent school currently serves 40 students. Schools within CIBI are generally small in size. Lamotey (1992) reported that schools in CIBI had enrollments between approximately 50 and 200 students. Of the 40 students at The Freedom School, one hundred percent identify as Black or African American. Though extremely small, this school is the only African centered School in the state that serves pre-school to 12th grade and the school is quite active in the Tamery community. It has been featured in the local newspaper and on the local news. In addition, the school has sponsored a variety of events in the community, including the Kwanzaa celebration at city hall (S. Kmt, personal communication, 2003).

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8 Perry (2003) defines counternarratives as scripts from within the African-American community about achievement and identity that challenge masternarratives about intellectual inferiority.
October 27, 2011). This small school sits within the larger Tamery School District, whose Black students comprised 61% of the students who dropped out in the surrounding county in the 2009-2010 school year, a number that speaks to a generally failing system of education for Black youth.

When I open the door that very first morning, a young student stands to greet me in Swahili, saying ‘Jambo Mama’ or hello mother, and sits down quietly. I learn later that all teachers and other adults are also addressed as either Iya or Baba, which mean mother and father respectively in Yoruba. Being called mother or father within the context of school alerts me to the way that students and their families are being taught to perceive the teachers and the space. Femi, a teacher’s aide, waves excitedly for me to come and place my things on a seat that he has set aside for me. He shares, ‘Baba Sipho told me all about you. I knew that you were coming this morning’. Sitting behind two djembe drums, I read the ‘Morning Kazi’ or morning work on the wall and recall, from my own experience as a teacher, how important morning work is for setting the tone for the school day. However, the examples for morning work suggest that teachers are setting much more than the tone for the day. As students file into the classroom in their traditional West African clothing, they pull out their notebooks to complete their morning work. The younger students are being asked to underline the complete predicate in the following sentences:

1. Baba told us about Fannie Lou Hamer.

They are also asked to complete a word problem:

“Iya Ori sold 1285 wooden carvings. She has 298 left. How many did she start with?”

Older students are asked to think about a prompt on the blackboard,

“How and why should you honor your Egun? (Ancestors).

The youngest students busy themselves with trying to unzip and hang up their coats, put away their snack and lunch, and find their spots on the rug. They are waiting for the morning’s unity circle to start. When Sipho finally enters and a few students fail to rise to address him, he gives a quick talk on the importance of showing respect to elders when they enter the room. After his talk, Sipho asks me to introduce myself to the students and explain my research. Throughout that first day, Sipho takes time out of his lessons to come and sit with me, asking me if I have any questions and providing me with the meanings of Swahili and Yoruba words that both the teachers and students use. At the end of the day several students, who make me promise that I will be back, hug me.
The school seemed to speak directly to my desire to find educational settings for Black children that were not dependent on their ability to leave parts of themselves outside of the school’s door. In the plethora of images, names, facts, faces, and objects that surrounded the children, I detected a real effort to provide the students with narratives about themselves that were empowering. Sipho’s attention to minute details—like the way the students greeted elders when they entered the room—created a familial environment that made it easy to see the sense of kinship and responsibility that he felt towards them. He felt a sincere duty to educate these students. His early morning admonition of those students who did not stand reminded me of the kind of behaviors that I had read about in the literature about the pedagogy of some Black educators and seen in the interactions between caring Black teachers and their students (Dixson, 2003; Foster, 1992; Ware, 2002). What I had observed that first day and what I would come to observe was a testament to the long and rich tradition of African American teachers working to create intentional communities that fit the specific needs of their students. However, I still wanted to know what this meant in daily practice. I wanted to know, what perspectives teachers believed they communicated to students, vis-à-vis their race and cultural identity in this particular setting? I also wanted to know how teachers enacted these perspectives in their pedagogy and curriculum? Ultimately, I wanted to know what a school like TFS could teach us about the education of African American youth. To answer these questions, I chose the methodology of portraiture.

Methodology and methods

Portraiture is a qualitative methodology that is a counterpoint to the positivist paradigm, which informs so much of social science research (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997). Portraiture examines the experiences of individuals and organizations through the lens of “goodness”, searching for instances of success, from the perspectives of the individuals in the setting that is being studied: “The nuanced search for goodness is really a search for a generous, balanced, probing perspective. It is a search for truth—or for the complex and competing truths that combine to shape an authentic narrative” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 146). As the portraitist listens to participants’ explanations of what is working in an institution, she is also looking and listening for dissonant voices and perspectives. Through deep storytelling, the portraitist provides an account of the interactions and experiences that inform the life of an organization and the people within it. The hallmark of the methodology is its blend of the aesthetic and the empirical. It is both beautiful and rigorous, conveying the details that make up the life of the participants within the organization while also taking time to compare these views of their experience against various data sources. The portraitist pays attention to the historical, social and political nuances that inform the context of its participants, resulting in a narrative that informs and hopefully inspires a broader audience to engage in a conversation about the issues presented.
Participants

Given the small size of the school, participant selection was a matter of convenience (Weiss, 1994). Four teachers participated in the study. Three of those teachers were there full time and one of the teachers was there part time. I conducted interviews using Siedman’s (2006) ‘three-interview series’. However, my interactions with the teachers at TFS went beyond formal interviews. Throughout the school year, my relationship with the teachers at TFS would grow. I remember rides to the train station with Sipho, his wife and fellow teacher Makini, and two of his youngest children, who were also enrolled at the school. During these car rides, Sipho discussed some of the politics of the community, his close relationships with the county’s officials, and his overall presence in the city as an educator. He was also a professor at the local community college and had facilitated mayoral debates. Often, after a full day at the school, Sipho continued to be generous with his time, answering any questions or explaining anything that he thought I might not have understood. Sipho and Makini invited me to students’ extracurricular activities, including dance and basketball along with larger events such as the science expo and the yearly Kwanzaa celebration at the community center. Later on, I was introduced to Ma’at, Sipho’s cousin, who actually taught at Makini’s elementary school for 20 years, including when Makini was a child. Ma’at welcomed me into her classroom and readily shared her phone number when I told her about the project. I had many conversations with Femi, the teacher’s aide, on the courses that he was taking in college and his desire to teach in the African American community. When I was getting to know the neighborhood, Sipho would often send Femi to pick me up from the train station.

Data Collection

I conducted classroom observations, arriving at school early in the morning and leaving after the last child left. I sat in on gym class, and watched students play the beringbau as Sipho instructed them in Capoeira. I sang along with the children, while playing the shekere with Mama Efua, the music teacher. I remember observing a history class as middle school students took quizzes on the Maroons and a math lesson with the youngest students, who were using manipulatives to learn how to add and subtract. I learned the Grace for snack time and helped discipline children with Femi when the noise level got too loud. I was even quizzed by students, in front of Sipho, on my numbers, in Yoruba. I spent lots of time sitting beside Makini’s desk as her youngest daughter tugged at her skirt. I was there when Makini had to call parents in for an emergency meeting regarding their child’s behavior. I shared lunch with Sipho and Makini when I forgot to bring my own. There were also the hours that I spent outside of the classroom. I roamed the hallways and read the calendar, memos, and other documents that the school had posted for parents to read. I also spent time looking at the items that were for sale in the school store. Outside of the school, I got lost in the small streets of the neighborhood and found myself asking
for directions. I was able to use all of these sources of data to help me think about my participants’ perspectives and my own questions regarding the pedagogy of the teachers at TFS.

Analysis

Using a grounded theory approach, I looked for repetitive phrases, metaphors and symbols throughout the interview transcripts, school documents, and memos. While the theoretical frameworks of a pedagogy of connectedness and anti-colonial pedagogy served as a spring board for understanding the data, I did not impose these theoretical concepts onto the data without first giving full analytic attention to the grounded codes.

Throughout my analysis of the data, I found that several words consistently featured in conversations with teachers, on internal and external documents, in formal interviews and during observations: “Sankofa”, “knowledge of self”, and “community”. These terms represent the major themes in teachers’ practices at TFS. “Sankofa” referred not only to the Ghanaian adinkra symbol but also the idea that it represented. “Sankofa” reminds people to remember and retain the most important and useful parts of their history, to prepare for the future (See Asante, 1988, p. 72). On the board, in workbooks, in assignments, in class, through song, through nearly every aspect of the school day, teachers at The Freedom School stressed and modeled the importance of this concept for students. “Sankofa” was intimately tied to a “knowledge of self” or, as Sipho explained it, “a sense of self esteem and a sense of culture.” Without an understanding of where they came from, teachers felt that students would not be able to understand who they were supposed to be today. Lastly there was “community”, which was dependent upon a child’s understanding of “Sankofa” and their “knowledge of self”. When the teachers talked about “community” they were talking about the larger African diasporic community. Of course, teachers wanted students to think about ways to improve the future of their immediate community members but they also wanted students to think about their responsibility to ensure the future of the global African community. I used teachers’ definitions of these concepts to help me understand their practices at TFS. I have done my best to be faithful to these definitions in my attempt to craft a portrait that is essentially a story about connection, so that teachers at TFS are able to recognize themselves and their practices. While this portrait focuses on a very small population, I do hope that readers are able to identify with this particular story and find themselves and their experiences reflected in the details.

Connecting students to the past (Sankofa)

Every day at TFS begins in the same manner. On this day, I wait for all of the students to arrive and take their place on the rug for the unity or umoja circle. I sit closest to the wall facing the street, under a window with valences made out of bright green and black African wax cloth. On the walls closest to me there are four posters. There is one poster saluting famous Black abolitionists and another that is a painting of a Black woman. Her back is to us and she is
wearing a long skirt and head covering. The other two posters are maps. One is a map of ancient Kemet and the Nile Valley. The other is a map of ancient ancestral sites throughout Africa. Two plants share the windowsill farthest from me and it is when Kwesi, a student, brings one of the plants to the rug that I know that the children are ready to begin the umoja circle. Once Kwesi kneels before the plant, the circle of students becomes more definite.

With one knee on the ground, Kwesi pours libations into the plant as he solemnly calls out, Esu, Yemoja, Osun, Sango, Obatala, Ogun, Ososi, Oba, Olokun and Oya—names of the Orisa. He leads this part of libations in Yoruba. However, as he gets closer to the end, all of the children chime in, naming their ancestors. Although they are each saying different names, there is unity in the loud hum of their voices. After libations, students sing a number of songs, covering topics such as their relationship to the ancestors and the unique responsibilities of Black men and women to the Black community. Students transition from one song to the next without any instruction and older students guide younger students through songs and their accompanying movements. The youngest members of the class, who are between two and five years of age, intensely watch the lips of their older classmates.

Today, after the umoja circle, students sit to hear the rest of other students’ presentations about their ancestors. Ampah, who is five, stands confidently as he speaks to the school about his Egun, his grandmother. He shares that she was born and raised in The South, came North, and had three children. Next, Naimah and Nigel, who are sister and brother, stand to talk about their ancestors. They are both nervous and have a hard time. Makini tries to help the children. She asks, “What are the names of your Egun?” Nigel and Naimah answer in voices so low they are asked by Sipho to speak up. Luckily, their grandmother who is standing near the door is there to help them. When Nigel begins to bite his nails, his grandmother comes slowly to the circle and kneels behind both of the children, coaching them to remember what they had practiced at home. Nigel and Naimah tell the class about an uncle, sharing the year that he was born and his occupation as a railroad engineer.

To my eyes, the activities of the morning unity circle and the import with which even the youngest students talk to their classmates about their ancestors come off as a polished product. Makini explains to me that it is a process, the result of a series of “lessons that are never ending.”

She explains:

Culturally, I know the things that I want them to understand...I think, ‘how can I teach them about their ancestors, their Egun?’... It’s about re-Afrikanization, meaning Sankofa, or going back and fetching, understanding who you are first and foremost⁹. So one of the things that I have to translate to the watoto is the importance of Sankofa...¹⁰

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⁹ The spelling of Afrika with a ‘k’ instead of a ‘c’ reflects reclamation of an identity that is different from that which has been constructed through colonialism. See Madhubuti’s (1973) Plan to Planet.

¹⁰ KiSwahili for children.
With the younger children, re-Afrikanization, or the study and practice of Afrikan epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies for the purpose of developing an Afrikan worldview, is indeed a process. It is a complex undertaking that requires persistence and creativity. On another day, Makini brings in a picture of Sankofa along with a wood carving of the symbol. She asks the watoto to explain what it is. One child answers, “It is a bird. It is looking back. It is touching its back.” As students are passing around the wood carving of the symbol, she has them color in a picture of the symbol and asks them to think about why it is important to look back to the past in order to improve the future. These lessons are presented to the students in a variety of formats. In between classes one afternoon, I hear the children in the preschool singing, “Sankofa...go on back and fetch it, go on back and fetch it. What do we fetch? Our history. What do we fetch? Our culture.” Thumbing through a workbook in the resource library entitled, *In the Black: Black line reproducibles for Afrikan Children*, I find a handwriting worksheet that asks students to print the following sentences: *A slave who does not know the true history of his people will help keep them in slavery. When we understand our true history, we can learn to think for ourselves and respect who we are—Afrikans.* Makini shares:

> Before we can reach our mission, our destiny. We have to remember. We have to remember who we are. Why do we have to remember who we are? Because we can learn from it...understanding first who you are and where you come from and being able to walk in that comfortably...then you can follow whatever path that you need in order to get your people to return to their traditional greatness. That is the point.

Having the children bring in the names of their ancestors, discuss the significance of and sing songs about Sankofa, and complete handwriting homework on the relationship between knowledge of one’s history and knowledge of self are all important parts of the process of helping the youngest students to understand the importance of remaining connected to their past. Makini explains that she has the parents from the preschool bring in the names of students’ ancestors, one from their mother’s side and one from their father’s side, so that they can begin learning to recite the names of their immediate ancestors during libations. She feels that when done this way, helping the children to remember who they are becomes a “holistic lesson”.

Having mastered a basic understanding of the concepts, the older children are asked to stretch their understanding and exhibit their comprehension of the importance of honoring the ancestors. This is why they are responsible for pouring libations. In one language arts class, several students read aloud from essays composed in response to the prompt, “How and why should you honor your Egun?” Kofi, who is seven, explains that it is important to honor the ancestors because, “They can guide us and tell us what they want us to do.” Adewale, who is ten, suggests, “We have to honor our ancestors because they are out there guiding us”. Mama Ma’at explains to me:

> Well one of the things that you make sure the children understand is that they come from a larger group of people. We’re not just here in this place right here.
There are people out here who are doing the things that we are talking about everyday and people who came before them. You are going to be the legacy.

As I listen to her, I am reminded of Muteshi (as cited in Dei and Azgharzadeh, 2001, p. 299) who writes that:

Within the colonized people’s historiography, for instance, the historic past offers an important body of knowledge that can be a means of staking out an identity, which is independent of the identity constructed through the Western ideology.

Indeed, this effort to teach the students to connect to and identify with their past, as it is explained by teachers at TFS, is an attempt to enable students to redefine themselves, to counter master narratives that position the African American as a supporting actor, entering the scene of American history on the world stage to simply be a slave, a foil for his superior European counterparts.

In other subjects, teachers share that students always begin the study of a topic by first acknowledging the contributions that African scholars have made to the topic. Regarding social studies, Mama Ma’at explains:

When I teach social studies I make them learn all of the presidents that we’ve had but they also [have to] understand what was happening with these presidents in the white house, what was going on in America with African Americans, what was going on in Africa with Africans you know…just to keep it in context…

The goal is not just for students to acknowledge an African past or understand how important that past is to their present study. Teachers want students to be able to read texts contrapuntally, to cultivate “awareness both of the metropolitan history and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts” (Said, as cited in Chowdhry, 2007, p. 104). In beginning with the past accomplishments of African and African American scholars, students are taught to expect that certain perspectives will be absent from their texts, to look for these perspectives and to question the univocal tenor of these texts. Furthermore, teachers at TFS are also encouraging students to reclaim and assert an identity outside of that which has been fashioned for them. Teachers’ efforts to make sure that students are attuned to the past are a practice of decolonization. Ultimately, this attention to the past is a part of a larger project to ensure that the students get a fuller picture of who they are, beyond what their experiences as racialized others have led them to believe.

**Connecting students to knowledge of themselves**

In addition to having a historical sense of who they are, students are encouraged to understand their identity in present terms and instructed to see themselves as part of a larger group of people
engaged in struggle. In addition to pouring libations to the Orisa and calling on the ancestors for guidance, students recite a number of pledges during the unity circle. All of the pledges, except for one, have been set to, or are already part of a song. The teachers at TFS have created some of these pledges; leaders and other educators in the African centered schools movement have written others. On this day, all of the boys in the classroom recite the “Black Man’s Pledge”. The girls stare nonchalantly at their peers and I am gripped by the assertive tone in the young boys’ voices. In the second stanza of the pledge they say, “I, the black man, am the original man… I have lost by force, my land, my language, in essence my life, I will seize it back so help me…” While I process the words uttered by these very young boys, I see the girls spring into action as they recite the “Black Woman’s Pledge”. One of the girls puts her hands on her hips as she recites the pledge. At the end of the pledge, all of the girls shout, “I am as beautiful as the universal blackness because I am the mother of humanity and whenever I’ve been given the opportunity I am successful!”

Following their separate pledges, the boys and girls pledge commitment to their people in unison. They state that they “are preparing leaders and workers to bring about a positive change for our people.” The short pledge gives way to the “Flag Song” and students clap vigorously as they praise the red, black, and green Pan-African flag. Swaying from side to side the students smile as they chant, “Praise the red, the black and the green/the brothers and sisters are being redeemed/why don’t you open up your eyes and see/we’re on our way to being free/ because the red is for the blood that we shed, the black is for the race that’s us, the green is for the land uh uh…” After clapping and swaying, the students stand somberly, with their hands at their sides and their eyes trained steadily on each other, and begin the Black National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing”. A very young child, who is being signaled by his peers to better manage his loud voice, belts, “We have come over a way that with tears has been watered/We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered…” While these songs teach the children about the struggles and triumphs of African Americans, educators at TFS also teach students songs that highlight the experiences of the African Diaspora outside of the United States.

Songs are a big part of a day at the school. In fact, gym and music class are sometimes combined at TFS. In the first half of the school year, students learned about the history and origins of capoeira Angola along with songs in Portuguese about returning to Angola. In one session, the children each held a berimbau and sang, “Eu vo Angola” or “I see Angola”, as Sipho accompanied them on his own berimbau. This song exposed the students to the nuances of the African experience. Through this song they were simultaneously made aware of the African diasporic experience and the way in which enslaved and later freed Africans maintained a connection to the continent.

Passing by a younger classroom one morning, I overhear three four year olds, in the pretend kitchen area, singing the refrain of the Dead Prez (2000) song, “I’m a [sic] African”:

I’m a African, I’m a African/And I know what’s happenin’/ I’m a African, I’m a African, And I know what’s happenin’/You a African? You a African? Do you know what’s happenin’?/ I’m a African, I’m a African, uhh/ And I know what’s
happenin’/ A-F-R-I-C-A, Puerto Rico, Haiti and JA/ New York and Cali, F-L-A/
No it ain’t ‘bout where you stay, it’s ‘bout the motherland…

They have their arms around each other and ask me if I heard them singing. I smile and tell them
that I did hear them singing and that I would like to hear them sing again. Sipho later explains
that he is always teaching them songs or creating songs for them that provide them with,
“positive messages about who they are.” As demonstrated by the young choir in the play kitchen,
he is also helping them to arrive at a broad and complex understanding of African and African
diasporic identity.

While walking from a classroom to his office one morning, Sipho shares a song that he
has recently created for the students:

I am Black…I made this song up. I am Black…actually my friend Rahim made it
up and I extended it. I love Black, I love Black, Black is beautiful, Black is
beautiful, I am beautiful, I am beautiful. Are you beautiful? I am Black, Black, I
am Black, Black. I love Black, Black is wonderful, Black is incredible, Black…

The song, set to the popular French children’s song ‘Frère Jacques’, is illustrative of some of the
techniques used by teachers at TFS to provide students with texts that convey positive messages
and counternarratives about Blackness and African heritage. Sipho is always thinking of songs,
rhymes and sayings that he can share with the children. I hear him making these songs
throughout my time at the school, in the hallway, at his desk, during a lesson. Sometimes they
come out of thin air. Other times they are an adaptation of, or addendum to, an already existing
text that is popular among the children. Sipho enjoys, “creating songs that will make it easy for
children to rejoice in their blackness.” I observe this same act of creating and tailoring texts, to
reflect the messages that teachers want to drive home to students, in the older children’s classes.

In language arts, Mama Ma’at often tailors assignments in textbooks, crossing out certain
questions on worksheets and replacing proper nouns so that they fit the students. Recalling a
specific text that needed tailoring, Mama Ma’at shares:

We wrote in people that we could recognize in the sentence, if we were working
with nouns…Just making sure that the sentences don’t take them where they
shouldn’t go because you know a lot of our kids will look at pictures that don’t
look like them and they think that is beautiful… the pictures that look like
them…that’s not beautiful. So if you give sentences that always talk about…like
some of the sentences you know…so and so blond hair something. Something is
actually the word. You don’t use that sentence. You know so those are the kinds of
things. Then I will be like, ‘Open the book and no you are not going to do number
one, do number this and this and then stop’.

The students do not always understand why she is telling them to skip over certain problems.
Sometimes they ask, “Why aren’t we going to do it?” When they ask this question she says,
“Well read it. Does it mean anything to you?” They respond, “Oh they’re talking about someone with blonde hair and blue eyes and that’s not us.”

Listening to Mama Ma’at, I am reminded of the way Kenyan writer wa Thiong’o (1986) describes his own education, where students were only allowed to read canonical English texts and prohibited from speaking any language other than English. He explains, “thus language and literature were taking us further away from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds” (p. 12). It is when a student is caught between worlds and selves that alienation grows. Mama Ma’at is aware of the very real ways in which students, through constant exposure to worlds that have no resemblance to their own, can begin to lose touch with and despise their reality and, in turn, themselves (Memmi, 1970). For Mama Ma’at, it is best to avoid the sentences in the textbook that make references to white people. She is trying to craft a world, during her class time, where students are able to see themselves and their reality reflected in every example.

Teachers are committed to making sure that students are properly equipped to stand up to global Africanisms (Morrison, 1992) so that they do not slip into a state of “disremembrance” (Glymph, as cited in Payne, 2003, p. 28). Glymph comes across the phenomenon of “disremembrance” in slave narratives. It connotes a, “false consciousness on the part of black persons who were thought to have acted in seeming disregard of their history and in particular, of the freedom struggles of black people.” In other words it is a sort of denial, a distancing from one’s identity as an African American. To make sure that their students know who they are, teachers at TFS give careful attention to making sure that the children have experiences that contribute to the acquisition and cultivation of a positive racial self-concept as individuals and in relation to the broader community.

Mama Makini looks forward to a day when she will not have to worry about crossing out any names or phrases in the children’s textbooks:

Hopefully in the future…We will have our own text book with our own Afrikan names and images in it and we won’t have to read Sandy went to the store and Bob came along...For a couple of years, I would white out their names. I would white out like Julie and Jack and put Amma and Kofi in there you know…So sometimes when we are reading a word problem, they’ll say, ‘Iya, we’ve got to change that name…

I am struck by the way that her experience with the texts that she uses in class echoes Albert Memmi’s (1970) observations about the curriculum in post-colonial Tunisa. Memmi finds that, “the books talk to him of a world which in no way reminds him of his own; the little boy is called Toto and the little girl, Marie, and on winter evenings Marie and Toto walk along snow covered paths, stopping in front of a chestnut vendor” (p. 149). Teachers understand that when students are constantly invited into an alternate reality that does not mirror their own, they begin to define and see themselves through that reality. Makini, like Mama Ma’at, replaces the names provided by the textbooks with names that are relevant to and more reflective of her student
body. Many of the children have come to expect alterations in their textbooks and worksheets and often let the teachers know when a name needs to be changed. Over the course of the school year, I hear Makini engage the students in this renaming activity, asking them to “think of another name that we could use.” These practices reflect the understanding that those in the margins, “can read [themselves] against another people's pattern, but since it is not [theirs]...[they] emerge as its effects, its errata, its counternarratives. Whenever [they] try to narrate [them] selves, [they] appear as dislocations in their discourse” (Said, 1986, p. 140). Mama Ma’at and Mama Makini want to make sure that the students are able to see themselves through their own eyes instead of through the eyes of others.

Students are being taught to notice when they are left out or erased from both history and the present. In changing the nouns and phrases found in the texts that the children use, the teachers at TFS are also teaching the students to write themselves into the past, present and future, to remember that their experiences and discourses are valid. Teachers show students how to “deconstruct...mechanisms that have been used to build and sustain Eurocentric constructions” of Black identity (Swartz, 1992, p. 353). Referring to her practice of reconfiguring texts to fit her students, Mama Ma’at tells me:

I think the first thing is a lot of people believe is that this is a threat to them. You hear people that look like us say oh they are teaching those kids to hate. They need to understand that we are teaching them to love...love themselves because you can’t love anybody else until you love yourself. You can’t take care of anybody else unless you take care of yourself, so they need to understand that this is not a threat to them.

According to Mama Ma’at, helping the students to connect to and seek positive images of themselves in curriculum that can be so marginalizing, is an act of love. Through songs and altered text, the teachers at TFS hope to help the students to gain a more accurate picture of the conditions of their reality. The teachers at TFS hope that when the students have knowledge of themselves, they will learn to love themselves and, by extension, their community.

Connecting students to the future of the community

Teachers at TFS help students to understand that their success is a communal endeavor. For them, success cannot be measured by the accomplishments of an individual; it is measured by the individual’s contribution to her community. Students are encouraged to pursue their education with one goal in mind: sovereignty. Makini explains that sovereignty means, “To be self sufficient, to not have to depend on anyone but the people in your community, for your community to flourish.” Makini hopes that her students will, “Not have to be dependent on anyone for their food, for their shelter, for their clothing.” She wants them to be able to, “Medicate themselves and do all of the essential things that we need.” She wants them to be able to take care of themselves and their community and be in control of the kinds of services that
their community receives. Students are taught that they must succeed in school so that they can improve their community. Makini shares what she can remember of impromptu talks with the children about the purpose of an education:

We say to them…If you are successful…If you have not come back to your community and shared it or come back to your community and helped someone then you have failed. You know we have to talk in a way that they can understand… When you get your fancy house and fancy things or whatever or if not…lets say if you do and you don’t come back and share then don’t come back here ok because me and Baba are going to tell you about yourself ok?

Makini makes sure that the children do not lose sight of their relationship to their community and the importance of “service to one’s family, community, nation, race and the world” (Lee, 1992, p. 166). Most importantly, these talks, Sipho explains, communicate the importance of being a “leader, producer, and owner.” Not only do the educators wish for the children to internalize the message about commitment to their community, they are also encouraging economic self-determination and sovereignty. In addition to helping students develop a positive self-concept, this commitment to community and the understanding that one must acquire tools from school to aid the community is one of the central messages conveyed to students at TFS. This message about community is present in writing prompts, and on the calendar. A science fair packet that the children receive in the spring includes a pledge for Afrikan scientists. The pledge urges them to find solutions to problems specific to Black people:

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YOUNG AFRIKAN SCIENTIST

PLEDGE

We are all scientists.
We must learn to work together using science
To solve the problems of our people.
If we cannot solve all of them,
Then we must leave our work for those who follow.
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There are a few messages in the text above. First, the students are told that they are all capable of conducting experiments and finding solutions because they “are all scientists.” Next, the children are encouraged to work together, to exercise collective responsibility among their community members. Finally, they are told about the importance of solving the problems of “our people.” Even if they are unsuccessful, their work and their efforts will be important for future Afrikan scientists. Towards the end of the science packet, students are asked to think about how their
projects, in addition to being innovative, reflect the Nguzo Saba or seven principles of Kwanzaa. There is constant reinforcement of the idea that students have a responsibility to their community.

During one of my interviews with Ma’at, when I am asking her to explain how students are explicitly instructed in how to fulfill their responsibility to their community, a student knocks on the door. It is Kwesi. He is outside with Sipho and the rest of his class and is out of breath from running inside to tell Mama Ma’at to open the window. The students are in the garden in the backyard and want to show Mama Ma’at what they have planted. Mama Ma’at and I move over to the window and look down at the plant bed that the students have created with planks of wood. Mama Ma’at shouts out of the window to the children below, “Watoto what are we planting?” The children, who are excited, are all jumping up and down and shouting at once. It is difficult to pick out the names of individual vegetables but I know that they have planted vegetables. Once the shouting has subsided, Mama Ma’at asks, “What are we going to do after we plant?” The children explain that they are going to eat all of the vegetables when they grow. Mama Ma’at asks, “Do we want to keep them all to ourselves?” One child explains that they will have to sell them and share them with the community. The children jump up and down with Sipho and chant, “Sell them, sell them!” After closing the window, Ma’at and I smile at each other. The children have answered my question about the most important lesson at TFS—giving back to the community.

Ultimately, this is what Ma’at hopes the children understand:

The whole idea of education is so that you can create jobs, bring them into the community, and make sure the people in the community are better off than they were when you left them.

Makini adds, “Your focus should be on your community and on your people.” I nod knowing that she is not just talking about the students at TFS. She is talking to me.

Echoing Lee’s (1992) description of African centered pedagogy, Mama Ma’at and the educators at TFS impart a world-view that entwines the success of the individual and the health of the community. They want students to realize that if they do not acquire the skills to contribute to the building of strong communities, they will never survive; they will never be free. This world-view locates academic success between the black struggles of the past and possibilities for the present and connects it with the betterment of the larger African American community. Although TFS may not be for everyone, it seems to have honed in on what Payne (2008) reminds us about the education of Black learners:

The growing national mantra about instruction, instruction, instruction is a good thing; we need to be encouraging it. Still, we need to be wary of sliding into the trap of thinking that instruction is the whole battle. For some children, the mantra needs to be instruction and connection, instruction and connection. (p. 116)

Teachers at TFS show us that connection is instruction.
Discussion

Charles Payne (2008) posits, “black youngsters are trapped between what they understand as a history of collective humiliation and impotence and a set of contemporary social images that seem to confirm the idea that there is something fundamentally wrong with Black people” (p. 116). In school texts, African and African American experiences and voices are distorted, muted and/or omitted, providing students with incomplete images of people of African ancestry (Swartz, 1992). In discussing curriculum as a racial text, curriculum theorists Castenell, Jr. and Pinar (1993) explain, “If what we know about ourselves…is deformed by absences…then our identity is… fractured” (p. 4). The consequence of being repeatedly met with fractured reflections of oneself, if we follow Pinar’s logic, is an inaccurate understanding of one’s identity, a fractured humanity. Curricular injuries to the Black child’s sense of self are exacerbated by school discourses, structures, and processes, which only serve to confirm the invisibility and inferiority that is inferred by the text. Sadly, many students are left to navigate alienating educational spaces alone. Payne explains that such experiences point to the importance of a pedagogy of connectedness for African American students that: “connects students to a past that they may have rejected, a rejection that leaves them with fewer tools to fight racial stereotype in the present” (2008, p. 116).

Payne’s (2008) pedagogy of connectedness, as it is operationalized at TFS, is an anti-colonial pedagogy. It reflects the understanding that the colonial pervades all social relations and can be read in any situation that constructs the dominant in relation to the dominated other. The colonial “refers to anything imposed and dominating rather than that which is simply foreign and alien” (Dei, 2006, p. 3; Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001). Colonialism is understood as not only affecting the indigenous; it is understood as a force that has operated and continues to impact the lives of minoritized and racialized populations. In Payne’s (2008) description of the educational experiences of African American students there are echoes of the works of Fanon (2008), wa Thiong’o (1986) and Memmi (1970) on colonialism and its effects on the colonized. Just as Fanon’s (2008) colonial subject struggles to exist in the midst of a past that has been disfigured and distorted by colonialism, African American students struggle to assert their humanity against a barrage of images that insist that they are outside of humanity. Memmi (1970) believes that “the most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community” (p. 135). African American students struggle to exist as full human beings as they are victims of what wa Thiong’o (1986) calls the “cultural bomb”, which can “annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves” (p. 3). wa Thiong’o (1986) goes on to explain that the cultural bomb “makes them see their past as one wasteland of non achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland” (p. 3). There is an understanding, across these observations of the effects of colonialism, that the history of the oppressed is a casualty of the colonial encounter.

Payne’s (2008, p. 116) call for a method of teaching “that connects students to a past that they may have rejected” builds upon the understanding that “for colonized peoples,
decolonization involves a reclamation of the past, previously excluded in the history of the colonial and colonized nations” (Dei, 2006, p. 2). Situating students within their own histories, allows them to access knowledges specific to their community, knowledges that can be used to critically analyze, challenge and subvert patterns of dominance. Furthermore, reminding students of their place in history gives them courage to proudly claim their space in the present and secure their space, among the rest of society, in the future. Ultimately, this anti-colonial pedagogy teaches students to resist domination and solve the “cultural catastrophe” that is the result of alienation (Memmi, 1970, p. 151).

Through rituals, like the pouring of libations, teachers at TFS are connecting students to the past. They are, in an effort to counter the pull towards “disremembrance” and dislocation, engaging students in practices of remembrance, practices that, by their very nature, contest the amputated history that has been assigned to them and encouraging students to challenge the mythology of univocal histories. When the youngest students are sitting and passing around the wooden figure of the Sankofa, they are being initiated into a long process of remembering.

During one of our earliest conversations, Mama Ma’at expresses her belief that, “[African-centered education] is the only education we should have for our kids…in America anyway.” Indeed, it is apparent that there is something happening in this space, something that is being done with these students, that is very different from what I am used to seeing in schools that are predominantly African American. The attention to the construction of a positive black identity, the explicit manner in which teachers help students to understand the connection between their success and the success of their community—these things are sorely lacking in most schools.

However, I could not help but notice how much whiteness figured into the construction of these students’ identity. When describing the colonized individual’s response to colonization and her ultimate decision to seek an “autonomous dignity” (Memmi, 1970, p. 172), Memmi states, “The colonized’s self-assertion, born out of protest continues to define itself in relation to it” (p. 183). In teaching students about African history and the ongoing colonial encounter, a discussion of the European was unavoidable. In the teachers’ attempts to connect students to themselves and make sure that the texts used in language arts were reflective of the students, it was impossible not to notice that these acts of connection always required a conversation about the way that the curriculum tended to be written from a Eurocentric perspective. While the school is an African-centered space, whiteness was very present as teachers’ and students’ identities were being formed against the idea of whiteness. This is a part of any attempt at decolonization. Memmi (1970) explains, “In order to witness the colonized’s complete cure, his alienation must completely cease. We must await the complete disappearing of colonization—including the period of revolt” (p. 185). The pedagogy of teachers at TFS suggests that, in their conceptualization of a separate and autonomous identity, they are still in this period of revolt. Thus, teachers and students continue to experience colonial alienation to a certain degree. Future research should examine practices that will move students and their communities beyond revolt and towards full decolonization.
Despite this observation, TFS is a powerful site of connection. I can only imagine how different the experiences of some of my second graders, who are now in college, would be if they attended a school devoted to countering the alienation that is their birthright. The pedagogy of connectedness embraced by teachers is the kind of educational practice that we should all be looking to if we are sincerely concerned about the educational outcomes of African American students and other racialized and minoritized populations. Although some may view an African-centered school as separatist, it is fundamentally about countering the disconnection or aforementioned alienation that schooling often creates for minoritized children, who are unwitting participants in their acculturation into a subjugated reality by members of the dominant class.

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