

# A Comparison of African & Mainstream Culture on African-American Students in Public Elementary Schools

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## Introduction

The public educational system is comprised of diverse demographics wherein each student has a distinct cultural personal history (O'Brien, 1998). In America, the traditional perception was that a melting pot society existed. But deMarrais and LeCompte (1999) maintain that a stew pot or salad bowl would be a more appropriate analogy. Melting pot suggests a European-American, middle- and upper-class orientation, whereas stew pot or salad bowl implies that diverse demographics exist alongside one another with many distinctive cultures enhancing humanity across America (deMarrais & LeCompte).

The melting pot theory has dominated the education system, adversely affecting many African-American students who attend urban, public schools (Carruthers, 1995; deMarrais & LeCompte; Marks & Tonso, 2006; Pai & Adler, 2001). A growing body of researchers have reported that educational leaders are constantly searching to find the best methods for teaching African-American students who attend urban public schools (NCLB, 2002). Leadership stakeholders and educators alike are now beginning to explore the possibility that infusing the cultural history of African descent within the schooling process may help African-American students learn more effectively (Pai & Adler, 2001).

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## Literature Review

One of every 10 African-American students drops out of high school (U.S. Department of Education as cited by Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008) compared to one out of every five of their European-American peers (Chicago Public Schools, n.d). According to Shockley (2007), the American education system has failed to address properly the educational and cultural needs of African-American students who attend public schools, which has caused major behavioral, social, and academic problems (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Shockley, 2007). Little research has been conducted regarding the way culture in general and African descendants' culture in particular is being applied to the educational experience for African American students who attend public schools in Chicago (Davis, 2005).

For decades African-American students who attend predominantly African-American public schools in their Chicago neighborhoods have not been able to experience a culturally relevant education and have continued to fall behind their European-American peers academically (Shockley, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2007/09). On the south side of Chicago, the principal of a predominantly African-American school recently adopted an African-centered approach to the Chicago Public School's curriculum (Finkel, 2007), but questions remain about the overall effectiveness of such an African-centered education.

Many educators realize that how education is transmitted to students affects their academic outcomes as well as their psychological and emotional well-being (Cholewa & West Olatunji, 2008). Experts argue that educators should teach students

... academic skills that are supposed to be taught using culturally relevant instructions that connect the content

of the lessons to the children. Students should exit classrooms and school with some sociopolitical awareness as well as cultural knowledge about themselves. (Ladson-Billings, 1994a, as cited by Boutte & Strickland, 2008, p. 55)

Infusion of African culture has a positive effect on learning, so the ability to address effectively the cultural and educational needs of African-American students must require leadership stakeholders, teacher educators, teachers, and counselors to work collectively to reform education and develop appropriate educational approaches. Leadership stakeholders must examine teachers and teacher educators' readiness and capacity to ensure they cease to misrepresent history and culture in teacher education programs (Swartz, 2007). Finally, leadership stakeholders and their constituents must evaluate their schools' cultural infusion methods to ensure that the deliberate transmission of culture aligns with the educational and cultural needs of attending students (Shockley, 2007).

Educational leaders, scholars, teachers, and parents are working to find the best ways to teach African-American students who attend inner-city public schools (Carruthers, 1995). Advocates for compensatory education suggested that the most effective way to help improve African-American student performance is to teach the same values, beliefs, and skills that the middle-class White students learn (Pai & Adler), yet others argued that African-American students achieve better academically when African culture is infused in the curriculum (Nobles, 1990).

For decades, according to Marks and Tonso, (2006), African-American students have not been achieving well with the compensatory education approach currently reflected in NCLB, an approach which began as an important part of the Great

Society programs intended to improve the quality of education for poor children of ethnic minorities, particularly African Americans (Pai & Adler).

Instead, compensatory education has had an adverse effect on cultural equality for African Americans by imposing traditional educational norms of schooling in America (Pai & Adler, 2001). The Great Society programs, even under NCLB, have continued to stress the melting pot goal (Pai & Adler, 2001), which deprives African-American students of a significant educational experience (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Pai & Adler, 2001; Shockley, 2007) and has affected the AYP outcomes for African-American students who attend public schools in Chicago and elsewhere.

In 1991, educational leaders in Chicago started the Small Schools Movement Workshop as an attempt to create new learning environments in communities that were historically toxic (Ayers & Klonksy, 2006). As a result at least two public schools in Chicago have used an African-centered curriculum (Finkel, 2007). While the former public schools CEO signed a proposal to open new small quality schools in Chicago. Finkel suggests that questions have emerged about the effectiveness of an African-centered curriculum in improving test-scores.

While a small number of predominantly African-American elementary schools infuse African culture in the curriculum, most schools do not (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008). The public education system has always been based on Eurocentric values that work to benefit the cultural backgrounds of European Americans. To ensure that education aligns with the norms of African-American students, African-centered education is necessary (Shockley, 2007), but advocates of African culture infusion have yet to convince the public, and even some African-Americans, of the benefits of African cultural infusion.

## Methods

A causal-comparative design was used to compare the educational practices of two predominantly African-American public schools in Chicago based on their AYP reports. A thorough investigation of existing documents and statistical data from the two schools was performed to determine whether cultural infusion affected AYP for African-American students. Information was collected from the Chicago Public School website and the websites of both schools that were under investigation as

well as 2009 AYP reports retrieved from the Illinois State Board of Education website's State Report Card.

Statistical reports and other pertinent documents, including Illinois School Report Cards and mission and philosophy statements, were used to help describe the process by which the two schools infused culture into the curriculum. The 2009 ISAT score-levels served as a comparison of the schools to reveal the effect of cultural infusion on AYP for African-American students.

The specific types of data collected included mission and philosophy statements of the schools, School Improvement Planning for Advancing Academic Achievement (SIPAAA), ISAT score-levels, and 2009 AYP reports for third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students from the two schools. One was a school that infuses African culture into the curriculum (school A), while the other school does not (school B).

Themes were found in the SIPAAA and parent-student handbook data from both schools A and B which showed significant differences in educational practices and AYP information. Themes found in both school's SIPAAA included mission statements, vision statements, and descriptions of curriculum. In addition, the parent-student handbooks from the schools included a welcome letter and general school information.

Although one of the two schools offered pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, the population for this study was limited to third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students because these were the grade-level's both schools had in common. In addition, testing was a mandate for students beginning in the third grade. Some class sizes were larger than other classes and might have produced conflicting results but that was remedied by choosing a common number of students in each class for this study.

Approximately 30 students were enrolled in each third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade class, and the student's ISAT score-level values in reading and mathematics were identified for this study. The total number of students at school A and school B who performed at level 1 and level 2 on the ISAT were calculated and a t-Test was used to compare the two schools. The Illinois School Report Card data revealed the percentages of student scores in each of four performance levels, identified as Level 1—Academic Warning, Level 2—Below Standards, Level 3—Meets Standards, and Level 4—Exceeds Standards.

The two-tailed t-Test was appropriate

for this study because the results would have been interesting in either direction, a significant difference either positive or negative between the schools' AYP results. The following hypothesis was established for the study: There is a significant positive causative relationship between cultural infusion and better AYP scores for African-American students in Chicago public schools.

The 2009 Illinois School Report Card data from school A and school B showed the classroom sizes ranged from 20-34 students per class. Third grade student's average class size at school A was 28 and the class size for third grade students at school B was 25. Fourth grade student's average class size during the 2009 school year at school A was 26 and school B had 34 students in the fourth grade. Fifth grade students at school A classroom size was 20 and at school B the classroom size was 32. Finally, the population of sixth graders at school A was 28 and 24 students in the sixth grade in 2009 was 24. Strategic statistical measures were taken to determine that ISAT score-levels of 1 and 2 were most likely in classes with more students.

Data analyses for the study involved observable and statistical data, comparing group differences and group results with former predictions and past research (Creswell, 2005). An in-depth analysis of mission and philosophy statements, prospectuses, SIPAAA, and 2009 ISAT score-levels were used to search for themes. Internal data including SIPAAA information revealed the manner in which both schools transmitted culture to attending students.

The two schools' cultural infusion methods were compared and significant educational differences were identified. The 2009 AYP reports from schools A and B revealed third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students ISAT score-levels, which were calculated and compared by using the t-Test to search for significant statistical differences. Comparative results were summarized and were used to explain the differences between cultural infusion practices and AYP for African-American students at the two schools.

To explain the statistical significance of the differences found in ISAT score-levels for School A and School B, both schools' 2009 Illinois School Report Cards were collected and analyzed. A t-Test was used to find the statistical significance and difference between the means of underperforming third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students' 2009 ISAT score-levels from the two schools.

## Results

Data from School A revealed significant evidence showing that school A seeks to infuse African culture and implement an African-centered curriculum in all classrooms. In comparison, data from School B revealed a lack of cultural infusion related to the background of the students and their community. According to the evidence from the data analysis, School B does not infuse African culture in the schooling process. Both schools' student populations are predominantly African American and both are located in predominantly African-American neighborhoods.

An independent t-Test was performed on the hypothesis to see if there was a significant difference between third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students' ISAT performance levels revealed in 2009 AYP results, which served as the dependent variable, with the focus on culture infusion methods. The hypothesis was tested and validated by setting the alpha level at .05 using a two-tailed test, calculating the appropriate statistics and stating the degrees of freedom.

The results of the statistical data analysis showed a significant lower performance in third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade students' AYP results in the school that does not infuse African culture (School B), as compared to students who attend the school that infuses African culture (School A). Thus, there is a significant positive causative relationship between cultural infusion and stronger AYP for African-American students in Chicago public schools.

## Discussion

Third, fourth, fifth, and sixth grade African-American students' ISAT score-levels in reading and mathematics at school A, the school that infuses African culture, were significantly higher when compared to African-American students at school B, which that does not infuse African culture in the curriculum. African-American students at school A benefited from African cultural infusion as evidenced by a significantly higher number of students meeting AYP standards compared to students at School B.

Currently many African-American children who live in predominantly African-American neighborhoods in Chicago and attend schools where the population is predominantly African American are not taught by means of an African-centered curriculum in which African culture is

infused (Marks & Tonso, 2006). Rather, most schools in Chicago employ a European-centered curriculum to educate all students (Pai & Adler, 2001). As a result, African-American students score significantly lower on the ISAT compared to their European-American counterparts (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008).

Infusing African culture in the educational experience of all students is significant to the well-being of humanity (Carruthers, 1995; Solomon, 1996). African cultural infusion places the educational and cultural needs of African-American students at the center of their education and serves to uplift them and help improve the quality of their education (Shockley, 2007). Unfortunately, currently the inner city of Chicago has only two predominantly African-American public schools that employ African cultural infusion methods (Finkel, 2007).

In this study a significant relationship has been shown to exist between African cultural infusion and African-American student achievement. Data from the research demonstrated that more African-American students in the African-centered public school (school A) met or exceeded 2009 AYP standards, with more students performing at level 3 and level 4 on the ISAT, as compared to students at the non-African-centered school.

The majority of African-American students who did not experience African cultural infusion at School B performed at level 1 and level 2 on the ISAT, not meeting 2009 AYP standards. When a curriculum that addresses the educational, cultural, social, and emotional needs of attending students exists and is implemented appropriately, African-American students will more likely perform better academically and meet or exceed the desired AYP standard requirements.

## Conclusion

Mainstream core curriculum in Chicago schools is not designed for the cultural interests of African-American students, resulting in suboptimal academic performance by many of those students (Banks, 2008; Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Shockley, 2007). According to Hilliard (1997) and Hopkins (1997) as cited by Shockley, the inability to address the cultural needs of African-American students effectively is one of the most complicated problems facing American schools.

Currently, only two predominantly African-American public schools in Chicago

infuse African culture in the schooling process (Finkel, 2007). Evidence from the data revealed that school B is a traditional educational institution serving a predominantly African-American student population which does not infuse African culture in the curriculum.

The vision for school B, as revealed in the school's mission statement, is for educators to design and maintain a safe learning environment that works to develop knowledgeable, healthy, and socially responsible students who will function effectively in the global community. School B reflects a compensatory education approach by offering basic academics as a means for students to attain skills needed to acquire better paying jobs (Pai & Adler, 2001). Students at school B might ultimately obtain better paying jobs, but may not be receiving a meaningful and effective education.

Evidence from the vision statement suggests that leaders of School B fail to recognize or use the richness and strengths of African culture to help attending students learn more effectively (Worrill, 2007). Results from the data analysis showed that students at School B continue to fall behind academically as compared to students who attend School A, where the curriculum is infused with African culture.

The way education is transmitted has an effect on student's psychological and emotional well-being as well as on AYP outcomes (Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008). Students at school B, as revealed in the mission statement, and many other African-American students who attend other public schools in Chicago, have not been able to experience indigenous culture while in school and consistently fall behind academically (Shockley, 2007). According to Pai and Adler (2001), the curriculum at schools like School B is designed for the cultural interests of European Americans without regard for African Americans' cultural needs.

If African-American students are to be successful in Chicago public schools and similar schools across the U.S., infusion of African culture in the curriculum is necessary. School leaders should collaborate with educators and curriculum development specialists to determine what is appropriate for students to know and understand about indigenous culture. In addition, to ensure that teachers are educated about authentic African history and culture, the school system must design an extensive curriculum plan addressing the cultural, educational, social, and emotional

needs and interests of attending students. Such a plan should involve students in class activities and field trips that reflect an African-centered curriculum.

School leaders can use the results of this study to advocate that African culture be infused in the schooling process. The study shows how school A infused African culture in the Social Studies content learning area as well as the various assembly performances throughout the school year such as Kwanzaa, African Heritage, and Ma'at.

Nobles (1990) suggests various ways to infuse African culture in mathematics, language arts, and science content learning areas. Addressing the mathematics curriculum, he calls for educators to understand the role of mathematics in classical African civilizations, the significance of numbers in African theology and music, math games, and the central role of African traditional math in the development of modern mathematics.

When curriculum deals with language arts, information should include the content of African art, the historical development of African art, and the functional continuity in African art (Nobles, 1990). Nobles points to the significance of infusing the curriculum with science and technology from the Nile Valley, understanding the ancient ancestral meaning of Sacred Science, and the African development of the earliest discovered scientific paradigms. This involves infusing the curriculum with African cultural information that reveals the use of time and the calendar, Dogon astronomical sciences, African ancestral metallurgy and electrical engineering practices, and African psychoenergetics are significant to highlight when the curriculum deals with science.

Students will benefit from an African-centered curriculum if leaders and educators collaborate, create, and adhere to an effective plan, and design the curriculum using the framework Nobles (1990) suggests. This approach will help African-American students attain self-worth, self-esteem, and self-identity and will have a significant effect on AYP reports for African-American students who attend public schools in Chicago and elsewhere.

Little research has been conducted regarding the way culture in general, and African descendant's culture in particular, is applied to the educational experience for African-American students (Davis, 2005). The results from this research study should encourage educational leaders to infuse African culture and provide significant

information regarding effective African-American culture infusion methods.

Curriculum specialists, educational leaders, and policy makers should work collectively to write the programs, guidelines, and policies for implementing African-centered curriculums in predominantly African-American public schools in Chicago and elsewhere. The ongoing struggle by leaders in the field of education to discover and implement the most appropriate teaching practices, strategies, models, and theories to uplift African-American students may be resolved if educational leaders take the necessary steps to collaborate, plan, develop, and infuse curricula with significant content and culturally relevant information.

Leaders in the field of education and policy makers should work in collaboration to assess all of Chicago's underperforming predominantly African-American student populated schools as well as the two schools that infuse African culture to determine the most appropriate teaching methods for African-American students. The findings of such an investigation are most likely to reveal that African-American students will gain a sense of self-worth, self-esteem, self-identity, and be more than likely to meet or exceed the AYP when curriculum is infused with culturally relevant content.

African-American students who attend mainstream (European-centered) public schools, schools that do not infuse African culture, are failing at a higher rate when compared to African-American students who attend African-centered schools. Current educational policies in the state of Illinois should be reevaluated and rewritten to impose a requirement for all Chicago public schools in predominantly African-American neighborhoods to infuse African culture in the educational experience of attending students.

### Researcher Reflections

Before the completion of this study, the notion was that African-American students were failing academically for lack of receiving a fair educational opportunity in Chicago public schools. The assumption was that African-American students might improve academically if the curriculum was designed to address the cultural interests of attending students.

For one co-author, several years ago, as a seventh grade student in a social studies class with a classroom student population of about 25 African-American students, cultural infusion consisted of learning that

Christopher Columbus discovered America and that the African presence began with slavery. This experience led to the idea that learning based on African history and culture would be more authentic than what educators were currently teaching in the schools.

To believe that African Americans sat around in darkness waiting for Christopher Columbus to show up and flip on the light switch or that slavery was the start of a civilized society for African Americans is to ignore the significant contributions that descendants of African people have made to the African continent, the United States, and other parts of the world.

Such realizations provided the impetus for this research and the conclusions we present, which we believe should spur all schools in Chicago and elsewhere to implement appropriate cultural studies for all students.

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