

Afrocentric Pedagogy as a Tool for Motivating African American Students

I was in pursuit of the definition of the role my own people had played in the history of the world; this had been my holy mission, my priesthood. You cannot successfully oppress a consciously historical people.

—John Henrik Clarke

The 1980s and 1990s represented the zenith of the Afrocentric movement. Described as part of an ongoing “culture war” (Keita, 2000) at its best, Afrocentrism represented an educational challenge to the traditional Eurocentric canon of knowledge that marginalized the contributions of people of African descent. However, as is often the case with ideologies, the excesses of Afrocentrism generated intense and public scrutiny. There was perhaps no better illustration of this than the 1992 *New York Times* op-ed written by the African American intellectual and literary critic Henry Louis “Skip” Gates (Gates, 1992). In this op-ed Gates was responding to what he perceived as a disturbing trend in Black anti-Semitism. He linked the trend, in part, to a book that was popular among some people in the Afrocentric movement called *The Iceman Inheritance: Prehistoric Sources of Western Man’s Racism, Sexism, and Aggression* (Bradley, 1991). The book controversially claims, among other things, that White people are essentially genetically predisposed to being racist, sexist, and aggressive because of being descended from Neanderthals. These notions have been coupled with presumed assumptions of White inferiority. This line of thinking has become a central tenet in certain expressions of Afrocentric thought, and has drawn the ire and rebuke of numerous African American scholars who believe, as Gates argued, that it represents Black demagoguery, pseudo scholarship, and an ill-fated attempt to raise the collective self-esteem of Black people. As I have previously reviewed, empirical data do not support the notion that Black people collectively suffer from low self-esteem. That said, there is a lingering belief that the attempts to infuse Afrocentric content and approaches to the educational curriculum for Black students is a sad, misguided attempt to make Black students feel better about themselves and their contributions to history.

In a much less heralded and publicized response to Gates’s op-ed, the venerable Afrocentric scholar John Henrik Clarke published a response and

dissenting view. He defended the Black scholars whom Gates criticized, and claimed that African people are "the most written about and the least understood people in the world." The motivation of Afrocentric scholars like John Henrik Clarke is in response to European scholars who, as stated by Clarke in his dissenting view, have basically implied or outright stated that Europeans brought light to a world waiting in darkness. Clarke discusses his own journey into becoming an Afrocentric scholar (though he does not use these exact words) in his book *My Life in Search of Africa* (Clarke, 1999). In the book Clarke recounts how his grandmother used to tell him stories about Africa, how he had a voracious appetite for reading history, and how he came to understand that Europeans colonized everything, from history to information about history, to the image of God as a White man. It was this sensibility that led Clarke to say in his dissenting view, "I could not find the image of my people in the Bible, so I began the search through the literature of the world until I found them and learned why some people considered it a necessity to leave African people out of the respectful commentary of history."

I start this final chapter with a reference to the old cultural wars related to Afrocentrism because I believe it is important to situate the criticisms of Afrocentrism within this historical context of perceived Black anti-intellectualism. Henry Louis Gates's characterization of certain proponents of Afrocentrism as Black demagogues and pseudo-scholars is another way of saying that Black folks, in this case Black professors, are anti-intellectual. In many ways, some may see a chapter on Afrocentric pedagogy to be anachronistic in 2014, especially given that the apex of debate about Afrocentricity occurred during the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, I conclude with this chapter because of my successful experience with incorporating my own brand of Afrocentricity into the classroom over the past 16 years. There is a lingering sentiment, especially among academics with elite pedigrees, that Afrocentricity is a vulgar form of racial identity politics, not a viable intellectual paradigm, devoid of intellectual rigor and substance, and consequently not deserving of serious intellectual engagement. There is much evidence to support my belief that this is a lingering sentiment. For example, at highly ranked African American studies doctoral programs housed at prestigious universities such as Yale, Northwestern, UC-Berkeley, and Harvard, along with Michigan State and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, there is little to no evidence of professors whose research and scholarly interests are related to Afrocentricity or any related variation (e.g., African-centered, Africentrism, Pan-Africanism). In my current departmental affiliation in African and African Diaspora Studies, aside from me that is certainly the case (with the possible exception of one or two individuals who quietly support in principle the idea of ideological diversity and intellectually engaging Afrocentricity). There seems to be an almost unspoken rule that certain intellectual discourses and paradigms are not welcome, indeed, are beneath

the "high culture" and "high theory" focus of the Black intellectual elite who strive for academic respectability.

That is why I include this chapter on using Afrocentric pedagogy as a tool for motivating African American students. There is indeed a certain irony of using an ideological approach characterized as pseudo-scholarship and anti-intellectual to actually engage and motivate Black students to care about school and to excel academically. In this chapter I briefly review how Afrocentric principles have been researched and applied in educational contexts among Black students. Additionally, I reflect on my experiences using Afrocentric pedagogy to successfully engage African American students in the passionate pursuit of self-knowledge. Specifically, I discuss the success of my Psychology of the African American Experience class, which students frequently describe as a life-altering experience. Through the use of videos, role playing, and an Afrocentric curriculum, students experience a sense of excitement and passion for learning that has often been missing from much of their education. I illustrate the importance of engaging the Black identity of African American students, and demonstrate that they are highly intrinsically motivated when they have a personal connection to the material they are being taught. Using excerpts from personal growth papers, I provide evidence of the pedagogical effectiveness and impact of a class that is explicitly Afrocentric in focus and practice.

BLACK CULTURAL LEARNING STYLES: FACT OR FICTION?

As previously mentioned, the 1980s and 1990s were the zenith of the Afrocentric movement. In educational circles, the idea of Black cultural learning styles was a popular idea that represented one manifestation of the influence of Afrocentric ideology. The idea of Black cultural learning styles was popularized by the early childhood educator Janice Hale-Benson in her book *Black Children: Their Roots, Culture, and Learning Styles* (Hale-Benson, 1986). Additionally, Madge Willis, a school psychologist, provided a review of the literature on learning styles of African American children (Willis, 1989). Hale-Benson and Willis, both African American, argued for the existence of Black cultural learning styles, which, if understood and incorporated into pedagogy, could improve the academic outcomes of African American students. Various Black psychologists had provided conceptual writings detailing how African American culture was different and distinct from White culture (Boykin & Toms, 1985; Hilliard, 1976; McAdoo & McAdoo, 1985; Nobles, 1974). Hilliard (1976, p. 41) provided a taxonomy of school learning styles of (a) school as it is in general, and (b) school as it could be, that roughly corresponded with the cultural learning styles of White and Black students, respectively. An abbreviated version is presented in Table 6.1.

The idea of a cultural mismatch in learning styles became a popular explanation for Black student underachievement. Such ideas contributed to the creation

Table 6.1
The Learning Style of the School

<i>School as It Is in General</i>	<i>School as It Could Be</i>
Rules	Freedom
Standardization	Variation
Conformity	Creativity
Regularity	Novelty
Memory for specific facts	Memory for essence
Egocentric	Sociocentric
Controlled	Expressive
Universal Meanings	Contextual Meanings
Cognitive	Affective
Isolation	Integration
Object-focused	People-focused

Note: Abbreviated excerpt from *Alternatives to IQ testing: An approach to the identification of gifted minority children (final report)* by Asa G. Hilliard, 1976 (p. 41). San Francisco, CA: California State Department of Education, Special Education Support Unit.

of Afrocentric schools and schools catered to young Black males. One of the more controversial responses was the creation of a pamphlet that was published by the New York State Board of Regents to address the high dropout rate of ethnic minority students. According to a *New York Times* article, the pamphlet promoted the idea of Black students having a learning style not supported by schools as being a contributing factor to the high dropout rate (DePalma, 1990). In her review of the literature, Willis (1989) makes the following observation: "Cooperation is an important dimension in African American children's learning style" (p. 53). She cites the research of Slavin and Oickle (1981), who found that cooperative learning groups, which include small, heterogeneous ability groups working together on learning tasks and activities, are especially effective for Black students.

Proponents of Black cultural learning styles generated a lot of attention and, predictably, criticisms. One notable criticism was by Craig Frisby, an African American school psychology professor. Frisby wrote a fairly scathing article in which he argued that there were serious flaws with the five major assumptions of Black cultural learning styles (Frisby, 1993). He identified those major assumptions as follows:

1. Within America, Black and White culture is fundamentally incompatible
2. Characteristics of Black culture "determine" the learning style of Black children

3. Learning style assessment is reliable and valid
4. Black learners are incapable of manifesting any behavior that is different from behaviors dictated by their identified cultural learning style; therefore, teachers are morally obligated to adapt their instructional practices to Black children's identified learning styles
5. There are "culture-specific" educational prescriptions that are uniquely effective in increasing academic achievement for Black students relative to Whites

Frisby then methodically examines each of these assumptions and attempts to debunk them through a combination of logic and research. One of his central and notable questions is whether methods attributed to Afrocentric interventions (e.g., including high levels of motor activity and stimulation; teachers exhibiting warmth; incorporating intense, group-oriented, interpersonal learning experiences rather than individual seatwork; and incorporating role-playing and sociodramatic teaching strategies) were really new and uniquely effective for Black children. He argued that these methods are not new, and in fact, no different from models found in early childhood education. More importantly, he argued that there was no empirical research to support many of these so-called Afrocentric interventions. Citing the research of Thomas Sowell (1986) on six academically successful predominantly Black public and private schools, he highlighted the following findings:

1. Race of the principal was unrelated to school success
2. Background characteristics of students were similar in successful and failing schools
3. The presence or absence of Black history was largely irrelevant to the success of schools
4. Student individual differences of ability vary between schools
5. Discipline characterized by a "law and order" philosophy was a prominent characteristic

Frisby concluded by saying that the reasons for continued support of Black cultural learning styles was because of conclusions drawn from (1) flawed research, (2) pseudoscientific theories of African American culture, (3) fear of being labeled insensitive or racially disloyal because of critiquing Black cultural learning styles, (4) hypersensitivity to any explanation perceived as a deficit model, and (5) failure of current educational practices to successfully educate African American children. Frisby warns us that the Black cultural learning styles theory (i.e., Afrocentric approach) is eerily reminiscent of nineteenth-century racist educational philosophy. He concludes that more focus should be placed on individual differences rather than group stereotypes. Not surprisingly, Frisby's article generated thoughtful, but critical responses (Hale, 1993; Richardson, 1993). Hale argued that Frisby misrepresented the suggestions made by Afrocentric scholars, and that he offered no solutions for how to improve the

educational outcomes for Black children. Richardson takes Frisby to task for overlooking the role of historical experiences as well as for holding little regard for Black culture.

The debates about Black cultural learning styles, similar to and perhaps in concert with Afrocentrism, reached their peak during the 1990s. An examination of the literature reveals that very little additional work has been conducted on this topic. It is tempting to conclude that the topic is passé and of little theoretical and practical significance today. However, I believe that would be a misreading and misunderstanding of the literature. While the term Black cultural learning style does not appear to be in vogue today, there is still attention being given to the idea that culture plays an important role in the achievement of Black students. In my opinion, no researcher has been more effective in identifying the role of culture in Black students' achievement than Wade Boykin.

AFRO-CULTURAL VALUES: COMMUNALISM, MOVEMENT, AND VERVE

Wade Boykin was trained as an experimental social psychologist at the University of Michigan. Currently the codirector of the National Center for Research on the Education of Students as well as professor of psychology at Howard University, he has conducted an impressive program of research examining cultural influences of Black students' achievement. While a comprehensive review of his studies is warranted to fully appreciate the significance of his work, I will provide a cursory review of his theoretical work and then briefly review a handful of his studies to highlight some of their important findings.

At the core of Boykin's work is the idea that the cultural environment plays an important role in the achievement of African American students. He identifies three Afro-cultural themes that are prevalent in African American culture and thus have educational implications (Boykin, 1986). The themes are communalism, movement, and verve. Communalism refers to the importance placed on social bonds and interconnectedness with others. Movement refers to the importance placed on expressiveness, dance, rhythm, and music. Verve refers to the preference for heightened levels of physical stimulation. Boykin theorizes that these three themes are commonly found in the homes and environments of African Americans.

Boykin and his collaborators have conducted a number of studies examining these Afro-cultural themes. In one study, Marryshow, Hurley, Allen, Tyler, and Boykin (2005) examined the perceptions of 90 African American children toward four high achievers who employed different orientations toward schooling and achievement. Two of the high achievers were characterized as individualistic or competitive (representing mainstream values), while the other two high achievers were characterized as preferring communalism and verve

(representing African American cultural variables). Students also reported their perceptions of what types of high achievers teachers would prefer. Results indicated that students rated the *verve* and *communal* high achievers significantly higher than the *individualistic* or *competitive* high achievers. Students also believed that teachers would have more favorable attitudes toward high achievers who were *individualistic* and *competitive*. The authors conclude that African American students do value academic achievement when it can be achieved in a mode that is culturally familiar to them.

In an extension of the previous study Tyler, Boykin, Miller, and Hurley (2006) examined 80 African American children's perceptions toward four high achievers, as well as their perceptions of what their parents and peers would prefer. Similar to the previous study, results indicated that students rated the *verve* and *communal* high achievers significantly higher than the *individualistic* or *competitive* high achievers. Additionally, students' perceptions of what their parents and peers would prefer yielded similar findings. The authors conclude that students have a clear preference for high-achieving students who have African American cultural values.

While I am a proponent of conducting research only using African Americans as a way to better understand behavior in indigenous cultural terms (what has been referred to as an *emic* approach), I also recognize that comparative research involving White students can, under certain conditions, offer important insights. One study that accomplished this was conducted by Ellison, Boykin, Tyler, and Dillihunt (2005). In this study, 66 African American and 72 White fifth- and sixth-grade students in a low income community completed measures of three learning preferences: *cooperative*, *competitive*, and *individualistic*. Results indicated that there was a preference for *cooperative* learning over *competitive* and *individualistic* learning among both African American and White students. However, African American students reported significantly higher preferences for *cooperative* learning than White students, while White students reported significantly higher preferences for *competitive* and *individualistic* learning. The authors conclude that teachers should accept, incorporate, and recognize culturally diverse learning preferences.

Most of the studies examining learning preferences focus on middle school students. I am unaware of any published studies of this nature that have been conducted among college students. However, a colleague and I published a study comparing dimensions of *individualism* and *collectivism* among African American and White students (Komarraju & Cokley, 2008). We found that African American students were higher on *horizontal individualism* (i.e., preference for uniqueness and freedom to express themselves) than White students, while White students were higher on *vertical individualism* (i.e., preference to be independent and competitive). One unexpected finding was the correlation between *individualism*, *collectivism*, and GPA. There was a significant positive correlation between *collectivism* and GPA among African American students

but not White students. These findings are consistent with Boykin's research showing that African American students prefer learning that emphasizes communalism rather than individualism.

AFRICAN-CENTERED EDUCATION

For some individuals, the chronic underachievement of African American students is attributed to what is perceived to be a cultural mismatch in terms of values, content, and pedagogy. One response has been the creation of African-centered schools, which share one basic assumption: that every child can achieve success. Children are not seen as "at-risk" or "disadvantaged"; rather, they are seen as having unlimited potential that needs to be tapped into by teachers. African-centered schools, like single-sex schools, have generated controversy because of the notion that African American students cannot excel academically in traditional, mainstream educational settings. Critics have suggested that it is insulting to assume that African American students are fundamentally different and need a different educational process to achieve. Other critics have suggested that it is too narrowly focused on one racial group. Some have even implied that it is dangerously close to being driven by racist assumptions about Blacks (Frisby, 1993). In some instances these concerns seem to be well intentioned (even if misguided), while in other instances they seem to be duplicitous. In either case, there appears to be failure to objectively examine African-centered schools to determine if they are making a positive impact. In this regard, several African-centered schools should be acknowledged.

One such school is the Marcus Garvey School, which was created in 1975 by Dr. Anyim Palmer. Located in Los Angeles, California, the Marcus Garvey School is a nonprofit, private school with an Afrocentric curriculum. The school has gained notoriety because of third and fourth graders doing algebra and fifth graders doing trigonometry and calculus, as well as sending seventh graders to various colleges. The teachers believe that students should not be taught with a "one size fits all" approach. In addition to having daily exposure to the five core subjects of math, English, spelling, reading, and penmanship, students are taught science, the importance of good health, Swahili, Spanish, world geography, African history, U.S. history, world history, and computer technology. Given the importance of math, students are taught at math levels that are two to five grade levels above state standard mandates.

In the April 27, 1998, *U.S. News & World Report*, the African-centered school Sankofa Shule was described as an "educational powerhouse of charter schools." Located in Lansing, Michigan, and opening in 1995, Sankofa was one of the first charter schools in Lansing. The school is described as combining African and African American history with a Montessori-styled curriculum. Sankofa's educational success was lauded by several media outlets, including the

Wall Street Journal and *U.S. News & World Report*, and became a model for other African-centered schools. According to Shariba Rivers, daughter of the founder Dr. Freya Rivers, Sankofa's guiding principles included ancient Kemetic/Egyptian principles of Maat and Ptah Hotep, along with the principles of Dr. Maulana Karenga's Nguzo Saba from his Kawaida theory (Rivers, 2010). The curriculum included the standard curriculum of science, language arts, mathematics, history, French, and Spanish, along with less common curriculum such as Swahili, martial arts, African dance, and African drumming. Policy and practice in areas such as discipline were guided by African-centered principles and concerns for the student's physical, emotional, and spiritual health. For example, children were not suspended from school because of bad behavior; instead, parents left work to attend school and work with the teachers and their children. Dr. Rivers also did not think that certification through traditional teacher education programs was the best way to ensure teacher competence for African American students. Instead, teachers were in a constant state of self-actualization through serious discussions every morning. These meetings typically involved (1) reading from a cultural and educational text, (2) conversations about students that focused on their overall well-being, and (3) discussing successful teaching strategies based on classroom observations.

In the June 8, 2006, edition of the *Christian Science Monitor*, an article was written about J. S. Chick Elementary School, a public magnet school in Kansas City, Missouri, that was transformed into an African-centered school in 1991. In a school where 99% of its 300 students were African American, Chick was recognized for having test scores that exceeded the state average. Chick was described as having a curriculum based on the history and culture of the African diaspora. Having high test scores was only one way the school was seen as being successful. Success was also measured by the fact that students learn to see themselves as leaders and contributors to the community. Chick empowers students by incorporating African cultural traditions and helping students to see their place within the world of learning. Teachers, parents, and students are greeted with *Jambo*, a Swahili word meaning hello. Drumming, dancing, and self-affirming chants are part of the culture of Chick. While there has not been a rigorous experimental study to determine any causal links to achievement connected with Chick's curriculum and approach, one often-reported statistic was that 48% of Chick students were deemed to be proficient or advanced on the Missouri Assessment Program, compared to the statewide averages of 24% for Black students and 36% for White students.

IMPACT OF PSYCHOLOGY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE CLASS

In the Introduction for this book, I briefly mentioned the impact that the class Psychology of the African American Experience had on Black college students.

I said that teaching this class has been without a doubt the most fulfilling aspect of being a professor. I mentioned that teaching this class has allowed me to see a level of enthusiasm, motivation, and achievement from African American students that energizes me and serves as a reminder about why I became a professor. I also mentioned that I have made this same observation at every institution where I have been privileged to teach. Teaching this class has proven to be a powerful and transformative experience, and has demonstrated to me that the notion that African American students have problems with academic motivation is indeed a myth. The class is explicitly Afrocentric in its orientation. I can think of no better way to illustrate the impact of the class and to demonstrate the efficacy of utilizing an Afrocentric approach than sharing the words of the students themselves. I have selected a few of the many quotes that I have read from personal growth papers over the years. I believe these quotes convey the impact this class has had on their lives. Some students compared this class to other "traditional" psychology classes.

As a psychology major at UT, I know first hand the one sidedness of the entire psychology department. Even though I love my major, I have found the excitement that I had once before to be diminishing over time. Practically all of the research articles and studies I have read have nothing to do with me, so it becomes quite difficult for me to remain interested. If a study of African Americans is brought up, it is never discussed in much detail. . . . I also appreciated how Dr. Cokley didn't just let these discussions go off on a tangent about nothing. We discussed facts and research. By the end of the course I noticed another change in myself. When Dr. Cokley did present certain statistics from research, I questioned them more. I wanted to know about the sampling, the circumstances of the participants, and the overall validity of the study in reference to African Americans. I was thinking even more like someone of my future profession.

It was during my freshman year of college that I decided to become exposed to the subject and take an intro psych course. In this class I learned about many controversial psychologists such as Freud, Pavlov, and Skinner, and their experiments (i.e., Pavlov's Dogs, Milgram Shock Experiment, and the Bystander Experiment). While being a member of this class a few things bothered me: (1) There were no African Americans in this class, (2) I didn't hear anything about any famous black psychologists, and (3) None of these teachings resonated with me as a black man . . . In this class, [Psychology of African American Experience] it made me happy to be provided a racial view of a very interesting subject for a change.

As a psychology major, I have learned to do something in this course which has not been emphasized in my previous psychology courses which was to think of the African and African American experience from a psychological perspective. I anticipated taking this course having heard personal testimonies from my African American peers who described it as life-changing, original, and the truth.

Other students talked about how the class has changed their thoughts, attitudes, and behavior.

This course has caused me to revamp my whole thought process in terms of the importance of education, the realness of racism, the history and psychological impact of oppression, power via hegemony. . . . Now I feel less gullible, am more skeptical of previous lessons about my ancestors taught in grade school.

One of the things that really change the way I thought about my own beliefs was the classroom discussion that surrounded the "N" word and Dr. Cokley's own personal views on it. The word is [the] subject of much controversy in the black community. The historical roots of this word ties it to oppression and racism and for many blacks it will never be an acceptable word, but for some it has been adopted as a term of endearment amongst each other. Dr. Cokley's opinion about it made me realize the seriousness of the word and no matter how we try to dress it up, it is still a word that has caused our ancestors anguish. That class discussion really opened my eyes to what I was saying, and how much me saying that word contradicts everything I stand for.

And though the vast majority of the courses I have taken at UT during my first year have been extremely informative and interesting, none of them seem to compare to the magnitude of which Dr. Cokley's Psychology of the African American Experience class has affected my perception of the world and my personal life . . . I honestly believe this course has also allowed me to grow and change in ways that have really helped me to deal with certain personal issues related to my experience as an African American student.

Some students talked about how the class motivated them to engage in further discussions outside class and to continue learning by conducting further research.

This information I learn in this course definitely goes outside of the classroom with me. I have discussion with my roommates or friends about topics that caused so much debate during our classes. When I tell people everything that we discussed in class for that day their first reactions are always "I want to take that class." This class has also helped me to stop using the phrase "acting white" to describe an African American person who does not live up to my standards of what I think "acting black" is.

In all honesty I learned too much and too little in this class which turns out to be the perfect mix of emotions I need to continue studying African American people and culture . . . Though I came into the class with an interest in studying minorities in the media, the topics we discussed only intensified my yearning to know more. I have found myself searching for more literature that covers the same subjects in order to gain an even deeper understanding of the history and affects [sic] of racism on the African American experience . . . After almost every discussion that we had in class, I have gone off and talked to my peers about the subject as if I had to implant/warn the masses about the issues that are affecting our society.

As a result of being exposed to different scholars I have began [sic] to do my own research, I realized that I was always interested in African American culture, but I always read from one perspective and the different scholars excited me in a different way.

Interestingly, and contrary to negative characterizations of Afrocentric approaches as being too narrow and ethnocentric, some students made comments about becoming more open-minded.

Having a new understanding of societal hurdles being a universal issue, I now understand that there is no one, singular, authentic "Black Experience," because no one person has the same life or deals with the same problems. With this new outlook I now embrace my black peers from all walks of life, and value their opinions, stories, and wisdom because they offer a window of understanding that I could not open by myself. This class has taken me out of my comfort zone and in turn has been the catalyst for me becoming a more open enlightened and understanding individual.

This class has definitely made me see a lot of things differently! How I see myself, the world, my community, the media, other cultures, etc. has changed and I'm more open-minded and conscious about things.

More than anything this class has taught me to be a more open-minded person.

Some students talked about having a new or renewed commitment to serving the Black community.

This class has opened my eyes even more to see the problems that the African American culture faces each and every day. It has motivated me to be more active in the African American community by fighting for justice and advocating for change. I plan to get into the community and begin to change things for the betterment of African Americans.

As a result of miseducation of the community, I have decided that I would work with different school districts to promote classes that teach students about African American history from beginning to end.

Consistent with the research of Dr. Wade Boykin, some students mentioned cultural themes that resonated with them.

Coming from a predominantly black school, this class made me feel like I was at home. Each day, my soul could not wait till the clock struck 12:15, that's the time I would be leaving my ASL class and heading to EDP class. The class was such a soulful class, it became my most favorite class out of the years I've been here at UT.

[M]y life has been enriched through the intellectual and social connection I have made with other students in the class. And such connections would not have been possible if it were not for Dr. Cokley's structuring of the class, which allows for tons of discourse, debate, and critical thinking and analysis. Furthermore, Dr. Cokley himself has been a great professor. He does not seem to try to make students think or feel a certain way, he tries to get his students to think critically. And his easy-going and laid back attitude definitely makes the class have a more communal feel. A truly unforgettable class!

You portrayed an African-American who is capable of uniting a group of peers into one big family (collectivism). This is one of the few courses where I can

honestly say I felt an equal amount of respect between all peers—not once did I feel that one of us was at a disadvantage.

Not surprisingly, many comments from students reflected their increased Black consciousness.

Because I have reconstructed my definition of Blackness, I no longer strive to succeed in spite of being Black, but instead, acknowledge my Blackness as aiding me in my success and understanding of the world. I not only understand, but I can identify with other African Americans who recognize the impact their race plays on their lives. Black is hardworking; Black is the way we talk and the music we listen to; Black is our kinky hair; Black is acknowledging and appreciating the plight of our ancestors, and Black is resilient and to be celebrated.

When a Black child grows up and reads history books and sees that other ethnic groups have histories painted with glory and discovery how do they feel about their own ancestors? Their history is painted as one of bondage and servitude. . . . I think the first thing that needs to be done deals with the type of language we use . . . I remember recounting the story of my friends and I and the hand games we used to play. "Step back Jack, your hands too black. You lookin' like a monkey on a railroad track." As a seven year old girl I didn't understand how what I was saying could be harmful or hurtful but when I recited these same words to a male peer, it was evident. If I hear some of the little girls saying this, I plan to nip it in the bud right there and explain to them in the best of my abilities why this is wrong.

This class has also helped change the way I look at myself as a Black woman. I used to try to separate myself from the Black community because of the social schemas and negative stereotypes often associated with Black people and, more specifically Black women . . . For a long while, I allowed such mental slavery to keep me from connecting with those whose identities intersect with mine. However, in taking *Psychology of the African American Experience* along with *Critical Perspectives in Black Women's Writing*, I am growing to embrace a new level of self-identification and agency.

This particular AFR class . . . has been the most thought-provoking, insightful, and sometimes emotionally draining (in a necessary sense) three hours of my weekly life. . . . It donned [sic] on me that there is a significant amount of cognitive dissonance that is created when an individual seeks black pride, but has nothing but the genocide that is known as American slavery to reference to as a source of history.

All the information from the videos was new and exciting. Honestly, sometimes I feel intimidated by being the only black person in my classes. Because I am one of maybe seven black people in my entire major of nursing I feel discouraged . . . but those days are gone. To hear that your people, black people were the actual first people, has stuck with me ever since. When I think of Egypt and Egyptian people, I now think of black people. I think of an African Eve who we all came from and feel motivated. Now when I sit in my classes and ever feel alone, I remind myself that black people had the first working civilizations and have contributed much to this world. If I ever start to doubt my worth, my contribution, or my intelligence,

I remember these videos and my real black history, which debunks my insecurities ... This class has impacted my self-esteem and self-worth.

Bottom line was I did not want to be called dark because, dark people aren't pretty, or intelligent. I thought I was both of those things which were the main reasons that I did not want to be considered dark. When Dr. Cokley asked the class why "African Booty Scratcher" was funny I had to question my own sense of humor. I always thought I was pro black but I still found hurtful terminology funny. I dug deep into my own conscious [sic] and I found that the term was funny because I had disassociated myself from being African, to me I was simply Black, which boiled down to Non African. After coming to the realization that I was African, I understood that I was not the only black person with the misinterpretation that I wasn't African.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

As I have said about the previous chapters, this chapter was not intended to be a comprehensive review of the literature on the impact of Afrocentric pedagogy. There are much more extensive treatments of Afrocentric pedagogy and education to which readers should be directed. For example, Diane Pollard and Cheryl Ajirotutu (2000) have edited a book that tells the story of an African-centered elementary and middle school. The premise of the book is that schools that are immersed in African traditions, symbols, and values are more congruent with the values, lifestyles, and cultures of African American families. Peter Murrell (2002) has written a book on African-centered pedagogy, where he argues that current ineffective educational frameworks can be made more effective if reinterpreted through an African-centered lens. Kmt Shockley has also written articles on Afrocentric education (Shockley, 2007; Shockley & Frederick, 2010) and being an Afrocentric teacher (Shockley, 2011).

I have suggested that the Afrocentric movement reached its zenith during the 1980s and 1990s during a period rife with debates related to "cultural wars." Some have argued that Afrocentrism is a "dying pseudohistory," and that it was a race-centric approach to history that, while understandable given academic racism, is nevertheless an intellectually specious and inadequate response to Black students' academic underachievement. Interestingly, educators, psychologists, and social workers have been more open to Afrocentrism than other disciplines by applying Afrocentric principles in the classroom and to mental health practices. While concerned about theory, the disciplines of education, psychology, and social work ultimately are especially concerned about how the practical application of Afrocentric principles can produce positive educational and mental health outcomes for Black students. This brief review of the literature and my 16 years of teaching Psychology of the African American Experience from an Afrocentric perspective lead me to draw several conclusions.

First, there are different expressions of Afrocentrism that vary considerably in terms of historical claims and attitudes toward White people. Some proponents of Afrocentrism have been characterized as "vulgar nationalists" whose "reactionary racism . . . is beyond the reach of normal discourse" (Cross, 1991, p. 213). This expression of Afrocentrism is perceived as making outlandish and unsubstantiated historical claims of ancient African greatness (e.g., Black Africans were the creators of civilization; Cleopatra was a Black African queen; Beethoven was Black; ancient Egyptians were Black; Greeks and Romans stole African culture; Black Africans invented philosophy, medicine, writing, technology, science, etc.) to which contemporary African Americans can lay claim. Additionally, this expression of Afrocentrism is often coupled with anti-White attitudes (e.g., biological inferiority of Whites because of the lack of melanin; hatred of Whites) which sometimes manifests in anti-Jewish attitudes (e.g., Jews being primarily responsible for the Atlantic slave trade). It is important to recognize that, as is the case with other intellectual paradigms, scholars can reasonably disagree on certain issues. For example, as much as some White and Black scholars have dismissed the notion that ancient Egyptians were Black, there is ample evidence to indicate that they were most assuredly not White and that we could consider them today to be "people of color." Surely this is worth Black students (really, all students) being exposed to and debating among themselves. While I personally believe that ancient Egyptians were what we consider in modern terms to be "Black" and/or "African," I am also comfortable with their being recognized as people of color, as long as they are not referred to as European or White. Additionally, I believe the expression of Afrocentrism that is vehemently anti-White is not productive or healthy for Black students. Afrocentricity does not, as Asante (1991) states, "convert you by appealing to hatred or lust or greed or violence" (p. 6). There is a difference in cultivating an awareness of racism and White supremacy (which I think is totally appropriate and necessary for Black survival) versus cultivating an extreme dislike bordering on abject hatred of White people and White culture. Afrocentricity should do the former and avoid the latter. My previous research has shown that even the word Afrocentric is misunderstood or narrowly defined (Cokley, 2002). For example, in one study, I found that in response to the question "What does it mean to be Afrocentric?" 24% of the responses of African American students linked Afrocentricity to anti-Whiteness or an extreme form of ethnocentrism (Cokley, 2005). Afrocentricity, as I understand and practice it, is a "radical critique of the Eurocentric ideology" (Asante, 1998, p. 1) that ultimately is "not hegemonic" and is "essential to human harmony" (Asante, 1999).

Second, there is reasonable empirical evidence to indicate that Black students tend to prefer certain cultural learning environments over others. This is not to say that all Black students in all circumstances prefer the exact same cultural

learning environment. One would be incredibly naïve to suggest this. For example, contrary to prevailing conventional wisdom, empirical research has not shown Black people to be lower in individualism than White people. In fact, meta-analyses have actually shown Black people to exhibit among the highest levels of individualism in comparison to Whites, Asians, and Latinos (Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2001; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002). On the other hand, what makes the psychology of African Americans (and therefore Black students) more complicated is the fact that research also suggests that African Americans are also higher in collectivism than White people (Coon & Kimmelmeier, 2001; Gaines, Larbie, Patel, Pereira, & Sereke-Melake, 2005) while other scholars suggest that there are no differences (Oyserman et al., 2002). Nevertheless, the work of Wade Boykin and his colleagues is building a strong case for the premise that Black students tend to prefer certain learning environments that emphasize the Afrocultural themes of communalism, movement, and verve. In addition to the growing empirical evidence, I have years of anecdotal evidence teaching the Psychology of the African American Experience class that support this premise. My use of humor, role plays, encouraging lively debate, taking the occasional opportunity to take pop quizzes in small groups and to use a "lifeline" with other students for help, and having the class final in groups of 5–7 students have all resonated very positively with my Black students. Classes with predominantly Black students invariably take on a certain ethos and character, and fostering an Afrocultural learning environment seems to be the most conducive and effective way of fully engaging them and maximizing their learning.

Third, Afrocentric pedagogy is not the only way to engage Black students and improve their achievement. There is truth in the idea that certain educational and pedagogical principles will be effective with Black students in spite of the fact that they are not explicitly rooted in Afrocentrism. For example, the importance of student-teacher relationships is central in Black student achievement. Teachers must show that they genuinely care about students. Additionally, teachers must have high expectations for Black students. Lowering expectations for Black students out of some paternalistic notion about perceptions of their ability and intelligence does not help them, and in many ways does them much more harm than good. Caring for Black students and having consistently high expectations for them are not exclusively "Afrocentric" principles. They are simply sound educational and pedagogical principles. If there is an advantage of using an Afrocentric pedagogy, it is related to the "type" of Black student and citizen that is being produced. I agree with Mwalimu Shujaa that Afrocentric education helps Black people to determine what is in our interests, to distinguish our interests from the interests of other people, and to recognize the consistency and inconsistency of those interests (Shujaa, 2003). In short, while Afrocentric pedagogy cannot take credit as being the only means through which to improve

African American student achievement, it can take credit for instilling a type of Black consciousness that will likely lead to producing a more civically engaged citizen who is invested in improving the conditions of the Black community.

Finally, I end with the reason why I wrote this book, which was to challenge the idea that Black students are anti-intellectual. My goal was to write this book to make the best of psychological and educational research accessible to the masses, and to specifically show that this research paints a very different picture of Black students than conventional wisdom. I have used anecdotes from my own personal history along with references to popular culture and social science research to make the case that Black students are not anti-intellectual. I have made the argument that Black students are actually very intellectual and inquisitive and engaged, particularly when they see themselves reflected in the curriculum and when they are taught by culturally competent teachers. The excerpts from the personal growth papers show examples of students who are highly motivated, engaged, and transformed from being in a class that was rooted in their experiences. Certainly, all classes cannot be taught that way, because all classes are not about the Black experience. However, classes can be taught in a way that the lived experiences and history of Black people are made to be salient in some meaningful manner. Black students want to feel that they (in the truly corporate sense of their race/ethnicity/culture) matter and have contributed to the course of human civilization. Black students are generally concerned about their communities, and they want to contribute to improving the material conditions of their communities. Their hope is that education is the vehicle through which this can happen. When education does not address this most basic of psychological needs, it may understandably be seen as irrelevant. Black students should not be viewed as anti-intellectual because of what is essentially the failure of their education to be relevant to their lives as Black people.