Book Review

Ibrahim, A. & Abdi, A. A. (Eds.). (2016). *The Education of African Canadian Children: Critical Perspectives.* Montreal, PQ: McGill-Queen's University Press. 248 pages. ISBN: 9780773548084

Positionality

Prior to migrating, I was born and raised in Jamaica and identify as an African-Caribbean, educated, immigrant woman. In Canada, my dark skin and lived experiences have included discrimination, and social marginalization which have shaped the lens through which I view the world. It is a lens that highlights and focuses on power relations, prejudice, racism, hope, agency, justice, and acts of resistance. A teacher by training, I completed an undergraduate degree in Jamaica, before moving to Canada to pursue graduate studies. I had very positive schooling and university experiences in Jamaica. My teachers demanded nothing but the best from me. I was reminded by family, friends, and my teachers that I was intelligent and could achieve my highest dreams. Further, I had the privilege of being educated in a country where I did not feel either minoritized or racialized. All around me, I could see persons who looked and sounded like me at all levels of society, whether as market women, teachers, doctors, professors, entrepreneurs, or as the head of government. This allowed me to have a strong self-esteem and the confidence that I could be successful if I worked hard enough. School was challenging but in many ways it was also nurturing, I never felt alienated, incapable, or inferior.

Years later when I became an educator, I too had high expectations for my students and encouraged and supported them so that they could excel. As such, I am troubled by the high non-completion rates and underperformance amongst African-Canadian students, and the challenges they face in the Canadian education system. I am troubled because I know that they are capable of much more given the right support and learning environments. This knowledge and confidence in their abilities is fueled by my educational experiences in the Caribbean. How can students be allowed to underperform in Canada, one of the wealthiest countries in the world with so many resources? I had classmates in high school, and later when I became a teacher, I taught students who excelled with only a fraction of the material resources available to students in Canada. Many of these students came from working class homes, single parent families, and some lived in communities with high levels of violence. These are similar to the problems some persons cite as contributing to the underperformance of African-Canadian students. Since the challenges are similar, what accounts for the students' success in Jamaica? I wonder if the African-Canadian children would do better if they were students in the Caribbean or in the African continent. My ethnic background and experiences as a student and teacher in Jamaica make me sympathetic to arguments regarding the need for a more culturally responsive education in Canada, and regarding the need to institute anti-racist and anti-colonial principles and strategies in Canadian schools. This is a necessary step in ensuring that all students regardless of their demographic characteristics are given an equitable chance at success.

Introduction

Ibrahim and Abdi's edited book, "The Education of African Canadian Children: Critical Perspectives" is a welcome addition to the critical scholarship on the relationships between the Canadian education system, African Canadian students and community members. The contributors include a high school student and 12 professors from various Canadian provinces and different disciplines such as, art, history, education, and sociology. The diversity of contributors gives the book an interdisciplinary perspective concerning a wide range of educational issues including but not restricted to, streaming of African-Canadian students, Afrocentric schooling, curriculum reform, African-Canadian students metacognitive processes, and African-Canadian community activism in education. As a doctoral student whose research interests include the educational experiences of African-Canadians, I find the book very useful because of its interdisciplinary approach and analyses of black educational life in Canada from a broad range of perspectives. While the book utilizes various academic theoretical and discursive frameworks, the language is accessible for persons with postsecondary education, and the writing style of the various authors is engaging. I have chosen to conduct a thematic overview of the book. Some of the recurrent themes across the different chapters comprising the anthology include: racism, exclusion, deprivation, resistance and hope.

Exclusion

In her chapter, historian, Afua Cooper examines how black parents challenged in court, the exclusion of their children from schools in 19th Century Canada West. She sheds light on the critical role that institutional racism played in the exclusion of black bodies from the Canadian education system since its inception. Building on this theme, Ali Abdi offers a historical, socio cultural, and philosophical examination of education in Canada, arguing that this system was built on racist assumptions that negated African intellectual contributions to civilization. Drawing on the work of Dewey, Fanon, Rodney, Carter G. Woodson, Freire among others, he posits that psychology and relationships play an important role in the educational process. Further, colonial and neo-colonial depictions of African countries causes African-Canadian children to have negative educational experiences in Canadian schools. The African continent and by extension Africans are associated with negative images and depicted as backward, civilized, and savage. As such, African-Canadian cultures and ways of knowing are excluded from schools. These arguments are supported by a plethora of studies that have examined the ways in which African-Canadian history and culture are excluded from the Canadian school curriculum and the detrimental effects it has had on the psyche and academic performance of students (African-Canadian Working Group, 1992; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Codjoe, 2001; Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac, & Zine, 1997; Kelly 1998; Toronto Board of Education, 1988). The negation of African Canadian history and contributions to Canada and civilization generally, convey the message that African-Canadians are lesser beings with no history, no identity, and who have contributed nothing to the Canadian society. Further, African-Canadian students are excluded in other ways such as being streamed out of academic programs and pigeon holed into sports and vocational programs. This point is elaborated in Carl James' chapter where he discusses how the media and schools are complicit in narrowing the choices of black males in particular, through racist constructions of black masculinity as being, physically strong but not particularly intelligent.

Habibo Cooper's article provides personal validation of Abdi's and James' arguments. She shares her experiences as an adolescent growing up in the Canadian education system and explains its traumatic effects on her psyche and body. Her recollection of how her peers frequently used Africa to depict all things negative and the negative emotions which that awakened in her illustrate the psychological struggle that African-Canadian students face every day in a school system that she declares "hinders the Black body."

Deprivation

In her chapter, Charmaine Nelson presents an intriguing discussion about the construction of black girlhood in Canadian art. She takes a historical approach, discussing from slavery to the present. She argues that "slave children were socialized into deprivation at a very early age" (p.75). This was due to the absence of their mothers for long periods of time due to work. In many instances, separation was due to either the sale of mother or child. Additionally, due to overwork and under-nourishment mothers were often unable to give their children the biological sustenance that their own bodies required during pregnancy and after. In drawing parallels to the present day, some activists have argued that teachers do not see black students as children in the way they see white students as children. Black children are viewed as dangerous, fearsome, even criminal. This causes teachers to surveil black students more and to offer much harsher punishments to them than white children. Additionally, children are deprived of nurturing relationships with their teachers. As noted in Ali A. Abdi's chapter, education has an affective dimension which involves students' emotional wellbeing, and feelings of belonging and acceptance at school. In an ideal world schools would be places where students are encouraged, valued, respected and feel welcomed. Unfortunately, the experience of many African-Canadian students is the reverse and they do not feel welcome in schools. Students share that being labelled by teachers and peers, being discriminated against by teachers, low teacher expectations, and the lack of black teachers contribute to their alienation from school (African-Canadian Community Working Group, 1992; Brathwaite & James, 1996; Codjoe, 2001; Dei et al., 1997).

The majority of the chapters in this book demonstrate that African-Canadian students are deprived of much needed cultural learning, care, and affirmation in Canadian schools.

Resistance and Hope

Amid the negatives in the education system, the contributors still offer glimmers of hope. Some scholars such as George Dei propose that Afrocentric schools are one answer. However, others such as Edward Shiza after weighing the advantages of such schools against the disadvantages find them less than ideal. All agree that there needs to be drastic reforms in the Canadian education system. Ali A. Abdi's, Benedicta Egbo's, Edward Shizha's and George Dei's chapters argue that there is still time to overhaul the Canadian education system so that all students can access education and maximize their potential. This overhaul would see a curriculum that includes the histories of all students and which incorporates and respects the diverse epistemologies and ways of learning that Canada's multicultural students take with them into the classroom. We see black parents in Afua Cooper's chapter using the courts to fight the exclusion of their children from schools because of the color of their bodies in the 19th century. Today black students are admitted to schools but we as a community are fighting for their souls, spirits, emotions, and the other aspects that comprise them to be admitted as well. Their entire beings can only be admitted when their history, culture, and the continent from which they

originated are honored. This will entail using anti-racist and anti-colonial approaches to teaching. Such an education must acknowledge black students as holders and co-creators of knowledge. This book makes it clear that the struggle for equitable education for African-Canadian students continues.

Conclusion

As a graduate student whose research interests includes African-Canadian students' educational experiences, I found the book to be very informative. The authors present their ideas within relevant academic discursive frameworks, using language that is accessible. It is necessary reading for those with research interests in or teaching courses in Canadian sociology of education, philosophy of education, Canadian studies, African Studies, Cultural Studies, Anti-racism and multicultural Studies, and related disciplines.

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