



Resisting the Statistic:

A Participatory Model for Black Youth Engagement

by Fiona Raye Clarke

BLACK YOUTH FACE A REAL CRISIS WITH RESPECT TO marginalization within the education system in Toronto. While Blacks have the highest percentage of youth 14 years-old and younger in Canada,¹ the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has recorded an over forty percent drop out rate among Black students.² Combine these statistics with the fact that Black students are more likely to come from the lowest income homes³, and that Black youth face a thirty percent unemployment rate in Toronto,⁴ and it becomes clear how so many Black youth become prey to over-criminalization and become ensnared in the Prison Industrial Complex. Within the prison system, fifty percent of the overrepresented Black inmate population is 30 years-old or younger.⁵ Thus, a significant portion of the Black youth population is disengaged from the traditional school system, and find themselves as either drop outs or in the prison pipeline.

While there are a myriad of complex reasons for this marginalization, much of the current research revolves around the systems of power within the education system. In a critical theory of education developed by Lisa Delpit, called the *culture of power*, Delpit sees the power for determining the subjects and achievement within the traditional school system centring around the experience of white upper and middle class students, and resting in the hands of white instructors and educational publishers.⁶ This reinforces the so-called 'cultural superiority' or hegemony of Eurocentrism - the belief that the European worldview is superior - and colonialism - the erasure of Indigenous people's

voices and history. Because Black students statistically come from lower income households, they are therefore traditionally excluded from participating in the culture of power and so are marginalized. This leads to disengagement from the system, resulting in the high drop out rate and rate of criminalization.

As a response to this culture of power, Black education advocates such as scholar, George Dei, suggest Afrocentrism as a methodology to disrupt Eurocentric hegemony. According to Dei, Afrocentrism is "the study of phenomena grounded in the perspectives and epistemological constructs of peoples of African descent."⁷ Its strength is that it "empower[s] students and educators to question the dominance of the Eurocentric paradigm,"⁸ thus helping to disrupt the culture of power. This approach is supported by statistics collected by the TDSB stating that seventy-eight percent of Black students feel that learning about their race and culture would make school more interesting; while sixty-six percent feel it would increase their enjoyment of school and fifty-six percent feel it would improve their performance.⁹

After years of agitation, and a close vote in favour of the project, the TDSB established the Africentric Alternative School in September 2009 accomodating approximately 120 students.¹⁰ In a document outlining its strategic vision for the Africentric School, the TDSB acknowledges the power of using "real life experiences of the students and their social context as a basis for learning."¹¹ So far, the Africentric model is a successful one, with the TDSB consistently reporting that Primary and

Junior Division students of the Africentric School are outperforming students from other schools in the province and in the TDSB in reading, writing and mathematics skills.¹² While the project has been expanded to include two Africentric Secondary Programs being offered to Grade 9 and 10 students,¹³ the impact of the project only reaches a handful of students compared to the tens of thousands of Black students currently in the TDSB alone. Thus, the current system with incremental changes such as the Africentric School, is very slow to bridge the gap into which many Black youth are currently falling.

As Tina Sharma points out in her thesis, “[o]nce minority cultures are marginalized, minority students become marginalized as well,”¹⁴ thus, I argue that to further disrupt the culture of power on a larger scale, community leaders must create grassroots solutions to these critical issues affecting the lives of Black youth.

One such solution is a participatory learning model I created which has been used in classrooms within the GTA and in detention centres in Ontario. The model invites contributions from Black youth to curate and create learning materials for use in the education system by inviting expressions of their personal and racial identities and experience with systems of oppression. This material is collected, anthologized and published, then given to teachers for incorporation into their lesson plans. This creates a radical shift from the culture of power: placing educational publication in the hands of Black youth.

The participatory model works in direct opposition to the tide of academic work currently being produced in Canada, which places race in quotations. The idea behind this practice is to reinforce the privileged notion that race does not exist. Thus, instead of ideologically denouncing race as a fallacy, my alternative learning model views race as central to a discussion of the systems of oppression at work in the Canadian context, giving Black youth the opportunity to write about and be a part of the system’s dissolution.

I created this model by a happy accident. When I failed to find any outlets for creative expression in celebration of Black History Month targeted to Black youth out of school, I applied for funding from the Office of the Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth. My goal was to create an anthology of work by Black youth, for Black youth on the topic of being young, Black and Canadian, while acknowledging that there is no homogenous Black community existent in Canada. Therefore, the anthology includes Black voices from both Continental Africa and the Caribbean. The anthology was published by General Store Publishing House in 2012, and was entitled, *Basodee: An*

Anthology Dedicated to Black Youth. It includes work from over a dozen youth from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds as well as those with experience as refugees, of incarceration, foster care, immigration and abuse. Thus, the model incorporates perspectives traditionally overlooked in the creation of educational materials.

Basodee was included on the Toronto Public Library Recommended Book List for Black History Month in 2013 and was placed in post-secondary library institutions throughout Toronto. More importantly it was adopted by at least one teacher for use in their Greater Toronto Area classroom and at Beaver Creek Institution, a penitentiary. While *Basodee* started from a desire to fulfill a creative impetus, it ended up creating an alternative learning model with the potential to engage Black students wherever they find themselves in Ontario.

After *Basodee*, I received funding from ArtReach for another anthology called *Black Like We: Troubleshooting the Black Youth Experience*, which is to be published this year. *Black Like We* will seek to explore and problematize systemic issues facing Black youth. In completing the project, I hope to incorporate feedback I received about *Basodee* from the teachers who have been using it in their classrooms, one suggestion was that more guidance is needed on how to teach the issues posed by the book to students. And so, a teacher’s guide will also be included with *Black Like We*.

The model created by *Basodee*, and soon to be followed by *Black Like We*, not only positively engages Black students by providing them with materials that reflect their lived experience, it also disrupts the culture of power. Since the materials are created by Black youth, it disrupts Eurocentric hegemony, imparting the idea that materials designed for the classroom do not have to be created by professors to be considered educational. Furthermore, the model facilitates shared power between the students and teacher, because rather than being able to “[claim] authority of text, knowledge, or experience”¹⁵ the teacher must acknowledge that the students in a sense were the authors of the experiences communicated in the materials, and therefore must relinquish their role as “authority.”¹⁶

While this model is perhaps a more radical approach to alternative educational models incorporating Afrocentric and community-sourced wisdom, it allows communities – in this case Black youth – to dictate what is important learning for them. Moreover, with community support, it is a model that can be repeated throughout different communities by grassroots organizers hoping to reach students neglected by the mainstream educational system. ▲

- 7 Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity in Canada, Statistics Canada
- 2 Canada's Forgotten Children: Written Submissions to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Third and Fourth Reports of Canada, African Canadian Legal Clinic
- 3 Census Portraits, Understanding Portraits Our Students' Ethno-racial Backgrounds : Black Students, Toronto District School Board
- 4 Creating New Paths to Employment for Youth, Civic Action
- 5 A Case Study of Diversity in Corrections: The Black Inmate Experience in Federal Penitentiaries Final Report, Office of the Correctional Investigator
- 6 Jane-Finch Black Youth Perspectives of Africentric Schooling in Toronto, Tina Sharma
- 7 The Role of Afrocentricity in the Inclusive Curriculum in Canadian Schools, George J. Sefa Dei
- 8 The Role of Afrocentricity in the Inclusive Curriculum in Canadian Schools, George J. Sefa Dei
- 9 Census Portraits, Understanding Portraits Our Students' Ethno-racial Backgrounds : Black Students, Toronto District School Board
- 10 Jane-Finch Black Youth Perspectives of Africentric Schooling in Toronto, Tina Sharma
- 11 TDSB (2008). Strategic vision: Africentric Alternative School
- 12 "Toronto District School Board EQAO Assessments of Reading, Writing, and Mathematics Levels 3&4" TDSB Primary Division (Grades 1-3) and Junior Division (Grades 4-6), 2012-2013
- 13 Africentric Secondary Programs, TDSB
- 14 Jane-Finch Black Youth Perspectives of Africentric Schooling in Toronto, Tina Sharma
- 15 The Role of Afrocentricity in the Inclusive Curriculum in Canadian Schools, George J. Sefa Dei
- 16 The Role of Afrocentricity in the Inclusive Curriculum in Canadian Schools, George J. Sefa Dei



*Fiona Raye Clarke is a Trinidadian-Canadian writer, playwright and visual artist creating from a critical race perspective and carrying the legacy of slavery and sexual violence within her. In her travels to Nicaragua, Trinidad, England, and Poland, she has met many individuals living on the margins and through her art she seeks to share their stories with the world. Her work aims to highlight the realities of racialized existence, both positive and negative, and claim literary space for this perspective. In 2012, she edited *Basodee: An Anthology Dedicated to Black Youth* published by General Store Publishing House, and is currently a member of the *InspiraTO Playwriting Academy 2014-2015*. In 2014, Fiona won the *ArtReach Youth Arts Pitch Contest* for her new anthology project *Black Like We: Troubleshooting the Black Youth Experience*. She is a co-facilitator for *Toronto WordSmiths* and is currently an intern at *Jumbies Theatre*.*

