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## Recommended Citation

Brigham, Susan M. and Parris, Sylvia (2011). "Diversity in Adult Education: Lessons learned from a Master of Education Program in Studies of Lifelong Learning with a Focus on Africentric Leadership," *Adult Education Research Conference*.  
<http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/papers/10>

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# **Diversity in Adult Education: Lessons learned from a Master of Education Program in Studies of Lifelong Learning with a Focus on Africentric Leadership**

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Keywords: Africentricity, Critical Race Theory, Higher Education

**Abstract:** In this paper we explore the lifelong learning experiences of students who graduated from a unique two year Master of Education (M.Ed) cohort program in studies of lifelong learning with a focus on Africentric Leadership. We conducted in-depth interviews with 13 graduates of the program to explore the role Africentricity and Critical Race Theory play in adult education in higher education institutions. Our findings draw attention to several key points about adult education in post secondary education institutions that have the potential to transform the culture of adult education.

## **Introduction**

This paper is based on a qualitative research study involving 13 graduates (all African Canadian) of a Master of Education (M.Ed) program in Nova Scotia, Canada. The M.Ed is a unique two year cohort program in studies of lifelong learning (formerly called adult education) with a focus on Africentric Leadership. In this paper we examine the impact the M.Ed has had on individual learners and the broader community during their studies and during the three years since they graduated. We draw upon the convergence of Africentricity and Critical Race Theory (CRT), to analyze the emerging themes in the research data. Our findings offer insights for adult education programs.

## **Methodology and participants**

The research data for this paper were collected through qualitative research methods informed by both Africentricity and CRT. An Afrocentric method “is concerned with establishing a world view about the writing and speaking of oppressed people” (Asante (1987, p. 172). An Africentric post-positivist methodology centres the research process and practices on the first-person voice of participants. The first-person voices “provides a way to communicate the experiences and realities of marginalized peoples/the oppressed, a first step on the road to justice” (Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995, cited in Writer, 2008, p. 10). Our data collection involved long in-depth one to one interviews with the M.Ed program graduates. Interviews were audiotaped when interviewees gave permission. Each interview lasted approximately two hours.

All 20 graduates of the program [which included 14 women and 6 men] were sent a letter via email inviting them to participate in this study. Thirteen graduates participated in this study (ten women and three men). They are employed in a variety of professional areas. To ensure confidentiality pseudonyms are used as follows (with their

corresponding age ranges): Ebele (22 – 34); Zoe (22 – 34); Simon (22 – 34); Paulette (22 – 34); Harriet (35 – 44); Sarah (35 – 44); Malcolm (35 – 44); Zola (35 – 44); Abeby (45 – 60); Robert (45 – 60); Jane (45 – 60); Numosa (45 – 60); and Dayo (45 – 60).

### **Geographical and Historical Context**

Nova Scotia is the second smallest province in Canada, located in the East, surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. Visible minorities represent just 4% of the population in Nova Scotia (Statistics Canada, 2009) half of which is African-Nova Scotian (Nova Scotia Labour and Workforce Development, 2009-2010, p.6). The majority of the Black visible group (91.7%) in Nova Scotia is Canadian-born (Statistics Canada, 2009).

The indigenous Black population of Nova Scotia descended from early migrants during distinct waves of forced and voluntary immigration. The first wave was in 1783, following the American War of Independence, when over 3000 Black Loyalists who fought for the British fled the United States for Nova Scotia. The second wave was when over 500 Maroons who put up a resistance to the British colonial powers in Jamaica were resettled in Nova Scotia in 1796 (many later emigrated to Sierra Leone five years later). The third wave followed the War of 1812 when about 2000 Black Refugees left the United States to settle in many parts of Nova Scotia (BLAC, 1994). The fourth wave involved as many as 40,000 slaves who came to Canada through what was referred to as ‘the underground railway’ in the mid 1800s up to the time of the American Civil War. Further waves include more recent immigrants from the Caribbean (many of whom settled in areas of NS, such as Cape Breton to work in the steel mills in the 1920s) and from Africa (particularly after the immigration policy changed to a point system in 1967). The history of African Nova Scotians has included stories of oppression, marginalization, and the denial of basic human rights yet history also includes stories of faith, hope, resilience, and acts of individual and collective resistance.

In the education system African Nova Scotian learners continue to face several challenges such as disengagement in schools, dropping out of school, poor academic achievement, low self esteem, lack of parental involvement in schools, racism, isolation, teacher insensitivity, low teacher expectations, and a lack of student support mechanisms (Lee & Marshall, 2009; BLAC, 1994). The Minister's Response to Lee and Marshall's (2009) report included the recommendation that school boards intensify efforts to recruit African Nova Scotian teachers.

The struggle continues to advance an education system that “meets the needs of all Nova Scotians” (NS Department of Education, 2010-11, p. 2). A holistic perspective of African Canadian adult education, the development of adult education curriculum and learning opportunities that reflect the heritage and lived experiences of peoples of African descent in Nova Scotia are integral goals in this cohort. Below we describe the cohort and then discuss the Critical Race Theory and Africentricity themes in the adult education classroom; Africentric Identity; Creating a counter space; and the challenges of being Africentric in a university setting.

### **A learning community: M.Ed cohort in Afrocentric Leadership**

As a way of addressing the dearth of African Canadian educators and researchers,

individuals from MSVU and the Council on African Canadian Education (CACE) came together in an educational committee to discuss the focus of a cohort that targets African Canadians. Through this institutional partnership the cohort was offered. A cohort model was used for logistical reasons such as the scheduling of courses (which were offered Friday evenings and a full day on Saturdays once a month), program design, and funding. Regarding funding, each student admitted into the cohort competed for and was granted a full scholarship (which covered tuition costs) provided by the African Canadian Service Division (ACSD) of the Nova Scotia provincial Department of Education and dispersed through CACE. The cohort model also served an Africentric purpose, which was to centre people of African descent in the content, analysis, pedagogy/andragogy, and create a learning environment that is respectful and supportive. The first cohort began in 2006 (see Brigham, 2007 for discussion on the early stages of the cohort); a third cohort will begin in fall 2011.

### **Critical Race Theory and Africentricity in the adult education classroom**

[The cohort program] gave me a language and a framework to make sense of things. (Zoe)

#### **Critical Race Theory.**

Dominant groups legitimize their position through hegemony. To counter these processes in an adult education classroom where CRT is applied, race and racism are highlighted as endemic in North American society. Students are engaged in analyzing how race and racism are engrained in educational, legal, cultural and psychological structures, discourses and policies that govern everyday practices. Central to analysis is the use of knowledge gained from and through the lived experiences of peoples of color to critique “the ‘normative’ values and ‘neutral’ social scientific and educational principles” that attempt to justify racism (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 134). Students also take on a critique of liberalism, including notions of colour blindness, meritocracy and neutrality.

[The success of the program was because of] ... the content and people. Having a shared experience was key. In my undergrad years at a particular university, I had no instructors that looked like me. (Abeby)

#### **Africentricity.**

The contributions of Africentricity to the adult education classroom include placing African people at the core of world experiences and Black students at the centre of their education (Asante, 1987; Hilliard, 1998; Wilson, 1998). Indeed learners’ home cultures can be used to critically interrogate validated school or workplace knowledge and empower learners to collectively engage in social criticisms in order to challenge the status quo and break down oppressive structures which historically and presently alienate and exclude marginalized learners (Dei, 1996). Africentricity emphasizes community, inclusion, and collaboration in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2000). The principles of *Nguzo Saba* (Karenga, 2008) also contribute to a pedagogy and philosophy of adult education. These are: *Umoja* (Unity), *Kujichagulia* (Self-Determination), *Ujima*

(Collective Work and Responsibility), *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics), *Nia* (Purpose), *Kuumba* (Creativity), and *Imani* (Faith).

The research participants' understanding of Africentricity reflects some of the principles of Nguzo Saba, particularly *Umoja*, *Ujima*, *Nia*, and *Kujichagulia*, and the necessity of analyzing shared lived experiences. They also talked about the importance of connecting to ancestral roots and the African Diaspora. For example:

Africentricity means to me being centred in my history, my heritage and my experience as an African person. I came to a deeper understanding from the program ...[and] know that it is not simply the opposite of Eurocentrism and [it is not] 'oh aren't you just pushing some other agenda?' (Paulette)

Africentricity ... is addressing the issues that directly relate to the African Canadian communities. I probably knew my responsibility as an African Nova Scotian is to make a contribution to my community but .... it made it clear the things we'd have to do... having Africentricity impact on the Eurocentric values to make it work. (Robert)

Africentricity, as Dei reminds us cannot mean embracing all home cultures/ knowledges without critiquing the oppressive, marginalizing and exclusionary aspects (such as sexist or homophobic tendencies and practices), and while the research participants highlight their level of comfort, trust and safety, two participants noted that at least one major topic, religion or *Imani*, was not discussed or integrated as much as other topics and should have been (e.g. its role in stifling and/or supporting societal change).

Our conversation about faith was limited. ... We talked about it in terms of the survival of the Black community... but I would have been interested in having a conversation about it ... [The idea that all] Black people are Baptist. Or the expectation of church leaders to be at the table and on advisory boards – why are they at the table and what does that mean in terms of expectations of the church? (Jane)

The Black community really boxes people in. It stems from the church and religion. The church is the centre of the community. You don't venture far from out of the box. This has to change. (Zoe)

Zoe's and Jane's stories serve as a reminder that in supposedly 'safe spaces', 'sensitive' or controversial topics are downplayed in the adult education classroom even when they are recognized as important.

### **Africentric Identity**

Racial group identification refers to a psychological attachment to one of several social categories available to individuals when the category selected is based on race or skin color and/or a common history, particularly as it relates to oppression and discrimination due to skin color. Members are believed to share an implicit understanding of what it means to be a member of the designated racial group (White & Burke, 1987, cited in Sanders Thompson, 2001, p. 155). Further, racial identification is important due to its association with positive psychological outcomes, such as an increased tolerance of frustration, a stronger sense of purpose, enhanced school performance, and greater security in self (Allen and Stukes, 1982, cited in Sanders Thompson, 2001, p.155). The research participants highlight the value of having a strong identity but they also problematize racial identity and underscore the need for self-analysis.

There were people that said, “You are just Black”. But I felt like I should be able to identify with both [Black and White] and say I am biracial. I kind of flip flop between biracial and Black. ... [Racial identity] is not so cut and dry. (Ebele)

What I learned from [the cohort] was that although we share the same skin as in being Black, we did not have the same cultural base. ... It was two professors in particular that I am thinking of [who] were very much interested in Africentricity ... but did not do enough self-analysis to understand that their individual behaviour was very Eurocentric. (Dayo)

Professors who ignore their students’ racial and ethnic identity are ignoring vital aspects and “end up teaching what they see as fragmented, disconnected, and incomplete individuals” (Milner & Ross, 2006, p.xix). Institutions of higher learning can benefit from an appreciation of racial identification and applying resources and strategies in a way that capitalizes on this understanding. The reality of racism and dominant cultural ideology can combine to stymie even the most resilient individual; that is why it is important to provide opportunities for creating a collective counter space such as was the case with this master's cohort.

### **Creating a counter space**

A counter-space provides a regenerating space in which African Canadian students escape discrimination in predominantly White universities (Solórzano et al., 2000). According to the participants the cohort provided this critical counter space. It was very comforting. I felt safe in the room. In other courses I would not have felt as comfortable to voice my opinion for fear of ridicule or backlash, you know, [using a different higher pitched voice] “Oh that’s not really true” or being coerced into thinking or doing something different. I felt my voice and opinion mattered. And it was valued. ... Like we all had something to contribute. (Sarah)

I would say the biggest benefit of being in the cohort was the recognition among fellow participants, colleagues and people who understood not so much my ethnicity but understood my struggles to be a woman of colour. I could freely learn to be myself and learning to be yourself is not an easy task once you’re a grown person. In order to learn yourself, you have to unlearn the layers that have been imposed upon you because of the power relations. (Numosa)

Being able to look at our community and be critical, this is where the cohort helped, because I don’t think I could have been so critical of our community unless I was in a room full of individuals who I knew their intent was not malicious. ... This [cohort] allowed me to put that barrier down and not be defensive .... And I don’t know if I could have done that anywhere else had it not been in a classroom with other individuals of African descent. And so now you can get down to [asking] those uncomfortable or difficult things, and not worry that you’re belittling your community. (Malcolm)

White students may interpret discussions around race and racism as a way to make them feel guilty or that there is a hidden agenda by the professor and/or students of colour (Dixson, 2006). Concerns about such interpretations can reinforce the silencing of critical dialogue. So while the cohort offers an opportunity to create a counter space, further research into how such a counter space and inclusive dialogue can occur in a multicultural/racialized classroom is required.

## **The challenges of being Africentric in a university setting**

Systemic racism and limitations to certain types of expression are deeply embedded in institutional practices. Zola and Numosa provide a sampling of the manner in which these can manifest.

In order to bring out whatever the topic was, we had to pump up the volume... and we had a little visit from the classroom next door, saying, “This is an academic institution you know and could you please pipe it down?” And this is how they walked in [illustrating straight posture, shoulders back, head held high] ...that’s the body language as though here we are in the academy and what do you think you’re doing with this music at this level? ... So here we are practicing our Africentricity and doing our self exploration ... and yet we are in the constraints of the academy. (Numosa)

[The workload was heavier than a regular cohort because] in reality we [Black folks] usually have to work twice as hard and know twice as much to be equal. (Zola)

Numosa also talks about the conflict of being in the “academy” and embodying Africentricity.

So for myself, as somebody who is willing to and puts a lot of effort to using non text methods for expression, this is something you can do in the academy but you have to have a lot of backup and a lot of support around how you do it, and when you do it.

## **Implications of this study for adult education contexts and Conclusion**

While institutions may not be in a position to offer a cohort that targets a particular racialized group the research participants indicate the unique value of providing a counter space for critical self and collective analysis. The reality of racism and dominant cultural ideology can be overwhelming. That is why it is critical to provide opportunities for a collective analysis and opportunities to create a safe space/counter space for both faculty and students for self-analysis, critical reflection and dialogue in order to interrogate individual, institutional and societal practices and structures. Additionally, the participants point to the necessity of reflecting and embodying (Africentric) values of unity, community, collective work and responsibility, and collaboration in the adult education classroom and in the institution as a whole. Further, faculty must develop an appreciation of racial identification and its impact on themselves and their students.

The voices in this study insist on structural as well as ideological changes. For the university to be truly welcoming to those in it, we need to critically reflect on its/our practices and be open to a disruption of the status quo and the learning that can emanate from places of discomfort and creativity. We believe in the spaces of possibility in the adult education classroom as bell hooks declares:

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality, even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. (hooks, 1994, p. 207)

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