
Social Representations of the Africentric School as Portrayed Through the Toronto Newspapers Les représentations sociales de l'école afrocentrique dans les journaux torontois

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ABSTRACT

In 2007, the Toronto District School Board announced a proposal to open an Africentric public elementary school, which would bring to the fore the experience and knowledge of people of African and Caribbean descent. This proposed project led to a debate in the Canadian media, with public opinion being divided between supporters of the proposal and those who opposed it. This article presents a study of the social representations of the Africentric school conveyed by the Toronto newspapers as they covered this debate. Through thematic content analysis, two different social representations of the Africentric school were identified, the main elements of which were the idea of segregation and the empowerment of the Black community.

RÉSUMÉ

En 2007, le conseil scolaire de Toronto annonce le projet d'une école primaire publique afrocentrique, basée sur les expériences et les savoirs des personnes d'origine africaine et antillaise. Le projet proposé devient l'objet d'un débat dans les médias canadiens qui a partagé l'opinion publique entre ses partisans et ses opposants. L'article étudie les représentations sociales que l'école afrocentrique a mobilisées dans les journaux torontois suite au débat. L'analyse de contenu thématique a permis d'identifier 2 représentations sociales distinctes de l'école afrocentrique, ayant comme éléments centraux l'idée de ségrégation et l'idée du renforcement de l'autonomie de la communauté noire.

In 2007, a proposed project to open an Africentric public elementary school led to a debate in the Canadian media. Public opinion was divided between supporters of the proposal and those who opposed it. Because the media greatly influence our understanding of social phenomena (Enache, 2006), we set out to study this debate as it was communicated through the Toronto newspapers in order to draw a portrait of the social representations that shaped this new social reality.

BLACK EDUCATION IN CANADA: FROM SEGREGATION TO AFROCENTRICITY

Afrocentricity (also referred to as Africentricity) falls within corrective cultural theories that promote the use of culture to meet the social needs of a community (Giddings, 2003). With regard to schooling, this primarily involves centring the

curriculum and pedagogy on the reality of Africans and members of the African diaspora. As Carter (2003) explains, ethnic-centred approaches focus on the need to include the cultural values and worldview of marginalized groups. Africentricity is thus a reaction to the Eurocentric discourse that has traditionally predominated in Canadian society.

Another important aspect of Africentricity is the focus on presenting Africans as subjects rather than objects. Given that action is central to Africentricity, a merely theoretical perspective is impossible from an Africentric point of view. As liberation is the ultimate goal, Africentricity must generate knowledge that is liberating and leads to empowerment (Mazama, 2001). Africentric education can be defined as an expression of the will of people of African descent to strengthen their cultural heritage, with the goal being to counter the negative effects of the relations of oppression that have affected Black (African diaspora) communities (Akoto, 1994).

In the 1980s, the dropout rate for Black youth in Toronto had reached almost 40% (Wallace, 2009). Africentric programs in the United States had already proven to be effective, and their merits were later examined empirically in several studies (Belgrave, Brome, & Hampton, 2000; Stevenson, 1995; Warfield-Coppock, 1992).

In 2007, in response to longstanding and repeated demands from the community, the Toronto District School Board studied the possibility of creating an Africentric public school in Toronto. Many consultation meetings were held, and the discussions were lively. Far from reaching a consensus, the community was divided on the question and faced strong opposition from outside (Wallace, 2009). The stated goals of the proposed project, as they appeared on the school's website (Toronto District School Board, n.d.), included encouraging young people to become engaged in their studies by creating an environment that promotes high academic achievement and inculcates high self-pride and a high motivation to succeed. This is seen as being a first step toward developing productive and responsible citizens who value the experience of African peoples and the African diaspora by teaching about their achievements in a nonstereotyped way.

The Africentric elementary school is currently operating at full capacity, and there is even a waiting list to get in. Additionally, the students have performed well on provincial tests (Rushowy, 2011). In 2011, following the posting of above-average standardized test scores and in light of booming enrollment at its elementary school, the Toronto District School Board began to consider extending the program by opening an Africentric high school within another existing high school. The original choice for this school was Oakwood Collegiate Institute (Rushowy, 2011); however, following opposition from the school community, this choice was subsequently changed to Winston Churchill Collegiate Institute (Brown, 2012).

The proposed opening of an Africentric school led to a lively debate on the role of notions such as race and cultural specificity in society. Opinions were many and varied and reflected an important debate concerning, among other subjects, the universality of education, relations between majority and minority populations,

ethnicity, and social inequality. The goal of the present study was to uncover the social representations that the media, and in particular the Toronto newspapers, conveyed on the subject of the Africentric school.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

As explained by Serge Moscovici (1976), when theories such as the Africentric theory succeed in changing social practices—in this case, the teaching practices in schools—they are adopted by the public through social representations. The public engages in a debate using the means of communication at its disposal, which can include discussions in coffee shops, exchanges with professionals, televised debates, and newspaper articles. In his influential book, Moscovici studied the social representations of psychoanalysis as conveyed through the most popular newspapers of the time, observing the different modes of communication used, namely dissemination, propagation, and propaganda. He showed how a reality that was previously unknown can start to become familiar, and how practices that were once unacceptable can start to make sense and be justified in people's minds. New knowledge, which would otherwise have been inaccessible to the general public, gradually becomes common knowledge—a social representation. This process “eventually gives meaning to behaviour and integrates it into a system of relations in which it is tied to its object” (Abric, 2002, p. 82).

According to Doise (1985), a social representation can be defined as “principles that lead to the adoption of positions on specific realities introduced into a set of social relations and that organize the symbolic processes involved in these relations” (p. 246, own translation). According to this definition, which will be used in this article, social representations contribute to the organization of social relations by attributing a set of positions to social identities. In other words, the students' parents and other members of the Black community, citizens of the neighbourhood in which the Africentric school was opened, policy makers, and school trustees all debated the meaning that the reality of this new phenomenon should take in people's minds. Our study aimed to determine what these different positions were and what organizing principle was behind the social communication surrounding the opening of the Africentric school in Toronto. Newspapers were selected over other forms of media because of the ease by which they are accessed by the population. Also, the written media is ready to be analyzed (i.e., no transcription is necessary). The study of the social representations conveyed through the Toronto newspapers also brought out important elements that reveal what meaning society gives to certain realities such as Black identity, community, and the social reality of minorities.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

A sample of 21 newspaper articles published over two different periods, that is, between November 2007 and January 2008 and between February 2011 and

April 2011, were selected. The number of articles available in the first period far exceeded the number of articles available in the second period; therefore, an appropriate number of articles was selected to proportionally represent each period. (These articles were selected according to relevance and richness of content.) The first period corresponded to the period in which several community forums were held and the debate surrounding the opening of the Africentric school intensified, culminating in January 2008 with the school trustees' vote on the proposal.

The second period, three years later, corresponded to the period just after the students' first standardized test scores were made public and the Toronto District School Board announced its intention to open a second Africentric school at the high school level. Our aim was to gain an understanding of how these events influenced the social representations of the Africentric school.

The Canadian Newsstand Major Dailies database, which includes more than 300 wide-circulation Canadian newspapers, was used to identify the pertinent articles. The key words used were *Afrocentric*, *Black-focused*, *Africentric*, and *Black schools*. The following types of documents were retained: articles, letters, feature articles, interviews, news items, and reports. A wide array of newspapers and magazines had initially been considered for the study but ultimately only standard Canadian newspapers were selected because they enjoy a wide readership, and thus are thought to be more apt to influence ideas and attitudes in a larger cross-section of the population.

Ten articles, constituting almost half the sample, came from the *Toronto Star*. The *Toronto Star* is a daily newspaper based in Toronto with a wide readership throughout Ontario. Seven articles came from the *National Post*, a daily newspaper that is also based in Toronto. The *National Post* enjoys a large readership across Canada. Lastly, four articles came from the *Globe and Mail*, a daily newspaper based in Toronto, which is also widely circulated across the country. From each article, only interview excerpts containing references to the Africentric school were retained for analysis. Often, these excerpts were only one or two sentences long, and sometimes involved only part of a sentence. However, before formalizing the excerpts and grouping them into subthemes, we also analyzed the context of the paragraph and the rest of the article.

The content analysis of the articles involved several steps. First, a preliminary reading enabled us to compile a list of statements. Next, the classification units were selected and defined. Then, the process to be used for the categorization and classification as well as for the quantification and statistical processing of the data was established. The last step in the analysis involved the description and interpretation of the results (L'Écuyer, 1987). The classification units were selected based on the words, sentences, or sentence fragments that referred to the social representation object—the Africentric School—and gave meaning to the statement. Thematic content analysis is a recognized method for the study of social representations (Negura, 2006; Sabourin, 2003).

To define the themes, the semantic units in the analyzed texts were identified. For the first period (November 2007 to January 2008), 115 semantic units relat-

ing to the Africentric school were identified and formalized as statements. These statements were then grouped into 39 subthemes. For the second period (February 2011 to April 2011), 30 semantic units relating to the Africentric school were identified and grouped into 17 subthemes.

Of the 115 units from the first period, 73 were grouped into three thematic categories. Similarly, 20 of the 30 units from the second period were grouped into three other thematic categories. The thematic categories for the first period were *segregation or separation; the inadequate solution that the school represented for the problems of Black people; and the concepts of autonomy, participation, and empowerment of the Black community*. For the second period, the thematic categories were *the segregation or separation that the school would introduce; the threat that the school posed for the Oakwood Collegiate community; and the empowerment that the school could bring to the Black community*. Semantic units and passages were analyzed first by the primary author of this study before being verified by the second author. After engaging in several discussions, both researchers then agreed on which thematic categories would be retained.

RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The high number of units in two of the thematic categories (*segregation and empowerment*) suggests that these themes were central to the development of the discourse on the Africentric school. For opponents of the proposal, the social representation of the Africentric school was organized around the units in the thematic category *segregation*: segregation, division, separation, and exclusion. The analysis revealed that the themes related to segregation were central to many arguments against the school and came up most often of all the thematic categories identified. There was a broad consensus on these themes among the opponents of the proposal, such that it would not be possible to consider a social representation of the school for this group that did not include these themes.

For supporters of the proposal, the Africentric school represented a locus of empowerment for the Black community. Some statements, however, implied that some of the people who supported the proposal did so only passively. Some people said, for example, that they wanted to try something “new”: “Let’s try something new because what happened before doesn’t work” (Alcoba, 2007, para. 2). Nevertheless, it would not be possible to consider a social representation of the school for supporters of the proposal that did not include the themes related to *the empowerment of the Black community*.

The debate surrounding the Africentric school raised several issues, including the question of diversity and the universal nature of institutions. The opening of this school, while a relatively recent development in Toronto, has already given rise to many different positions. The results of the thematic content analysis brought out four thematic categories related to the Africentric school, which was alternately seen as a locus of segregation, a locus of empowerment, an inad-

equate solution to the problems of Black people, and a threat to the Oakwood Collegiate community. These categories reflect the public debate that took place. Supporters of the Africentric school referred to the empowerment of the Black community, while opponents of the proposal considered that the Africentric school represented an inadequate solution to the problems of Black people, an example of segregation, and a threat to Oakwood Collegiate Institute.

The references to segregation by opponents of the school often mentioned the civil rights struggle in the United States. The Africentric school, as a community-based project, was seen to represent an obstacle that civil rights supporters, such as Martin Luther King, fought to overcome in the struggle for equality. On the other hand, supporters of the Africentric school pointed out that they had also fought to obtain this school, which they saw as representing an opportunity for the community to take charge of itself. The thematic categories *segregation* and *empowerment* were thus opposed and made up two separate sets of elements organizing the social representation of the Africentric school.

These two sets of elements had the particularity of sharing the same organizing principle (Doise, 1985): the struggle for equality. The meaning attributed to equality differed, however. One group held that equality can only be attained through participation in shared institutions, which allow for intercommunity interaction. This group felt that it was necessary to defend the integrity of shared institutions. The other group held that equality will only be attained when the community has gained autonomy. For this group, integration and shared institutions (such as schools) are not satisfactory if Black students are disadvantaged compared to other students. They saw the creation of a separate school as a valid solution if it ensures the academic success of these students. Whereas coexistence was the main concern for the opponents of the Africentric school, for its supporters, empowerment of the Black community was what mattered most in order to meet the needs of its members.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING PRACTICE

Counsellors can benefit from the findings of our study for at least three reasons. First, it can help enhance their understanding of the lived realities of various minority groups in Canada, particularly the Black community of Toronto. It can also help foster understanding of the perceptions others may have of these communities. Keeping in touch with these realities is an essential part of understanding the issues significant to all parties involved. Second, a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding the Afrocentric school—for example, the opposing themes of segregation and empowerment—can help inform one of the other matters of relevance to the community at large, such as the importance of equality in our society. Finally, counsellors can use this information to engage with their clients and contribute to the discussion on how these issues affect them and how counsellors can contribute to clients' well-being and empowerment. Counsellors are often in a unique position to mediate between institutions and individuals, and

have a responsibility to keep themselves informed of the changing realities in their social environment. Minority groups have specific needs that must be taken into consideration by counsellors in their practice. For the Black community of Toronto, it becomes incumbent on counsellors to have an awareness of the debate on Africentric education in order to be able to offer a service that is adapted to the specific needs of Black children, thus contributing positively to their personal growth and development.

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