IS IT IMPORTANT TO TEACH THE HISTORY OF AFRICANS AND PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT IN SCHOOLS?

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Beyond political partisanship, teaching the history of people of African descent in schools is a legitimate necessity. Contrary to what is conveyed by the so-called connoisseurs of Africa,[1] African history spans more than 3,000 years. Undoubtedly, it has been more than 3,000 years[2] since Africa experienced the birth of states, science, great religions, architecture, especially temples and palaces, writing, etc... Rich and complex, African history deserves recognition in national and world history, in short in our collective memory.

There is a legitimate necessity to teach these fundamentals in primary and secondary schools, but it would be a mistake to do so in the form of a sub-history. Nurturing the misconception of African primitivity held by Africanists and some self-styled intellectuals is not at all the teaching we are talking about. Perpetuating the colonialist and paternalistic discourse that promotes ignorance; ignorance that is designed to separate Africa from the rest of the world and thus exclude it from modernity, is not the right kind of education that should be offered in the school curriculum. But why should we teach the history of Afro-descendants in our schools, you might ask?

Some very popular arguments for teaching Afro-descendant history in schools is to adapt to the profile of increasingly multicultural classrooms. This is not an erroneous motivation, but African descendants have been in America for over 400 years and, to date, their history is almost non-existent in Ontarian and Canadian textbooks. In fact, *teaching* the history of people of African descent is often limited to topics about slavery and post-war immigration or the celebration of Black History Month.

Despite the important contribution of Afro-Canadians in many spheres, it is inconceivable that in the twenty-first century we are still debating the relevance of teaching their history and culture in our schools. Some would argue that there is a month set aside for this. A month to tell more than 3,000 years of history, how ironic! One thing is certain, G. Woodson

1 Africanists study African civilizations according to exclusively European criteria. Highly skilful, they have constructed a very solid discourse that participates in an ideology whose aim is to provide a logical explanation for the slave trade, slavery and colonization, on the one hand. On the other hand, Africanists systematically refuse the existence of an African culture and civilization.

2 UNESCO General History of Africa, History of Humanity Volume II: 3000 to 700 BC, Volume editors: A. H. Dani and J.-P. Mohen, Co-directors: J. L. Lorenzo, V. M. Masson, T. Obenga, M. B. Sakellariou, B. K. Thapar and Shang Changshou, Foreword: Jean Pierre Mohen.

and WEB Du Bois, two American thinkers who proposed the need for curricula to teach the history of Afro-descendants in the 1930s, are no doubt turning over in their graves to see that 90 years later the subject is still up for discussion.

Returning to the original issue, that is, the teaching of the history of people of African descent in schools. Breaking the cycle of ignorance is the first order of priority. In our contemporary societies, prejudices inherited from history continue to pollute people's minds and lend support to everyday racism against people of African descent. Teaching Afro-Canadian history is a good way to combat the prejudice and racism that victimize thanks to ignorance. As the saying goes, "ignorance leads to fear. Fear leads to hatred. Hate leads to violence... That is the equation". Ignoring the history and culture of a segment of Canadian society only perpetuates the marginalization of a group of citizens. Yet the Ontario International Education Strategy put in place by the Ontario Ministry of Education (MOE) is supposed to reflect UNESCO's vision "for Global Education for Citizenship" which aims to encourage respect for all, to foster a sense of belonging to a common humanity, and to help learners become responsible and active global citizens.

Teaching the history of people of African descent in schools not only enhances the cultural heritage of this group of citizens, but also strengthens the health of our province and our country. If, for example, our students learned in a history class that the great African civilizations (Mali, Ghana, Songhai, Ethiopia, Sudan, etc.) were not part of a narrow, closed world, but dynamic societies open to the wider world, the frequently negative image of the history of Afro-descendants that is perpetuated would be transformed; and lead to a new sense of mutual understanding. Clearly, educating our students to develop a global perspective on citizenship would give them a better grasp of today's diverse and interconnected world. They would have a better understanding of major historical issues such as the slave trade and colonization, and the impact of these tragic moments in history on our collective memory. In fact, young people would have a better understanding of the causes and modus operandi of slavery and the slave trade, as well as the issues and consequences of slavery in the world. Moreover, the teaching of history in our schools would enable young people to grasp the global transformations and cultural interactions resulting from the history of the slave trade and slavery that have involved all continents and caused considerable upheavals that subsequently shaped our modern societies. At the same time, students would be able to discover Africa's contributions to the construction and transformation of contemporary societies.

By valuing the history and culture of people of African descent in Ontario schools, one can only hope to witness the pride and fulfillment of students from a community with a very high dropout rate. Some believe that multicultural education policies have not had the desired effect. In their view, factors that stem from the relative failure of the multicultural model include racism, the alarming dropout rate, and the non-inclusion of history and minority cultures in teaching practices. Although the issue has agitated Toronto's political and educational circles for some time,[3] the marginalization of black minority history seems to have been the reason for the creation of the first alternative school focused on African history and culture. Advocates of this school are convinced that learning about the achievements and contributions of their ancestors is a source of motivation to curb their children's educational handicaps.

The correlation between dropping out of school and the over-representation of Afro-descendants in prisons is all too clear and is supported by research that states that a large proportion of the prison population has not completed high school. In Canada, Blacks and Aboriginal peoples constitute a disproportionate segment of the prison population and their presence behind bars has exploded over the past decade. According to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (November 2013), Blacks are over-represented in prisons "the number of Blacks has grown sharply by 80% in the last 10 years. They represent nearly 10% of the Canadian prison population (9.5%) while they represent less than 3% of the civilian population".[4] In fact, according to the Annual Report of the Office of the Correctional Investigator (February 2014), people of African descent make up almost 10% of the Canadian prison population while they represent less than 3% of the civilian population of Canada.[5]

In conclusion, teaching the history of Afro-descendants in schools would have a positive impact on both students of European and African descent. Both can learn more about the history and culture of people of African descent, develop intercultural dialogue among students, and bring together the different cultures present in schools and in the community. For students of African descent, valuing their history may enhance their pride in their origins. For some students, this pride may translate into greater investment in their studies and greater involvement in the community.

In addition, the teaching of African history and culture in schools would enable teaching staff to become familiar with the cultural references of people of African descent. In

3 In 2009, Toronto's first Afrocentric public school opened its doors. This school was created as a result of the dissatisfaction of a group of parents... Its goal is to reduce the high dropout rate among black youth in the city.

4 http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelles/societe/2013/11/26/002-canada-prisons-noirs-autochtones.shtml

5 www.rcinet.ca/fr/2014/02/17/noirs-et-autochtones-surrepresentes-dans-les-prisons-canadiennes

general, the teaching of the history of people of African descent in schools would have a positive impact at the provincial and national levels. Such teaching can undoubtedly contribute to the awakening of young people who, in turn, can build an inclusive economy, more dynamic civil and political institutions and healthier and safer cities. Finally, rethinking the teaching of the history of people of African descent in schools and at various levels requires engagement with people in communities from Africa and its diasporas.