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Telling Stories: Examining the Views of an African-Centered Female Minority Leader
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Abstract

Many educators believe that unless a determined effort is made to include cultural relevance in public school curriculums, public education will continue to fail African-American students. In fact, the quality of one's experience in education and in the community is often identified as a critical determinant for gaining a foundation for higher intellectual pursuits. This article examines the beliefs of an African-centered educator as she uses her own African-centered model to empower African-American students and solve this serious problem in her community.

Telling Stories - Examining the Views of an African-Centered Female Minority Leader

There is an increasing interest in the leadership of schools. During the past two decades of school research and reform efforts, one insight from this focus is the realization that the leader sets the direction for a school and plays a pivotal role in facilitating change. According to Fullan (1993), the leader is not only an instructional guide and moral compass for the school, a leader is a key agent for change in the public school environment. Likewise, as women enter leadership roles in increasing numbers, research indicates that their experiences differ from those of men, both in their preparation for leadership and how they manage their leadership responsibilities in the school (Hegelsen, 1990). Research demonstrates that women appear to be less influenced by hierarchy in their thinking, integrate different roles more fully, accent the building of relationships, and work at making connections among organizations. Women leaders are also intensely concerned with efficiency and effectiveness (Gilligan, 1982). Despite this relative breadth of research, however, very little research has been directed toward how African-American women assume and implement leadership tasks. Most studies of leadership focus on White, European, and middle-class tradition and thought; they rarely consider the ways in which race, ethnicity, and culture influence administrative behavior and decision-making.

This article focuses on the life experiences of Dr. Freya Rivers, a minority female who acted as founding leader of a newly created African-centered charter school in Lansing, Michigan, Sankofa Shule. Dr. Rivers discusses her views and beliefs concerning teacher, student, and parent empowerment through an African-

centered empowerment model. The school's African-centered model aims for continuous change and learning to take place on multiple levels among teachers, students, administrators, parents, and the greater community. In this model, the school becomes a learning organization for the entire community. The initial focal point of earlier research with Dr. Rivers' school was on how teachers changed their teaching perspectives and incorporated new ways of teaching and learning. However, the focus of this article will be the views held by Dr. Rivers, an African-American founding leader of the school and a female in her fifties, and her life experiences. This data was culled from interviews conducted during the earlier qualitative research concerning the teaching and learning at the school.

Methodology

According to Cotte (1986),

Feminist stress on women's socially constructed "differences" from men can go along with recognition of diversity among women themselves, if we acknowledge that multifaceted entity - the patchwork quilt, so to speak-that is - the group called women. (p. 60)

This research was an attempt to explore the importance of one woman's experiences in creating her leadership style and beliefs. It was an attempt to explore a woman school leader, her life, her perception and experiences, and its effect on her leadership style and aspirations.

As I observed the teaching and learning taking place at Sankofa Shule, I wondered how Dr. Rivers' life experiences impacted the development of her African-centered theories and ideas, as well as her role as a leader in this new, evolving organization. Shakeshaft, Nowell, and Perry (1991) proposed that research about women and leadership should be conducted from a female-defined paradigm that included a method of inquiry growing out of personal experiences, feelings, and the needs of the researcher. They encouraged researchers to look at the world as women experience it and try to document those perspectives in order to help expand the knowledge base of practices in educational administration. In addition, she suggested that interviews with women administrators would help us understand the way they think and speak about their worlds.

Review of Relevant Literature

Because I was a participant-observer at the research site and decided to tell the stories of these teachers, I considered Elliot's (1991) six features to determine whether a study should be qualitative: field focus; self as instrument; interpretative character; the use of expressive language and presence of voice; attention to specifics; and believability based upon the researchers coherence, insight, and instrumental utility. For me, it was important to use the context and setting of the school and the participant's work to delve more deeply into her life experiences and how it affected her work as a school leader.

An examination of the literature of women leaders revealed that several characteristics were commonly found in women's view and influences their leadership practices, such as a strong caring ethics (Gillian, 1982; Nodding, 1986); accomplishment of work through relationships (Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Gillian 1982); value placed on inclusion and connection (Lipman-Bluman, 1992); use of voice to empower others; communication as the key to success; and the integration of the professional and personal aspect of life. Therefore, in conducting this research it was most important for me to capture Dr. Rivers' voice and how it had been influenced by her history.

Mama Freya's World

The first thing I noticed as I conducted my research at Sankofa was that Dr. Rivers' discussions were permeated with words such as "caring, culture, community, and holistic teaching and learning." At her

school, Dr. Rivers created an environment where students, teachers, parents, and community members freely care and support one another. At Sankofa Shule all female teachers are called "Mama" and all male teachers are called "Baba." These terms stress the familial relationships, as well as the caring exhibited between teachers and students. The African-centered worldview and paradigm, derived from the teachers' and the administrators' cultural history, promoted this type of caring. In an African worldview, the community is stressed and the individual is de-emphasized. In African society, the village and the villagers take care of the needs of all participants.

The Setting

The School

Sankofa Shule Academy is a public school academy established pursuant to Act No. 416 of the Public Acts of 1994; a law that proposes to improve public education for students in the State of Michigan . According to its charter, the mission of the school is "to educate and nurture each and every child, with special emphasis on at-risk African American male students, to achieve their maximum potential, and develop productive citizens" (Sankofa Shule Charter, 1995). The philosophy of the academy is "that all children can learn and will learn to their maximum potential." The goal of the teachers and administrator of the school is to eliminate every barrier to student success by any means necessary to allow students' dreams to be their only boundaries. Sankofa implements this philosophy and mission by providing a holistic program that produces students who are academically competent, behaviorally confident, and socially conscious in all endeavors.

The Curriculum

The staff of the school uses an African-centered curriculum that incorporates themes for effective teaching. The steps are: 1) **Heshima** (respect) for self, others and the environment; 2) **Expect** the best in every child; 3) **Success** begets success through design, implementation, coordination, and evaluation based on needs, interest, ability, and purpose; 4) **RIP** for positive reinforcement by re warding often, i nvesting time and interest, and p raising, praising, praising; 5) **TAP** when all else fails. In other words, take away privileges to reinforce rules, order, responsibility, and self-control; 6) **Multisensory** strategies of seeing, feeling, hearing, tasting, smelling, dancing, cooking, singing, acting, and any other experiential activity that engages students in active, participatory learning; 7) **Multimodal** strategies of traditional methods including basal, phonic, and linguistic experience units, as well as non-traditional modes of individualization including workshops, whole language, themes, contract, and experiences; 8) **Multicultural** strategies of respect of knowledge and inclusion of all cultures; 9) **Multi-dimensional** perspectives of holistic development of body, mind, and character; 10) **Hotep** in the medu neter (hieroglyphics) that signifies the ultimate state of self-actualization in reaching one's maximum potential while serving the community (Sankofa Shule Charter, 1995).

This philosophical basis of the curriculum, which was created by the founding leader, reflects the goal of African-centered education enumerated by Lee, Lomotey, & Shujaa (1990) which states that this type of education must:

1. Legitimize African stores of knowledge
2. Positively exploit and scaffold onto a productive community and cultural practices
3. Extend and build on the indigenous language
4. Reinforce community ties and idealize service to one's family, community, nation, race, and world
5. Promote positive social relationships

6. Impart a world-view that idealizes a positive, self-sufficient future for one's people without denying the self-worth and right to self-determination of others

7. Support cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness. (p. 50)

Finally, the school's model uses Assante's (1988) African-centered paradigm, which provides that one must define oneself from an African perspective by putting Africa in the center of the environmental system (its original position). This paradigm defines reality from an African viewpoint. According to Dr. Rivers, "Afrocentricity is necessary for the inclusion of African contributions to the world. The theoretical model of an African-centered perspective presents a global perspective of people, histories, and cultures" (Rivers, 1994, p. 7). According to Rivers, the African-centered perspective is offered for inclusion in the Academy's curriculum as an African cultural frame for self-esteem, economic independence, cultural socialization, and for the survival of the African-American family in all their environments (Rivers, 1994, p. 10).

Her Philosophy

Dr. Rivers believes that African-centered education represents empowerment of the African-American family, and its children display conscientization through education, transformation through ancient ecological and spiritual development, and self-actualization through economic and cultural independence. Rivers asserts that African-centered education develops responsible adults in families and empowers them to leave a legacy of various talents and economic and academic skills to their children. Accordingly, her first goal in designing the school was to develop strong, positive "self-concepts" that can help youth to become productive, responsible adults. The second goal of Sankofa Shule is to provide families and students with the knowledge about their Afrocentric heritage and culture in order to instill the pride, dignity, and values of their ancient African ancestors.

According to Dr. Rivers, the mission of the school is to provide leadership for African-American families by maximizing knowledge, spirituality, entrepreneurship, and the opportunity for an enhanced Afrocentric quality of life. Dr. Rivers states that her role as a leader is "basically to facilitate the process. To make sure that we have competent staff, that our materials are bias-free and to assist them whenever they need assistance, whether it's in subject matter area or African-centeredness or classroom discipline" (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999). She adds that,

I really don't like to go in and tell people how to run a classroom. If I hire you, I expect that you have the expertise to do it. I don't mind assisting people, but I'm not a person that goes in on a day-to-day basis. I pretty much hire people with leadership qualities, so that they can go in and get the job done. Every morning we do have the staff meetings where we get together as a group and discuss it, to make sure that we operate as one and basically, that's all that I do. I'd like to remain in that type of position, as a facilitator. (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999)

However, as the originator of Sankofa Shule, her influences on the direction of the organization drew on her cultural history and personality to fulfill administrative goals. Like most leaders, Dr. Rivers has a high level of self-confidence and determination. In addition to designing, Dr. Rivers created a curriculum for her school and another African-centered charter school in the same Midwest community, less than one mile from Sankofa Shule. When charter school legislation was adopted in 1995, parents in this Midwest community created a committee to take advantage of this new legislation. In the end, however, the group splintered and two African-centered charter schools were formed within one mile of each other. In creating both curriculums and charter school proposals submitted to Central Michigan University, the governing board of a state public university have the authority issued to charter to schools, Dr. Rivers relied on her extensive background in African and African-American history and culture.

Dr. Rivers is a graduate of Louisiana State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Speech and Hearing, and holds a Masters of Elementary Education from Southern University of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She also has an Ed.D. from the George Peabody College of Teacher Education of Vanderbilt University. Her résumé is filled with detailed listings of the various African locations she has visited over her lifetime-places, such as Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, and Egypt.

In her educational biography, provided at the beginning of the study, Dr. Rivers listed five critical life-changing events in her educational history. It appeared after reading her biography that the fuel for the changes or its ignition or spark was Dr. Rivers' sense of empowerment or her call to action which began early in her childhood. In her educational biography, Dr. Rivers described her education as beginning at two years of age when her working parents sent her to nursery school. At four, she started at her Aunt's (she was the principal and the teacher) one-room schoolhouse that educated students from pre-K all the way through eighth grade. At that one-room schoolhouse, Dr. Rivers recalled competing in spelling bees and reading competitions with seventh and eighth grade students. Her formal education began the next year, when her mother enrolled her in a Catholic elementary school, St. Francis. At the Catholic school she was skipped to the second grade. Dr. Rivers credits the education she received in her Aunt's school for the grade promotion. "They wanted to move me up higher, but my mother didn't like the idea of skipping it [first grade] at all because she thought my age just was not appropriate" (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999). In her second year at St. Francis, she remembers being in a regular structured program that "just drove me up the wall because I always wanted to read more and do more in school. It seemed like I was always being held back because you can only read a sentence at a time with seventy kids in the room" (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999). Very large classrooms characterized her elementary education:

In fact, in my second grade year, there were eighty kids; in my third grade year there were seventy kids; in my fourth grade year we had gone down to like sixty; and by sixth grade I think we had like fifty-four kids in a room to one teacher. And all of us learned. So, it was amazing, but they did it because of the structure and each child got a chance to read one line. (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999)

Smaller classes were a signature concept at Sankofa, and Rivers created Sankofa based upon her lifelong commitment to African-centered education and political/social activism. The first critical influence that she experienced as a person and an educator was the teacher she had in the seventh and eighth grade. "She made education a wonderful experience," Dr. Rivers reports, "Had I not had her, I probably would never have enjoyed my educational experience, but she was fantastic" (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999). The second critical influence was her Teacher Corps experience at Southern University. She states, "I think it allowed me the freedom to be creative in learning how to teach and not stifling me like most teacher education programs do" (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999). She cites her doctoral program at Vanderbilt as the third critical event "because not many universities offer that kind of off-campus experience that doesn't require you to just sit in a desk and listen to a professor all day. Again, it gave me a chance to be creative" (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999). The fourth critical event was her experience of actually entering classrooms during her Masters program. She states that during her observation

I saw children who don't know anything and there's nothing wrong with them; just that they haven't been taught. I think that was the most gut-wrenching experience I've ever had in my life. I can still recall my second class of second graders, who didn't even know their names, couldn't write their names. I thought something is wrong with this. And that's when I went back to my master teacher and said, 'Sister Bruce, how do you teach reading?' And I sat at the foot of a master teacher to learn. (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999)

Dr. Rivers believes that all these factors, combined with her personal experience of being "put out of school every year because the teachers were not able to understand a creative child" led to the teacher that she is today (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999). However, she believes that the ultimate responsibility for who she is comes back to her family. "My mother's an educator, my father's a dentist, but he's been involved in civil rights all of his life, so that has to be where I get my drive for working with Black children and trying to teach the African American experience (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999)." Dr. Rivers states that the values that most strongly affected and directed her adult professional life are her African-centered values, which she teaches at the school. These are the values that her family instilled in her. According to Dr. Rivers,

One of the most profound quotes from our African culture is "I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am." I don't exist in isolation. I only exist because of the family that I came from, and that family is the community that created them, that I exist in. Therefore, I need a total community to exist and that community also needs me. (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999)

Therefore, she believes that it is important for her to teach these same values to the African-American students, making African-centered education more than an educational theory, but a way of life. She tries to

live the Kemetic principles of truth, justice, righteousness, order, balance, harmony, and reciprocity. Those are the truths that we operate from in the school; the ethical values that you must have to be human. The rules of the school: respect self, others, and the environment, and the Nguzo Saba. Those are the principles and the values that I live by, and I hope to instill them in the children. I truly believe that if you could ever get even a small portion of our society to try and live by ethical principles, we'll make a better world that can exist in harmony. (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999)

In 1995, when Michigan's new charter school legislation was passed, Dr. Rivers' took a leave of absence from her local public school teaching position (she later retired from the district) to create Sankofa Shule Academy. Her vision was African-centered because of her belief in Afrocentric education as a means of improving the academic achievement of African-American students. Dr. Rivers summarized her beliefs concerning African-centered education in a book written several years prior to the opening Sankofa Shule Academy . She stated:

[A] n Afrocentric perspective is essential to attain educational excellence and peace. The infusion of an Afrocentric perspective will not be easy but it is vital for the future of the children. "The opening of the American mind must be a high priority topic" (Hillard, Stewart, & Williams, 1989). The first objective is to change the way people perceive themselves.. Lenore Bennett, Jr. states "If you want to change a situation, you have to change the image that men have of themselves and their situation" (Manhubuti, 1978, p. 5). The second goal [of an African-centered education] is to provide students and people of the world with the truth of history. At the current time these truths are omitted, distorted, stereotyped, and presented as lies. Finally, the third goal is to recognize the traditions and cultures through an Afrocentric perspective for the future of all people, the world, and all its environments (Nobel, 1990). (Rivers, 1993, p. 1-2)

According to Dr. Rivers, to teach in an African-centered manner means several things. First, educators accept her concept of African-centered education, a concept that is based upon on the readings and teachings of Molefi Assante, Asa Hillard, and Maulana Karenga. This method requires knowledge and acceptance of the principles of Maat, the principals of Kemit, and the principles of Nguzo Saba . To teach from an African-centered framework also means supporting those we teach from an African-centered perspective, focusing on ourselves, Black people, as the agent of the curriculum. Everything else is peripheral to us. Not that we do not study everything else in the world, but we look at it from our perspective first. Then we try to view it from the eyes of other cultures. In doing this you must look at a timeline to make sure that you understand the frame of reference. The most important thing about this is

when, especially in teaching African history, we seem to focus on the last three hundred years of history, which is where we started to decline, without looking at the other seven thousand years, five years in which we were in ascendancy.

Dr. Rivers believes that students, teachers, and parents are the agents of the Sankofa Shule curriculum. She believes that to teach African-American students one must look at the total timeline of African and African-American history, not only period of African capture, slavery, and independence in America. The third implication of her concept of African-centered education addresses how to teach the children. At Sankofa Shule, she stressed that the teachers

instruct a multisensory, multimodal, and multi-dimensional manner, because there is not one way to teach any particular subject that you're going to succeed with everybody. But if you use a lot of different ways to teach children, maybe you could reach them in one of those ways. (Freya Rivers, personal communication, April 1, 1999)

The school's curriculum, a developmental program filled with arts and humanities, aims to develop the child's readiness level in music, art, movement, and creativity in order to foster readiness skills for future learning. Cooperative teaching and the formation of cooperative groups for students are encouraged for social skill and self-discipline actualization. According to Dr. Rivers, the rationale behind Sankofa Shule is that students educated in an African-centered perspective and involved in constructive work and leisure activities will become self-actualized and demonstrate positive behavior. It is her goal that the possible success of Sankofa Shule can become a model for public school systems, university teacher training institutions, and further educational and community development. Test results during the research period demonstrate that students entered Sankofa Shule at one level but showed significant growth thereafter. The total reading scores for students across all grades also indicate significant changes in literacy in the development and comprehension of Sankofa students.

How did the teachers at Sankofa create these results? Sankofa Shule created opportunities for professional growth for its teachers, administrators, and staff through various programs, materials and research, personal and job development, in-services, workshops, seminars, and travel based on its African-centered empowerment goals. The professional development model was consistent with the school's goal of sharing and developing information. The school emphasizes experimental learning in and outside the community for students, teachers, staff, and administration.

Dr. Rivers implemented several instructional reforms at the school, such as: expanding the school day to increase opportunities for learning; extended day classes, summer sessions, team teaching, mentoring, and tutoring sessions; and community-based activities-along with special programs to ensure that students had opportunities to try and try again until success is achieved. Students are grouped for learning, which includes cooperative learning, cross-age tutoring, and grouping students of varying abilities together in order to help them learn material faster and retain it longer, as well as develop critical reasoning power. Teachers instruct by academic matter rather than by grade. From Pre-K to second grade, teachers at the school instruct in a traditional elementary school manner: one or two teachers instructing or co-instructing a group of students for an entire day. However, from second grade on, teachers instruct students by their academic subject, allowing the students to experience several teachers each day, which allows teacher to delve in-depth into their subject matter.

The school also made the changes to facilitate teacher learning: by giving teachers an opportunity everyday within the school day to read, research, and to discuss student problems. Each morning the teachers at Sankofa have an *Indiaba*, Zulu for "a very serious discussion," from 8:00 to 8:30 a.m. in which they read African-centered literature, discuss African-centered philosophies, etc.

The Results

Since its creation in the Fall of 1995, Sankofa Shule has created a credit union, conducted Rites of Passages seminars, conducted a Voters' Registration Drive, and has become politically involved in the affairs of its local community. The school has also conducted economic classes, parenting classes, and mentoring groups. It has served as the forum for African-American community issues in this Midwest community. The school has also enacted institutional changes and created a professional development environment that produces teachers with strong professional relationships and increased instructional and pedagogical knowledge that in turn works actively to create a supportive and caring learning environment for students. The school responds to the basic needs of teachers and students in part because of its small size and carefully adapted space. Teachers can take on diverse roles that increase their opportunities and responsibilities. The school has also developed an individualized student curriculum, which allowed teachers to be more responsive to student needs, while appropriations created additional academic work and responsibility when needed. Whenever possible, the school hires from the community of parents and families.

As a female leader, Dr. Rivers exhibited many of the feminist attributes of women leaders, such as: 1) a non-hierarchical view of the organization (Bancroft, 1995); 2) a focus on relationship (Gilligan, 1982); 3) inclusion and connections to work accomplishment (Bancroft, 1995); 4) a strong caring ethic (Nodding, 1986); 5) leadership by voice and vision (Gilligan, 1982); 6) ongoing learning from a variety of sources; and 7) the integration of professional and personal lives (Lee, 1994). Most importantly, she was a change agent. The leader's ability to influence and lead change efforts in curriculum, teaching, and learning through thoughtful efforts is the cornerstone of school leadership practices. This role is increasingly being taken over by women.

Respect self; respect others; and respect the environment

Nguzo Saba is based on the principles of unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibilities, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith

The Rites of Passages activities (conducted by caring adult role models) teach men and women that responsible people love themselves, support and care for their families, and they must plan each step of their lives so that they can remain on a path to success. Men and women learn strategies to help them deal with the real world via a series of teaching and hands on experience that are organized into ten areas. These rites are:

Personal Rite of Passage -Life is a series of problems to be solved and questions to be answered. You must equip yourself. Life is hard but you cannot quit. Men and women need a vision and a plan for living.

Spiritual Rite of Passage -Men and women often exhaust personal wisdom and knowledge needed to overcome problems. You may have to call upon a spirit, a being, an authority bigger than yourself to get you through

Economic Rite of Passage -Men and women know the power of money and a job. They know how to stop, to save, and manage their earnings. They support businesses in their communities to help the community to survive.

Emotional Rite of Passage -Men and women must master their emotions and subdue unhealthy, negative urges. They manage and can communicate in positive ways about their feelings. They do not tolerate violence in a relationship.

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