A Simple, Revolutionary Idea
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In January 2009, I began my PhD program with a class on the sociology of inner city children. I read a lot that semester, but one article stood out to me. In "Per Âa Asa Hilliard: The Great House of Black Light for Educational Excellence," Nobles (2008) reflected on the work of Asa G. Hilliard. Hilliard analyzed ancient Egyptian (Kemetic) education and held it as a model for the education of African American[1] children today. Hilliard argued that attempts to close the achievement gap and reform education for Black children with special programs are futile because they do not address the root of the problem, which is that schooling alienates Black children through a lack of representation in the curriculum, discriminatory discipline practices, overrepresentation in special education, underrepresentation in advanced courses, and deficit perspectives of their culture and families (Blanchett, 2014; King, 1994; Nobles, 2008; Shockley, 2007; Skiba, et al., 2011). At the root of the problem is a school system that marginalizes the worldview of many African American students[2] (Asante, 1991; Kwate, 2001; Swartz, 2009; Woodson, 1933/2006). To counter this, Hilliard insisted that Black children be centered in an education that honors their worldviews—their ways of knowing and viewing the world—so that they may become aware of the greatness that their African heritage affords them. What a simple, yet revolutionary idea.

After several years in the classroom struggling to get students to believe in the merits of the United States' educational system, I realized that I had allowed myself to be blinded in a way that many of my students had not. Some of them did not trust in the payoffs of schooling, and they were right not to. The system that I was working for was not designed for their healing or liberation as African American people. It was designed to ensure their compliance. I no longer wanted to be a teacher who perpetuated this psychic violence against my students (Freire, 1970; Wilson, 2011), but I did not know what else to do. I did not know how to teach differently from how I had been taught, or even how I had been taught to teach. Sadly, after about 20 years of formal schooling from kindergarten through graduate school, I knew relatively little about the greatness that my African heritage afforded me as an African American woman. So, I had work to do.

Fortunately, there were numerous scholars upon whose shoulders I could stand. I spent the next few years learning about the purposes of schooling for African American children and the importance of parents and communities in this education. My personal philosophy of education evolved in the process, as did my vision of the purposes and processes of schooling. The purpose of this article is to delineate this vision for African American children in particular, although I believe that the principles described here will apply more broadly for all children. I draw from my own experiences, as well as the work of other scholars in the field, making this work part autobiographical and part theoretical.

My Approach: The *Currere* Process

In writing and organizing this work, I followed Pinar's (1994) method of *currere*, recounting my earliest school experiences to the present day. I let my mind return, as best as I could, to recapture the thoughts and feelings I had as early as kindergarten. These early memories reminded me of how quickly my love for school in kindergarten

shifted to little more than a tolerance for it as I grew older. I always did well in school, and I had some great experiences along the way, but I determined to become a teacher who made learning more meaningful. With this in mind, I wish to fast forward a few years into my regressive stage and begin with my undergraduate teacher preparation. From there, I shift to the progressive to discuss an imagined future for the education of African American children. Next, in the analytical stage, I draw on the scholarly literature to show how my past experiences and future dreams connect to both the history of schooling in this country and to others' articulations of what should take place in schools instead. Finally, for the synthetical step, I bring these pieces together in an attempt to describe what they mean for me today.

Regressive: A Search for What is Missing

What does it mean to be educated? My social foundations professor challenged my class to answer this question in 1998, during my junior year of undergraduate school. By the end of the semester, I had developed a personal position paper, detailing my vision for schooling. I wrote,

> What kind of person does the world need? To answer this question, perhaps we should look at what problems are in the world. Hunger, violence, hatred, broken families, and poverty are just a few of the issues that people on this planet face every day. What kind of person could help put an end to all of these? Surprisingly, the answer may be simpler than people think. Across the ethical, social, political, and economic realms of life exist a number of qualities an ideal person would have.

In the paper, I discussed how I would nurture such qualities in my classroom. My professor invited me to present my paper at my university's undergraduate symposium the following spring, which, for me, affirmed that the vision I had was worthy. I was filled with idealism and compassion and excitement about what I was capable of doing as a teacher.

Naively, I accepted my first teaching job the following fall at an alternative school, believing that my skill at explaining math and my concern and commitment would be enough to help these "troubled" students. I quickly realized that my teacher preparation program did not prepare me for what I faced at this school. Most of these students were not successful in their neighborhood schools academically and/or behaviorally. I made so many mistakes during the two years that I was there, but I was determined (most days), and my principal believed in me, so I kept trying. The students ran my classroom the first year, and although many of them seemed to like me, many of them were regularly disrespectful, making that first year emotionally exhausting. At first, I did not understand why. I didn't understand why they wouldn't sit quietly and listen. I didn't understand why they didn't want to do their work. I didn't understand why avoidance of detention was not motivation enough to behave. I didn't understand why they called my bluff when I threatened to take points off of their grades until they stopped talking. I had never seen students like this. I was never a student like this. I didn't have classes with students like this. I was tracked into higher-level classes where everyone paid attention. Sure, there were a few goofballs, but not like this. How did the teacher handle them? I honestly don't remember. Was I just oblivious to misbehavior?

I knew that I was missing something. My dream of developing students who had ethical, social, political, and economic skills fell by the wayside in my quest to just

make it from one day to the next. I determined that these students just needed more help than I could provide within the confines of the classroom, so I decided to quit teaching after only two years, further my education, and perhaps go on to run my own community center or something. I started working on my master's degree full time while also looking for a new career. I saw jobs at museums and science centers and other nonprofits and figured that I could coordinate education programs there. But, no one called to give me an interview. Ultimately, I relented and landed a teaching job at a predominantly African American independent school. I loved it. I regained my confidence in my ability to teach children and relate to them. Students loved me again, and I found it easy to love them back. The shell shock of my last job wore off, and I allowed myself to connect and take initiative in leadership roles. I was able to implement bits and pieces of my vision. I realized that I was actually good at this teaching thing and that my degree was not completely a waste.

After three years in my dream teaching job, I got antsy, and a desire for more in my life pulled at me. So, I exchanged the harsh winters of the Midwest for a home in the South, with the intent to establish residency and then work on my doctorate at Georgia State University. Atlanta was full of distractions, and my new teaching job was overflowing with challenges that were similar to what I had in my first teaching position. Unlike at my first school, however, where these behavioral challenges were exceptional enough to merit placement at an alternative school, what I dealt with daily in Atlanta seemed to be the norm school-wide. Old questions about why students respond to school in negative ways resurfaced. I knew more than I did when I first started teaching, but something was still missing. I found that missing piece in my first class at Georgia State, through Hilliard's work. There, I developed the language to articulate what I found wrong with traditional schools all those years. There, I realized that the holistic vision that I had developed for my future students was not mine alone, but was shared by others who had thought long and hard about the problems with schooling.

Progressive: Articulation of a Dream

When I wrote my position paper in 1998, I knew that I wanted to develop students holistically. What was not fully explored in any of those four realms—ethical, social, economic, and political—was cultural knowledge. This is why Hilliard's work was so revolutionary for me. For African American children, in particular, cultural knowledge is not only absent from school, it is missing in many of our communities. We simply do not know our history before the capture and enslavement of our ancestors. To address this void in our understanding, I imagine a future where all children participate in a culturally centered, transformative education. Culturally centered means that the students' worldviews and ways of knowing are at the core of their educational experiences. Transformative means that students use what they learn to transform their local (neighborhood, city, state), national, and global communities. In other words, I imagine a future where schools help children in the revelation of their identities, knowledge of purpose, and the development of skills to realize those purposes. Regarding identity, I use the term revelation purposefully because it refers to presenting something that already exists. Our identity is not imposed upon us, but it is something that is influenced by past generations. Identity is not taught, but rather is revealed through knowledge of our ancestry, history, and current cultural practices and familial relationships. Schools should provide space for students to learn about their ancestries and histories and to understand their worldviews and ways of knowing.

Importantly, students should learn about the ancestry, history, and worldviews of other people, particularly those who are marginalized in the U.S. (e.g. African American, Latino American, Native American, Asian American, and Arab American). Parents and family members can be involved in this process in myriad ways, such as participating in oral history projects. We cannot fully know ourselves without knowing about others in community with us. We cannot serve justly without knowing how our decisions will affect those in community with us.

Knowing who we are and to whom we are connected helps us to determine what we are to do with our lives. Schools can help students find their places in the social, political, economic, and spiritual realms and their purposes in each of those realms by involving them in multiple real-world opportunities. The social realm encompasses our interactions with people, family, friends, colleagues, co-workers, acquaintances, and strangers. Schools do not define, conclusively, our roles and responsibilities to people, but rather help us to understand the roles that we can play. Parents, community members, and community institutions (e.g. churches, non-profit organizations) can serve as resources in developing students' understanding of purpose. For instance, schools can partner with non-profit organizations to research and develop solutions to community problems. The political realm focuses on civic duty, political participation, and social transformation. Schools should teach students about the functions of national and local government and how they can participate in government. Students should also learn about ways that they can create changes to policy and transform society to improve the lives of people in their local and global communities. The economic realm refers to personal and collective finances. Students should learn how to manage their personal and household finances. They should also learn how their usage of money affects their local and global communities. Ideally, students will choose to use their resources to strengthen their communities, and not just acquire wealth for their individual households. I refer to the spiritual realm in a generic sense as the unseen forces that sustain life. Students who wish to make spiritual connections should be encouraged to do so, within reason and with respect for others' beliefs.

At a minimum, students can learn about ecological justice, including respect for the Earth and sustainable food systems. Imagine how many problems we could solve in communities if we simply learned to grow our own healthy food! In short, instead of depositing skills that might prove useful in some future task, schools should engage students in solving real problems that affect their current realities in these different realms of life.

Analysis: A Burgeoning Rebellion

Again, this dream is not mine alone, but is influenced by a combination of personal and professional experiences and is informed by the work of other scholars. To understand, in part, why schools do not currently educate in this way, we should remember that public schools were not created with children of color in mind (Blanchett, 2014). In 1779, Thomas Jefferson introduced the idea for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge bill, which would provide three years of free schooling for all non-enslaved children. The goal was to provide instruction in core academic subjects (reading, writing, arithmetic) and Greek, Roman, English, and U.S. history (Spring, 2000). Those who showed the most promise would be able to receive a free grammar school education and, potentially, even more years of schooling at the public's expense (Blanchett, 2014; Spring, 2000). Horace Mann, the "father of public education" in the U.S., designed the first common, or public, school to assimilate and socialize children

(mostly European immigrants) and develop a common value system among children, thereby reducing schisms in the larger society and supporting maintenance of political order (Blanchett, 2014; Spring, 2000). Spring (2000) argued that Mann's purpose differed from Jefferson's in that Mann sought to remedy social ills through education, whereas Jefferson believed that people could become good citizens without schooling.

Later, the purpose of schooling shifted to identifying the most talented children for high school and college and developing the remaining obedient, hard-working children who could work in factories (Blanchett, 2014; Boggs, 1970/2011; Spring, 2000). Separating children in this way worked until the 1950s and 1960s when automated devices increasingly replaced skilled labor. Children who were no longer needed on the farm, at home, or in the factory became "visible" and had to abide by compulsory education laws mandating that they attend school at least until age 16 (Boggs, 1970/2011). By 1960, the public school had transformed into a "mass detention home" (Boggs, 1970/2011, n.p.).

Overall, Spring (2000) summarized the historical purposes of education as political (to educate citizens and develop future political leaders); social (to fill in the gaps in the family and religion to teach social and moral values); and economic (to increase economic growth and reduce wealth disparities). Spring noted, however, that Mann's common school was never common to all and that there has never been a consensus about what schools should teach. Boggs (1970/2011) warned that continuing to run schools in accordance with myths about the purpose of schooling, namely that schools are to help students "increase earning power," that their achievement is measurable by test scores, and "that schools are the best and only place" for education (n.p.), would only escalate the already burgeoning rebellion in secondary schools. Further, Boggs argued that any educators who continue to operate schools in this way "will find themselves increasingly resorting to force and violence and/or drugs like Ritalin to keep youth quiet in school and/or to keep so-called troublemakers and trouble out" (n.p.).

In order to address the needs of African American children, scholars have redefined the purposes of schooling for African American children, often drawing from the "original" purposes of education for African children in ancient Kemet (Egypt). In his review of Hilliard's scholarship on this subject, Nobles (2008) stated that, in Kemet, the goals of education were "unity of the person, unity of the tribe, and unity with nature; the development of social responsibility; the development of character; and the development of spiritual power" (p. 731). The "fundamental purpose" was social and emphasized the responsibility to one's community and humanity in addition to learning skills, developing wisdom, and refining moral character. Nobles (2008) further argued, "education should directly result in each generation's having an inextricable link to its total past and an unbreakable responsibility for our infinite and collective future" (p. 734). In other words, children need to know and understand their history and how it informs the work that they need to do in the future. Knowledge of history informs a child's identity (Nobles, 2008). This understanding of history, or identity, is critical for African American children.

Many scholars see public education as an opportunity to undo the damage of cultural stripping that so many African Americans have endured. In his review of several scholars' approaches to African-centered education, Shockley (2007) determined that an African-centered education should teach African American children their identity; to recognize that all people who descend from Africa are African; their cultural knowledge; to embrace African values (e.g. the Nguzo Saba, the seven

principles of Kwanzaa); and to commit to African nationalism. African nationalism refers to the belief that, because of their shared ancestry, Black people comprise a nation and, as such, should be able to build and operate community institutions (e.g. schools, stores, businesses) independently. Shockley clarified that this must occur in an environment that educates and not simply "schools" African American children.

Similarly, King (1994, 2005) argued that schools should teach African American children to identify collectively with people of African descent; to be responsible not just for their own educations, but for the educations of their peers; to use their educations for the benefit of their community, society, and humanity; to maintain their worldviews even when it differs from that of the mainstream culture; and to analyze and understand the strengths and weaknesses of their community's culture. Their education should be meaningful and rooted in their African culture. African American children's education should also teach them how to transform their communities and society.

What is common in the works of both Shockley and King and the works of several other scholars is the importance of African American children embracing an African identity, developing a sense of mutual responsibility for their communities, and acquiring the tools for social critique and transformation (Hale, 1986; King, 1994, 2005; Nobles, 2008; Shockley, 2007). African-centered educators advocate an interactive "circle of practice" that includes the student and the teacher and also the family and the larger community (Akoto, 1994; Murrell, 2001; Rivers & Rivers, 2002). African-centered educators believe that parents must participate in the educational process along with the students (Rivers & Rivers, 2002). An effective African-centered educational environment incorporates parents into the governance of the school, shaping the curriculum, and participating in assessment (Akoto, 1994; Murrell, 2001). It also places a responsibility on the school community, family, and outside community to reinforce cultural values and expectations, to provide guidance, and, when necessary, give sanctions for poor behavioral decisions (Akoto, 1994). In short, the structure of the African-centered classroom is communal, and it supports the purposes of African-centered schools by reinforcing the collective African identity of the students and their families, supporting mutual responsibility for academic and character development, and encouraging social transformation to improve communities and humanity.

Synthesis: Coming Alive

Looking back on my time in the K-12 classroom, I never completely lost the hope of using my classroom to develop students ethically, socially, politically, and economically, but it was subordinate to the daily demands of managing behavior and preparing for tests. I believe that, had I incorporated that foundational knowledge of identity and heritage, I could have done much more with my students. I could have been more effective at addressing the problems that affect so many of them—the alienating school curriculum, discriminatory practices, and deficit perspectives of their culture. Looking back on my position paper, I realize that I also shifted in my focus from ethical to spiritual development. A focus on spirituality is consistent with the African worldview and with the experiences of African American children, many of whom grow up in church. I believe that part of what contributed to my success in teaching at the independent school was the freedom to make spiritual connections, particularly regarding students' moral and ethical decisions.

My undergraduate social foundations position paper began with a question: What

kind of person does the world need? Several years after writing this question, I came across the following quote by Howard Thurman:

> Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive. (Howard Thurman Center, n.d.)

So, if I were to write that paper again, I would ask a new question: What will make my students come alive? I believe that they will come alive when they are awakened to who they are—when they come to learn and appreciate the greatness of their heritage and the divine purposes for their lives. When this is accomplished, they will want to learn everything that they need to learn in order to live out those purposes. I do not mean to be overly simplistic. I understand the challenges of poverty, the lack of resources in schools, and the testing mandates that can make such a vision seem like wishful thinking. Part of me wishes that I could start all over again in that alternative school with all that I know now. Then, there is the other part of me that considers all that I have to share with future teachers who will be in positions like I was in so many years ago. I want to help them to dream big and implement those dreams effectively early on. For now, this is the work that makes me come alive.

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[1] I use the terms Black and African American interchangeably, based on the U.S. Census' definition of Black or African American as "a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa" (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The experiences that I describe relate more closely to those who descended from enslaved Africans in the United States, but I do not exclude those from other areas of the African Diaspora (e.g. the Caribbean, South America) who have also experienced the effects of European colonization.

[2] I operate on the assumption that, in spite of living in a Western society, African culture informs the worldview of many African Americans and that this worldview differs from the mainstream worldview. The ontological orientation of a mainstream worldview is individualistic and competitive, and epistemologies from this worldview rely on deduction and scientific method. In contrast, the ontological orientation of an African worldview is collectivistic, and epistemologies are relational. See Swartz (2009) for a lengthier discussion of this distinction.