The Nairobi Day School: An African American Independent School, 1966–1984

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There is a crisis in the education of Black people. Forty-eight percent of African Americans are functionally illiterate (Kozol, 1985). Textbooks for African American children are often insensitive to racial and ethnic concerns (Chira, 1991), and they frequently stereotype Blacks as ignorant comics, brutes, or primitives (S. Brown, 1933). Funding for schools predominated by African American students is woefully inadequate (Kozol, 1992). In addition, these children are often denied access to effective instruction. Flesch (1981) has estimated that only 15% of Black children attend schools that use techniques proven to be effective in teaching them, and simple characteristics that assist Black children in acquiring literacy skills have yet to be implemented in public schools (Hoover, Dabney, & Lewis, 1990).

There is nothing new about the above findings. African Americans have received a watered-down curriculum as the consequence of every movement in American education from progressive education to compensatory education (Hoover, in press). As Ballard (1974) stated: "There has never been a national commitment to educational opportunity for Black folk" (p. 13). A few solutions have been offered. Some have advocated pressuring the public schools to perform for Black children. Perhaps the most prolific response to the failure of the public schools has been the formation of African American independent schools.

African Americans have long had a "greed for letters" as Lucy Chase, a Virginia teacher, described it in 1803 (Levine, 1977, p. 155). In slave cabins they organized "play schools" (Bullock, 1967, p. 10). Schools were also founded by the emancipated African Americans and other supporters of literacy education for Blacks. In 1793 an ex-slave woman who had bought her freedom established a school in New York called Katy Ferguson's School for the Poor. Her students were recruited from local poorhouses (Davis, 1981, p. 102). Richard Allen, an African American minister, founded schools for children and adults at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia (Bennett, 1964, p. 83). Prince Hall, founder of the African American Masons, established a school for Black children in Boston (Davis, 1981, p. 101). The Quakers supported these efforts and themselves organized a Black school in Philadelphia (Bennett, 1964, p. 83). The Free African Schools of New York City were organized by the New York Manumission Society, the first being founded in November 1787 (Bennett, 1964, p. 83). Black freedpersons were also the first to establish public schools in the South (DuBois, 1973, p. 621). Eighteenth- and 19th-century African American families went to great lengths to send their children to school, as the following account demonstrates:

> The women take in sewing and washing, go out by day to scour, etc. There is one woman who supports three children and keeps them at school; she says, "I don't care how hard I has to work, if I can only sen[d] Sallie and the boys to school looking respectable." They are anxious to have the children "get on" in their books, and do not seem to feel impatient if they lack comfort themselves . . . (Lerner, 1972, pp. 102, 103)

Slavery and Reconstruction were not the only eras producing African American independent schools. The Civil Rights/Black Power era from 1955 to 1975 spawned the development of African American independent schools not only because of the failure of the public schools but also because of the need to provide outlets for the development of new political views and values. A number of new schools were founded during this era.

African American educator Septima Clark of South Carolina was a leader of the literacy campaign at the Highlander School in Tennessee. Her intensive, two- or three-month-long "citizenship schools" provided Blacks with both literacy skills and training to help them speak out for their citizenship rights. By 1961 Clark had trained 82 teachers (C. Brown, 1986, p. 60). Andrew Young, civil rights activist and former mayor of Atlanta (GA), described Clark's work as "the base on which the whole Civil Rights Movement was built" (C. Brown, 1986, p. 70).

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized "Freedom Schools" in Mississippi in 1963 because of the inadequacy of that state's public schools for Blacks. The teachers in these schools, which held their classes during the summer months, were northern college students. The curriculum included academic subjects, cultural expressions, and leadership development, including the history of the Black liberation movement (Carson, 1981, p. 109).

Some other schools founded during this era were the Center for Black Education in Washington, DC (Garrett, 1972); Malcolm X University in Durham, North Carolina (Fuller, 1972); Uhuru Sasa in New York City (Farber, 1991); and the African Free School in Newark, New Jersey (Baraka, 1972). Another of these schools, the Nairobi Day School in East Palo Alto, California, evolved into a school system educating African American children and youth from preschool to college level (Blakeslee, 1975; Coombs, 1973; Slater, 1971).

In 1966 Gertrude Wilks, a high school graduate and community leader in East Palo Alto, discovered that her oldest son could not read—even though he had attended and graduated from high school. As Wilks (1990) stated:

> I did all of the things for my children that they said you were supposed to do: I married one man, stayed under the same roof, made all of the cupcakes, made all of the coffee, and was a good parent. Yet my son graduated from high school not reading, and that made me mad. I've been mad ever since. (p. 26)

That year Wilks vowed that no other mother in her community would have such a problem if they worked with her. After a boycott of the local public high school was initiated by African American parents and students to protest racist educational practices there, Wilks and other community leaders placed an article in the local newspaper, announcing the formation of a Saturday school, Nairobi Day School, as an educational alternative for the boycotting students and inviting the assistance of concerned adults as tutors. Reverend James Branch volunteered to serve as the school's first Superintendent; Ida Berk, was designated Assistant Superintendent; Robert Hoover, Oneida Branch, and Mary Hoover assumed the positions of Principal, Dean of Girls, and Curriculum Coordinator, respectively.

On the first day of school in 1966, founders of the day school expected a handful of high school students and tutors. However, approximately 200 students (mostly elementary) and 200 tutors arrived! Saturday morning and Wednesday evening classes were held until 1969, when Nairobi Day School became a full-time school in conjunction with its Saturday school (Aaron, 1970; Blakeslee, 1975; Slater, 1971). The school's first teachers were Rachel Bell, Marsha Fabian, and Evelyn Fewell. Nairobi High School also opened in 1969 under the principalship of George Murray; its first teachers were Beverly Dunsmore, Barbara Christiani, and John Anderson. The full-time schools consistently had approximately 50 students at the elementary level and approximately 30 at the high school level.

The Nairobi Day School was described as "one of the best educational programs for Black children in the country" by the Institute for Black Child Development (Blakeslee, 1975, p. 30). It offered a "money-back guarantee" to refund tuition to any parent whose child did not learn to read at grade level. No refunds were ever requested. Nonetheless, Nairobi Day School closed in 1984; Nairobi College ceased functioning in 1979 because of funding difficulties.

The Nairobi Method: Pedagogy and Philosophy

Positive Attitudes, High Expectations

The founders of Nairobi Day School realized that a relevant philosophy is a key aspect of an educational program. Their concept of a community-based school was similar to that of Freire (1970), who asserted that students' motor and cognitive activities are enhanced and they become "more fully human" when they are motivated by philosophies rooted in their own cultures. The "Nairobi Method" developed out of the workshops that were developed to orient and train its volunteer tutors, most of whom were European Americans with no previous experience teaching African American youth. Three materials workshops and three attitude workshops were developed. During the attitude workshops, it was made clear to tutors that they were required to have high expectations and a nonpatronizing attitude toward Nairobi Day School's predominantly African American students. Some of the tutors held racially biased, "holier than thou" or "White man's burden"-type attitudes. A typical

attitudes workshop would begin with a talk by the principal, Robert Hoover. For instance, Hoover made the following statements during one of these workshops:

> The first thing you should know about the Day School is there is no pay. There are no contracts. We have no tenure. If you don't do your job, you have to leave. You will be trained. We will show you our way of teaching and what we expect of you. We do not believe in many pedagogically approved practices. We don't try to decide what a child's mental capacity is; we just expand it. Your job is to teach, not diagnose. (Aaron, 1970, p. 42)

Reflective of the philosophy of education voiced by Fannie Jackson Coppin, who taught at and became principal of the Institute for Colored Youth in Philadelphia from 1865 to 1869, the Nairobi Day School philosophy emphasized labelling and describing students positively. As Coppin stated, "Never let the word 'dumb' be used in your class. . . . Remember all the time you are dealing with a human being, whose needs are like your own" (Lerner, 1972, p. 91). Wilks's (1990) pronouncements further illustrate this point:

> We also believe that every child can learn. We do not buy the idea that because we are teaching children from one-parent families and our community is 99-1/2 percent Black that it is hard for our children to learn. We tell the children they are smart enough to do anything. And you can see the pride and dignity build up in them when we tell them that they are smart, that they are good looking. (p. 27)

Thus, the attitude workshops were extremely important, although in some instances they weeded out up to 50% of a volunteer group!

Skills-oriented Instruction

The reigning philosophy of education when Nairobi Day School was founded was a relaxed one based on improving the self-concept of students; however, the school's leaders felt that the self-concept of its students could best be developed through the teaching of academic skills in a supportive environment. This skills-oriented approach was not the most popular among educators at other African American independent schools of the day, some of whom, perceiving a dichotomy between skills instruction and political education, usually favored the latter. The leadership at Nairobi Day School emphasized both. As principal Hoover stated:

> We are not here to play games. New teachers sometimes feel the best way to establish rapport with students is to play with them. That kind of thinking runs through the whole society. But we can't afford to spend Saturday mornings playing with our children. The programs developed are not play programs, they are educational. (Aaron, 1970, p. 42)

Use of African American Culture, History, Language, and Politics in the Nairobi Day School Curriculum

> We also believe that children must see themselves with a history, language and culture that is theirs. It is valid. They do not have to turn into white kids. Our children don't need to love opera and ballet. They can dig James Brown and John Handy and not be ashamed. (Robert Hoover, cited in Aaron, 1970, p. 42)

The Nairobi Day School philosophy stressed that the motivation to learn and the joy of learning comes from the culture itself—not from external rewards such as money, raisins, or stars. The study of Black

history and culture was an integral part of the Nairobi Day School's pedagogy. Students and teachers at the school celebrated Black history and culture in the form of politically oriented music, rhymes, and short stories. As Wilks (1990) stated:

> I use a lot of my father's plantation tricks [in class]. My father, a minister, used to do a lot of singing—to get folks together and organize churches. At the Day School, we use the assembly for motivation. Assembly begins with the singing of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which is sometimes referred to as the Black National Anthem. We continue with motivational songs, many of which are old familiar hymn tunes and spirituals with new words to stimulate the students in developing a positive attitude towards community. Typical songs include: "I'm On My Way, Don't You Hinder Me"; "I'm a Learning Man"; "Good News! Freedom's Coming!"; "Come and Go with Me to Nairobi School." (p. 28)

African and African American history rhymes were also used to reinforce reading skills, as shown in the following (Hoover et al., 1972):

Genocide
Genocide, genocide,
A hundred million Black folks died.

Imhotep
Imhotep, Imhotep,
Built the pyramids, step by step.

Malcolm X
Malcolm X, Malcolm X,
Read so much he needed specs.
Malcolm X, Malcolm X,
Loved his people, loved the Blacks.
Taught us how to speak up loud,
Taught us how to stand up proud.

At Nairobi Day School the use of and respect for Black vernacular language and Standard Black Language (standard grammar enhanced with elements of Black style, speech events, and vocabulary; Taylor, 1971) was encouraged through songs, games, poetry, and drama to make students bidialectal (Hoover, 1978). The methods and materials workshops familiarized the school's teachers and tutors with the characteristics of African American speech patterns. Thus, far from viewing their students' dialects as "broken English" or the result of cognitive deficits (as Bereiter & Englemann [1966] inferred), Nairobi Day School teachers came to view African American speech habits as rule-governed, based on West African pronunciation and grammatical patterns, and as having several strengths (as shown empirically by Daniel's [1972] research tieing Africans' and African Americans' use of proverbs to intelligence). For example, workshop participants were informed that in most areas of Africa, words are generally syllable-final (i.e., "kujichagulia"); and the African American tendency to omit consonants at the end of words (e.g., "he come" as opposed to "he comes") was also shown to be rule-governed and culturally based.

Culturally sensitive approaches were also found to be of practical value in classroom management at Nairobi Day School. Their effectiveness countered the assumption that the only way to discipline Black children and other children of color is by violent corporal punishment or sophisticated psychological subterfuges. Wilks (1990) recalled the following incident:

> One day I went to a classroom and found a little boy lying on the table. . . . So I started a song from one of our stock tunes with the words changed to fit this problem: "If you miss me from lying on the table and you can't find me nowhere, just come to the Day School and I'll be learning in there. I'll be learning in there somewhere, I'll be learning in there." . . . I got his attention and knew he heard me. He sat up on the table. I said, "Will you help me sing this?" He got off the table, since you had to get off the table to sing. The next morning in the assembly he wanted to lead the assembly. We let him. That was the first verse he came up with: "If you miss me from lying on the table and you can't find me nowhere, just come into the Day School and I'll be learning in there." (p. 29)

Activities at the school also focused on the political culture of the community. For example, Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Ture), who was the president of SNCC and a frequent visitor to the Nairobi Day School community, regularly stopped at the school to share his views on Black Power and the connection of African Americans to Africa. On one of his visits Carmichael, "surrounded by Black Panthers in leather jackets," left the students with the following message:

> Now the public schools to which you go don't tell you the truth about yourselves, because all of us came from Africa. . . . They tell you that Africans run around with spears in their hands, don't they? Well, those are beautiful spears, and Shaka invented a spear called the *assagai* that was the best spear of its time. Now you have to understand this, too. Before you learn to read and write and learn mathematics and chemistry, you've got to learn to love yourself . . . because if you don't love yourself you won't want to learn about mathematics and chemistry. (Aaron, 1970, p. 69)

A Holistic Approach Based on African American Learning Styles

The Nairobi Day School used what has been called a "holistic" approach to teaching reading (Hilliard, 1976). This approach has been proven effective with Black children, bilingual, and bidialectal students who constitute a "semi-foreign" language population (Hoover, 1978; Hoover, Politzer, & Lewis, 1979). Rather than sounding out each letter or memorizing words by rote, students were taught to recognize syllable patterns through rhymes, "raps," and stories. These rhymes taught syllable spelling patterns as well as political pride. (In grades four through six, the school's reading instruction was oriented toward problem solving, core subject vocabulary development, and reading for enjoyment.) For example:

- to introduce the simple vowel spelling pattern ([cv̄c]-consistent pattern):

Harriet Tubman
Harriet Tubman
had a plan
to help Blacks get to
the promised land

• to introduce the double vowel spelling pattern ([v̄v]-variable pattern):

Old Prophet Nat
Not afraid to fight
To fight for right
Not afraid to lead
A hero, indeed.

Research (Cureton, 1978) suggesting that Black students tend to learn better in group activities rather than in individualized settings led to the use at Nairobi Day School of a variety of audience participatory games and activities to teach skills. Daily assemblies frequently engaged students in call-and-response, group singing, discussion of current events, and poetry. Another speech presented by Stokely Carmichael to Nairobi Day School students provides an excellent example of the call-and-response/audience participatory mode of teaching utilized at the school:

> . . . the only way they can't make you ashamed of Africa is if you say, "I'm an African! I'm an African! I'm an African first and foremost!" And then you have to love Africa and people from Africa. Understand that? How old is Africa, do you know? . . . . How old is the United States? Four hundred years, right?. . . . Do you know how old Africa is? Four thousand years old! . . . . Which one would you rather be from, the one that's four hundred years old or the one that's four thousand years old? (Aaron, 1979, p. 69)

Developing Youth with a Caring Commitment to the Community

According to Slater (1971), the most outstanding characteristic of the Nairobi Day School was its commitment to training leaders who would return to their communities of origin and improve the quality of life for Black citizens (p. 89). Nairobi Day School students were constantly reminded that they had to be of service to their communities. Every opportunity was seized upon to help students gain the sense that the community was depending on them to bring about constructive change.

For example, in 1967, in one of the most important community projects developed by the school, teenage students were trained in the Nairobi Method to teach reading to preschoolers (ages 1-1/2 to 5) in the backyards of their homes. The Teen Project, as this activity was named, was conducted under the auspices of the Nairobi Day School until 1969 and under Nairobi College from 1969 to 1977 (Coombs, 1973; Egerton, 1974). It involved about 150 teenagers and approximately 750 preschoolers each summer of its existence.

Because it was a government-funded project, the Teen Project underwent formal evaluation and its results were statistically measured. (Although Nairobi administrators rejected both the concept and the traditional uses of testing—particularly as it related [then and now] to the placement of a disproportionately large number of Black students in classes for the mentally retarded—at the time, few alternatives existed for measuring academic improvement among preschoolers.) As a result of this six-week summer program, significant and measurable improvements were noted in the reading skills of both the preschoolers and their teenaged tutors alike. The preschoolers in this project improved an average of 14 points on the Peabody Picture Test. The teenage tutors, whose average grade-level equivalent was 9.1, benefitted not only from having an actual paying summer job, but their reading scores improved as well—an average of 1.5% per teenager for every summer of participation (Hoover et al., 1972).

Additionally, the participants in the Teen Project received a psychological boost. All the songs and games the Nairobi Day School teenagers played with their preschool tutees were designed to teach something academic or culturally affirmative. The preschoolers were thus given an early injection of self-confidence, and their role models took the form of teenagers from their neighborhoods. The teen tutors were given daily instruction in teaching reading; subsequently, while they were learning what to teach to the preschoolers, they also improved themselves.

Conclusion

The Nairobi method and model could provide solutions to a number of the contemporary educational problems African Americans face in public schools. The school's academic contribution could also stand duplication by today's African American independent schools. The Nairobi Day School was a unique private school, located in an 88% Black community that had a 50% unemployment rate. Eighty percent of the school's families received financial assistance to pay their school tuition (Blakeslee, 1975). With its various programs and its related institutions, the school reached a broad cross-section of the African American community in East Palo Alto and was likewise accountable to that community. Its commitment to the intrinsic values of the African American community should be duplicated in the nation's schools today.

Nairobi Day School's pragmatic position on testing is an example of its commitment to community needs. Students' test scores in the local Ravenswood Elementary School District, which were published in the local papers twice a year, demonstrated the utter failure of the public schools in educating the children in the community. Though Nairobi personnel were strongly opposed to excessive reliance on testing and were aware of the deleterious effects of tests on children of color, they were determined to prove that Black children could learn in a Black environment. Balanced, sensitive use of standardized tests was the only way to prove this.

The lesson of the Nairobi Day School demonstrates that independent schools can improve the academic skills and self-concept of urban African American students. Moreover, by demonstrating that teachers of European American descent can become sensitive to the needs of Black students, the Nairobi Day School model provides a solution to current problems of teacher attitude in multicultural settings. Once the White teachers at Nairobi Day were made to realize that the Black community had its own distinctive structure and legitimate values—and that the relaxed, "anything goes" philosophy toward the education of Blacks so popular then (and now) was not acceptable to the African American community—they were able to quickly absorb the pedagogy transmitted via the school's attitude and materials workshops, and many became excellent teachers.

For those who presently agonize over whether a school should stress Afrocentricity or basic (or higher order) skills, Nairobi Day School's philosophy and pedagogy demonstrate that the relationship of the concept of Afrocentricity (or Africology) to African American student achievement is neither new nor unproven, as some current writers assert (Leo, 1990). The dualistic belief in academic excellence and corrective Black history once championed at Nairobi Day is as relevant today as it was then. Educational research has since corroborated the Nairobi Day School's practice; Goleman (1987) reports that an emphasis on Black history and cultural study can improve the self-concept, and thus academic achievement, of African American students; additionally, the literature on effective schools indicates that improved student self-concept, spurred by high teacher expectations, is an integral factor in the success of African American students (Edmonds, 1979; Hoover, Dabney, & Lewis, 1990). The combination of a skills-oriented curriculum, a caring and community-oriented philosophy, and a pedagogy based on corrective history—the paramount facets of the Nairobi Day School method and model—must be resurrected.

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