

George J. Sefa Dei

[with Foreword by Molefi K. Asante]

Explorations of Educational Purpose 9

Teaching Africa

Towards a Transgressive Pedagogy



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Teaching Africa

EXPLORATIONS OF EDUCATIONAL PURPOSE

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In today's dominant modes of pedagogy, questions about issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, colonialism, religion, and other social dynamics are rarely asked. Questions about the social spaces where pedagogy takes place - in schools, media, and corporate think tanks - are not raised. And they need to be.

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Coming from a critical pedagogical orientation, *Explorations of Educational Purpose* aims to have the study of education transcend the trivialization that often degrades it. Rather than be content with the frivolous, scholarly lax forms of teacher education and weak teaching prevailing in the world today, we should work towards education that truly takes the unattained potential of human beings as its starting point. The series will present studies of all dimensions of education and offer alternatives. The ultimate aim of the series is to create new possibilities for people around the world who suffer under the current design of socio-political and educational institutions.

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This work is dedicated to the late Joe Kincheloe for his intellectual kindness, love of life, and his untiring efforts and devotion to inspire the critical work of minority scholars to gain a footing in the corridors of dominant publishing circles.

Foreword

One is always struck by the brilliant work of George Sefa Dei but nothing so far has demonstrated his pedagogical leadership as much as the current project. With a sense of purpose so pure and so thoroughly intellectual, Dei shows why he must be credited with continuing the motivation and action for justice in education. He has produced in this powerful volume, *Teaching Africa*, the same type of close reasoning that has given him credibility in the anti-racist struggle in education.

Sustaining the case for the democratization of education and the revising of the pedagogical method to include Indigenous knowledge are the twin pillars of his style. A key component of this new science of pedagogy is the crusade against any form of hegemonic education where one group of people assumes that they are the masters of everyone else. Whether this happens in South Africa, Canada, United States, India, Iraq, Brazil, or China, Dei's insights suggest that this hegemony of education in pluralistic and multi-ethnic societies is a false construction. We live pre-eminently in a world of co-cultures, not cultures and sub-cultures, and once we understand this difference, we will have a better approach to education and equity in the human condition.

What I have always appreciated in the work of George Sefa Dei is what I appreciate in this book: his impeccable optimism as indicated in the fact that he deems equity and justice to be possible. It is not only the possibility of these virtues existing in the society that concerns Dei, but also his commitment to demonstrating the necessity of this optimistic stance towards hegemony as the coin of good neighbourliness.

Dei is prophetic in ways that no other educational philosopher has been. He is not a bombastic voice crying out in some lonely wilderness to anyone who will listen to him. He is not an irrational foe of everything that has gone on before him, but rather he is a sober and pedantic scholar who sees the evidences and results of a globalized and hegemonic Eurocentric educational process that has served to "dumb down" a massive amount of children and adults. We are victims of this educational globalization sold on the mass markets of the world as the sole commodity to save social, political, or economic health in societies.

As globalization has increasingly revealed itself to be a part of the ongoing process of the hegemony of those who hold both military and economic power, because with such power the Eurocentric elite have been able to commodify education and

to make a world where everything becomes a product. The reality is that Africa has suffered in such a construction of reality. Our educational systems have not worked for the interest of Africa but for the interests of Europe. Children in some French-speaking areas of Africa who still learn that their ancestors are the Gauls are scarred for life. They spend a considerable amount of time cleansing their brains of this type of education meant for the white colonialist children, but yet African children are victims of it. One can find books written in English that still teaches that Mungo Parks discovered the Niger River. These are a few examples, which are not trivial by any means, but examples that conceal a much bigger problem: the assumptions of knowledge and information are only Eurocentric.

One of the reasons we have not been able to ensure our children a competitive edge is because we have lacked the courage to reconstruct the curricula of Africa. George Sefa Dei is the bold challenger of the system that we have been waiting for to disturb our minds, to create dissonance about our process, and to respect those values that are worthy of respect. Dei is not claiming that everything African is good and everything European is bad; no, he is claiming that Africans must interrogate African cultural forms and systems in order to discover the best road out of the chaos and confusion of teaching African children to know more about the European culture than they know about their own culture. No other continent or people have seen such violation of traditions and values as Africa and Africans.

This is precisely the reason Dei opened his book with the idea that history has been a tool of colonialism. If you want to maintain power and control over people you have to teach them that your information and knowledge are more valuable than theirs. You have to create ways to accredit the subjects who support the system over those who do not support the colonial system. You also have to have an established cadre of individuals who believe that it is more important to carry out the mandates of the colonials than to investigate one's own culture. The issue is often resource management and the fact that long after the colonials have left physically they retain their power in images, institutions, and an entire coterie of the most loyal African Eurocentrists. They do not understand that they are not only mis-educating the children but continuing the mental enslavement of the people. Afrocentric education is not racist education; it is the fundamental right of African people, as with other people, to commence the education of children from the standpoint of Africans as subjects of their own history. We are no less agents of transformation in our historical experiences as other people. We must regain our own footing and teach our children the value of knowing the intellectual traditions of Africa. For so long Europe took its own specific, narrow, and provincial way of the world as if it were universal and imposed it upon Africa; that was racist. There is no imposition on the rest of the world in Dei's conception; he is only interested in how we go about educating African children.

What Dei and his colleagues have always encouraged us to do is to interrogate, in the best terms of that word, the cultures of numerous Indigenous peoples to gain some idea about how they have managed to transmit the values of character, common interest, and appreciation for what has already been achieved, and an intense belief in the future of the world. This is the objective of a careful, deliberate

educational voice that seeks to provide for contemporary educators the path towards the eternal river of human truth. This is not a misplaced metaphor. The river is from long ago, and we are simply seeking to know something about how to manage our own affairs; George Sefa Dei has said that we have to examine everything to gain knowledge of longevity in our institutions and in our projects. This is the most remarkable advance about which I have read in many years in the matter of our education.

Temple University

Molefi K. Asante

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Over the years, many people have influenced my intellectual growth to whom I owe a deep intellectual debt. I shall always be grateful for the love, kindness, and the giving of colleagues, friends, and family who have inspired me in my academic and political journeys. I have repeatedly spoken from the learning I have received in my interactions with my students and research work among youth. This work would not have been possible without the research contributions of Dr. Meredith Lordan, Stanley Doyle-Wood, and Arlo Kempf of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). The research contributions of Arlo for chapters 1 and 2, and Stanley for chapter 5 were central to the completion of this work. Meredith spent many hours to get this entire work in shape and I shall forever remain grateful. Thank you to Marlon Simmons also for doing a quick read through of the manuscript and fixing the corrections to the galleys. I would like to thank the late Dr. Joe Kincheloe. I know he is happy where he is about my continuing work. I also want to express thanks to Shirley Steinberg for continuing where Joe left off and supporting my work. I am grateful to my family – Nana Adwo Oku-Ampofo, Ernest, Prince, Joyce, Helena, and, the rock, Agnes Koduah for always being there for me.

Toronto, Ontario
May 2009

George J. Sefa Dei

Introduction

1 Teaching and Learning Africa: An Introduction to Transgressive Pedagogy

I want to contribute to opening Africa – and African ways of thinking and doing – to you.

This book is written largely from the perspective of an African-centred knowledge base and educational practice. It utilizes an anti-colonial discursive pedagogy: a theorization of colonial and neocolonial relations and the implications of imperial structures on knowledge production and use; the understanding of Indigeneity; and the pursuit of agency, resistance and subjective politics. Ultimately, though, it is a book about reclaiming and claiming new educational spaces for African-centred knowledges, identities, and realities to emerge. It is a book about seeing our place – our identities and responsibilities – within these educational spaces.

In this context, I use “colonial” not in the conventional sense of “foreign” and “alien”, but more importantly, as “imposed and dominating”. This view of “colonial” allows us to see how colonialism is domesticated and how those who have been oppressed by dominant/hegemonic discourses may find it difficult to step out of it and/or even to challenge/resist it. The book is a call to challenge dominant knowledge about Africa in order to help the contemporary learner come to grips with the challenges and possibilities of knowing about the African world and the African human condition. Critical teaching is a form of decolonization. Beyond questioning imperial, colonial, and oppressive knowledges, we need to subvert the cultural, symbolic, and political practices that render difference unimportant. The book challenges the fixed definitions and interpretations of Africa, preferring a much more dynamic presentation of the knowledge and political possibilities it offers. The book seeks to achieve these ends in the following ways:

- uses an Anti-colonial discursive platform to address distorted Eurocentric views of Africa;
- raises questions about teaching methods and methodologies relating to Africa, by addressing the pedagogic, instructional, and communicative need and urgency of what it means to critically teach about Africa;

- discusses African Indigenous knowledges and what the rest of the world can learn from these knowledges, and how to present problems such as HIV/AIDS, genocide, poverty, and human exploitation to reflect larger international issues such as the legacy of colonialisms, and the enslavement of African peoples.

This book takes an important philosophical and pedagogic position. It stresses that the teaching and learning of Africa by the contemporary student and educator of African culture, history, language, religion, political economy, and development must approach the subject matter through an Afrosopic lens or an African-centred perspective. For many youth in Euro-American schooling contexts, particularly Black youth, this is significant since the African-centred knowledge base stresses the importance of Africa and the links to the Diaspora as an intellectual exercise to affirm the students' sense of pride in their histories, myriad identities, and social, cultural, and political achievements. Even to this day many students in our school systems are continually contending with the denigration and devaluation of African culture, history, and development. There is a correlation between seeing Africa today as a "basket case" and the devaluing of the Black and African peoples' experiences in Euro-American context. Black students have been asked to repeatedly amputate a part of their history and connections to Africa on the naïve idea that the present generation of youth have no connection to Africa! How can we discuss the issues of the Diaspora without a connection to Africa and vice versa? For Africa to matter to the learner, as we consider this basic premise, educators must start to teach Africa critically in order for learning to happen.

A nagging intellectual problem that most students of Africa have to deal with is the oversimplification and over-romanticization of Africa, in terms of the challenges, opportunities, and problems confronting the continent and its peoples. This book will take an approach to Africa that goes beyond the continent and connect the missing dots. I am interested in the exploration of African issues that cross boundaries and implicate all peoples of African descent and beyond. In this context, Diasporian connections are equally important as what pertains within the continent. Africa defies simplistic analysis and interpretations. If Africa had simple problems, challenges, and solutions, then opportunities for resuscitating itself would not pre-occupy minds for a long while. My optimism encourages me to think that students of Africa or any one who cares to develop a sympathetic understanding of the continent can muster the courage to confront the complexities, challenges, and opportunities offered by this geographical space. Africa is a place of study – teaching and learning among a people. Through their cultures and histories the pessimism of the intellect will be overturned.

Discussions in this book will centre on a critical exploration of the theory and practice of teaching and learning about Africa, African peoples, and the implications for schooling and education in Diasporic contexts. With the settlement of Africans around the world as a result of the Diaspora, this variety allows for multiple experiences of African-awareness to emerge. There are many questions for critical intellectual engagement: How best to address distorted Eurocentric views of Africa, including White racism toward Africa, its peoples, and the African Diasporas? What

are the multiple knowledge systems in Africa? How to teach these systems in contemporary North American schools? My political and academic project is to stress the importance of Africa as a key educational issue in the twenty first century. In teaching and learning about Africa, a major concern is what the contemporary student needs to know about Africa, its importance in the international community, current neocolonial struggles, and the impact of globalization and transnational capitalism. The learning objective is to show how these issues affect Africa today and how Africa affects the world. For the educator the objective is to uncover how the interests and issues about Africa, including contemporary challenges and knowledge systems, can shape the development of curricula and critical instruction in diverse schooling settings.

At the theoretical level the discussion raises some useful questions about teaching methods and methodologies relating to Africa. In order to identify particular teaching strategies that make for the creation of relevant knowledges on Africa, we must begin by addressing the pedagogic, instructional, and communicative needs of what it means to teach about Africa in critically informed ways. Let me state from the onset that I am not concerned with the specifics of teaching tools. Instead, the discussion focuses on philosophical questions. One must first understand the philosophical basis of what we do if our educational/teaching practice is to be effective at all. I do agree theory cannot stand in opposition to what is pragmatic; we need to have theory and practice working together.

In penning down my thoughts, I have reflected on some issues from my graduate teaching experience. Over the years, I have repeatedly witnessed at least three major concerns that emerge from the students with interests in Africa. The first is around the processes of [in]validation and [de]legitimation of knowledges – how knowledges are produced and disseminated nationally/globally. Students have often queried why and how is it that certain knowledges count more so than other ways of knowing. There is a realization on the part of learners that knowledge is applied differently given local histories, environments, and contexts. Unfortunately, the processes of validating knowledges fail to take into account the many ways of knowing that can speak to the diversity of the histories of ideas and events that have shaped and continue to shape human growth and development. In questioning the hierarchy of knowledges, learners also allude to the problematic position of neutral, apolitical knowledge. In our teaching of African studies we must lay bare and grasp the processes through which, for example, Western science knowledge positions itself as a neutral, universal, and non-hegemonic way of knowing.

The second concern is the role of Indigenous/local knowledge in understanding Africa and to help rupture the dominance of certain forms of knowledges. Indigenous knowledge is perceived here as knowledge “accumulated by a group of people, not necessarily Indigenous, who by centuries of unbroken residence develop an in-depth understanding of their particular place in their particular world” (Roberts 1998: 58). The common sense ideas and cultural resources of local peoples concerning everyday realities are significant. This knowledge refers to those whose authority resides in origin, place history, and ancestry. Through these forms of knowledge in the academy (schools, colleges, and universities), educators and

learners can open spaces for knowledge. For students, the role of Indigenous Knowledges in a Western academy is to serve in a project of decolonization: the active questioning and dismantling of colonial thinking and structures (see Semali and Kincheloe 1999; Dei 2000; Dei et al. 2000; Smith 1999; Yankah 2004).

The third major concern raised by students of Africa is the problematic call to “amputate” the past, culture, and community, knowing full well what Andrew Lattas (1993) says: “that the present is itself constitutive of what it is not.” This posture of amputating the self, identity, and history contrasts sharply with the idea of “resistance to amputation” (Fanon 1968). The “Africa” that is present today is very much constitutive of the past. Hence, for students of Africa, it is unsettling to speak of a “post” as if we have obliterated or simplistically done away with that past and history.

These three major concerns further implicate other key questions for me: What does studying about Africa entail? What does it mean to teach Africa? What knowledges and paradigms (ways of seeing) do we employ in such undertakings? Who is producing such transgressive knowledge, how, and why? The relevance of these questions is that they have significant implications for teaching Africa. I see the implications in terms of the particular academic and political projects. I do not take the position that everyone must subscribe to these positions. But I reiterate that these positions have far-reaching implications that cannot be ignored.

2 Towards a Transgressive Pedagogy

In terms of its overarching framework let me now broach some areas critical to the teaching of Africa today (see also Dei 2003 for an abbreviated discussion).

2.1 (Re)Conceptualizing Africa

Reconceptualizing Africa calls for understanding Africa via local (African) subjects who know themselves. It also requires a sincere acknowledgement that Africa is in many ways an artificial construct and that there is power of knowledge in theorizing and teaching Africa beyond its artificial boundaries. We must also see Africa beyond homogeneity by exploring all the emerging contestations, contradictions, and ambiguities in peoples’ lives. Africa is a community of difference. The politics of claiming universal sameness served well the interests of those who did not want to see Africa challenge their “stable knowledge”. Difference challenges that stability and the community of sameness. There is the power of knowing difference by seeing Africa as powerfully demarcated by ethnicity, gender, class, language, culture, sexual orientation, and religion. Africa is complex, nuanced, and heterogeneous. Such acknowledgement of difference is key to appreciating the many challenges that confront the continent. It brings to the fore the fact that a one-size solution offered to Africa’s problems woefully lacks a depth of knowledge about the complexities of modern-day Africa. To begin to understand, teach, and learn about Africa educators

and students must understand Africa as more than a geographical space or territory. Africa is a place rich in culture and heritage, histories of struggles, successes, failures, and opportunities for moving ahead.

2.2 Beyond Particularities

Africa's complexities emerge from its diversity in terms of people, cultures, histories, and experiences. The diversity and contextual variations and differences in Africa and among her peoples and cultures must always be visible in our pedagogic practice. But acknowledging such difference and diversity in teaching and learning about Africa is not enough to understand Africa. Educators must challenge the essentializing of difference. So teaching and learning about Africa must connect the particularities and the historical specificities to their broader macro-political contexts and forces. For example, we need to see Africa within the globalized context. The "global encounter" still shapes and influences the specificities and the particular. It is always important for us to view Africa in the broader context of North-South, East-West relations. We must begin to ask where is Africa's place in contemporary global geo-politics? How do we resist the marginalization of Africa in contemporary world affairs? Africa matters fundamentally to how we construct the world. Africa's history, achievements, and contributions have served to make the global complete and whole today. We cannot dismiss these knowledges in discussions about Africa and the world. Africa is the world and the world is Africa.

2.3 Creating Relevant Knowledge

Knowledge is worth pursuing if it assists human survival and existence. The relevance of knowledge is measured not so much by what we can do with the knowledge but how such knowledge truly accounts for everyday existence. How does this knowledge offer solutions to the problems, challenges, and obstacles that confront us as a people? When I speak of "creating relevant knowledge about Africa" I gesture to the power and efficacy of teaching relevant knowledge, knowledge anchored in African people's aspirations, concerns, and needs. It is knowledge local peoples' can identify with. It is based on the philosophical position that we must understand Africa on its own terms. Richard Sklar (1993) long ago noted that those who seek to interpret Africa must develop a sympathetic understanding of African thoughts and values, as well as history and culture. Africa's history cannot be easily defined by historic periods. It is a history of the totality of lived African experiences.

Teaching Africa as a method and a means to create relevant knowledge is crucial if we are to succeed in constructing new identities outside of Euro-American ideology and dominance. It calls for developing a particular prism, one that frames issues and questions within a particular lens: "Is this in the best interests of African peoples?" We cannot take a comforting escape route which says "no one knows what is in the best interests of peoples". At least we can initiate our teaching practice by

posing the relevant questions to begin with. Creating relevant knowledge begins by identifying, generating, and articulating a pedagogic theory and practice that uses lived and actual experiences of local peoples as a starting base of knowledge about Africa. Creating relevant knowledge begins by asking the right questions. Although we may not have all the answers to the questions, starting with the right questions aids the search for solutions. How is this social pursuit in the best interest of African peoples? This is a more relevant question than a bland inquisition as to “in whose interests does particular social undertaking serve?”

2.4 Collaborative Learning and Teaching

It is difficult in a world that privileges individualism and rights to ask for notions of community, interdependence, and mutual sharing of knowledge. But such a shift of the gaze is significant if we are to address what Africa symbolizes in the twenty first century. The enormous challenges confronting Africa and African peoples cannot be addressed within an individualist prism. This calls for initiating critical thought on issues of community development, community work, regionalism in development practice, and an engagement of the global on the basis of a solidification of ties with others with shared interests, desires, and agendas. When this gaze is turned to teaching and learning about Africa, the key challenge becomes how we pursue collaborative education.

Let us focus on teaching in this regard. I am aware of the desires and perils of collaboration at all times. Yet, I make a case for collaborative teaching on many fronts. For example, scholars share academic knowledge and pursue research from different/multi disciplines. Educators need to engage students and local communities in the process of knowledge generation. Teaching across disciplines and subject matters is another. Also, collaborative teaching must see experience and practice as the contextual bases of knowledge. Such collaboration should challenge the split between “the sources of raw data” and the “place of academic theorizing”. It must present Africans as active subjects, resisters, and creators, not just victims of their own histories and experiences. But such collaborative teaching will attest to the power of identity and its connection to knowledge production. Thus, who is teaching about Africa is equally important. In our teaching academies, physical representation of different African bodies is significant to rupturing genuine academic knowledge of Africa. Of course, this approach to teaching does not intend to be a panacea but an important step in new ways of seeing, learning, and doing.

2.5 Telling Success Stories

In my mind I think Africa is one of the few places that can be infantilized and denigrated freely without consequences or due regard to local peoples’ sensitivities. Africa is a “basket case”! One only needs to watch current news media to see the voyeurism, infantilization, and degradation of the continent. Rather than focusing on the positives – the emergence of ICT-facilitated distance learning, HIV/AIDS

awareness, and environmentally sustainable resource extraction and management – popular culture prefers civil wars, death, and squalor. The word *crisis* is synonymous with Africa. The Continent is all too often presented as an exercise in failures! Africa is about mal-development and failed leadership. Where are the success stories that can lift the spirit of the learner beyond the doom and gloom? Hearing so much about HIV/AIDS in Africa, one might conclude all must be dead on the continent by now. Although Africa faces many challenges, including the enormous toll of HIV/AIDS, civil unrest, and poverty, it is not all about disasters and failures. When it comes to “development” how and where do we speak about responsibilities and complicities (see also Kankwenda 1994; Ragwanja 1997; Chabal 1996). Teaching should tell the success stories as well as the failures and disasters. Learners must be exposed to successful stories about the continent that embolden the human spirit. There is an indomitable African spirit that needs unearthing in order to demonstrate the capacity of the continent to lift itself from terminal collapse. Therefore, education must challenge the “failures” of the continent. We must ask: What can we learn from the success cases? We need to consider the sites and sources of local peoples resisting and empowering themselves through their own creativity and resourcefulness. How can we devote our research and teaching focus to the African success stories as another educational strategy? There is much to be learned from the successes. How can these lessons be repeated? What are the implications of these success stories in the search for general solutions to human problems? While local communities adapt to contemporary global changes, they are also resisting the encroachment of the negative effects of globalization. There is revitalization of Indigenous cultures and cultural knowledges. This is the reclamation of relevant past cultural values in a bid to find and offer positive (solution-oriented) approaches to dealing with contemporary African problems. Arguably, and notwithstanding any good intentions, the focus on failures serves to justify the continued imperial gaze on Africa. It highlights the benevolence of those who want to “help” in the midst of disasters, crises, and destruction. Why spend time, energy, and effort determining who is responsible, complicit, and accountable for failures when there is so much disaster and crisis demanding immediate attention? The work of the imperial saviour is not about asking tough questions. It is about getting things done for the common good! The lessons of history are irrelevant in the face of facts presented to us about human disasters and the imperatives for quick action. Focusing on successes can give a feeling of complacency that things are alright. Students of Africa should know about how local peoples are surviving against the odds. We should learn about the extent of local creativity and resourcefulness in the face of human and natural disasters as well as the impact of the globalization of local, regional, and national economies.

2.6 The Dangers, Perils, and Seduction of Romanticism, Overmythicization, and the Claim to Authenticity

It is easy to romanticize Africa after so much negativity and selective misrepresentations of the continent. But critical teaching and learning must avoid this