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Expert says others fill gap left by absent black fathers

Dalhousie University professor keynote speaker at Toronto conference on dads' involvement

Oct 23, 2008 04:30 AM

[Comments on this story](#) (3)**SHABNAM JANET JANANI**
STAFF REPORTER

Black men are more involved with families than is widely believed, but when they are absent, other men step in to help raise children, says Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard, a leading parenting expert who speaks to a research conference today.



Dr. Wanda Thomas Bernard stands in front of City Hall Thursday in Halifax. Sept 25, 2003.

"Statistics show that black children are more likely raised by a single mother, but what the studies don't show is how the fathers are still involved and contributing to their child's life," she said in a phone interview.

Physical absence doesn't necessarily mean a father is emotionally absent from a child's life, she added.

However, when the fathers aren't around "otherfathers" become very common.

"Otherfathers" refers to those who fill the gap of absent fathers who have died, left the family, or have never been there, Bernard said.

"Otherfathers is very common in terms of history of black fathers," she said.

She argues black families have an extended structure as opposed to a nuclear structure, which includes a father, a mother and children.

"The role of otherfathers is more significant when black newcomers come to the country," said Bernard, a professor and director of the School of Social Work at Dalhousie University. "They are going to find replacements for the members of extended family, like grandfathers, uncles or neighbours."

She believes descriptions of "black men as being hypersexual, not responsible and more likely to be involved in crimes" are stereotypes.

The 2001 Canadian census shows almost half of black children 14 and under live with only one parent, compared with about one-fifth of children of other races living in single-parent homes. But Bernard suggests the role of social policy is the main factor leading to absent fathers in a black child's life.

"For a black born in this country, life is already pre-scripted," she said. "Intersection of race and class has a huge impact on the family structure for blacks."

Racism, and in particular institutional racism, is an everyday experience for blacks and has an impact on every choice and decision they make, she added. Bernard believes there are fewer opportunities for black people, and that may eventually lead people to commit crimes.

In a diverse society such as Canada's, she says public education could improve learning experiences so all students benefit, including those outside the mainstream.

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"A black child in school is not likely to see him or herself represented in the system, especially not in roles of management," she said. "A black student is studying someone else's history or someone else's cultural contemporary art, and the system is not giving opportunities to build the positive side of him or herself ... and that's one of the arguments for having (an) Africentric school."

Toronto's public board plans to open such a school next fall.

"Shaking up the image that we have of black men as fathers" is the main message for Bernard's keynote speech at the Father Involvement Research conference in Toronto. The event at the Delta Chelsea Hotel is Canada's first official gathering of international fatherhood experts. It ends tomorrow.

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DBCoraill hasn't a clue...

If your statement were true, CANADIAN history/cultural studies would include the history of people of all backgrounds who helped make this country. But this is not the case. There has been a black presence in Can for 400 years. Can has had black communities and settlements for upwards of 200 years across the country. Black & Aboriginal Loyalists fought for the British & came to Can as did other Loyalists to create a life for themselves. The standard Cdn history texts used in public schools scarcely mention these FACTS. Cdn Hist courses, even at the university level, barely a whisper about Canadians who weren't of British or French origin. Then there's the omission of Asians, East Indians & others who have been here building this nation for well over 100 years. If the educational system doesn't acknowledge contributions of black & other communities to this great country how can you say the history being taught isn't someone else's history? It is incomplete Cdn History, not good enough.

Submitted By Riseup at 3:02 PM Thursday, October 23 2008

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Everyone coming to Canada is learning/working in an environment unlike the one they were familiar with, being a black/African person does not make them that different. It is also quite obvious that the "Otherfather" system is not working well at all for many young black men. The Canadian system has been bent enough for recent immigrants, it is time for all immigrants and their children to adapt themselves to a system that worked very well for a long long time, not the other way around.

Submitted By canada first at 2:05 PM Thursday, October 23 2008

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This is the Problem

"A black student is studying someone else's history..." They are not studying someone else history, they are studying CANADIAN history and culture. It's not that their black or white, purple or green, they are CANADIAN! By treating them as "Black students" we continue to perpetuate the stereotypes that divide our nation.

Submitted By DBCoraill at 12:14 PM Thursday, October 23 2008

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