



# Applying Kwanzaa Principles to Education: Kujichagulia

By Educator Barnes – December 27, 2021

Kwanzaa is celebrated from December 26 to January 1. According to the book “The Seven Days of Kwanzaa” by Angela Shelf Medearis, “In 1966, Dr. Karenga created Kwanzaa, a cultural holiday based upon the ancient customs of Africa ... Dr. Karenga hoped that the things that were studied and practiced during Kwanzaa would guide African-Americans all year long.” Each day of Kwanzaa covers one of the seven Kwanzaa principles. On each day of Kwanzaa, Indy K12 will explore how these principles can be applied to education.

The second principle of Kwanzaa is Kujichagulia which means self-determination. For some reason calling out racism and inequities have turned into opponents of these issues being called out saying that calling out these issues is making people victims and that everyone can overcome anything. People can experience racism or inequities and still believe they can overcome and persevere, and they might actually do so. However, people should not have to overcome these obstacles. Calling out problems is not the same as accepting defeat.

There needs to be more self-determination in education despite the oppressive and broken systems in place, racism, and inequities. No matter what barriers people in the education system face, they should continue to push forward.

In the Kwanzaa tradition self-determination is defined as being able to “define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves.” Students need help with this especially speaking for themselves. Parents and teachers should work together to help students build self-advocacy skills. The reality is that parents cannot be at school all day with their children. Students need to learn how to speak up and question situations appropriately. They have to be taught self-advocacy.

I told my boys if they do not understand what they are learning they should raise their hand during the lesson to ask for the teacher to explain it again or when the teacher is walking around the room during work time. I also explained if they want to learn more about a topic to ask how could they learn more. Students need to have the confidence to take ownership of their learning and be determined enough to learn more about their interests.

Teachers must exude more self-determination. Even though school leaders try to provide professional development to meet the needs of all staff, there may be areas that staff need help with that are not covered. Teachers must be determined to be learners and improve skills to better teach students. If they have the capacity, they should consider learning more about education policy. Lawmakers need to hear from teachers who are in classrooms and doing the hard work in hopes the lawmakers will make decisions that will best suit them and their students.

When there are inequities, people who are harmed in the education system must keep speaking up for themselves. They cannot allow naysayers and opponents to craft a false narrative about what is happening. The late bell hooks once said, “being oppressed means the absence of choices.” It is important to bring attention to the lack of choices and opportunities students face solely because of the schools they attend.

Being self-determined is hard work. It is not for the faint or the weary. I want my sons and my students to have the confidence to speak up and keep pushing forward.