AFRICAN-CENTERED EDUCATION PRACTICE GUIDE

Transformative, Culturally Responsive Practices for Black Children's Excellence

Equity Research Action Coalition
UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

Acknowledgments

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AUTHORS

Danielle J. Allen, Ph.D.

Project Director, Equity Research Action Coalition

Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

djallen@live.unc.edu

Iheoma U. Iruka, Ph.D.

Professor, Department of Maternal and Child Health, Gillings School of Global Public Health

Founding Director, Equity Research Action Coalition

Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Takondwa Musa

Graduate Research Assistant, Equity Research Action Coalition

Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

tkmusa44@email.unc.edu

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Executive Summary

African-centered education (ACE) in the United States dates back to the 18th century, with independent schools that were designed specifically to meet the cultural and intellectual needs of Black children. Focusing on the culture, history, and life experiences of individuals of African descent, ACE foregrounds community, culture, music, rhythmic motion, inquiry-based projects, and virtue-based education to support the positive racial identity development of Black children and guide them to realizing their full potential.

> *African-centered education (ACE) foregrounds community, culture, music, rhythmic motion, inquiry-based projects, and virtue-based education to support the positive racial identity development of Black children.*

By using both explicit and implicit strategies to affirm the race, ethnicity, and culture of children of African descent, ACE schools can serve as a protective mechanism against the harmful impacts of racism and racial discrimination on young Black children. Explicit practices include daily verbal affirmations, constant positive visual representations of Black people in the classroom and in instructional texts, and the implementation of culturally relevant enrichment activities. Implicit strategies include hiring faculty and administrators who reflect the students that they serve. In his seminal work, *The Miseducation of the Negro,* Dr. Carter G. Woodson highlighted the importance of reaffirming educational approaches such as ACE to combat anti-Blackness; the use of these implicit and explicit strategies is one way African-centered schools affirm their students.

This guide provides an overview of practices used by African-centered school leaders and teachers of young learners ages 3–6 and organizes them into two types: structural features and process features. The practices observed in ACE schools are undergirded by common mindsets and philosophies of African-centered school leaders, and these beliefs are key to implementing an instructional program that is fully and genuinely African-centered, as opposed to simply adopting a set of practices. These philosophies are listed below:

- Rejecting Eurocentric notions of intelligence as ineffective in measuring the intellectual potential of Black children
- Centering of the history and accomplishments of Africans
- Pursuing academic excellence
- Honoring ancestral legacy and culture
- Recognizing the sovereignty of the Black community
- Incorporating open-ended outdoor learning experiences

The structural features of ACE schools are related to formal and informal settings, funding mechanisms, classroom and grade organization, and daily schedule. Process features are related to the curricular approach to delivering content across subject areas; the classroom environment; family community engagement; and personnel recruitment, hiring, and support. Across all of these features, ACE's commitment to centering the needs of Black children and affirming their racial, cultural, and ethnic background is the central, cross-cutting theme. ACE school leaders often adopt funding mechanisms that allow them the greatest flexibility and autonomy in delivering the content that they believe will best benefit Black children, and multi-age and multi-grade classrooms are often utilized to allow students the benefit of learning from and with their classmates.

Content-area curricula emphasize the histories, accomplishments, and culture of African people, and ACE classrooms create culturally affirming environments with murals, textiles, and representations of Black achievements. Family and community engagement are central to the ethos of African-centered schools, as teachers and administrators view themselves as an extension of the family and seek to create a familiar and supportive atmosphere for students. Finally, teacher recruitment and development in ACE schools prioritizes methods that will produce educators who are unwavering in their dedication to the children they serve. Teachers are often hired through parent or community referrals, and professional development commonly includes trainings on African history and culture.

It is our hope that this practice guide will be used to spur additional research on African-centered education in the early years. Future iterations of this work are needed that examine the implementation of African-centered practices as well as the process of transforming traditional, Eurocentric schools into learning environments that foster the excellence and intellectual and socio-emotional well-being of Black children.

Introduction

Purpose of this Practice Guide

This practice guide provides a primer on African-centered education (ACE), explaining why it is needed, how it has been implemented, and what it requires of school administrators, faculty, and parents. This guide is meant to provide a framework through which school leaders, teachers, and parents can better understand African-centered teaching and its potential for improving children's academic and socio-emotional outcomes, including how aspects of ACE can be authentically incorporated in or interwoven throughout early childhood classrooms.

Use of terms African, African-American, African-centered, and Black
While the focus of this practice guide is primarily on U.S. contexts, we understand anti-Blackness as a global phenomenon experienced by African-descendant people on every continent. As such, we use the terms African, African-American, African-centered, and Black interchangeably throughout the guide. We also understand that there are many variations of Blackness, and that Black people live their Blackness in many complicated and contradictory ways (Boutte, 2022). Some may be African-centered, while others may identify with double consciousness or another variation of Black identity. At the same time, common threads and deeply rooted cultural values exist—even when efforts have been made to eliminate them.

How to Use this Practice Guide

This primer should be used as a preliminary blueprint and a resource to create culturally sustaining spaces and practices that support the socio-cultural learning of Black children in particular. While we argue that ACE is positioned to help all children thrive, given the continued marginalization and invisibility of culturally sustaining practices for Black children—

> *"I have never met a Black child who isn't a genius.... There is no mystery on how to teach them. The first thing you do is treat them like human beings, and the second thing you do is love them."*
>
> *~ Dr. Asa G. Hilliard III*

coupled with the harm they experience on a daily basis due to racism—it is essential to prioritize their needs. This practice guide can be used to examine the structure and culture of any school or program, including schedule and routines, family and community engagement, staff configuration and competencies, curriculum and assessment, climate and expectations, as well as mission and vision. This guide provides selected examples based on currently operating ACE schools that serve preschool-age children and older.

The information shared here is not intended to serve as a comprehensive curriculum or exhaustive practice guide for ACE schools. In the Additional Resources section, we have provided supplementary information to guide the learning and practice of readers and implementers.

Why is African-Centered Education (ACE) Needed?

Black children are geniuses and have the capacity, curiosity, and willingness to excel in all facets of learning and in life. Unfortunately, there are several challenges confronting Black children in excelling: the narrative of their lack of intellectual merit that was first used to colonize their native land and subjugate them as enslaved people; the systematic denial of health, economic, and educational opportunities that has created a cycle of inequities and disparities in outcomes; and the weaponization of white supremacy, which has created bigotry that has resulted in Black children being subjected to harmful and dehumanizing practices and policies as well as the internalization by Black children of their lack of worth.

For *all* children to achieve their full potential, they need health care and nutrition, protection from harm and a sense of security, opportunities for culturally sustaining early learning, and responsive caregiving—talking, singing, and playing—from parents and caregivers who embrace and love them (NASEM, 2023). Preschool provides young children with the promise of profound early learning experiences, while serving to reduce educational and racial inequities.

Parents, educators, and policymakers, among others, are all too familiar with the "achievement gap" or the gross disproportionality among Black children in special education placements and suspensions and expulsions—with the highest disparity observed among Black preschool

girls (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2017). We maintain that any gaps in achievement between Black students and their peers are more indicative of a system of education that does not prioritize the academic, social, emotional, or cultural needs of Black students than any inherent deficiency in Black children themselves.

The U.S. educational system has changed very little over time as it relates to meeting the academic, social, and cultural needs of Black children. Moreover, the traditional measures and metrics of success used in the American educational system rarely take into account the myriad ways that children can demonstrate learning nor are they culturally relevant or centered (McCoy & Sabol, 2024; Portilla & Iruka, 2024). Standardized tests generally do not offer multiple methods for children to show what they've learned and, as a result, they often yield scores that are perceived to illustrate deficiencies in the knowledge gained by Black children, when it is more likely that these scores are evidence of the inadequacy of the tests themselves (Gardner-Neblett et al., 2023). Moreover, traditional metrics of early learning environments and indicators of literacy for Black children (such as the number of words to which a child is exposed) rarely represent or assess multiple literacies that Black children possess or the richness of language present in their lived environments (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015; Portilla & Iruka, 2024). For example, a National Center for Education Statistics report (2013) highlights the persistence of large gaps between math and reading scores of Black and White students. Multiple studies claim to have data supporting the assertion that "weak home learning environments" are responsible for lower cognitive skills in young Black children (Farkas and Beron, 2004). However, the narrative that young children must be exposed to a certain number of words per day assumes that those words should come from books or formalized

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conversations (Boutte and Compton-Lilly, 2022; Farks and Beron, 2004). Yet Black children's literacy environments are rich with words from a variety of media including music, conversations, television, and preaching, and the rich oral history of storytelling in Black families and communities often goes unrecognized. Thus, it is essential that in order to meet the educational needs of Black children, an anti-racist and asset-based perspective that critically examines the education enterprise must be activated. To mitigate these harmful narratives and experiences (i.e., opportunity gaps) experienced by Black children in educational spaces, it is essential that they are afforded learning opportunities that incorporate their civil and human rights, factual histories about their ancestry, and culturally sustaining opportunities that integrate and build on their family and community cultural assets, i.e., African-centered Education (ACE).

What is African-Centered Education?

At at its most basic level, ACE can be defined as the endeavor to supply a cultural base, with an emphasis on the culture, history, and life experiences of individuals of African descent (Merry & New, 2008). ACE encourages students to find a meaningful connection "... with their ancestral heritage by creating instructional opportunities for them to build on and expand their heritage knowledge" (King, 2015, p. 4). In addition to centering the life experiences of students of African descent in the learning process, African-centered educators value community, culture, music, rhythmic motion, inquiry projects, and virtue-based education (Durden, 2007; King & Swartz, 2015; Watson-Vandiver & Wiggan, 2018).

ACE calls us to think more intentionally about who Black children are—socially, culturally, spiritually, and expressively—and to center those ways of knowing and being into how they are taught. Following African traditions of schooling, which appeal to the intellect, the humanity, and the spirituality in students, ACE uses symbols, proverbs,

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language development, and rites of passage to support the socio-cultural and intellectual potential of Black children (Shockley, 2020; Shujaa, 1994). Antiquated performance measures seem to indicate that Black children are struggling academically when compared to their peers. ACE offers a counter-narrative on the learning abilities of Black children by implementing teaching approaches that acknowledge oppressive systems and elevate their pan-African cultural heritage. This approach helps propel Black students to success and fosters a more culturally appropriate definition of academic, social, and cultural success (Shockley & Frederick, 2010; Shockley, 2020).

Considering the benefits of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) for children—especially those from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds—by offering opportunities in access, experiences, and outcomes (Meek, Iruka et al., 2020), it is paramount that ECE move beyond its color-blind, and arguably anti-Black, approach (Zulauf-McCurdy et al., 2024). Integrating ACE principles and educational pedagogy is one way to transform early learning to ensure Black children flourish in school and life.

History of African-Centered Education

African-centered education is an educational approach that has the potential to revolutionize and remedy the poor educational experience and outcomes of Black children. To counter the intellectual and historical disfranchisement of African people, ACE offers an opportunity to "thrust Africans as centered, healthy, human beings in the context of African thought" (Asante, 2007, p. 120). A critical aspect of this re-centering process is the adoption of a new language that elevates African culture and people since almost all terms commonly used to refer to Africa are laden with Eurocentric debasing connotations or denotations.

Tracing the origins of African-centered sites of learning in the U.S. context, Durden (2007) stated, "since the 1700s Blacks have designed independent schools to meet the cultural and intellectual needs of their children" (p. 24). Afrocentricity provides the theoretical framings of African-centered education (Shockley & Lomotey, 2020). African-centered education refers to teaching and learning practices that use African ways of knowing and being (King & Swartz, 2015) to foster Black children's positive racial identity development, self- knowledge, and agency (Shockley & Lomotey, 2020).

Understanding and serving the Black community requires a reaffirming education, such as ACE, to achieve racial equality.

Dr. Carter G. Woodson's influential book, *The Miseducation of the Negro,* highlights the deep-rooted anti-Blackness in educational and societal institutions. He argues that understanding and serving the Black community requires a reaffirming education, such as ACE, to achieve racial equality. Woodson's efforts included founding the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History and *The Journal of Negro History.* In the 1930s, Black teachers, led by the National Association for Teachers in Colored Schools, integrated Black history into school curricula. The NAACP Youth Councils worked to eliminate racism in textbooks and pressured school boards to include unbiased Black history. During WWII, they demanded comprehensive Negro history education in public schools. Activists in the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s also questioned the degree to which the standard curriculum met the needs of Black students and established independent Afrocentric schools to center Black perspectives and African history and culture.

Current ACE Schools

Figure 1 shows the location of 43 operational ACE schools across the U.S. These schools appear to be clustered in urban areas such as Brooklyn, N.Y.; Washington, D.C.; and Metro Atlanta, GA. The geography of ACE schools slightly mimics where the majority of the Black population is based according to the 2020 U.S census, with the majority living in the Southeast and along the eastern seaboard (Frey, 2021).

Figure 1: Location of ACE Schools in the U.S.
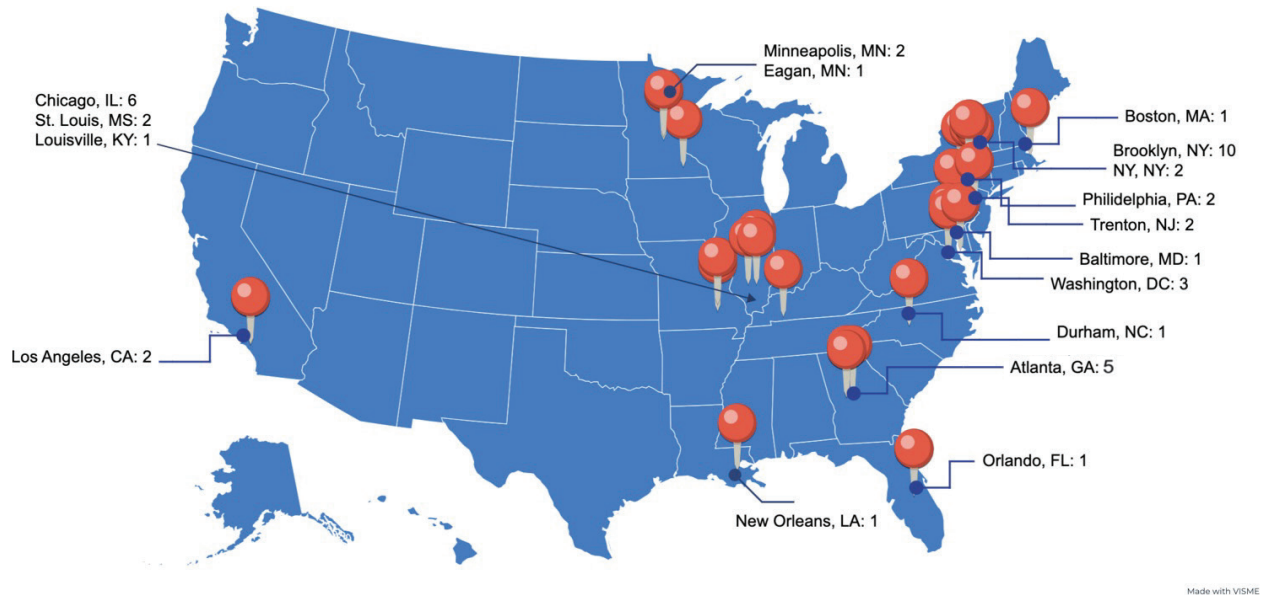
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conceptual Theories Guiding
Culturally Sustaining Practices for Black Children

Much of what we consider education today developed from the gathering and regurgitation of European heroics and triumphalism (Asante, 2017). Too many Black children, and adults, operate from a position of cultural dislocation and consequently are unaware of African contributions and ways of knowing. ACE provides an educational experience that assists students in making life decisions, and this requires deprogramming and reprogramming on the part of students and educators. The distinguishing features in this section are grounded in extant literature on best practices for content and pedagogy that center Black children, as suggested by Boutte et al. (2024); Iruka, Curenton et al. (2020); Iruka, Durden et al. (2023); Meek, Iruka et al. (2020); and Shockley and Lomotey (2020).

Early childhood educators in the U.S. enter their classrooms armed with theoretical knowledge bases as tools for analyzing and understanding the children they teach (Boutte, Jackson et al.,

2024). Extant literature notes that these theories are developed almost exclusively by European men whose studies reflect only Eurocentric, White, middle-class norms and perspectives (Lewis & Taylor, 2019; Wilson & Peterson, 2006). Across time and space, Black children are not prioritized in educational spaces and society writ large (Boutte, Jackson, et al., 2024; Boutte, 2016; 2022; Ladson-Billings, 2022). Rather than subscribing to deficit-based educational approaches that do not properly address the needs of Black children, this practice guide draws from pro-Black knowledge bases and African-centered scholars and school founders to share approaches for cultivating the genius found in Black children.

Pro-Blackness in Early Childhood Education

Pro-Blackness pedagogies and methodologies are important to Black children regardless of the setting (e.g., public, majority Black, majority White, etc.). It is equally important for children from all ethnic groups to learn about pro-Blackness, in order to mitigate the pervasive notions of anti-Blackness. Escayg (2020) offers three main principles of anti-racist early childhood education: a) early childhood knowledge systems and children's racial competencies; b) knowledge systems and families; and c) unsettling and unmasking the white racial frame by critiquing pedagogical practices. Consistent across all three of the principles is the interrogation of knowledge, power, and white privilege. Contemporary racial inequities in education, such as discipline practices, are closely linked to knowledge, power, and privilege. Thus, pro-Blackness in early childhood education focuses on moving beyond "developmentally appropriate practices" to advocate for practices that explore critical questions such as these: Can these developmentally appropriate practices fully incorporate the diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds of students into the curriculum? What are the material consequences and privileges of the inability to do so? Without a deep understanding of these factors, educators might inadvertently misinterpret or overlook students' needs.

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Cultural Dimensions for African-American Children's Learning Excellence

In his seminal 1983 article, "The academic performance of Afro-American children," scholar A. W. Boykin identified these 11 African-American cultural dimensions:

1 Spirituality
2 Harmony
3 Movement
4 Verve
5 Affect
6 Communalism/Collectivity
7 Expressive collectivism
8 Oral tradition
7 Social time perspective
10 Perseverance
11 Improvisation

Black educational scholars (e.g., Hilliard, 1992; Johnson et al., 2018; Boutte, 2016, 2022) have documented the importance of these 11 cultural dimensions for Black children's success. These enduring dimensions are redemptive and reparatory for Black children, yet they are absent in most Western education theories. Each of Boykin's (1983) African-American cultural dimensions can be applied in classrooms to provide holistic support for Black children, who are constantly told they are insufficient and incapable of learning explicitly or implicitly (Broughton, 2019; Edmin, 2016). As children mature, they become aware of how their intellect is perceived, and they internalize those perceptions. U.S. teachers' overwhelming adherence to the foundational education theorists has contributed to a foundation of white privilege, which has not worked favorably for Black children. That is in part because teachers and educational policymakers continue to apply White theories to individuals with vastly different lived experiences. (Broughton, 2022).

A key takeaway from the cultural dimensions is that theoretical guidance should be informed by the scholarship of Black scholars (Boutte, Jackson et al., 2024). Black scholarship draws from intergenerational cultural legacies and strengths that are important for Black children's cultural and academic excellence (Boutte, Jackson, et al., 2024). Indeed, it is

audacious to believe that theories about White children should be unquestionably applied to Black children's development. To be clear, this does not imply that some aspects of the foundational theories *may* not be useful in some cases. The African-centered school founders we interviewed and pro-Black educators understand that reflection on Black children's socio-cultural realities is essential for excellent teaching.

African Diaspora Literacy

African diaspora literacy (ADL) is presented as a concrete pedagogy for actualizing pro-Blackness in educational settings (King, 1992). ADL can be defined as being literate about Black people's histories, cultures, epistemologies, axiologies, ontologies, and so forth (Boutte, 2021). Being literate about the African diaspora enables us to collectively address commonly faced, persistent, and pervasive societal issues. ADL is beneficial to people of African and non-African descent and can result in deeper understanding of the ways African worldviews help "disrupt Eurocentric hegemonic paradigms that depend on oppression and hierarchy in opposition to justice and human freedom" (Ladson-Billings, 2018, p.13). ADL scholars assume people can learn *about* and learn *from* African diasporic culture.

These are the four constituent and interrelated components of ADL:

1   Black historical consciousness themes (King, 2020)
2   African values and principles (Jackson et al., 2021)
3   Black cultural dimensions (Boutte 2016; 2022)
4   Historical and contemporary perspectives (Boutte 2016; 2022)

Four Components of African Diaspora Literacy (ADL)	Clarifying Examples from School Leaders
Black historical consciousness themes	"Other people have ruins. We have pyramids all along the Nile river. [Students are] introduced to those ideas. [...] We built that. And so it infuses [students with] this idea that if we were able to do these things, then we can continue the legacy of that. That's what Afrofuturism is. You go back and you look at what your people have already created and accomplished and manifested. And then how do you bring that into the future or your present space? Let's look at what they did, and then there is an expectation that you can improve on what your ancestors did—that's what inventions are."
African values and principles	"We also have rites of passage. [...] We do that every month. And we have activities. We've done sewing, coloring. They've made journals, and then we have all the girls make friendship bracelets and all kinds of stuff. How to wrap your hair? What is the meaning of your name? And how do you exude that?"
Black cultural dimensions	"We're not a religious space. Maybe more of a spiritual space. So we do include [concepts of] Ma'at: harmony, balance, justice, order, truth, righteousness, prosperity, reciprocity. So how are those concepts framed in science? If you know when the kids learn those concepts, then you're saying, 'How do we preserve the earth? How do we operate in balance?' We don't waste water. We make sure we're interacting with the earth and the abiotic factors in the backyard in a positive way."
Historical and contemporary perspectives	"[Students] have their set of interests and the things that they want to know. So, in terms of the pedagogy, it was important to focus on their interests first and foremost. And [...] not just their interests, but what we felt was part of their history. What we felt was part of who they were ancestrally. An example would be an overarching curriculum that covered a world view, a universal view first, which is very different from standard preschool curriculums. They start with the individual, then the city, then the state, and the globe. They go from in and then out. Overall, we decided that we would, as an African-centered view, start out and come in because the community and the larger world view was the center of what we thought that the children should be able to express."

Methodology

This practice guide is the culmination of a multi-year project carried out in partnership with administrators, educators, staff, and parents from the eight majority-Black Educare sites in the United States (Educare Atlanta, Chicago, Flint, Milwaukee, New Orleans, Omaha, Tulsa, and Washington D.C.). This journey started when it became apparent that even in these programs designated as high-quality ECE, Black children and those in Black-majority Educare schools were experiencing more inequities and showing less growth in developmental outcomes compared to all children in other schools (Iruka, Kainz et al., 2023). What these analyses unearthed is that a focus solely on the achievement gap is not fruitful; rather, it is important to use a critical race lens to recognize the impact of historical and contemporary racism and inequities in the ecosystem of Black children's lives—from parents who are underemployed, under duress, and economically vulnerable to educators who are also under economic, social, and psychosocial duress. This means that attending to just the traditional markers of quality ignores the systemic conditions—a complex interaction of multiple historical and present-day inequities, e.g., racism and intergenerational poverty (Poteat et al., 2020)—that permeate the fabric of Black children's daily lives. Often, blame for these poorer outcomes is cast on children's supposed lack of intelligence rather than the systemic conditions that are present.

Becoming African-centered Through Unlearning and Relearning

The leaders of the eight majority-Black Educare schools sought to identify strategies that could help to activate change within their purview. Hence began an 18-month facilitated exploration of African-centered education practices with renowned scholar Dr. Kmt Shockley. In monthly facilitated convenings, Dr. Shockley led the research team and administrators of the eight majority-Black Educare schools through a process of *becoming African-centered through unlearning and relearning,* which involved deep introspection and reflection; questioning and interrogating our own beliefs; uncovering the ways in which our own perceptions had been shaped by Western, Eurocentric influences; and recalibrating our perspectives to center the needs of Black children. At the end of the 18-month exploration, the research team used a six-month pause and reflection period to digest and debrief on what was uncovered during the unlearning and relearning process, and to map a process for the creation of this African-centered practice guide.

Primary Data Collection and Analysis

Following the 18-month exploration phase, the research team moved onto primary data collection. The goal of this phase was for the research team to identify African-centered schools in the U.S. serving children from birth to five and to better understand those schools' practices and pedagogies. The team identified 43 African-centered schools serving children from birth to five and subsequently recruited 11 ACE school leaders for semi-structured qualitative interviews. Based on the objectives of this practice guide, the research team considered this to be a feasible number of interviews to reach saturation. The goal of the interviews was to understand the origin stories of the ACE schools, the tenure of the school leaders, the structure of the programs, the practices that support African-centered teaching, and the conditions under which African-centered schools are most likely to thrive.

Once the interviews were recorded, they were transcribed, de-identified, and uploaded to a secure server for analysis. The research team used an iterative process of inductive and deductive strategies to identify parent and child codes for analysis.

This section begins with the philosophies of ACE school leaders, followed by information on the structural features (e.g., staff, schedule) and process features (e.g., curriculum) of ACE. These features have been used extensively in early childhood standards, systems, and research (Burchinal et al., 2002; Cassidy et al., 2005; Iruka & Morgan; Tout et al., 2017). We believe this information will help orient system and school leaders who are seeking to transform their schools, programs, and classrooms into ACE learning spaces. We also provide additional data regarding infrastructure, such as family and community buy-in.
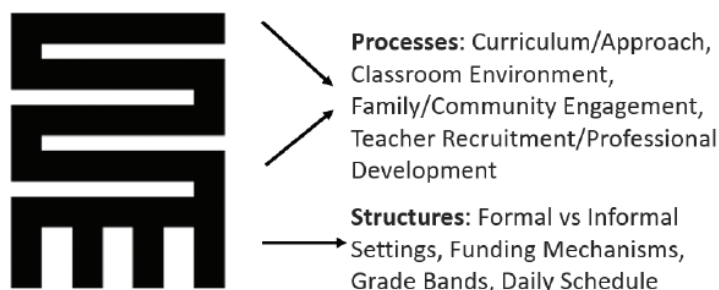
The Akan symbol *nkinkyim* is used to represent the organization of our findings. "Nkinkyim" is an Akan word that means "twisting," and it is a symbol for the tortuous nature of life's journey, including the toughness, versatility, and dynamism required for individuals to thrive along the way (Adinkra Symbols and Meanings, 2016). It is also a symbol of dedication to service. We envision the mindsets and philosophies of African-centered school leaders as the (unpictured) foundation of the nkinkyim, upon which the structural and process features of ACE schools are based.

MINDSETS/ PHILOSOPHIES OF ACE SCHOOL LEADERS

Nkyinkyim: Organization of Findings

Processes: Curriculum/Approach, Classroom Environment, Family/Community Engagement, Teacher Recruitment/Professional Development

Structures: Formal vs Informal Settings, Funding Mechanisms, Grade Bands, Daily Schedule

Multiple ACE school leaders expressed frustration with the lack of culturally relevant, African-centered schooling options for children, and subsequently started ACE schools to fill this void. Many had experience as educators in the traditional public school system, where they attempted to infuse African-centered practices into the classroom, often to the ire of school administrators: *"Once I graduated [from undergrad] I got hired at [a large, urban school district]. I stayed in trouble. […] I was teaching things that were not in the books. I'm an avid reader. I'm a student of African history. So I was infusing African history into the social studies curriculum. I was infusing elements that would give our students pride and self-confidence. I had positive affirmations for them all across my walls. I had an artist come in and paint a mural on my wall that was set in ancient Kemet, showing the pyramids and all the things we built that are the*

foundation of math and science. I had my students greeting one another in African languages. My classroom was a whole other place to be."'

ACE school leaders were visionaries in their community, creating schools and curricula where none existed, and they often built support and buy-in for their schools among families who then encouraged them to expand or make additional grade levels available. Early findings from the data collected for this practice guide revealed mindsets and philosophies commonly held across our sample of African-centered school leaders, which are documented in the article by Iruka, Musa, and Allen (2023). The mindsets of African-centered school leaders are especially important, as scholars have written that ACE is not "just about what we teach and how we teach it, but also about educators' attitudes toward Black students and the lens we use to interpret Black and White students' behaviors, linguistic abilities, and family structures and support" (Braden et al., 2022, p. 508). In other words, how teachers perceive Black students, and the amount of love and respect they have for their students and their families, is absolutely critical in the successful implementation of African-centered teaching (Braden et al., 2022).

The philosophies of these school leaders are listed and described in detail below:

- Rejecting Eurocentric notions of intelligence and education as ineffective for Black children
- Centering the history and accomplishments of Africans
- Pursuing academic excellence
- Honoring ancestral legacy and culture
- Recognizing the sovereignty of the Black community
- Incorporating open-ended outdoor learning experiences

Rejecting Eurocentric Notions of Intelligence and Education as Ineffective for Black Children

ACE early childhood educators center the needs of Black children in their classrooms, creating learning environments that will foster academic excellence and reject traditional Eurocentric beliefs about Black children and their potential to meet high academic standards. One educator stated, "I believe that the content, the methods, and the aim in the schools are all wrong for our children. [...] Back in 1933, Carter

G. Woodson said, 'It will be no benefit for us to have more educated Black people if they are educated in the same exact ways as their oppressors; in fact, our situation will get even worse.'"

This educator went on to explain why they felt that traditional Eurocentric learning environments were not the most effective for Black children, stating, "There's no track record of [White] people who are currently in charge of education creating excellence amongst our children. Yet African methodology, African ways have a tremendous track record. We built the pyramids. This is a key thing that our children won't know unless they go to an African-centered school."

Centering the History and Accomplishments of Africans

In addition to decentering Eurocentric ideas of intelligence, African-centered educators also foreground the history, culture, and achievements of individuals of African descent. As one educator explained, "The people in Sierra Leone were master rice farmers. [Colonizers] studied Africans and they specifically stole Africans from Sierra Leone and brought them to South Carolina to do rice farming. They knew exactly what our expertise was and whatever resource they stole, they were naming those places after it." This African-centered educator made it a practice to herald the myriad advancements made by African ancestors when teaching their students, because they believed strongly that exposing children to the true history of Africa early in their academic journey would pique their interest and their desire to learn more about the African continent and create a strong foundation for subsequent learning experiences. Moreover, this educator believed that students should know the history of their ancestral homeland at the same level that they are taught American history. This approach enables students to learn about events, people, places, and things through a critically conscious lens that foregrounds the assets and strengths of Black people.

Pursuing Academic Excellence

Along with the denunciation of Western perspectives on the intelligence and promise of Black children, African-centered educators recognize the rich ancestry from which their students have come, recognize the value of such an ancestral lineage given its laudable achievements, and understand that their students' ancestral lineage has provided a

> *In addition to decentering Eurocentric ideas of intelligence, African-centered educators also foreground the history, culture, and achievements of individuals of African descent.*

African-centered educators see their students through asset-based frames and make it a point to herald the achievements of African descendants so their students know that excellence is in their genetic make-up.

strong foundation upon which their students can achieve and excel. African-centered educators see their students through asset-based frames and make it a point to herald the achievements of African descendants so their students know that excellence is in their genetic make-up. *"Our children oftentimes aren't told that [Black people] are experts at what we do. They think expertise is something for people who don't have skin like ours,"* stated an African-centered teacher. For example, he believed that his students had the ability to grasp multiple languages: *"I have my students name ethnic groups, and there are thousands of them in Africa. We [Africans] speak over 2000 languages. The average West African speaks from five to seven languages, so there's no reason why children here can't speak five to seven languages."*

Another educator sought to have his students embody the greatness and excellence that their ancestors demonstrated, by having the students dress as trailblazers and civil rights leaders. He spoke at length about how this activity taught students to have pride in themselves and their ancestry: *"This is my young brother [student] dressed up as Marcus Garvey. This brother was homeless, but he still had pride. Look at his chin up, just like Marcus Garvey—he was so proud to be able to represent him that day. This is little Fred Hampton, who would say all day, 'Power to the people!' We have Malcolm X right here; we have Bass Reeves over here; and they have to stay in character all day on days called 'Freedom Fighter Fridays.'"* Freedom Fighter Fridays teach children to take on the ideals of Black leaders in ways that encourage them to marshal the strengths of Black people even in the face of oppression.

Honoring Ancestral Legacy and Culture

African language and culture are evident throughout the African-centered schools and classrooms. One common use of African languages in ACE schools is the use of daily greetings and call-and-response chants in languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, and Twi. One ACE teacher stated, *"We know language is the primary transmitter of culture. So the language that we use in my class is infused with Yoruba, it's infused with Akan, it's infused with Zulu."* Students use the phrase "Yebo, Baba!" ("Yes, that's good!") during lectures to indicate that they are following along with the content. African-centered educators and parents of students in African-centered schools are often addressed as "Baba" or "Mama," which are terms of respect. Students are often referred to as "sister" or "brother" to encourage a familial environment and mutual respect. *"Having children call [adults] by their first names is not our [African] culture. It's not our culture to be disrespectful to elders; it's not our culture for children to talk to each other the same way they talk to adults [. . .] but the more and more that we're here, we embrace other people's culture and it's destroying our children."*

Another method of infusing ancestral legacy and culture into the learning environment is through the use of African music, art, and textiles. One teacher explained, *"I had musicians coming in, playing drums and music for my kids. I had people coming in painting murals all over the walls of Black people who were doing great things in little and big ways. [...] I went out and tried to get every African textile that I could get my hands on and hung and wrapped [the classroom]."* Another educator spoke of conducting a rite-of-passage ceremony with her students: *"I teach a class called 'Pre Rites of Passage'— it's for 7-year-olds because we realize when you're in the [African] tradition, we do rites at 7, at 14, at 21, and in eldership."*

Recognizing the Sovereignty of the Black Community

African-centered educators also spoke about Ujima, which is the Kwanzaa principle meaning collective work and responsibility, to highlight their belief that people of African descent have the ability to build and maintain communities as well as to solve the issues facing those communities.

As one educator explained, *"The basis to me of African-centered education is sovereignty. We must know how to feed ourselves, hold ourselves, protect ourselves, heal ourselves, build ourselves. [So I teach my students to] farm; we have to learn how to grow our own food. We have to work out daily to keep [ourselves] in shape. You got your triceps, [your] biceps, your legs, your back. We are redefining our reality and that's what free people do. If the kids live in apartments, it doesn't matter—still grow food [and] we want our spaces looking as clean and as healthy as possible."*

After sharing photos of his students planting and harvesting vegetables, he stated, *"These foods, they learn how to grow from scraps. I want them to learn how to be nurturers, builders, and developers. [...] We learn by doing."*

Incorporating Open-Ended Outdoor Learning Experiences

African cultures and religions have long held nature and the natural environment in high esteem; however, more recent iterations of outdoor learning have traditionally been held for or viewed as an approach best suited for affluent or White families (Ho and Chang, 2021; Rose and Paisley, 2012). African-centered educators often take the opposite stance, making concerted efforts to teach their students a connectedness to nature and often incorporating outdoor learning into their academic program. One ACE teacher stated, *"I'm a huge believer that [children] need to be in places where it's complete nature. Nature is one of our best teachers."* After sharing pictures of students hiking, the educator stated: *"[We do] lots of studying animals, looking at tracks. We even look at fecal matter because we want to know about the environment. I teach a class called Knowledge of Self and the Environment, and we learn to purify water; that's very important."*

Both open-ended outdoor learning experiences and African-centered education place significant importance on **experiential learning** and the **holistic development** of learners. When combined, these approaches can create an environment where learners not only engage with nature in open-ended ways but also connect deeply with African cultural traditions, wisdom, and worldviews. For example, Black children can study the natural world through the lens of African philosophy, such as understanding the interconnectedness of all living things in relation to the land.

If you seek to implement an African-centered educational program, consider the teaching philosophies of the individuals you hire as classroom teachers and aides. Do these individuals reject traditional ways of thinking about the potential of Black children? Do they have experience in centering the history and culture of Black children in the classroom? Are they open to learning this approach? Do they incorporate open-ended outdoor learning experiences into their pedagogical practices?

STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF ACE SCHOOLS

Formal vs. Informal
Our research into ACE schools revealed that some follow more formal models, such as public charter or private schools or homeschools, while many others are informal programs. These informal structures include Saturday school, after-school/daycare, summer enrichment programs, and forest schools.

Private vs. Public/Hybrid Structure
The majority of ACE schools included in data collection for this practice guide are private and fully self-funded, which school leaders said allowed them full latitude and control over the curriculum, hiring, schedule, etc. Several school leaders spoke at length about the challenges of operating a privately funded school and the difficult decisions—and sometimes concessions—that must be made in order to continue providing an African-centered education for their students. Additional details on the decision-making processes of ACE school leaders regarding school funding and operations can be found in the section on school funding.

Multi-Grade/Multi-Age Classrooms

Several African-centered school leaders described implementing multi-age classrooms during portions of the school day. One ACE educator said, *"Mixed age groups allow for children to learn a lot from each other. I learned that the mixed age group or mixed level group is critical. I love the dynamic of a mixed age group, whether it's for a particular subject or several different activities. We also have peer-guided learning, where one student is guiding the lesson. So I may have one of the eight-year-olds guide an activity that's math-based, where [a four-year-old] gets to be guided by the older child. This affects several things: Not only are they getting the academic skills and concepts, they're also bonding. The relationship that's built in the process of learning and working together is unmatched."*

Schedule

ACE school leaders described daily and weekly schedules that, on their face, do not differ substantially from the schedules seen in traditional early learning environments. The difference between traditional and African-centered early learning environments is the curricular focus on African customs, languages, ways of being, etc.

Table 1. Sample schedule for preschool

Time	Activity
8:00 AM–9:00 AM	Drop-off/breakfast
9:00 AM–9:30 AM	Harambe circle time
9:30 AM–10:00 AM	Coloring activity
10:00 AM–10:45 AM	Morning snack
10:45 AM–11:45 AM	Math + small group activity
12:00 PM–1:00 PM	Lunch
1:00 PM–2:00 PM	Outdoor enrichment class related to African diaspora
2:00 PM–3:00 PM	Nap time
3:00 PM–3:30 PM	Afternoon snack
3:30 PM–4:30 PM	Group play (games + center activities)

According to one ACE educator, *"We do a typical preschool day. What is different about us, is that everything we do [is African-centered]. If we're having our morning circle and we're singing songs, we may be singing Swahili songs because we have a Swahili teacher who comes in and works with our kids and teachers. And then we have many enrichment teachers, so pretty much every day our kids are doing something along the lines of enrichment. On Monday, they'll have [an African] drumming teacher. We have a teacher here from the Ivory Coast who teaches both drum and also African dances. … [T]hen on Tuesday, they'll have martial arts. Wednesday we'll have violin. A lot of people are like, 'violin, that's a [Eurocentric] thing.' No. Every instrument started in Africa. We collaborate with [a local organization] that teaches violin to our kids. … [A]nd then it's pretty much a regular day."*

If you seek to implement an African-centered educational program, consider how your grades/classrooms will be organized. Will it be possible to implement multi-age classrooms or activities? How diverse are the extracurricular and enrichment offerings? Are students able to see themselves and cultivate talents/skills from their rich ancestry? How are students welcomed in the morning? Are they and their culture/ethnicity being affirmed?

PROCESS FEATURES OF ACE SCHOOLS

Implicit and Explicit Cultural Affirmation

A key strength of African-centered education is how it affirms the racial and cultural identity of Black children through both implicit and explicit practices. The impacts of racial discrimination and racism on the development of young children have been studied at length. Racial trauma can be particularly damaging to young children, as they can recognize racial differences as early as three months old but do not yet have the cognitive understanding or language to process potential racial discrimination (Liu et al., 2011; Saleem et al., 2020; Sangrigoli and De Schonen, 2004). Youth experiencing racial discrimination may develop a sense of powerlessness, inequality, and injustice, which can negatively impact physical and mental health (Sanders-Phillips et al., 2009). In addition, experiencing racial discrimination and race-based trauma has a wide-ranging impact on children's development, including difficulties in school, more risky behaviors, mental health struggles, and physical health problems (Hughes et al., 2016; Umaña-Taylor, 2016; Yip, 2018). Developing a positive ethnic/racial identity (ERI) can help protect children from these effects, promoting better academic achievement, prosocial behavior, and social and emotional well-being (Iruka et

al., 2021; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014; Umana-Taylor; 2016). Furthermore, though ethnic/racial identity evolves and becomes more refined in later childhood and adolescence, its roots begin in early childhood and even infancy (Williams et al., 2020), and more researchers are considering it a normative developmental process (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2012). Iruka et al. (2021) provide an extensive overview of the current evidence on racial identity formation in the early years and the relationship between positive racial identity in children and improved outcomes.

Given the importance of ethnic/racial identity for children's healthy development, African-centered schools and their emphasis on affirming children's racial identity can provide a blueprint for how to insulate children against continued racial trauma.

Given the importance of ethnic/racial identity for children's healthy development, African-centered schools and their emphasis on affirming children's racial identity can provide a blueprint for how to insulate children against continued racial trauma. Much of the affirmation that happens in ACE early care learning environments is interwoven throughout this practice guide and is evident through each section, from the mindsets and philosophies of ACE to the school mission/vision statements, to daily classroom instruction and family/community involvement. We categorize these culturally affirming practices as either implicit or explicit, and

we provide a definition and examples of each type.

We define explicit culturally affirming practices in early care African-centered environments as those practices that are enacted by African-centered teachers and school leaders. These include leading students in daily affirmations that center their intelligence, interconnectedness, worth as individuals and human beings, belonging to a supportive

school family and community, and origin from a rich and diverse heritage. Teachers also use curriculum materials and foster a classroom environment that support and encourage children, recognizing that genius can be demonstrated in a variety of ways.

The use of daily affirmations is a consistent practice among African-centered schools. One educator spoke about daily affirmations that were used at an African-centered school where she taught previously, stating, "*[We would] start the day with affirmations; we would do a village circle where we gave children an opportunity to have a fresh start to the day [...] and the affirmations always came from the other children, instead of always coming from [the teachers]. So we [would] greet each other by saying* 'Habari gani?' *and we would do the seven principles of the Nguzo Saba. And one of the songs that we used to sing was* 'we're going to do Black things today and we're going to do Black things again tomorrow' *because children always talk about how Black is dirty, Black represents a negative color, so we always talked about what we're going to do today. We're going to do Black things, even in the classroom.*"

Another educator spoke about "undoing the brainwashing" that has taught children that Black is negative or inferior. *"We're constantly undoing the brainwashing that comes with words, so we don't say 'fair-skinned'—we're not saying that. If I'm 'fair-skinned' then a dark person is 'un-fair-skinned' and that's nonsense. We need to get out of our lexicon [that kind of language], so my children and I think about how we can make [Blackness] positive."*

A third ACE school leader described summer enrichment activities designed to help students explore their culture: *"We have a summer camp called Cultural Explorers, which is an integral part of our school year. [...] We call it Cultural Explorers because we wear our camp shirts and we explore our culture. That's our campaign. So [...] sometime in April or May, those of us who are part of the [Little Sun People] team, we sit down and think about various parts of the world that we would like to expose our children to, and we [create] a curriculum that is [age appropriate]. We [select] which part of the globe that we, African people, live in the diaspora or on the continent, and then each week of our six-week program is committed to the study of one of those areas. For example, this summer, [our] first week was Egypt, and we had the*

Caribbean, then we had Central America, then West Africa, East Africa, and we always end with New York City because that's where we live and where our children's communities are. So we end here with the big celebration. And then, it just turned out that this [year] is the fiftieth anniversary of hip hop, so we were able to bring that all in. So yeah, culture. Everybody has their [summer camp] themes in New York—some people are doing Harry Potter, some people are doing tennis, but we do Cultural Explorers."

Although they are not explicitly stated, implicit practices can still be important in affirming children. This includes being taught by a teacher who looks like the student, having a school principal and/or founder who looks like the student, and being surrounded by classmates from a similar racial/ethnic background and those who have similar manners of speech, hairstyle, etc.

If you seek to implement aspects of African-centered teaching into your specific context, consider how the Black children in your school are being affirmed and centered, both implicitly and explicitly. Do they have teachers and school administrators who look like them and share/celebrate their physical features? Do these adults share similar cultural/ethnic backgrounds? Are the children surrounded by positive images/representations of Blackness? Are they taught to speak highly of themselves, their culture, their community, and their heritage?

Curriculum/Approach

- *Literacy and Reading.* Boutte and Compton-Lilly (2022) assert that "language and literacy for Black children should begin with the stories, histories, perspectives, and worldviews of Black people" (p. 324). This includes affirming the language and multimodal literacies from Black homes and communities, acknowledging the legitimacy of AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) and the richness of literacy environments in Black homes and communities, and the rich tradition of oral storytelling that traces back to ancient Africa (Boutte and Compton-Lilly, 2022).

  Many of the literacy concepts taught in pro-Black and African-centered classrooms are taught in traditional classrooms (i.e., critical thinking, high-frequency words, vocabulary, phonics skills, expressive language, semantic reading strategies, etc.) (Braden, 2022, p. 508-509). One ACE educator described using phonics principles to teach reading on a typical day:
  "[Our] learning groups are very small and [children] are getting either one-on-one or very small group interaction to review. Usually we do language arts and reading first. We're

reviewing phonics principles and [other] skills we've been covering for the last week or so. After we've reviewed the skills orally, there's going to be independent practice, writing, creating sentences. There may be [...] a phonics puzzle, then a review of the puzzle [where] students tell me rhyming words, opposites, etc."

Another educator explained, *"Every Adinkra symbol has a meaning, a proverb, and a story that goes with it. So the symbols sometimes resemble animals, but they're stylized. So sometimes you can't even tell what animal it is. But when you learn the proverb and the story, then it becomes clear. So I'll give you an example: Sankofa is one of the Adinkra symbols and the Sankofa in the Akhan language literally means, 'go back and fetch it.'"*

Another educator created an African-centered curriculum called Nguzo Babies™, wherein she teaches letters of the alphabet using African words and phrases.

■ ***Science, Technology and Math (STEM).*** ACE educators describe creating a classroom environment that celebrates the accomplishments of Africans in math and science. As one educator explained, *"I had an artist come in and paint a mural on my wall that was set in ancient Kmt, showing the pyramids and the things that we built [...] that are the foundation of math and science."* The reasoning behind this was two-fold: 1) ACE educators seek to instill racial pride in their students by highlighting the contributions of Africans to math and science, and 2) ACE educators want students to know that they too can become highly accomplished mathematicians and scientists. These beliefs help to cultivate positive racial identities and positive STEM identities in their students.

> *ACE educators describe creating a classroom environment that celebrates the accomplishments of Africans in math and science.*

ACE teachers incorporate the philosophies of African-centered teaching into their delivery of math and science curriculum content. For example, during a site visit, the research team observed an early

elementary math lesson aimed at teaching children how to count and add. The lesson was set outside, and students worked in groups to gather various objects (such as pine cones) before counting them with their group and tallying the totals. This lesson infused outdoor play with communal learning.

STEM education is important in early learning because it encourages and promotes analytical skills. For young children, early STEM identity development can be considered as a social identity bound by deliberate exploration of STEM and an explicit recognition of the relevance of STEM-related activity in daily life (Hachey, 2020). STEM identity can be defined as the concept of fitting in within STEM fields—specifically, the way individuals make meaning of science experiences and how society structures possible meanings (Carlone and Johnson, 2007; Hughes et al., 2013). Experiencing a culturally relevant STEM education might be a necessary step in diversifying the STEM workforce.

- *Social Studies/Geography.* ACE educators describe infusing African-centered culture into the curriculum, and this phenomenon was also observed during a school site visit, where students ages 4-7 were participating in a cross-curricular unit on Brazil. The day prior to the site visit, students made Brazilian musical instruments. The next day, they listened to Brazilian music while learning about the history and culture of Brazil, the country's climate and natural resources, as well as animals that were native to Brazil.

- *Enrichment Classes (Art, Music, World Languages, etc.).* Interview and site visit data provide examples of African-centered lessons. As mentioned previously, during a site visit to an African-centered school in North Carolina, students ages 4-7 participated in a cross-curricular unit on Brazil that infused music, art, social studies, and biology. The same school hosted a theatrical production of *Mr. Chrono and the Adventures of the Sankofa Time Machine Vol. 1: African Heroes* a few weeks after our site visit (see images below).

If you seek to implement aspects of African-centered teaching in your early learning context, consider how your curricular content centers children of African or African-American descent. How does the curriculum foreground the rich histories, cultures, and contributions of African people of the diaspora across continents?

Classroom Environment

The importance of early classroom environments that are culturally affirming and celebratory is emphasized in scholarship on best practices for Black children (Iruka, Durden, et al., 2023). ACE school leaders describe creating a classroom environment that affirms Black children. An ACE school in Durham, N.C., features wall murals of pyramids in Egypt and other prominent individuals of African descent, including scientists, freedom fighters, and civil rights activists. An ACE school leader from New York described decorating classrooms when the school first opened: *"I had people coming in painting murals all over the walls of Black people who were doing great things in little and big ways. […] I went out and tried to get every African textile that I could get my hands on and hung and wrapped [the classroom]."*

Discipline

Harsh disciplinary practices and their disproportionate impact on young Black children have been documented at length (Meek et al., 2020; Iruka et al., 2023). Meek et al. (2020) identify the elimination of harsh disciplinary practices as a key strategy in dismantling systemic racism in early care learning environments. They cite evidence that "the rate of expulsion in younger children is about three times that of older children, while other work on public pre-K suspension, in particular, finds that the rate in younger children is lower than in their older peers. Across all forms of harsh discipline, Black children are disproportionately affected…" (p. 13). The researchers go on to recommend culturally responsive socioemotional supports for the development

of a positive racial identity. Jackson (in Boutte et al, 2024) notes that disciplinary and classroom management practices are "often exclusive of Black students' cultures, voices, and ways of being" (p. 151). ACE school leaders described how they encourage healthy, constructive behavior in the classroom, and they emphasized the role of the classroom leader in guiding students to healthy behavior. One ACE school leader stated, *"The teacher's place is about guidance and patience and empathy. [...] The first thing we would do when a child was having a hard time was have someone come to them, come on their level, and ask them to center themselves. [The child would] hold their hands here, close their eyes, take a deep breath. Take three deep breaths and think about a warm place. [The teacher would] remind them that they're safe, remind them that they're part of a whole, and that we're here with you. You're not alone. That's the beginning of anything that has happened. If a child is screaming and crying, if they hit someone, if they threw something; it didn't matter what happened. The first step was to have them center themselves so anything that we did after that was from somewhat of a grounded place."*

Another ACE educator stated, *"The most beautiful thing that I experienced in a school setting is when you build a child's character authentically and you build them from the inside out, and you infuse into them affirmations and principles and concepts that allow them to self-correct from a loving place, not from, you know, negative self-talk, or any one of those things, but from a loving place."*

If you seek to implement an African-centered educational program, consider how the classroom environment is eflective of an African-centered approach. What discipline policies are implemented in the school? And in individual classrooms? Are these policies fair and just? Are suspension and expulsion rates examined to identify disparities by race or ethnicity? Are these policies written and implemented from a place of love for Black children?

INFRASTRUCTURE, SUSTAINABILITY, AND BUY-IN OF ACE SCHOOLS

Mission/Vision of ACE Schools

A content analysis of ACE school mission and vision statements revealed a number of common values, several of which are reflective of and aligned with the ACE school leader mindsets and philosophies, which are described above. The common values are outlined below.

- *Self-determination.* Mission statements with a focus on self-determination encourage students to leverage and wield the power within themselves to improve their lives and those of their families and communities around them. This theme appears to be closely aligned with the ACE mindset and philosophy of "sovereignty of the Black community," which encourages students of African ancestry to apply what they've learned for the betterment of the culture and community at-large. These mission statements also encourage students to eschew the traditional labels often thrust upon those of African descent and to reimagine themselves and their potential.

    "We endeavor to ignite, empower, and transform people traditionally labeled 'at-risk' into social entrepreneurs, engineers, and global leaders. [...] We at [ACE school] seek to empower the minds that will create a more equitable and thoughtful world based in love and kindness."

- *Self-love.* Mission statements with a focus on self-love encourage students to value themselves and to hold themselves and their families and communities in high regard or esteem.

    "[Our school] was founded to provide an educational institution that would ensure Afrikan children the development of a strong, positive self-image, a sense of values and the achievement of academic excellence."

- *Social responsibility.* Mission/vision statements with a focus on social responsibility are closely intertwined with an emphasis on self-determination and encourage students to adopt a sense of responsibility or obligation to use what they're learning to improve the lives of Africans in their communities and across the diaspora. They also encourage students to become change agents dedicated to healing and rebuilding the consciousness of Black people.

    "[Our school] will produce agents of justice and change—who walk with everlasting passion for knowledge alongside the desire and ability to heal, rebuild, and experience self-determined success."

- *Cultural and global awareness.* ACE empowers Black children to reclaim their history and culture, promotes diversity and inclusion in the global narrative, and challenges Eurocentric structures that have historically dominated global discourse.

- *Moral character.* Moral character in African-centered education is deeply rooted in the values, philosophies, and traditions of African cultures. It focuses not just on academic knowledge but on the holistic development of individuals who are morally, ethically, and socially responsible. Key aspects of moral character include respect for elders and their wisdom, collective well-being over individualism, and spiritual and ethical development.

- *Liberation.* Mission statements often speak to a desire for the schools to serve as a space of freedom and liberation for students of African descent and their families and communities.

- *Multi-generational support.* Site visits and data collection efforts reveal that multi-generational support is a foundational concept in African-centered education, emphasizing the importance of connections among different age groups—elders, parents, teachers, and youth—in the process of learning and moral development. In this framework, learning is seen as a communal, lifelong process, rather than something that occurs only within the confines of formal schooling.

- *Community.* The importance of family and community are foundational in African-centered education. Mission statements often speak to supporting parents and communities. *"Our mission is to support Black parents to heal from historical and ongoing trauma and interrupt intergenerational violence to build resilient and joyful Black families in community."*

If you seek to implement aspects of African-centered teaching into your specific context, consider what values are being espoused in your school's mission and vision statements. Do these statements center community, liberation for all, social responsibility, and self-love?

Family, Parent, and Community Engagement

An analysis of mission statements and qualitative interview data reveals an emphasis on parental support and creating community for whole families to thrive through their child's education.

School leaders seek to create a familial, warm atmosphere for students, as they believe this is the kind of environment that affirms Black children. This is evidenced through the titles used for ACE teachers and leaders: *"Mama and Baba. [...] Most of the male teachers are the enrichment teachers but the staff is primarily females, and we're all called Mama [...] because that is the African village. And Baba, that's the male who's part of the village. We take responsibility and accountability for our children, whether we gave birth to them or not."*

ACE school leaders described creating opportunities for parents to be involved at the school. As one administrator explained, *"I still have a high level of parent involvement because I've infused the concept of a co-op. I've been functioning that way for the last seven years. A co-op element is where parents get to participate within the classroom in field trip opportunities. I have a very talented group of parents. Most of my parents are entrepreneurs. They have a home-based business that they work full-time or part-time. If it's a two-parent household, one parent runs the family business, and the other one works a job. Most of my folks are self-employed to some degree, so they have some flexibility in their schedules. I have parents who come in and teach a workshop. They come in and they do visual art projects, hands-on activities. I have parents who own various types of businesses, so they are able to donate items from their businesses. I've had parents come in and do cooking classes. All kinds of things because the parent body is very talented, even for those who are just able to volunteer to carpool [for a] field trip. [...] They drive their vehicle. They stay for the field trip and they help chaperone. [...] Parents help—some come in and they clean the school. They come in, they clean, they decorate, they paint, they come in and build things and fix things, and just all kinds of ways that they can give. I had one parent who had some kind of grant that she got as a homeschooling parent. And she donated her entire grant to our school, so we were able to get a brand-new printer. We were able to get tablets for the children, all kinds of new books and learning materials. People contribute in a variety of ways, and that is really important because that's what helps make it go right."*

If you seek to implement aspects of African-centered teaching practices into your specific early learning context, consider how parents and community members are integrated into the workings of the school. How do students address adults in the school environment? How are parents/caregivers addressed?

Recruitment of Teachers within ACE Schools

Teachers are often hired through parent or community referrals. As one ACE school leader explained: *"We talk to our community. So we think of our parents as part of our Little Sun People community [...] when we're looking [for new hires]. So say, for instance, our administrative assistant before the young man who's our current administrative assistant, that person had a major health issue and had to leave very abruptly. And we put the word out to the entire Little Sun People community— meaning the parents, the board, friends of Little Sun People. We also put it in our newsletter that we were [urgently] looking for a new administrative assistant, and one of the grandparents of a current student called us immediately: 'I have somebody for you.' So that is one of the ways that it happens. With the teachers, it has happened similarly, [with referrals] from friends, family, community, resource sites, and internships."*

Training of Teachers

Meek et al. (2020) highlight the importance of embedding equity into professional development for the teaching force, noting the following: "Anyone working in the ECE system should have comprehensive and sustained training on the history of race and racism, implicit bias and its manifestations in decision making, culturally responsive and sustaining practices and pedagogy, dual language learning, inclusive best practices, and building positive relationships with diverse families" (p. 9).

These researchers assert that racial equity training should be required as a part of credentialing and ongoing professional development and that professional development trainers and coaches should have a deep understanding of the history of race and racism and how it impacts students and learning environments.

Infusing African history and culture deeply into the curriculum is a central goal of ACE school leaders. One specifically described her desire for her teachers to eschew performative aspects of African-centered teaching in favor of deep engagement with African culture and history in lesson planning and delivery.

Another ACE school leader described an annual professional development retreat held for the staff at her school. The year prior, the retreat was facilitated by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, and the facilitators spoke about systemic racism and what it means for the work their school does as an African-centered school. *"When we did our staff retreat last year, [it] was led by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. We had a whole weekend with me and my teachers—just spending a weekend with them, having them talk to us and teach us about racism and systemic racism specifically in this country. But really, it's global. And what that means for us and our organization, how to move forward."*

This same school leader also described her school hiring a scholar of Black history to lead a 12-week professional development series with her staff. *"Another thing that we did recently is we hired a professor of Black history. [Name redacted], who [edits a Black history and culture journal], is also a professor here at [a local university] in African studies. So he met with [...] me and my staff for 12 weeks and he would give us activities, lessons, etc., to think about, and then we would all get together and take our laptops and go in various places around the school, and we would meet with him virtually and discuss and think about those various topics in African history [and] culture."*

Leadership Supports

The Council for Independent Black Institutions serves as a resource for African-centered school leaders and teachers, sponsoring the CIBI Council on African-Centered Education Conference annually as well as a CIBI Science Expo and the Baba Hannibal Tyrus Afrik Teaching Training Institution, sponsored on a more intermittent basis.

If you seek to implement aspects of African-centered teaching practices into your specific early learning context, consider what criteria you are using to identify qualified teaching and administrative staff. What mindset should they embody? What kind of training and professional development opportunities are provided for staff? Which networks and professional associations are you joining to identify and create community with like-minded teachers and school administrators?

Funding

ACE school leaders noted that securing adequate funding is a consistent challenge. A number of African-centered schools have closed in recent years due to inadequate funding. School leaders described creative avenues through which to fundraise and keep their schools in operation, including accepting public funding (and consequently, a certain degree of government oversight) as well as communal, school-based financial supports, where parents can donate funds and/or receive assistance with school tuition. One administrator noted, *"[When my daughter was young], there were schools that I knew were African-centered [...] but now all of those schools are gone. Over the [...] years, the amount of struggle it takes, the amount of resources that don't come to the hands of Black and Brown people—they weren't able to get enough [financial resources] to keep going, and they all closed."*

Another African-centered school leader described the challenge of operating a private, African-centered school for families who often were unable to afford tuition, while wanting to maintain as much agency and autonomy as possible in how the school functioned: *"At the beginning, I tried to pick the best structure in order to have the most freedom. Once, I looked into [opening an African-centered] day care. If you have a day care center, then you have to list it with the county, and you have to follow the guidelines that they set out."*

The educator went on to describe how the county mandates certain nutrition guidelines that were counter to the values of families that she served; for example, the county required schools to serve dairy milk, and while students were not required to drink it, dairy milk must be served. *"I wasn't willing to do that. I'm not about to set a glass of [dairy] milk in front of these babies who are vegan. Especially at that age, where parents are probably instilling [these values], and children don't have that discipline to [refuse dairy milk] if it's readily available. So I declined to go that route."*

ACE school leaders described public funding used to subsidize the cost of operating the school. However, this was not common across participants. One leader explained, *"We have DOE [funding]. Three of our classes are [state subsidized], because the Black and Brown people who are here, even if they are middle class, [the high cost of living] is a struggle. Having the Pre-K classes really helps our parents, which means that from 8:40 to 3:00 they don't have to pay anything if they just use those services. [...] So now, us [accepting public funds] having to be part of the [state education agency], has definitely [brought] additional challenges as an institution."*

One ACE school leader described annual fundraisers and a requirement that parents of enrolled students participate: *"We have annual fundraisers that we do and everybody is required [to participate]. I learned how to make it a requirement and not optional. [...] That part really is essential, and it makes them accountable to help in their child's educational process."*

Limitations

This practice guide is intended as an introduction and overview of African-centered practices for school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members. The guide describes a number of practices but stops short of providing detailed instructions on implementation. Future iterations may explore phases of implementation as well as instructions for implementing African-centered teaching in various contexts.

Additionally, this practice guide does not provide empirical, quantifiable evidence of the success of these practices, for a number of reasons. One is that the age ranges and grade levels included here are generally not included on state standardized exams. Future work may administer age-appropriate assessments to determine academic outcomes resulting from African-centered practices; however, another important distinction to make is that African-centered school leaders generally place little emphasis on standardized testing, particularly with children ages 3-6.

Finally, this guide is limited to the variety of school types included in the sample. All of the schools included in this data collection were privately run, which has implications for the amount of flexibility the school leaders and teachers have in setting the curriculum and academic program. Future work should examine African-centered public schools serving students in Pre-K through 2nd grade.

Conclusion

African-centered schools have been in operation for more than 200 years and have long provided affirming and enriching educational opportunities for African children. As the impacts of racism and racial discrimination on the growth and development of our youngest learners become more apparent, the educational community faces a critical question: How can we structure early learning environments so that they center the needs, history, and culture of Black children? This practice guide seeks to serve as a primer on African-centered education for children ages 3-6, as school administrators, teachers, parents, and community members look for solutions and learning environments that position their children for success.

This practice guide opens with an overview of African-centered education in the United States and explains the theoretical frameworks underpinning our analysis of the data, which include the 11 Cultural Dimensions for African American Children's Learning Excellence and the four components of African Diaspora Literacy. Next, the practice guide outlines the implicit and explicit culturally affirming practices used by ACE schools and offers an in-depth explanation of ACE's implementation across the curriculum, as well as how ACE schools are structured, how they engage parents and community members, and how teachers and principals are trained and supported.

It is our hope that this practice guide will be used as a springboard for future work on ACE in early learning settings, and that as future editions of the practice guide are published, more ACE school leaders and teachers provide input on how they have successfully implemented African-centered teaching.

Additional Resources

Research and papers on schools transitioning from non-ACE environments to ACE environments

- Shockley, K. G., & LeNiles, K. (2018). Meeting the People Where They Are: The Promises and Perils of Attempting an African Centered Institution in a Public School System. *Journal of Pan African Studies, 11*(4).

  Purpose and Overview
  The study aims to understand the experiences of an African-centered principal and teacher in transforming a regular public school into an African-centered institution. The principal and teacher, referred to as "Principal Obenga" and "Baba Baye," lead the school and support other educators in adopting African-centered practices.

  Findings
  The findings are organized around two themes:
  1. **African-Centered Principals Lead from Among the People:** Principal Obenga demonstrates leadership by being actively involved in the school and community. He addresses issues with empathy and promotes African-centered ideals in his interactions.
  2. **African-Centered Personal Transformation is a Prerequisite for African-Centered Teaching:** Baba Baye emphasizes the importance of personal transformation for teachers. He uses African-centered methods in the classroom and believes that teachers must adapt their personalities to effectively teach Black children.

  Implications
  The study highlights the challenges of implementing African-centered education in public schools. It argues that African-centered education is essential for addressing the cultural and academic needs of Black children. The authors call for more support for private African-centered schools and increased community involvement in public and charter African-centered schools.

- Shockley, K. (2011). Reaching African American students: Profile of an afrocentric teacher. *Journal of Black Studies, 42*(7), 1027-1046.

Method

The study uses an Africalogical critical ethnographic biographical case study methodology. The author spent years tracking the teaching and community outreach of a selected teacher, Brother Ture, as well as conducting interviews, recording observations, and participating in cultural activities.

Findings

1. **Energy and Knowledge:** Brother Ture brings immense energy and African cultural knowledge to his teaching, creating a family atmosphere in the classroom.
2. **Relationship Building:** He builds deep connections with students, using African proverbs and historical examples to teach life lessons.
3. **Transformation and Teaching:** His teaching methods include critical thinking, cultural relevancy, and engaging activities that keep students deeply involved in learning.

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