

Reconnecting and reclaiming Africentricity: Applying Africentric principles and pedagogy in early learning and child care settings

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Abstract: An Africentric Early Childhood Education diploma program offered in Nova Scotia (Canada) at the Nova Scotia Community College has been highlighted as a community asset, bringing strength to the early childhood sector. Underpinned by the philosophy of Ubuntu, this pre-service training fosters a supportive learning environment for Black early childhood educators. This research used a Photovoice methodology to explore the application of Africentric principles and pedagogy from participants (n=12) who were graduates of this program and working in early childhood settings during the time of the study. Through a series of workshops, participants identified five key themes: 1) I am the foundation; 2) Connection; 3) Our cultural identity; 4) Self-expression; and 5) Support. Participants referred to themselves as foundational for driving change in early childhood education and curated environments that offered authentic learning experiences of cultural advocacy. At the same time, participants shared feelings of not being supported in their practice as educators, primarily by program administrators, which hindered trust. Participants collectively developed recommendations for the early childhood sector to improve cultural safety and responsiveness. The results from the study are transferable to other educational settings in efforts to challenge systemic racism and ensure safe working environments for educators.

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Introduction

Federal commitments to the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system over the recent years has heightened attention on the importance of high-quality early learning environments (Government of Canada, 2022). While these investments to address barriers of accessibility and affordability of early childhood education are critically important (Akbari et al., 2020), it is also vital to ensure ELCC programs are culturally safe, responsive and anti-oppressive for the diverse Canadian population of educators, families, and children. An anti-oppressive education focuses on disrupting the hegemony of gender, ableism, and race, to name a few, and this is especially pertinent given systemic issues of anti-Black racism in Canada (Callaghan et al., 2023; Mullings et al., 2016). While culturally safe and responsive ELCC must be at the foundation of efforts to transform the system, prior research has criticized early childhood environments for their prioritization of Eurocentric middle-class cultural values, literacies, and practices, which includes the over punishment and reprimanding of Black children, lack of representation in staffing and materials that reflect the identities of Black and racialized children and a lack

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of recognition and celebration for non-European cultural holidays (Iruka et al., 2021; Pimentel et al., 2023; Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). Additional research is needed to identify strategies to move the ELCC system towards culturally safe, responsive, and inclusive programs for all.

It is essential to amplify the first-voice experiences of Black educators given the dominance of white heteronormative values across the ELCC and broader education system, particularly in Canada where there is limited research. This is even more significant given African Nova Scotians being one of the four founding cultures of the province, which we expand on further below. While there is less research from early childhood education settings, many racialized educators in school settings have reported experiencing feelings of isolation and a sense of being devalued in their efforts toward racial justice as a result of racism, ignorance, and cultural insensitivity by white colleagues (Howard, 2014; Howard & James, 2019; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016). In predominantly white educational spaces, Black educators have also noted minimizing themselves to avoid being associated with harmful stereotypes held by the dominant group associated with Black identities, such as being loud and aggressive, a phenomenon described as “pathologizing cultural values and communication styles” (Brown, 2019, p. 188-189). Additionally, Pizarro and Kohli’s (2020) study used the concept of ‘Racial Battle Fatigue’ to unpack the impacts of racism on racialized educators working in majority white spaces. The significant impacts of racism experienced by racialized educators lead them to feel less confident and doubt themselves within the Eurocentric education system; racialized educators also felt they needed to limit their goals as educators given the lack of acknowledgement and existence of racism, which impacted their overall psychological and physiological wellbeing (Brantley, 2023; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Walton et al., 2024).

Research has also reported that Black educators feel the need to work extra hard to prove their worth and value and be mentors for Black children who they notice are not receiving the support they deserve (Brown, 2019). Howard (2014) goes on to assert that “... the choice that politically conscious Black teachers make to teach Black students how to navigate schools and society and to engage in politically relevant pedagogy in multiracial schools is usually a choice to gamble with one’s career” (p. 513-514). Often, Black educators have to make the difficult decision to remain silent and keep their jobs or challenge the Eurocentric system in which they practice and risk losing it all—a reality that is not the same for their white colleagues. Hill (2023) explains that when one’s education centres their racial identity a sense of liberation is experienced. Liberatory education, especially one centred on one’s racial identity, enables students to be self aware and self directed as learners (Hammond, 2021). This transformative approach to education decentres students as passive learners, rather empowers students to critically examine and challenge oppressive structures and systems (Hammond, 2021).

The perspectives of Black pre-service educators have also been explored in the literature. For example, in a USA study from Souto-Manning and Cheruvu (2016), participants of various racial backgrounds (e.g., Latino, Asian, Arab American and African American) described feeling excluded during their pre-service training program and felt a sense of internalized racism as a result of the foundation of their program that was derived from a dominant white mainstream dialogue. The overall identity of educators is further influenced by their social context and additional intersecting identities, along with their race. For example, African, Muslim, Refugee pre-service early childhood educators in Canada discussed the conflict they experience in how care was practiced in their own culture and home countries, compared to how their practicum sites practiced care—specifically as it related to the independence of children during mealtimes (Massing, 2018). These educators felt the need to assimilate to a certain degree so that they could belong in this new community, however concurrently needing to find the balance of how much to give up their own cultural values and beliefs (Massing, 2018). The intersection of race alongside of immigrant identity may further influence barriers students encounter in pre-service training and as they graduate from their programs and begin their professional educator roles.

Africentric Early Childhood Education

Research affirms that when viewing the world from an African-centred perspective, it allows for a lens into the interest of people from the African diaspora, emphasizing cooperation and spirituality

(Schiele, 2017). Hill (2023) states that although Africentricity holds special significance for Black people, it can also be a worldview held by non-African descent people alike. The importance of interconnectedness, spirituality, and harmony is further emphasized in an Africentric approach to education, which strengthens one's cultural identity within Black communities (Hunn, 2004; Ramirez et al., 2024). For Black early childhood educators, reconnecting and reclaiming Africentric values, beliefs, and ways of knowing and being can connect themselves and Black children to values of the African Diaspora, while also countering negative messages of Black inferiority and inaccurate historical representations of Black people (Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020). Research on Africentric schools has reported a sense of empowerment for Black students in grades K-12 in promoting their identity (Howard & James, 2019; Hudson et al., 2024), however, to our knowledge, there is a gap in research on the experiences of educators within a preservice Africentric educational model.

Our research team sought to understand the influence and power of Africentric early childhood education as inspired by Black educators' preservice educational experiences. Specifically, the Africentric Early Childhood Education Cohort is a diploma program offered by the Nova Scotia Community College and has been highlighted as a community asset, bringing strength to the ELCC sector (Pimentel et al., 2023). The east coast province of Nova Scotia is home to the largest historical Black population in Canada, with families arriving more than 400 years ago across 52 African Nova Scotian communities (Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, n.d.). African Nova Scotians are descendants of Black Planters, Black Loyalists, Jamaican Maroons, Black Refugees, and Caribbean domestic and coal miner workers (Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia, n.d.). African Nova Scotians were not afforded the royalties for their longstanding contributions to the province. Instead, they have faced intergenerational racism and discrimination that is ingrained into the social and educational systems and continues to influence outcomes for Black children in the province (Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994; Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Pimentel et al., 2023; Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). The Africentric Early Childhood Education Cohort program (hereafter *Africentric ECE Cohort*) delivered at the Nova Scotia Community College offers a culturally responsive and educational experience aimed at fostering impactful and sustainable leadership in Nova Scotia's ELCC sector. Learners are guided by the principles of Ubuntu, which emphasizes community through the vision of "I am because you are, and you are because I am" (Ngomane, 2019). The Africentric ECE Cohort fosters a learning environment for future African Nova Scotian and Black early childhood educators to centre their identities and lived experiences as Black people in the curriculum, a key component of Africentric education (Padayachee et al., 2022; Ringstaff, 2023). This includes emphasizing a collective effort in completing lessons and assignments as an example. Community plays a vital role in the program, fostering a reciprocal support system. Each class begins with a collaboratively created acknowledgment, affirmations, and check-ins. Funding for the development and the on-going delivery of this program has been provided by multiple Nova Scotia government partners. The first cohort of this program graduated between 2023-2024.

This research aimed to better understand the experiences of graduates of this Africentric program following their transition from their culturally safe cohort to a broader ELCC program context where Black identity has been historically marginalized. Specifically, we sought to understand how the graduates of the Africentric ECE Cohort are implementing Africentric principles and pedagogy in their early learning environments, and the further support they need through the following objectives: 1) To build confidence and skills in visual methods among graduates of the Africentric ECE Cohort; 2) To enable graduates of the Africentric ECE Cohort to record and reflect on the assets and concerns they have regarding ELCC programs; 3) To promote dialogue among Africentric ECE Cohort about ELCC programs in Nova Scotia, by understanding their experiences and concerns; 4) To centre knowledge mobilization with the voices of participants. It was expected that the results of this research would identify the significance of Africentric ECE pre-service training for the identity and pedagogical practice of Black early childhood educators and highlight the ongoing challenges they face in the Eurocentric ELCC system, which are transferable to many other contexts considering the pervasiveness of anti-Black racism.

Methodology

Our research used a transformative approach to ensure our research was action-oriented and consciously addressed inequities experienced by Black early childhood educators with a goal to achieve transformative change through social justice in the ELCC system (Mertens, 2021). We used photovoice, a participatory action research methodology, which integrates participant narratives with photography to explore community needs, concerns, and experiences to redress power imbalances (Wang, 2006). Participants of photovoice, who are often from communities that have experienced systemic oppression, use cameras to document their experiences, reflect on the forces that influence those experiences, and promote systemic change (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice methodology aims to shift policy and ignite community change through destabilizing universality notions of experience and mobilizing new knowledge through co-creation, reflection, and critical group dialogue (Strack et al., 2004; C. Wang & Burris, 1997). Researchers have explored a range of issues related to health and social inquiry with a variety of population groups using photovoice, and it has been identified as a culturally competent methodology within an Africentric paradigm (Harley et al., 2015) and with early childhood educators (Fakhari et al., 2023). The essential elements of participatory action research (participation, research, action, social justice) are intentionally integrated into this study (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Liebenberg, 2018). This project followed the 9-step approach as described by Wang (2006) through three phases: *population and recruitment* (steps 1-2, connecting with community; recruiting participants); *data collection and analysis* (steps 3-8, establishing informed consent; brainstorming; distributing cameras; time for photo-taking; discussion of photos; selecting, contextualizing, and codifying photos); and *knowledge mobilization* (step 9, sharing photos). Below we offer detail of each of these steps in the context of this study.

Population and Recruitment

Participants were eligible to take part in this research if they graduated or completed the education requirements from the first Africentric ECE Cohort (either the in-person or accelerated online cohorts) from the Nova Scotia Community College and were working in ELCC programs in Nova Scotia during the time of recruitment. The two community researchers recruited participants for this study as they had developed trust and rapport as the primary instructors. A poster and information letter (that included details on risks and benefits) was used by community researchers for distribution through their existing networks of eligible participants. Through telephone and/or in-person conversation, the community researchers shared more about the opportunity to participate in this study and answered any questions. Upon expression of interest, the research staff scheduled a telephone or virtual (i.e., through Microsoft Teams) call to ensure eligibility and ensure the participants understood the study information and were comfortable taking part. Verbal consent to participate in the study was also collected during this call. The research staff also inquired about potential supports to enable them to take part in the study and to address potential barriers to participation (e.g., child care, transportation, etc.). In total, twelve (n=12) participants took part in this study; as graduates of the Africentric ECE Cohort, all identified as African Nova Scotia or Black (4 from the accelerated cohort, 8 from the in-person cohort). Their experience in ELCC programs ranged from 1.5 years to 10+ years in both regulated ELCC and school-based settings. Four (n=4) participants worked within an ELCC program located in a historic African Nova Scotian community and the remaining were at different locations across the capital city of Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) in the province of Nova Scotia (Canada).

Data Collection

Three in-person photovoice workshops (3 hours each) were held over the spring of 2024, with an optional fourth workshop in early fall. These three workshops used a standard focus group process, with a semi-structured guide facilitated by one of the lead academic researchers (JM) and the community researchers (MS, JW). All sessions were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and deidentified. Participants were reminded of their voluntary participation and that they could withdraw at anytime with no negative consequences to employment or access to resources. An electronic gift card was offered to all participants to honour their time and commitment to the project. In addition, we also provided an

honorarium to support participants who required child care and/or transportation support.

Following a meal together, each workshop began with a land acknowledgement and a collective practice of affirmations and 'ways of being' to build community among the participants and the researchers. The practice of sharing a meal collectively was intentionally designed as part of the agenda as it's a universal act of building community (Katz, 2012). To end each workshop, a water ceremony was led by one of the community researchers, inspired by a ritual practiced by elders on the Caribbean Island of Bequia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. The ceremony was designed to connect participants to their ancestors and own inner strength. Conducted indoors, the ceremony involved creating an environment with the sound of moving water and dim lighting. Participants formed a circle, engaged in silent reflection, and recalled moments and people that make them feel valued and safe. This practice promotes spiritual renewal, emotional healing, a sense of belonging and encourages participants to face new endeavors with courage and faith. After the reflection, participants shared their experience and recorded their thoughts, reinforcing the support of community and the guiding wisdom of ancestors.

The goal of the first workshop was to establish trust between the research team and the participants, and discuss their initial ideas that would inform photo taking. In particular, participants engaged in discussion on their individual and collective meaning of Africentric pedagogy and how they currently use photos in their practice. Participants were asked to take photos following the workshop in response to the following guiding questions: 1) *How do you apply Africentric principles and pedagogy in your practice?* 2) *What has been the response from those you work with (colleagues, children, families, etc.)?* All participants decided to use their own device to take photos and were provided with photo consent forms for children or non-participant early childhood educators (i.e., their colleagues). Participants were responsible for obtaining parental consent of children who appeared in photos shared for the purpose of this study. Consent forms were provided to the research team at the end of each photo sharing workshop. Participants were provided with a unique link to a Microsoft One Drive folder owned by the lead researcher on the university's secure platform to upload their photos.

Data Analysis

The participatory data analysis process followed the three-step photovoice process of selecting, contextualizing, and codifying (Wang et al., 1998; Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, 2006). The focus of the second workshop (which occurred one week after the first workshop) was for participants to select and share their photos and stories and begin this critical dialogue and collective analysis (i.e., meaning making). Participants were divided into two small group discussions facilitated by an academic and community researcher. In each group, participants *selected* one of their photographs (that were printed in advance by the researcher), *contextualized* the photo to others in the group and were invited to place it on a large wall chart. All participants engaged in a discussion about the photo and began to codify the meaning of the photo in relation to the guiding questions. In particular, the researchers facilitated discussion using the SHOWeD technique to ensure critical reflection of: What they See, what they think is really happening, How what is happening relates to Qur lives, Why the issue/problem/strength exists, and what can be Done about it (Wang et al., 1998). Codification occurred by the researchers and participants using sticky notes to write down any words or phrases that arose when looking at the photos and listening to the stories. Following individual sharing of photos, the two groups were brought back together to share back what was discussed and begin to merge the ideas on one wall chart through a collaborative discussion. In particular, the academic (JM, MP) and community researchers (JW, MS) facilitated grouping of similar photos and ideas to enable a broad understanding of key concepts identified through the codification process. At the conclusion of the second workshop, participants were encouraged to take more photos to support additional discussion in the third workshop.

The goal of the third workshop (again a week later) was to continue and deepen the process of selection, contextualization, and codification. Prior to this workshop the lead researcher and research assistant continued to merge ideas across the two wall charts based on the discussion at the second workshop. These groupings were shared back with participants at the third workshop to further codify

together. The facilitators (JM, JW, MS) encouraged participants to select new photos and, if possible, contextualize these within the previously shared photos. New and refined ideas and concepts were encouraged throughout the discussion and continued through a codification process and directly writing on the wall chart, adding and moving sticky notes/photos, drawing lines/arrows, and discussing additional imagery (e.g., umbrella) to reflect how the ideas related to one another. Participants also identified core concepts (i.e., themes) that they felt were central to the photos/stories that were shared. Following this discussion, participants brainstormed ideas for how, and with whom, they wanted to share the results of this project.

After the third workshop, the audio-transcripts were reviewed by the research team alongside of the wall chart to organize a summary of the findings. Throughout the process, the lead academic researcher (JM) and research staff (MP, KS) reviewed the audio files and transcripts multiple times to ensure the participant stories and ideas continued to lead this process. A summary of findings was developed to organize the key themes identified by participants and representative photos and quotations from participants. The summary was shared with participants in an optional fourth workshop (September 2024) as a process of validation with participants ($n=9$) and community partners to ensure their stories were reflected in ways that best represented their key ideas. Participants provided feedback on the themes and the selected photos and quotations, which were incorporated into the final results. At the end of the workshop, participants were also reminded about their choice to use their real name, initials, or a pseudonym in the presentation of findings; this was an intentional decision given the participatory nature of the research. Allowing participants, the choice to be individually named recognizes their critical role in the transformative and participatory research process, (Bruckman et al., 2015; Lahman et al., 2023). Following this workshop, the academic researchers incorporated feedback into a final draft report that was disseminated by email to all participants with a request for additional feedback. This feedback was incorporated into the final report shared at a community event and presentations to government and the early childhood sector.

Positionality, Rigour and Trustworthiness

This study used a transformative approach through the use of photovoice to prioritize the voices of African Nova Scotian and Black educators that experience oppression and are often excluded from traditional research (Wang & Burris, 1994). The stories shared reflect those from this specific cohort who all work within an urban setting, but could be transferable to some experiences from racialized educators practicing in the field but that did not complete their education this way. For example, in Nova Scotia this cohort is only offered at the one college and there are many other accredited programs for aspiring early childhood educators to obtain early childhood diplomas outside of this focus. Photovoice offered a creative, meaningful and accessible opportunity for participants to share their stories, many who have not been engaged with research before. The number of participants allowed for sufficient data for the planned depth of analysis while also ensuring meaningful participation (Wang, 2006). The process allowed participation through a photo of their practice which enabled further expression of ideas beyond words. Participants reflected symbolism and metaphors in their photos which permitted meaning making that may not have been so easily expressed in words.

This participatory research was inspired by and developed with community partners who are involved in the Africentric ECE Cohort. The academic researchers had existing relationships with the community partners and emphasized continued trust building with these partners and within the African Nova Scotian community. The lead academic researchers were two African Nova Scotian women, and one white woman who have a strong working relationship studying Anti-Black racism among early childhood and school systems. Funding and the administrative responsibilities for the research was managed through the research centre of the white woman who engages in ongoing personal self-reflection on privilege and power and is committed to co-leading research that addresses inequity in early childhood through amplifying community voice. Two research staff were involved, including one Afro-Latina woman and one African Nova Scotian woman. Two instructors (one Afro-Indo Canadian man and one woman of

African descent) of the Africentric ECE Cohort were employed as community researchers to support various stages of the research, including the recruitment of participants, co-facilitation of workshops, and knowledge mobilization. Community partners self-identified as: the Dean, white non-binary person who oversees the Africentric ECE program; one African Nova Scotian woman and one female of African descent who are both directors of ELCC programs and teach part-time in the Africentric ECE Cohort; and one Black African woman who also teaches part-time and has previous research experience. All members of the team were foundational to the project at every phase, from developing the research question, the protocol, recruiting participants, participating in workshops, validating findings, and supporting final knowledge mobilization activities.

From the onset of this study, we acknowledged potential power imbalances between researchers and the participants. Honorariums were provided to participants to demonstrate respect for their time and contribution and a meal was shared together before the workshop to build informal connections. The community researchers (instructors of the Africentric ECE Cohort) were integral to recruitment of the participants and their ongoing engagement through their shared co-facilitation roles. Community partners were also respected members of the African Nova Scotian and Black ELCC community and provided insight throughout the research process; they also attended the dinner at the first workshop and participated in the fourth workshop to help support the overall interpretation of findings. In addition to the core research content during the workshop, the community researchers led a process of affirmations at the beginning and a water ceremony at the end to foster a continued meaningful practice used in the Africentric ECE Cohort.

Contending with power imbalances was also considered as it related to dual roles held by one of the researchers (MP who was also an employee within a government body serving the ECE sector) and one community partner (who was also the employer of some of the participants). As a research team, we understood the potential conflicts and addressed these to ensure the ethical integrity through intentional decisions throughout the data collection process. For example, community partners were asked to only join for the dinner portion of the first workshop, removing themselves prior to the initial data collection process. The involvement of MP in all sessions we believe was an asset to participants experiences in this project. Participants were informed of the dual role at the onset of the study. As an Afro-Latina, this reflected representation within a government body directly supporting the ECE sector, demonstrating that the services offered are reflective of diverse communities and supports diverse voices are present at a government level. As a member of the research team, MP signed a confidentiality agreement to assure that information shared during the workshop by participants will be kept confidential.

The academic researchers were intentional about meaningfully building relationships with the participants; before and after each workshop the researchers engaged in reflexive discussion about our own impressions of the findings and the meaning of our own insights based on our lived experiences. We also discussed ways to manage the potential influence of our social positions through purposeful design of the workshops to enhance participation. The community researchers (JW, MS), the white researcher (JM), and Afro-Latina staff member (MP) were present at every workshop, which provided consistency for participants. The other African Nova Scotia researchers attended the majority of sessions and had connections to the communities and individual participants, which helped to solidify trust in the research process and assured participants that their voices were heard and protected. Participants reflected at the final meeting how important it was for the researchers to continue to show up and listen to their stories, and for the broader team to be a part of the process.

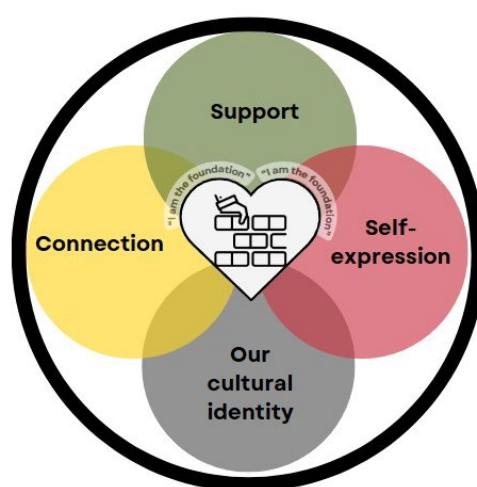
Findings

The participant-led data analysis process resulted in the identification of five key themes (Figure 1) related to the participants' experiences: 1) "I am the foundation"; 2) Connection; 3) Our cultural identity; 4) Self-expression; and 5) Support. First, participants referred to themselves as the foundation for driving change in the ELCC system and showed up as their authentic selves. They curated ELCC environments that offered children learning experiences to give voice and language specifically around racial and social

justice and enabled a practice of cultural advocacy in their early learning environments. While participants affirmed their contribution to the ELCC sector, they shared feelings of not being supported in their practice as early childhood educators, primarily by program administrators, hindering and influencing trust. Figure 1 represents the themes co-developed with participants at the fourth workshop. In particular, participants noted the importance of interconnection between themes, with “I am foundation” at the core. Participants acknowledged the importance of themselves as the foundation when they encountered obstacles in their Africentric practice. They acknowledged the importance of their voices in ELCC programs to ensure culturally responsive and safe environments not only for the children in their care, but themselves and their racialized colleagues. To begin, we discuss this theme followed by others through the collective stories of participants using illustrative quote titles and photos (parental consent provided) from participants. Participants are identified in their respective stories using their selected preference of name, pseudonym, or initials.

Figure 1

Overall themes identified by participants



“I am the foundation”

The first theme reflects participants’ role as African Nova Scotian and Black early childhood educators applying Africentric principles and pedagogy in their work environments. Upon reflection on how participants applied an Africentric approach to their practice, almost all shared that their Africentric approach was about their intention to ensure reflection of all children and families, because they understood what it felt like to not be included. Participants shared that their Africentric lens represented and celebrated all identities. MH shared,

From an Africentric lens, it’s being diverse versus when you’re going from a more Western white-washed lens, it’s not about it being diverse it’s about doing things how they are supposed to be. We want to make sure everyone is represented. We’re not just doing Christmas and Easter because not everyone celebrates [those holidays]. I find it hard to define it as an Africentric lens, it’s more of a diverse lens.

The importance of setting a foundation for themselves is reflected in photo 1 (Figure 2) where Ranae sits at the water to bring comfort and grounding. Ranae shared,

This is me at the water because I feel that I am foundation. It has to start with me first, because if I’m not grounded, if my feet [aren’t] planted then I can’t teach my children. [...] So, if your foundation is not the way that you need it, you’re not going to be able to properly support children.

Participants and researchers reflected on the importance of taking care of themselves so they could show up for children in their programs and at home as many were also mothers.

Nicolle: I mean, we’re mothers but try being a mother of 24 [children in the classroom] ...

Ranae: [...] Because [you’re a mother] at home and then you mother at daycare [...]

Nicolle: Exactly.

Crystal: We’re always mothering.

Ranae: So, we need that break.

Figure 2

Photos representing "I am the foundation"



Often, participants noted that they play foundational roles in conversations and action related initiatives to ELCC environments that are diverse, inclusive, and culturally safe and responsive. Participants emphasized that their ongoing efforts to create such environments occurred whether they had support from others or not, as they felt a sense of responsibility and emphasized their presence in programs as foundational. DC, who took photo 2 reflected on this expectation to take initiative as it was felt it would not be taken from their coworkers. The colours represented in photo 2 (Figure 2) reflect those within a newly recognized African Nova Scotian flag (Currie, 2021), which the participant felt important to display in different ways in their program such as through water play as shown in photo 3 (Figure 2). DC said:

So, I just knew that they [co-workers and administration] weren't going to do anything for [African Heritage Month] [...] last February, I worked there they didn't do anything. So [...] I just took the initiative. Something just told me to do it [...] my coworkers didn't really take the time, they're two white women so they [don't] take initiative to do anything Africentric unless they ask permission, just to be respectful...

Our cultural identity: "[What] I bring [as] my part of Africentric practice is just to be there for them, to be their safe space and their community..."

Participants highlighted how their identity as African Nova Scotia and Black early childhood educators influenced their selection of materials and resources for children in their early learning environments. Participants aimed to foster a sense of belonging among children and families in their programs by intentionally picking materials that reflect diversity both within their classroom and the broader community (as seen in Figure 3, photo 4).

Figure 3

Photos representing "Our Cultural Identity"



Photo 5 (Figure 3) reflects how Nicolle incorporated cultural identity into practice with things like hopscotch, “Being able to use my culture’s childhood game to teach dexterity and basic math is just one way I use the Nova Scotia Curriculum Framework in everyday play”. The Nova Scotia Early Childhood Curriculum Framework: Capable Confident and Curious is a tool that the ELCC sector uses to ensure the delivery of high-quality early learning programs. The Framework is based on the image of the child, includes five principles, and four learning goals and learning objectives and strategies within each of the learning goals (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2025). Another educator, MH shared how Afrobeats were incorporated into play:

I have a little speaker that I hang in the trees and they ask me to play the floor is lava and crazy frog [...]. So today that was playing and all of a sudden I look over [...] and they’ve all got sticks in their hands and the little guy on the tire is dancing. So I [wondered] what are they going to do if I change up the music to instrumental Afrobeats. [So I did] to see what they would do and they were all like “what’s this” and they loved it [...] and they were jamming.

Self-expression: “I also wanna encourage the kids to be their authentic selves...”

Participants discussed that their Africentric practice was a form of resistance against the current Eurocentric approach to early childhood education. Through their self-expression, educators were able to challenge the harmful stereotypes associated with Black identity. Participants encouraged children to safely express themselves through play with invitations and provocations. Participants used materials and resources as opportunities for conversations about difficult concepts with children. In some cases, such as in photo 6 (Figure 4), participants reflected upon the intersecting identities between race and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Covington explained:

My picture is just a photo of me and a [...] toddler reading a Ru Paul book. So obviously, it’s the typical bringing in books with representation and everything in them. But I’m also a part of the queer community so I also feel like bringing my most authentic self to work is really important for me, like last summer I did my first pride month in a [child care] classroom and I was really nervous to bring it up with the kids and with the staff members, just [because] I’m a part of the community so like I feel a little more awkward about it, but my co-worker was amazing and she like brought in books, and like little flags, and she did chants and everything and I just felt like so seen and heard and supported and another part of that is, I also wanna (sic) encourage the kids to be their authentic selves.

Figure 4

Photos representing “Self-Expression”



These educators acknowledged that when they could show up as their authentic selves, it served as a model for children and families. Participants discussed different experiences across communities where sometimes this authenticity was welcomed and other times it was pushed back as a result of different family values and beliefs. In photo 7 (Figure 4), Corinne’s self-expression and authenticity includes self-care acts like getting their nails done. Having children ask questions about the nails, as well as comparing their nails was an authentic way to express herself and foster relationships with the children. Corinne explains, “So many of the children come with their nails painted and compare themselves to me—like “look my nails are painted.”

Connection to Safe Space, Nature, and Culture

Participants acknowledged that creating a safe space for all children and families was important. Participants did this through building connection with children, for example photo 8 (figure 5), where reading stories was a common way to build understanding about topics of culture and race, Julieta highlighted:

I do like [reading] because you can talk with children about the ways [...] they see themselves. There was a book that said my hair is beautiful and it had a mirror at the end, so then they would talk about all the different hair styles that children can see, the different hair colors, hair textures, and in the end they would see themselves [...]. The subject of skin came up through there in a mirror and it was important for the children [...] to speak about it in the class because it's a normal thing and provides an opportunity to discuss culture and race in the early years while embracing the diversity in our class.

Photo 9 (Figure 5) showcases an educator with children where other participants commented on the sense of comfort, they saw in these children because of the sense of safety that was created.

Figure 5

Photos representing "Connection to safe space, nature, and culture"



Participants also emphasized the importance of connection to nature. One participant noted that for African Nova Scotians, this connection to nature was a "natural way of being". Connection to nature is something that was identified as important within the African Nova Scotian community. Being able to explore the world within nature overall supports the well-being of the child and the educator. Further, having access to connect with nature is just as important for the educators as it was for the children. Connecting with nature is one of the ways that participants shared their Africentric culture. In photo 10 (Figure 5) the participants spoke about the joy that comes when children can explore and build that connection is evident on the child's face. KW specifically shared the resistance faced when allowing children to engage with nature,

We went for a walk; I work with infants. There's 2 other staff with me, and they both have been there [for a long time]. They always do this walk, but this was the first time that I went for this walk with them, it was to a duck pond. We stopped, and I said "Okay I'll take two out and we're just going to walk around", and they were like "We've never done that." I was like 'well if we're out, we're going to explore', we're not going to let them just watch the water. Their response was like 'okay wow, we've never done this before.'

Some examples of how participants use everyday life and play to build connection with and among children in their program was shared. For example, one educator spoke about how using African print cloths allowed children to explore wrapping their baby dolls around their tummy and back to carry the doll. One mother told the educator she was happy to see that in the context of play, as that is how she carries her child. This example demonstrates how participants fostered a safe and comfortable environment for children to explore their own cultures and learn about others. In photo 11 (Figure 5), Cheyne, shared a how children were allowed to freely discuss culture through their lens and experience. During one particular exchange, Cheyne spoke to the interactions between a Black child who was describing bonnets

and braids to a white child, and the resulting engagement of their families:

I currently work in preschooler's classroom. The preschoolers in my care showed a strong interest in dramatic play. But I really wanted to bring some more diversity and incorporate it in the classroom. To facilitate their creativity, I added some loose materials such as, rubber bands, combs, washed out hair spray bottles, shampoo bottles and beads, to our dramatic play area. The children were delightful, especially when one girl referred to a bonnet, sparking a conversation about its meaning. The following day, one of the children rushed in to show us her hair and braids, and her mother was explaining that all she could talk about at dinner last night was hair, exploring hairdressing and related roles. This imaginative play lasted for two weeks, much to the delight of the families who were eager to see their children showcase their creations. The children were excited to share their experiences, as evident from one child who went home and discussed bonnets with her mother.

Support: "I am the person that will speak..."

Participants highlighted the urgency in having support to implement their Africentric practice from families, co-workers, and especially administrators of their programs. Participants working in communities outside of historic African Nova Scotian communities felt a lack of support from administration regarding voicing concerns about the children and/or families they work with and understanding their perspective and experiences as an African Nova Scotian and/or Black early childhood educator. Educators also discussed often receiving push back from co-workers in certain instances, leading to feeling undervalued. In photo 12 (Figure 6), MH explained,

The reason I took the photo myself is because I'm unhappy with my co-workers and I don't feel I even want to ask them to take a photo for me [...] it [is] just a lack of communication. So, in my Africentric practice, I am the person that will speak up.

In photo 13 (Figure 6), Denisha highlighted the push back she received from their co-workers for allowing children to get messy and paint outside. What those co-workers did not account for was how through "getting messy" allowed creativity, to the point of sharing culture. These two children in the photo are from India, when their mother came to pick them up, seeing the girls and other children play around with the paint outdoors reminded her of Holi, because of the festival of colours that takes place during that time.

Figure 6
Photos representing "Support"



Photo 12



Photo 13

These two girls are sisters, and I had a painting activity set up and they started dipping their fingers in the paint, and then it was rubbing the paint on the hand, and then it was dipping the whole hand in the paint, and then it just became a sensory experience. They were rubbing it all over their hands and one of the girls kept looking at her hands and marvelling at them and other educators might say, like, "stop, what are you doing? Like this isn't how we use paint", but I just thought, you know in that moment it was important to let them explore that and do what they wanted to do [...] for me, Africentric is just allowing children to have that freedom to explore, even unconventionally and just giving children that space. After that, their mom came and we were having this conversation and she said it reminds her of Holi, because they have the festival of color and they paint themselves. That was them bringing their culture into it. [...] I got so many comments [from colleagues] and even, you know, the backward comments.

Overall Findings

All of the photos and stories shared as part of this project highlight the commitment of these educators in creating culturally safe and inclusive ELCC environments for all children and families following their participation in the Africentric ECE Cohort. These educators believed in creating ELCC programs where all individual cultural and racial identities, including their own African Nova Scotian and Black communities, can belong and be represented through intentional practice. Participants spoke to the importance of dismantling the current hegemonic approach in ELCC programs through the knowledge, confidence, and pride in their Black identity that they gained through their participation in the Africentric ECE cohort. Through sharing their stories, the participants demonstrated their passion for early childhood education, but also their struggle when continuing to encounter acts of anti-Black racism in their ELCC workplace. The participatory action research project provided an opportunity for participants to critically reflect with one another about their shared realities as a result of their prior participation in the Africentric ECE Cohort. At the last workshop, the participants (alongside of the researchers and community partners) reflected on the importance of continuing to build community with one another to reignite their passion and remind each other of the vast power of their inclusive practice to create change in ELCC programs. Together with the researchers, participants identified knowledge mobilization efforts to share the results, such a community event and presentations for the provincial government and ELCC administrators and program leaders. As the community researcher, Justin, said:

[...] that's what I'm hearing in the conversation that we're having. And therefore, it's exhausting and we already fight all the time so if you're constantly fighting it's--then coming back to this it's still innate, it's still there, it's fighting our people. We just made this happen, so don't lose this connection because even though things are happening at work, use that power and that voice that's within our values and our community or whatever to keep moving forward because like we said earlier, there's a group coming up that's graduating, and you're already making that pioneer move, to make that change. So now we're here, how are you using that power.

Discussion

With increasing investments in the ELCC system in Canada, continued attention is needed to ensure cultural safety for all educators, families, and children for the diverse Canadian population of educators, families, and children. Given the historical marginalization of African Nova Scotian communities and the realities of anti-Black racism in early childhood and broader educational settings in the east coast province of Nova Scotia (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Pimentel et al., 2023; Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023), this research amplified the stories of graduates of an Africentric ECE diploma program as they moved from a culturally safe cohort to working within a broader ELCC sector. Through the use of Photovoice methodology, participants had the opportunity to record and critically reflect upon their shared experience and the significance and impact of their Africentric ECE education through photos and stories. The examples illustrate how educators embody an Africentric approach through their engagement with children holistically—mind, body, and spirit—and how they embrace the principle of Ubuntu. Following their participation in the Africentric ECE Cohort, these educators deepened their confidence and pride in their identities as Black early childhood educators, which supported them in their practice as they create enriched experiences that will help children learn about themselves, each other, and the world around them. Through the Africentric ECE Cohort, participants had the opportunity to celebrate their Africentricity in a safe space, which likely provided them with the confidence and permission to integrate their identity, and broader vision of inclusion, into their ELCC program. Findings from this study further affirm prior literature on Africentric cohorts through highlighting the importance of learning with others with shared lived experiences and providing a learning opportunity where students were not inundated with learning materials that did not reflect their identities (Howard & James, 2019; Hudson et al., 2024). The focus on pride in Black identity encouraged confidence among the educators to continue showing up as their authentic selves in the ELCC programs (Howard & James, 2019). As a result, their participation in the Africentric ECE Cohort helped them in their pedagogy in the ELCC sector, ensuring a continued foundation in their cultural identity as African Nova Scotian and Black early childhood educators.

The stories from participants also revealed the challenges that African Nova Scotian and Black early childhood educators experienced in applying Africentric principles in ELCC programs. Especially for those participants working outside of African Nova Scotian communities, they spoke about the lack of support from colleagues and administrators who fail to recognize and address anti-Black racism in these spaces. Similar to other literature, these experiences of anti-Black racism influence cultural safety and lead to invalidation and worry about the potential repercussions if they voice their concerns and leading them to ultimately feel alienated and mistrust in ELCC programs (Brown, 2019; Howard, 2014; Howard & James, 2019; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016). Participants in this study wanted to ensure that the talents and expertise of African Nova Scotian educators, and the overall African Nova Scotia culture, was valued, and not tokenized. This finding is consistent with other research that described Black educators' experiences of being othered and isolated. For example, Griffin and Tackie (2017) discuss educators in their study recounting experiences of negative treatment, devaluing and being excluded from the school community, which led to them feeling a lack of desire to remain in the field. Further attention is needed to ensure that broad ELCC sector policies and individual program leaders understand how to welcome, acknowledge, meaningfully celebrate and value diverse educators into programs. It also requires solidarity:

Solidarity is probably the single most important element of this work that will keep you on course. It is through solidarity among colleagues, families, students, teachers, and administrators that we build and sustain the courage and confidence to engage and persevere. Solidarity is a space through which we teach and learn. Solidarity gives us energy but also recognizes when we need to take care of ourselves. Solidarity can turn difficult work into moments of great joy and love (p. 587 Wynter-Hoyte et al., 2022).

Wynter-Hoyte and colleagues (2022) further identify the humility and responsibility required by white people to "...listen to and trust the experiences of Black colleagues, students, and families.... acknowledging that they have the option to turn away from anti-Black realities whereas their Black colleagues do not" (p. 585). White educators, administrators, and program leaders should continuously engage in reflective practice as it relates to anti-racism in addition to engaging in continued professional development opportunities. Challenging those that hold white privilege on how to act in authentic allyship with Black communities will be important to disrupt notions of anti-Black racism in their workspaces. While we acknowledge that instances of white fragility may arise as one engages in this continuous learning, we feel this discomfort needs to be embraced to enact change.

Contrary to this experience, participants spoke to the support they felt from within their cohort and from leaders in historic African Nova Scotian communities. Howard and James (2019) similarly discussed how working within an Africentric school promotes pro-Blackness and empowers educators to nurture Black identity, a challenge faced by participants in this study, yet understood to be critically important (Iruka et al., 2023). Consistent with findings in this study on importance of an overall community, Howard and James (2019) also identified that Black educators partnered with parents and the broader school community to ensure children's success; all of which allowed educators themselves feel integrated and valued as educators. At its very core, Africentricity is about connection (Hunn, 2004; Ramirez et al., 2024). As discussed in the connection theme developed by participants, the interconnectedness of safe space, culture, and nature was integral to their practice. Additional education with the ELCC sector is likely needed to communicate the core essence of the inclusive Africentric approach and the necessary shifts needed from the dominant, and often exclusionary, Eurocentric framework that is currently used (Iruka et al., 2021; Pimentel et al., 2023).

Key themes identified by participants align with other research that highlights importance of cultural identity and authentic self-expression to ensure programming represents cultural diversity all the time, not just on days of recognition (Pimentel et al., 2023; Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023). Researchers agree that workforce diversity is essential in ECE, as racially diverse early childhood educators tend to create culturally safe spaces for racialized children and are usually more inclined to enhance their white colleagues cultural understanding (Griffin & Tackie, 2017; Villegas et al., 2012). Further, racialized educators can serve as representation for racialized children. They also tend to be more sensitive and

understanding of different cultural backgrounds and lived experiences, providing an environment for racialized children that promotes safety and a more positive learning experience (Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016). These Black educators are invaluable members of the ELCC sector. Their lived experiences allow them to see the inherent value in working with and sustaining the lived experiences of Black children alike (Gardner et al., 2020). However, participants in this study identified the importance of clear pathways for educators to voice concerns about racism without fear of retaliation, alongside of accountability and action. It is important to address these needs of Black educators to ensure retention in the ELCC field.

Participants in this study felt that there should be requirements for training on microaggressions, implicit biases, and cultural competency, especially for white program staff. To disrupt anti-Black racism, all program leaders and educators needed to be involved. This needs to begin within all pre-service training that ensures early childhood educators are competent and confident in their practice through an equity-centered lens (Iruka, 2022). Pre-service training that centres equity, anti-racism, and Pro-Black pedagogies offers future early childhood educators (white) to develop skills necessary to affirm Black children, families and Black colleagues in a way that ignites Black joy (Williams, 2022). Government should implement standards and monitor the delivery of post-secondary programs to ensure principles of equity and anti-racism are embedded in workforce preparation programs to ensure equitable experiences for Black children, families, and educators (Meek et al., 2020). Participants in this study, and others (Acuff, 2018) have spoke to the constraints within the dominant narrative and the resulting exhaustion, referred to as racial battle fatigue, that results from working within this imposed context. Therefore, especially for the dominant population of white educators and leaders, critical reflection and action on privilege and white superiority is needed to support equitable change (Escayg, 2021). ELCC program leaders and educators need to be supported to immerse themselves in critical conversations to engage in unlearning racial stereotypes, naming and addressing prejudice and discrimination, and acknowledging the privilege and power of whiteness within ELCC programs and the broader Canadian culture. Pedagogical leaders can critically observe practice and offer feedback to encourage ELCC program leaders and educators to dig deeper into this critical reflection. For example, (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021) suggest a framework for leaders to *name* the manifestation of anti-Blackness, *own* and challenge theirs and others' silence and perpetuation of white heteronormative values, *frame* actions that meaningfully and intentionally dismantle anti-Black racism, and ensure *sustainability* of their actions and encourage and empower others to develop a critical understanding of anti-Black racism.

Conclusion

As investments into the Canada-Wide ELCC system are ongoing, provinces/territories must be accountable to uphold principles of equity among ELCC programs. There needs to be robust efforts to ensure anti-Black racism and anti-oppression is embedded into children's learning experiences and environment, pedagogical practices, as well as system and policy design (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2021). With a focus on anti-oppression education, there is tremendous opportunity to not only challenge system and policy design, but to redesign education all together (Callaghan et al., 2023). The Africentric ECE cohort offers a glimpse into a redesign that prioritizes liberation. Participants in this study experienced a sense of cultural support in the Africentric ECE Cohort and were liberated and empowered to celebrate their Black identity and create inclusive environments for all children and families. However, participants wanted to see broader changes within the ELCC system to address and disrupt anti-Black racism to ensure their Africentric pedagogy can realize its full potential. The results identify opportunities for transformative action at multiple levels to strengthen the impact of the Africentric ECE Cohort, including guidance for anti-discrimination policies, requirements for pre-service training, and ongoing professional development (Escayg & Faragó, 2023; Meek et al., 2020). In particular, providing opportunities for all early childhood educators to learn and engage with Africentricity would empower Black educators who currently work in the ELCC sector and provide white educators with greater understanding of its inclusive approach (Hill, 2023). Accountability toward actions that address anti-oppression is needed to support Black children, families, and educators to uplift their identities in a

responsive and respectful manner. Although prior research has identified the experiences of Black families and educators (Pimentel et al., 2023; Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023), there is more limited research with racialized children. Future research should prioritize the voices of Black children and the resulting impact of an Africentric approach on their early experiences.

"Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion" (hooks, 2018 p.215).

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

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