Using African Diaspora Literacy to Heal and Restore the Souls of Young Black Children

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All over the world, African worldviews and epistemologies have been and are currently being overlooked, undervalued, and delegitimized (Fanon, 1963; Hilliard, 2002; King, 2005; King & Swartz, 2014, 2016; Watkins, 2005; Woodson, 1933/1990). This pervasive process of anti-Africanism is so endemic that it frequently goes unnoticed even among people of the African Diaspora. This essay focuses on the revitalization of indigenous African knowledges and collective solidarity among people in the African Diaspora. As Dillard (2012) reminded us in her book, *Learning to (Re)member the things we've learned to forget: Endarkened feminisms, spirituality, and the sacred nature of research and teaching*, it is important for Black people to reconnect and reclaim African indigenous ways of being and knowing. Doing so is essential to the survival of our souls. Acknowledging the importance of naming the oppression in order to begin to dismantle it, we explain that the divorcing of African people from their collective heritage is systemic and intentional. That is, it did not happen by chance and it is supported by policies, laws, mores, and practices—even within educational contexts (or perhaps we should say—particularly within these settings). Similar to anti-bias and critical multicultural approaches in Early Childhood Education (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Pelo, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2013), this article seeks to interrupt, counter, and promote praxis (reflective action) on behalf of Black children specifically, and all children in general.

We acknowledge at the onset that many people in the African Diaspora will not embrace the major thesis of this article. This will be discussed briefly; however, suffice it to say that the disassociation by some/many Black people of all things African is a fundamental aspect of the oppressive cycle which results in divisions within cultural groups and internalized oppression (Boutte, 2016; Fanon, 1963; Woodson, 1933/1990). Agreeing with King (2005), we understand that the intellectual and real struggle to legitimize African epistemologies is not only for the well-being of people in the African Diaspora, but also because *human* freedom from dehumanizing structure of hegemony is in the balance. Indeed, Black education can be thought of as a precondition of global social justice since African thought and Blackness represent the diametric opposites of Eurocratic thought and Whiteness. This is not to say that other cultural groups do not face the severe and devastating effects of racism, or to compare degrees and variations of oppression. Rather, it is to say that as racism goes, White people are privileged; Black people are at the 'bottom of the well' (Bell, 1992). Hence, Blackness can be viewed as an ontological symbol that is the quintessential signifier of oppression (Cone, 1970). A major premise of this article is that it is important for all people, but especially those in the African Diaspora, to love Blackness as political resistance to hegemony (hooks, 2006). The global recognition of the need to embrace the humanity of Black people can

be seen in the #Blacklivesmatter movement and in the United Nations' declaration of 2015-2024 being the International Decade for People of African Descent (http://www.un.org/en/events/africandescentdecade/).

Since this essay is guided by ten principles for Black Education, we begin by presenting them. Next, we suggest that "Diaspora literacy" (King, 1992) and African systems of thought and morality can be used with young children to confront and counter endemic oppression experienced by African children in schools and society. Missing from many Early Childhood programs is instruction guided by the understanding that children (and teachers) are cultural beings (Souto-Manning, 2013). Thus, our focus on learning about the histories and culture of Black people can be readily extrapolated to other ethnic groups. We begin with a discussion of African Diaspora literacy and then provide dimensions of African culture. An overarching premise is that not only can Diaspora literacy be used as a process for interrupting the ongoing detrimental effects of oppression and endemic microaggressions that Black children face, but also it can be used to heal them from the ongoing cultural assaults and damage to their African souls and spirits (Johnson & Bryan, 2017). We share examples of lessons to illustrate African Diaspora literacy in action. Here, we capture the voices of children and their thoughts. Finally, we discuss implications for teachers of young children.

Principles of Black Education/Socialization

In 1999, the American Education Research Association (AERA) commissioned and assembled an impressive group of top scholars from around the world to contemplate how to effectively conceptualize and design transformative research and practice in Black Education. The Commission on Research in Black Education (CORIBE) published a book, *Black education: A transformative research and action agenda for the new century* (King, 2005), which presented ten vital principles for Black education and socialization. These principles guide the present work and explain key assumptions of African Diaspora literacy.

Ten Principles for Black Education and Socialization

1. We exist as African People, an ethnic family. Our perspective must be centered in that reality.
2. The priority is on the African ethnic family over the individual. Because we live in a world where expertness in alien cultural traditions (that we also share) have gained hegemony, our collective survival and enhancement must be our highest priorities.
3. Some solutions to problems that involve differential use of three modes of response to domination and hegemony: Adaptation - adopting what is deemed useful; Improvisation - substituting or improvising alternatives that are more sensitive to our culture; and Resistance - resisting that which is destructive and not in the best interests of our people.
4. The "ways of knowing" provided by the arts and humanities are often more useful in informing our understanding of our lives and experiences, and those of other oppressed people, than the knowledge and methodologies of the sciences that have been privileged by the research establishment despite the often distorted or circumscribed knowledge and understanding this way of knowing produces.
5. Paradoxically, from the perspective of the education research establishment, knowledge production is viewed as the search for facts and (universal) truth, while the circumstances of our social and existential condition require the search for meaning and understanding.
6. The priority is on research validity over inclusion. For research validity, highest priority must be placed on studies of:
    a) African tradition (history, culture, and language);
    b) Hegemony (e.g., uses of schooling/socialization and incarceration);
    c) Equity (funding, teacher quality, content and access to technology);
    d) Beneficial practice (at all levels of education, from childhood to elderhood).

7. Research informs practice and practice informs research in the production and utilization of knowledge; therefore, context is essential in research:
    a) Cultural/historical context;
    b) Political/economic context; and
    c) Professional context, including the history of AERA and African people.
8. We require power and influence over our common destiny. Rapid globalization of the economy and cyber-technology are transforming teaching, learning, and work itself. Therefore, we require access to education that serves our collective interests, including assessments that address cultural excellence and a comprehensive approach to the interrelated health, learning, and economic needs of African people.
9. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims, and the UNESCO World Education 2000 Report recently issued in Dakar, Senegal, affirms that "education is a fundamental human right" and "an indispensable means for effective participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century." We are morally obligated to "create safe, healthy, inclusive, and equitably resourced educational environments" conducive to excellence in learning and socialization with clearly defined levels of achievement for all. Such learning environments must include appropriate curricula and teachers who are appropriately educated and rewarded.
10. African people are not empty vessels. We are not new to the study of and practice of education and socialization that is rooted in deep thought. We will not accept a dependent status in the approach and solution to our problems.

African Diaspora Literacy

> The education of any people should begin with the people themselves, but Negroes thus trained have been dreaming about the ancients of Europe and about those who have tried to imitate them. Woodson (1933/1990, p. 32)

Emanating from a Black Studies paradigm and African and African American epistemological frameworks and theories (DuBois, 1903; Fanon, 1963; Hilliard, 2009; King, 1991, 1992, 2005; King & Swartz, 2014, 2016; Lynn, 1999; Lynn, Jennings, & Hughes, 2013; Woodson, 1933), Dr. Joyce King (1992) defined Diaspora literacy as Black people's knowledge of their (collective) story and cultural dispossession. Diaspora literacy challenges and critiques social and equity issues while building the racial and ethnic uplifting of people who are often on the margins in society (Boutte, 2016; Lynn et al., 2013). Important parts of this process for young children include helping them: 1) identify and name oppressions and their constituent components; 2) learn about their own history as a healing antidote against oppression; 3) imagine possibilities for a better world; 4) take reflective actions to interrupt ongoing oppression; and 5) organize and collaborate with others who are seeking to dismantle oppressive structures (Boutte, 2016). Early Childhood Educators whose teaching is guided by decolonizing perspectives will foster a space for African Diaspora literacy by disrupting deeply embedded Eurocentric curricula. In this vein, African people can be viewed as possessing agency and wisdom (Dei, 2012).

African Diaspora literacy relates to people with African origins wherever they are in the world (e.g., Caribbean, Africa, U.S., Brazil, Europe). The assumption is that people in the African Diaspora have informed and indigenous perspectives which lead to self-recognition, healing, and "re-membering"[1] (Dillard, 2012; Fu-Kiau & Lukondo-Wamba,1988; King, 1992; King & Swartz, 2014). In pursuit of an anti-colonial framework, this process allows Black students to repossess their stories, including a cultural identity as "Africa's children" (King, 1992, p. 321).

[1] Re-membering is "a process for recovering history by putting back together the multiple and shared knowledge bases and experiences that shaped the past." (King & Swartz, 2014, xiii).

King (personal communication September 27, 2014) noted that Blacks should strive for Diaspora literacy "in order to recover our heritage from ideological knowledge, distortion, and omission but also so that we can relate to and be useful in the liberation struggle here and on the continent." For example, "(W)e should not dismiss or over-simplify the ways that Africans participated in slavery, but that is not the beginning of the story and we need a deeper deciphering analysis because this narrative about 'Africans selling their own brothers and sisters' drives a wedge among us and deprives us of a human feeling of connectedness to the Motherland. What it does to White people and others is a whole other issue."

It is important to express the importance of African Diaspora literacy during the educational and socialization process of Black children. As Dillard (2012) emphasized,

> How do we (or might we) recognize the child we are observing as an African American, as connected to and collectively a part of the circle of African time? How is an entire system of education shaped by the lack of our own memories (or knowledge) of an event like the Middle Passage, one so very traumatic that it forever changed the very time, space, and spirit of humanity in that there would have been no African diaspora, no African Americans without it? … But the power and relevance of the memory endures. (p. 9)

In schools which serve preschool through twelfth grade (P-12), the history of African American students is limited, one-sided, often inaccurate, and typically begins with slavery. Woodson's (1933/1990) timeless analysis explains how the contributions of African people have left everyone "mis-educated" (having distorted, inaccurate, or incomplete accounts of history). He expatiated on how not only were the White missionaries misguided, but how they also passed these interdisciplinary omissions and inaccuracies to Black people whom they 'taught.' Being "ill-taught themselves (missionaries), (they) followed the traditional curricula of the time which did not take the Negro into consideration except to condemn or pity them" (p. 17). Woodson provides examples in geography (e.g., parts of the world inhabited by Whites were presented in great detail, whereas less "attention was given to yellow people, still less to the red, and very little to the brown, and practically none to the Black race") (p. 18). Likewise, he illuminates how Blacks were eliminated from the sciences—e.g., Africans' early advancement and influence on European culture. Woodson also provides examples in language, literature, fine arts, medicine, and history which have been widely corroborated (Asante, 1987; 1991; Hilliard, 2002; King & Swartz, 2014, 2016). Hence, it should not be surprising that many African American students experience shame and embarrassment, and many teachers feel discomfort and/or do not have adequate information for African and African American history.

From a Diaspora literacy perspective, it is useful to use a "Sankofa" approach (Boutte, 2016; Dillard, 2012; King, 1992). The word "Sankofa" to the Akan people of West Africa can be translated as "to reach back and get it." Sankofa is represented by a mythical bird whose body is facing forward (representing the future) and whose head is looking backwards (representing the past). It is a symbol for Africans in the Diaspora to keep a knowledge of history in the forefront of consciousness when teaching current and future generations of African American students. Some may think that a focus on Africa and African history does not address school standards; however, this is not the case. It is included in most school standards; however, many textbooks gloss over the topic so there is a need for teachers to supplement the incomplete narratives that exist. Examples will be included later when sample classroom lessons are discussed. Additionally, professional development is needed for teachers to build their knowledge bases on the topic as well. The larger lesson to learn is that African Americans are not ahistorical people; however, the history before enslavement has not been taught in schools or has been eradicated through the use of textbooks by publishers such as McGraw-Hill, which choose to describe African slaves as "workers". Such rewriting, *white*washing, and 'sanitizing' of history allows White enslavers and exploiters to gloss over the atrocities that they committed (Fanon, 1963; Woodson, 1933/1990).

African Cultural Legacies and Dimensions

Teaching children and ourselves (educators) about the rich legacies of African thought can be restorative not only for African people, but for humanity at large since we are all interdependent on each other. Indeed, it is important for all students to experience more comprehensive and accurate historical and contemporary accounts of people from many cultural backgrounds. We suggest that African American thought can serve as healing and guiding processes for Black children in the face of ever-present adversities. Resisting the continuous and endemic cultural assaults on Black humanity all over the world, we acknowledge that Western education equates humanity with Whiteness; hence, assumptions about prototypical examples of humanity show no respect for indigenous ways of being and knowing which differ from Eurocratic conceptions (Lee, Lomotey, & Shujaa, 1990; King, 2005). While believing deeply in the humanity of everyone, we are haunted by decades of educational research and instructional practices which demonstrate that the humanity and needs of Black children in the Diaspora have been pervasively and persistently ignored. Central to a focus on African versions of humanity and African Diaspora literacy is a knowledge of Africanisms, or African legacies and continuities. We present some of these legacies and dimensions of African culture next. We suggest that these Africanisms exist among people from the African Diaspora and should be retained while also allowing for dynamic transformation and generative changes.

While readily acknowledging that African people are not monolithic, at the same time we note that we share a collective history (King, 2005) and that social constructions of race affect Black people in many sociopolitical ways (e.g., "Driving While Black"; relegating Blackness to lower statuses across the world) (Hale, 2001; King, 2005). This means that teachers will have to become astute at noticing cultural nuances among children and uniqueness among communities, children, and families. Notwithstanding caveats regarding overgeneralizations about cultural groups, a significant body of research has demonstrated general cultural strengths and legacies among people of the African Diaspora.

Legacies and Dimensions of African Culture[2]

1. **Spirituality**—an approach to life as being essentially vitalistic rather than mechanistic, with the conviction that nonmaterial forces influence people's everyday lives
2. **Harmony**—the notion that one's fare is interrelated with other elements in the scheme of things, so that humankind and nature are harmonically conjoined
3. **Movement**—an emphasis on the interweaving of movement, rhythm, percussiveness, music, and dance, all of which are taken as central to psychological health
4. **Verve**—a propensity for relatively high levels of stimulation and for action that is energetic and lively
5. **Affect**—an emphasis on emotions and feelings, together with a specific sensitivity to emotional cues and a tendency to be emotionally expressive
6. **Communalism/collectively**—a commitment to social connectedness, which includes an awareness that social bonds and responsibilities transcend individual privilege
7. **Expressive individualism**—the cultivation of a distinctive personality and proclivity for spontaneous and genuine personal expression
8. **Oral tradition**—strengths in oral/aural modes of communication, in which both

[2] Sources: Boykin, 1994; Hale, 2001; Hale-Benson, 1986; Hilliard, 1992; King, 2005; King & Swartz, 2014, 2016; Shade, 1997.

speaking and listening are treated as performances, and cultivation of oral virtuosity—the ability to use alliterative, metaphorically colorful, graphic forms of spoken language. This does not mean that strengths do not exist in written and other literacy traditions as well.

9. **Social time perspective**—an orientation in which time is treated as passing through a social space rather than a material one, and in which time can be recurring, personal, and phenomenological
10. **Perseverance**—ability to maintain a sense of agency and strength in the face of adversities
11. **Improvisation**—substitution of alternatives that are more sensitive to Black culture.

Using Black students' cultural strengths as integral parts of instruction and socialization is important for beginning the healing process which is needed because we have been (and are being) dispossessed from our past, connections to our culture, original homelands, languages, and each other (Dillard, 2006). In order for every child to "demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010), "(W)e [African people] must (re)member in order to be whole" (Dillard, 2012, p. 4). The ongoing disrespect of Black bodies, minds, and souls in schools and society include treating Blacks as if we are non-beings, virtual blank slates, sites of hate and abuse, and the ultimate "Other" for inscription of White male dominance (Dillard, 2012). Such ongoing microaggressions are damaging not only to children, but to adults as well.

Part of the difficulty in effectively teaching children from African backgrounds in ways that are healing and restorative is that many educators: 1) do not understand and/or respect Black culture and 2) believe that content taught in school is neutral or culture-free. Advancing the thesis that African Americans have a long tradition of excellence in education, socialization, and mastery of their environment and circumstances (Hilliard, 2002; King, 2005; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003), we invite educators to consider wisdom and research-based strategies from the African Diaspora when seeking *best practices*. In order to ensure that African American students achieve educationally and socially to their fullest potential, educators need sufficient, in-depth understanding of students' cultural backgrounds to make education meaningful and transformative (Boutte, 2016; King, 1994). Mainstream ways of acquiring school competencies do not offer universally applicable models of development (King, 1994, 2005; King & Swartz, 2016).

Understanding the complexities involved in helping Black children use Africanisms as an antidote to hegemony entails reflecting on typical modes of responses to racial oppression used by people in the African Diaspora. King (2005) explained that one of three responses are likely to be used (Black Education Principle 3): 1) adaptation or adopting what is deemed useful; 2) improvisation or substituting or improvising alternatives that are more sensitive to African American culture; and 3) resistance or resisting that which is destructive and not in the best interests of African Americans. These three modes, taken together with the Black cultural legacies, are helpful for understanding that Blacks may use different responses to oppression and how these responses may all be adaptive and healthy depending on the context and circumstances. Consider an example of African American Language, a dialect spoken in the U.S. by many African Americans (Boutte & Johnson, 2013).

African American Language (AAL) speakers who respond using the first mode (adaptation) are likely to learn to code-switch and alternate between using Standardized English (SE) and AAL, depending on the context and benefits. It is likely that these speakers will use AAL in informal settings and SE in formal settings. AAL speakers who improvise may find ways of making AAL work for them - (e.g., blending the two languages in their speech and writing). This improvisation has also been referred to as code-meshing or code-mixing (Alim & Smitherman, 2012; Canagarajah, 2006; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Young, 2009). Finally, AAL speakers may figure out (consciously

or not) that the best way of maintaining their psychological and social health (their spirits and souls) is to resist using SE altogether; thus, opting not to code-switch and to flourish primarily in their AAL proficiency. Although no language is really "pure" or uninfluenced by others, speakers who opt for this response intentionally choose AAL as their predominant language. Following this line of reasoning, they are likely to consciously gravitate toward opportunities and activities that lend themselves to appreciation of AAL strengths — (e.g., church, hip hop, radio personality, comedy, poetry). We readily note that any of these three adaptive responses make sense, depending on a variety of factors, such as familial, educational, and social influences, and opportunities to be scaffolded. Importantly, speakers may alternate between one or more of the responses.

The remainder of the article shares thoughts about how Diaspora literacy can be translated into practice with young children. First, we share examples of Diaspora literacy used in two Early Childhood teachers' classroom. Second, we provide samples and snapshots from a series of lessons done with two of the authors' (Boutte and Johnson) grandchildren.

Diaspora Literacy with Young Children

Many Early Childhood Educators wonder how Diaspora literacy might be used in classrooms with young children. Here we share two examples.

Jennifer Strickland

Desiring to do her part to ensure that Black children in her classroom would have a strong sense of their stunning African heritage, Jennifer Strickland engaged in ongoing activities with her students in her preschool and kindergarten classrooms (she taught both grade levels). In both settings, Jennifer's students were 99% African American. Following her students' interests in princesses and princes, Jennifer, a White woman, introduced predominantly African American students in her class to their heritage by using a text set on African princesses[3] as a counternarrative to the prevailing images of White kings, queens, princes, and princesses. She wanted her students to know that their history did not begin with enslavement. Below is a list of books that she read on princesses.

1. Hansen, J. (2004). *The amazing lives of Africa's royal women*. New York, NY; Jump at the Sun.
2. Myers, W. D. (1999). *At her majesty's request: An African princess in Victorian England*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
3. Price, L., & Dillion, D. (1990). *Aida.* New York, NY: Gulliver Books. (she also engaged children in listening to the opera, *Aida*).
4. Steptoe, J. (1987). *Mufaro's beautiful daughters. An African tale.* New York, NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books.

The students became quite involved with the idea of being kings and queens. Mrs. Strickland provided different styles of Kente cloth for the students to use during dramatic play. Learning that African kings and queens had great rule over their land stimulated children to act out their interpretations of what life was like in ancient Africa. This became a favorite dramatic play activity that Mrs. Strickland complemented by teaching about places in Africa as well as creating an African museum with artifacts from Africa (which she taught children about). The few Latino children in her classroom and the one White child benefited and learned about African history as well.

[3] Fuller description of Jennifer Strickland's classroom can be found in: Boutte (2016) Boutte (2008)

Nichole Folsom

Over the years, Mrs. Folsom, a Black teacher, has taught both second and third grade in majority-Black schools. Like Mrs. Strickland, she found ways to teach Diaspora literacy in different grade levels and at different schools. As an African American and as an Africanist, focusing on Black children's heritage and ways of being are non-negotiables for Mrs. Folsom[4].

Both of her classrooms were filled with African-centric imagery such as sculpture and African drums. In the third-grade classroom, colorful Adinkra symbols from Ghana were posted with the following words: Strength; Unity; Compassion; Cooperation; Responsibility; Readiness; Loyalty; Confidence; Patience; Greatness–all African values that were taught in her classroom. Indeed, her classroom management was based on these principles.

Mrs. Folsom's interactive communication style was built on Black culture communal strengths. To get students' attention, she would use "agoo", a word from the Ghanaian language Twi. The children would respond using the Twi word, "amee." The term "agoo" is used when someone is about to enter a house or a room and wants to notify whoever is inside of his/her intention to enter. These words are uttered instead of knocking at a door or gate. The response could be "amee" meaning come in or you are welcome. To say "agoo" is to ask for permission from the gathering to speak. Borrowing from the culture of the Akan people in Ghana, if there is a meeting of elders or the chief and his entourage, it is the linguist (a post not taken lightly because one must be able to speak in very flowery language and mostly in parables) who shouts this alert, bringing the gathering to silence. When the floor responds "amee," it means you are given consent to express your view.

Songs, drumming, and poetry are daily events, as are connections to students' collective African histories and present realities. Weekly affirmations, like the one below, capture the communal aspect of Black culture.

> ***Pride*** (by Alma Flor Ada)
>
> *Proud of my family*
> *Proud of my language*
> *Proud of my culture*
> *Proud of my race*
> *Proud to be who I am*

Mrs. Folsom used students' strong oral skills as a bridge to reading and writing activities. She wrote morning messages each day, and often used them to teach students about African American Language (AAL), its history and structure, as well as how to translate AAL to standardized English. In her classroom, as with Mrs. Strickland's, students' Blackness was honored and celebrated. The classrooms became healing places of refuge. Indeed, as one parent conveyed to Mrs. Folsom about her daughter, "Even when she sick, she want to come to school" (AAL used by parent for emphasis). Though academic outcomes are not the focus of this study, it is important to note that both Mrs. Strickland's and Mrs. Folsom's students excelled in school. More importantly, they left understanding that they were, *young, gifted, and Black—with their souls intact* (borrowing from the song, *Young, gifted, and Black*, recorded and sang by two different artists—Nina Simone and Aretha Franklin).

[4] Fuller descriptions of Nichole Folsom's classroom can be found in: Boutte (2016)

Diaspora Literacy at Home

We (Boutte and Johnson) are engaged in ongoing Diaspora literacy activities with our grandchildren. Though they are now five (a boy) and ten (a set of twin girls), we have done this with them since they were three. This summer, we decided to focus on Black history and principles of MAAT[5] with our African American grandchildren.

Using the concept of Diaspora literacy, which is designed to teach about the collective history of people with African origin, content and activities in Early Childhood classrooms will cover three key periods: 1) life for African Americans before enslavement; 2) life during initial contact with Europeans and European Americans; and, 3) contemporary life (Boutte, 2016).

We began with a discussion about why we needed to study Black history, why they thought that this was not being taught in their schools, and why it was important for us to do so at home. Their responses helped us see places where we could scaffold their historical and social understandings.

Carter (age 4)	They (school) like teaching about White stuff and they do not really care about us, but we are the best people in the world.
Jaliyah (age 10)	So they didn't really care to tell us what happened. Back then, it wasn't really appropriate to tell us because it was very mean to do.
Janiyah (age 10)	Because there are White people now and stuff and so they probably don't want to do it anymore since if they teach us about Black history, the White people will get mad.

We were most surprised by Carter's response. Even though we teach him/them about Black history at home, we were pleased to hear that he understands that most of the content at school was Eurocratic. Both girls seem to intimate that discussing Black issues in racially mixed groups could cause tensions, which is why they believe it is avoided. We made mental notes for future lessons on the value of all people in their own right and a need for later discussions regarding why it is okay to discuss "White stuff" and not "Black stuff."

Another initial activity that we did centered around our purposes in life. The children wrote about and discussed what they thought their purposes were in life. The focus on purpose rather than careers/jobs fits nicely with more holistic African values which focus on spiritual and social well-being. We also tied this into the African communal idea of *Ubuntu* (I am because we are), which emphasizes our responsibility for our families and ancestors. We talked about the value of respecting our parents and elders. This provided a nice segue into activities about Africa. We began with the examination and coloring of maps of Africa, and then pointed out places that we have been. We also engaged the children in two movement activities and rhythms, *My mother told me to tell you what to do* and *My mother's calling me.*

[5] Maat or Ma'at is based on ancient Egyptian concepts of truth, balance, order, harmony, law, morality, and justice.

Of course, the lessons are ongoing and we discuss difficult topics such as the enslavement of African people. In these discussions, we thought together and problematized the enslavers and how their actions relate to the principles of MAAT. We shared stories and songs from the Civil Rights era with books such as, *New shoes* (Meyer, 2015) and *Freedom on the menu, The Greensboro sit-ins* (Weatherford, 2005), and the songs *We shall overcome* and *Don't you let nobody turn you around*. As we shared historical accounts, often re-enacting some parts, we emphasized three themes that captured the role of African people: resistance, rebellion, and revolution (Weaver, 2003). We also emphasized collective struggles across many races, ages, religions, and lifestyles. During our ongoing study, we traveled to one of our hometowns and shared historical experiences, and visited landmarks such as schools, movie theaters, and shops that were once racially segregated.

During several lessons, we emphasized finding truth in the world, we explained that there is beauty and truth in ourselves, our families, and communities. We read the book *Something beautiful* (Wyeth, 1998) and discussed our agency as a people and as a family. We discussed that at school sometimes they may or may not hear that they are smart and beautiful, but we know that they are, and we know them better than anyone. We emphasized that they should believe what family members and/or people who care about them say rather than outsiders. We discussed how to process negative messages about Black people or children that may be conveyed at school.

Over the weeks, we developed poems for our family creeds. Jaliyah's was the most extensive and included themes about spirituality and family. We discussed values that Africans brought to the U.S. and which are reflected in folktales like the ones in the Br'er Rabbit stories (Harris, 2008). We read some of the stories during the day or at bedtime, and listened to or watched some of the stories on video while riding in the car. The children felt empowered and proud. Jaliyah said one day, "I never knew history could be so much fun!" We also discussed contemporary issues such as the Black Lives Matter Movement and Marley Dias' "1,000 Black Girls Books" campaign. We played and sang songs such as James Brown's *Say it loud, I'm Black and proud* or Nina Simone's and Aretha Franklin's versions of *Young, gifted, and Black.*

All children have the right to have their history and culture validated (Souto-Manning, 2013). While young children may not always have the words to explain the marginalization of Black people and Black culture by schools and society, they know it in tacit ways (Delpit, 2007; Tenorio, 2007). Once when Jaliyah was about five-years old, I (Boutte) read her the book, *A mother like no other* (Taylor-Butler, 2004), which is about the ordinary, daily activities that a little girl's mother did with her. Jaliyah said, "I like this book because it seems real." I knew all too well that the other stories she heard in school were typically not affirming her culture. I loved the excitement that Carter (age four at the time) expressed when I read two books about Black barbershops: *Bippity bop barbershop* (Tarplay, 2003) and *The barber's cutting edge* (Battle-Lavert, 1994). We will continue to provide Diaspora literacy activities and lessons to our grandchildren, because we view it as food for their souls. We also plan to start an African Diaspora Literacy Saturday School so that we can extend our efforts to more children.

Implications for Early Childhood Educators

The previous examples of Diaspora literacy learning engagements point to several implications for practitioners. First, it is problematic to ground Black history in the conceptual framework that begins with slavery. From an anti-bias perspective, children must be taught to recognize unfairness and understand that unfairness hurts (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Omitting African history is an excellent example of unfairness in curricula. European history is covered, but African history is not. This is problematic. Even young children can be taught how to take actions against such injustices by writing letters to publishers and school administrators to ask that missing African history be included.

Second, an African-centered curriculum is critical for all students and not just for African American learners (Asante, 1987, 1991; Hilliard, 1991, 1992). We can only imagine the positive and powerful impact Diaspora learning would have if all teachers were required to teach about Africans as kings and queens (i.e., King Ramesses II, Queen Nefertiti), warriors (i.e., King Hannibal, King Masa Musa, Nana Yaa Asantewa, Queen Nzingha), scientists and mathematicians (the Ishango Bone, Egyptians) rather than portray them as only captured, enslaved, and brutally damaged bodies, minds, and souls. For example, in the U.S., educators are encouraged to visualize how African American learners who are continuously referred to as "at-risk" or "below-grade level" would shift their self-perceptions from powerless to powerful through studies which focused on Diaspora literacy. We have seen the power of Diaspora literacy in examples with other cultural groups such as those by Jaime Escalante whose teaching of Latino students was featured in the movie *Stand and Deliver* (Musca, 1988). Escalante understood the value of Diaspora history when teaching primarily high school students who were labeled as low achievers and proclaimed to them, "It was your ancestors, the Mayans, who first contemplated the zero. The absence of value. You have math in your blood."

Third, since schools are locations where power struggles between majoritized and minoritized groups are likely to occur (Lazar, Edwards, & McMillon, 2012) (e.g., economic: wealthy vs. poor/working class; linguistic: Standardized English vs. indigenous languages; racial: White vs. People of Color; gender: male vs. female), educators should provide spaces for students to explore and question hegemonic systems. One approach is through *critical literacy*, which invites educators and students to examine literacies through a sociopolitical lens. Fourth, we emphasize the long-term and cumulative damage of Black children not being engaged in Diaspora literacy. Too many African American adults have internalized the culturally invasive and negative messages about people of the African Diaspora. For example, recently during a professional development session which focused on the book, *Educating African American students: And how are the children* (Boutte, 2016), an African American teacher described how heartbroken she was because she could not imagine envisioning a world in which Whites were not the dominant group (they were asked to envision a world in which most people in the following roles were Black—U.S. President, doctors, teachers, CEOs, and so forth). Decades of being taught and teaching a European curriculum had shackled her psyche and ability to think from an Africancentric perspective or about different possibilities. But there is hope. Another African American teacher told the first teacher to imagine that Black people ("our people" she said) had been allowed to keep their language, traditions, and customs. In this case, Africancentricity would have been the norm.

If Early Childhood Educators wish to address anti-bias goals such as: "Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human differences; and deep caring connections" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010), they will have to help White students understand that when one group of people is harmed by others, it dehumanizes us all. For example, when we leave the evildoings of Whites during enslavement (such as lynching Black people; beating Black people; raping Black women; selling humans) unproblematized, White children stand the risk of not learning empathy for Black people. They will learn that there is something different about people from the African Diaspora that makes them less than human; therefore, children may erroneously deduce that such mistreatment is okay. Intended or not, White children may readily extrapolate lack of empathy to Blacks living during contemporary times unless educators interrupt them, and also show present information and commentaries which show the correct history, humanity, and agency of Black people.

Conclusion

As we think of ways to be stronger allies for all children (Swadener, 2008), we urge readers to explicate how this charge translates to practice. One consideration is extending the interpretation of the ethical principle, "First do no harm," which most educators translate as not physically harming children (Boutte, 2008). Emotional damage is often thought of in terms of blatant and overt examples of shaming or otherwise hurting children in ways that are readily apparent. We have offered our perspective that exclusion of indigenous African knowledges, epistemologies, and worldviews from early childhood settings makes educators complicit in damaging the souls and spirits of children in the African Diaspora and White children who often internalize the destructive messages of White supremacy. We have suggested that Diaspora literacy may be a significant antidote that educators can and should offer. The benefits extend to the humanity of people around the globe.

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