

# Applying Africentric Principles and Pedagogy in Early Learning

*May 2025*



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**Additional team members:** Jessie-Lee McIsaac, Justin West, Moashella Shortte, Kiara Sexton, Trina Fraser, Anne Briscoe, Kerri Johnson, Terrah Keener



# Agenda

- Land Acknowledgement
- Meet Our Team
- Situating this work
- Goals and Objectives
- Participants
- Photovoice Methodology
- Participant Stories
- Gallery Walk and Discussion
- Recommendations
- Questions/reflections



# Land Acknowledgement

We acknowledge, with gratitude, that this land - Mi'kma'ki - on which we get to live and participate in community, is the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq. We vow to make a concerted effort everyday to allow the spirit of Ubuntu to guide us as we strive to honor and respect the Treaties of Peace and Friendship that cover this territory.

We acknowledge and pay homage to the Elders, past, present, and emerging of the Mi'kmaq Community and those of my African Nova Scotian Community. We acknowledge and offer gratitude for our ancestors and those of our L'nu brothers and sisters for their spiritual guidance even now.

We acknowledge that “I am because we are.” We are all treaty people!

Thanks to Moashella Shortte for offering this land acknowledgment to support our conversations.



# Meet Our Team



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# Situating this Work



- Principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility are foundational to high-quality early learning and child care.
- Our pedagogical approach and image of the child are pivotal in planning for, and responding to, moments that can foster these opportunities for shared learning related to equity .



# Past research in Nova Scotia

- Earlier work by our team identified that ELCC settings often adhere to mainstream white norms

LEISURE/LOISIR  
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OPEN ACCESS

## Early Childhood leisure experiences of African Nova Scotian children: the privilege of risky outdoor play

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### ABSTRACT

Unstructured play is fundamental for healthy child development. Research indicates that racialized children participate less in outdoor play. Limited access to outdoor spaces restricts play for Black children. This study used Critical Race and BlackCrit Theories to understand how outdoor risky play is accessed and perceived by African Nova Scotian (ANS) parents and Early Childhood Educators (ECE). Caregivers (8 ECEs and 7 parents) of ANS children aged five and under participated in semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the data revealed the systemic issues restricting outdoor risky play opportunities for Black children. Hesitancy about

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

risky play; Black children;  
early childhood; anti-  
blackness

### MOTS-CLÉS

jeu à risque; enfants noirs;  
petite enfance; racisme  
envers les Noirs

## Original qualitative research

### Anti-Black racism in the early years: the experiences of Black families and early childhood educators in Nova Scotia

Emma Stirling-Cameron, MA (1,2); Nicholas Hickens, BSc (2); Crystal Watson, MA (3); Barb Hamilton-Hinch, PhD (3); Milena Pimentel (2); Jessie-Lee D. McIsaac, PhD (2)

This article has been peer reviewed.

Tweet this article

### Abstract

**Introduction:** Anti-Black racism is a social determinant of health that has significantly impacted Black children and families. Limited research has examined anti-Black racism during the early years—a critical period of development. In this study, we sought to understand the manifestations of anti-Black racism in early childhood and explore its impact on Black children and families.

**Methods:** This qualitative research project was informed by critical race theory, Black Critical Theory and interpretive description. Early childhood educators (ECEs) and parents with Black children between the ages of 18 months and 5 years ( $n = 15$ ) participated in virtual, semistructured interviews.

**Results:** Awareness of and protection against anti-Black racism was a constant in Black families' lives. Parents felt as though they had to remain hypervigilant and overprotective of their Black children, knowing they were liable to encounter racial violence. The early learning environment was a source of heightened stress for families, given the significant amount of time young children spend in child care. Black children were often "othered" in predominately White spaces and had been objectified by White ECE staff and children. Parents worked to instill a strong sense of self-confidence in their children to counteract the negative impacts of racial discrimination.

**Conclusion:** Results from this study suggest that children as young as 18 months are experiencing racial violence and adverse childhood experiences. Findings may contribute to antiracist policy development and a focus on more inclusive early childhood education for Black children and families.

**Keywords:** anti-Black racism, early childhood education, child care, mental health, African Nova Scotian

### Highlights

- The objective of this qualitative research study was to increase understanding of the impacts and manifestations of systemic and interpersonal anti-Black racism on African Nova Scotian children and their families.
- Children as young as 18 months had experienced anti-Black racism in the early child care setting, including verbal abuse, bullying and discriminatory treatment by early child care educators.
- Black children were often "othered" in predominately White spaces and some had been objectified by White ECE staff and children.
- Medical settings were also a space where violence and discrimination occurred, with Black mothers reporting that they had been accused of abuse by care providers, and that they and their children experienced maltreatment rooted in anti-Black racism in hospital settings.

African descent are significantly more likely



JOURNAL OF CHILDHOOD STUDIES

ARTICLES FROM RESEARCH

## Amplifying the Encounters of Young Black Children with Anti-Black Racism: An Exploration of Parents' and Early Childhood Educators' Perspectives on Early Learning and Child Care Environments

Milena Pimentel, Jessie-Lee McIsaac, Crystal Watson, Emma Stirling-Cameron, Nicholas Hickens, and Barb Hamilton-Hinch



ON THESE SHOULDERS  
RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE



## A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consisting of several overlapping hexagons. The colors include olive green, yellow, black, and red, arranged in a geometric pattern.



In the previous study, the **Africentric Early Childhood Education diploma program** at the Nova Scotia Community College was highlighted as a community asset bringing strength to the ELCC sector in Nova Scotia.





# Goals and Objectives

## Goals:

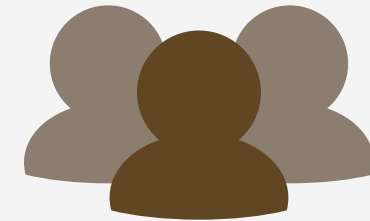
- To understand how the graduates of the Africentric ECE program are implementing Africentric principles and pedagogy in their early learning environments, and the further support they need.

## Objectives:

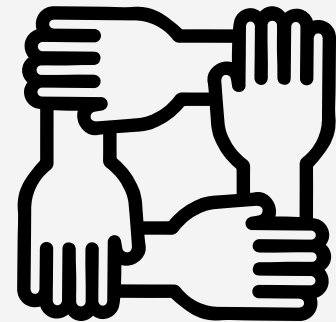
- To enable participants to record and reflect on the assets and concerns they have regarding ELCC programs.
- To promote dialogue among participants about ELCC programs, by understanding their experiences and concerns, and by centering knowledge mobilizations with the voices of the participants.
- To build African NS /Black education confidence and skills through visual methods.



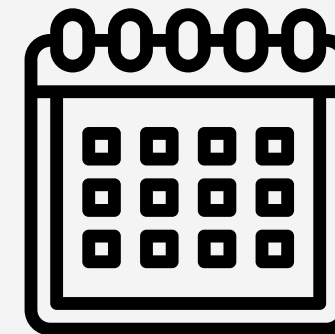
# Participants



A total of 12 participants participated in this study.



4 working within a historic African Nova Scotian community



Experience in ECE ranged from 1.5 years to 10+ years



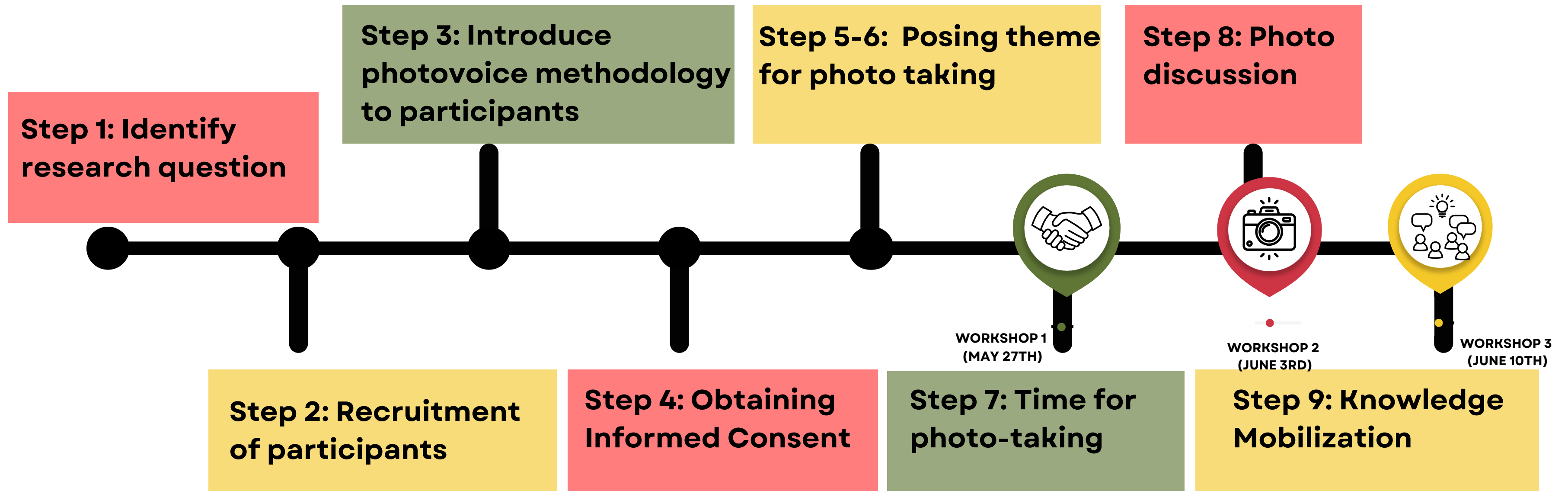
All working in regulated child care or in Pre-primary



4 in the accelerated online cohort and 8 from the in-person cohort



# Photovoice Methodology



# Participant Stories

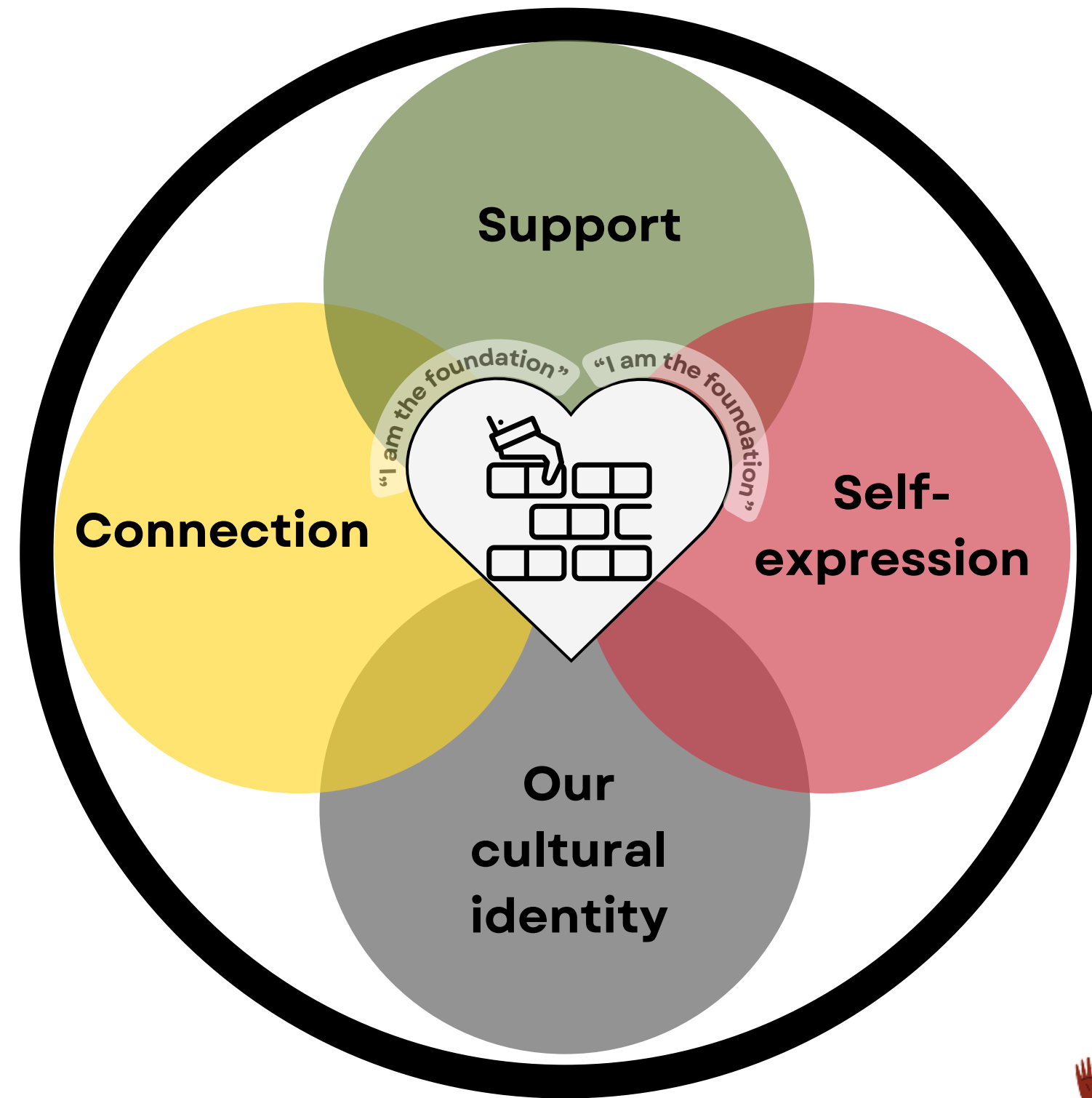
- Reflection questions:
  - How do you apply Africentric principles and pedagogy in your practice?
  - What has been the response from those you work with (colleagues, children, families, etc.)?

“For me [...] what I do [is] bring in books into our classroom....I look and I make sure that I find books that have children that are in our programs [...]. **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.**”





# Our Stories



# Gallery Walk and Discussion



## Reflection Questions:

- ***How do these stories from the early childhood sector resonate with your experiences working in education?***
- ***How can we amplify the talents and expertise of Black and African Nova Scotia educators?***
- ***How do we create cultural safety for Black and African Nova Scotia educators beyond Africentric cohorts (i.e. post-graduation)?***



# *“I am the Foundation”*

“*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.*”



“*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”*



*“**Being able to use my culture's childhood game to teach dexterity and basic math is just one way I use the Nova Scotia Framework curriculum in everyday 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 gonna 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...”*



“—  
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 had did my first like 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.**”



# Connection

*to safe space, nature, and culture*



“*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.***”

*“**What I bring into my practice is a safe space for them.** A person that they can feel that they can come and talk to and tell all about their weekend, about their family and their friends. **They feel love towards me in that they think about me to pick that flower and bring it just for me, to pick those special three rocks and give it to me.** To come and tell me that she misses her mom but that I can make her feel better even though I'm not her mom [...]. **Part of my Africentric practice in my work is to be there for them [...].**”*



# Connection

*to safe space, nature, and culture*



“  
**Educator:** We did a photo shoot for promoting the daycare and [the children] were chosen to be in the photoshoot and so in this one, the camera guy asked us to just do us like, do your own thing. **So we’re singing songs on the drum.**  
**Educator:** I see a lot of happiness in the photo.  
**Educator:** They know that they’re doing a photo shoot but they don’t look nervous. **They’re just relaxed because they’re with you.**  
”



# Connection to safe space, nature, and culture

“**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’.”





# Connection

## *to safe space, nature, and culture*

“ I currently work in preschoolers classroom. The preschoolers in my care showed a strong interest in dramatic play. But **I really wanted to bring some more diversity and incorporate in the classroom.** To facilitate their creativity, I added some loose materials such, rubber bands, combs, washed out hair spray bottles, shampoo bottles, 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 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 up...”*

*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.***





# Summary of findings



- The photos and stories exemplify the meaningfulness of Africentric early childhood education.
  - Examples illustrate how educators engage with children holistically—mind, body, and spirit— and embrace the principle of UBUNTU, which means “I am because you are, and you are because I am.”
- The stories also reveal the challenges these African Nova Scotian and Black educators experience in applying Africentric principles in early childhood education.
  - These experiences influence the cultural safety of educators and lead to worry about the potential repercussions if they speak up.


# Recommendations


- Continued investment in Africentric early childhood education training
- Policy to ensure commitment to Anti-Black racism
- Awareness and training on microaggressions and implicit biases
- Professional development in Africentric early childhood education and cultural competency
- Recognition and appreciation of the talents and expertise of Black and African Nova Scotia educators
- Open communication that allows educators to voice their concerns
- Create or strengthen support networks







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<https://tinyurl.com/ECEAfricentricpedagogy>





Thanks to the participants for sharing their photos and stories and our community partners for their advice and support. This research was funded by the Inter-University Reserach Network (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development)



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ECEAfricentricpedagogy](https://tinyurl.com/ECEAfricentricpedagogy)



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UNIVERSITY**



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