

# Applying Africentric Principles and Pedagogy in Early Learning Report

## November 2024



### Researchers

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# 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!

## **A message from Moashella Shortte:**

**In an effort to show up authentically, laying bare all intent and purpose, as they relate to my commitment to community, self, and that which connects us, I, in conscious reflection, penned this acknowledgment. In the same spirit, I offer it up for use to any individual or organization with whom it's sentiments align.**



# Meet Our Team



**DR. JESSIE-LEE MCISAAC**  
LEAD INVESTIGATOR

Dr. Jessie-Lee McIsaac is an Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair in Early Childhood at Mount Saint Vincent University. As a white mom of two children, she works with others to amplify stories among equity-deserving communities to inform meaningful changes. She believes that all educators, children, and their families deserve to be healthy and safe where they live, learn, and play. She enjoys learning with and from teams with varied lived experiences to make research meaningful and useful.



**DR. BARB HAMILTON-HINCH**  
CO-INVESTIGATOR

Dr. Barb Hamilton-Hinch is from the historical African Nova Scotian communities of Beechville and Cherry Brook. She is a mom to three sons who she says inspires her every day. She is currently employed at Dalhousie University as the Assistant Vice Provost of Equity and Inclusion and an Associate Professor in the School of Health and Human Performance. Her work examines the impact of structural, systemic, and institutional racism on diverse populations, particularly people of African descent. Through research she is able to bring voice to those who have not been heard. She is honoured to work with such amazing people and be a vessel for change and equity.



**CRYSTAL WATSON**  
CO-INVESTIGATOR

Crystal Watson an Academic Chair at NSCC and also a PhD candidate at Dalhousie University in the Faculty of Health. She has family roots in the community of East Preston and is a mother to one daughter. She has over 25 years in the recreation field, which includes working in community recreation and as a certified Recreation Therapist. She is interested in understanding recreation, play and leisure as a health promoting activities for Black children.



# Meet Our Team

Our team also composed of community researchers and community partners.

Given this study is centred on principles of community-based research, community partners played a critical role alongside the research team by providing feedback on the research design to ensure that the concerns, interests, and needs of the community were considered during every phase of the project.

Community researchers co-facilitated each workshop session alongside the research team. Their relationship and rapport with the participants were invaluable to ensure participants felt safe in the space.



**Justin West**

*NSCC Lead Faculty of the Africentric ECE Program (Community Researcher)*



**Moashella Shortte**

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*ECCRC Research Assistant (MSVU)*



**Trina Fraser**

*Executive Director at the East Preston Day Care Centre and Family Resource Centre (Community Partner)*



**Kerri Johnson**

*YWCA Provincial Director of Early Learning and Child Care (Community Partner)*



**Terrah Keener**

*NSCC Dean, School of Access, Education and Language (Community Partner)*



**Anne Briscombe**

*Early Childhood Educator (Community Partner)*

# Situating this work

- Early childhood educators (ECEs) play a critical role in the quality of early learning and child care (ELCC) and in setting the foundation for equity, diversity, inclusion, and accessibility.
- Through pedagogies, meaningful and intentional conversations, and program planning, ECEs can elicit and deepen children’s critical thinking on issues of social justice.
- Earlier work by our team identified that ELCC settings often adhere to mainstream norms, which promote white heteronormative values as a result of the pervasiveness of Eurocentrism, which negates the values and lived experiences of Black children, families, and educators.
- Reconnecting and reclaiming Black people to African-centered ways (Africentrism) can support cultural safety for Black children and educators and counter negative messages of Black inferiority and inaccurate historical representations of Black people.

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 to begin dismantling anti-Black racism.

# Objectives & Goals

- The overall goal of this study was to understand:
  1. How the graduates of the Africentric ECE program are implementing Africentric principles and pedagogy;
  2. Identify the support they need to do so in their early learning environments.
- This project's overall objectives were:
  - To enable African Nova Scotian and Black ECEs to record and reflect on their assets and concerns regarding ELCC programs.
  - To promote critical dialogue among African Nova Scotian and Black ECEs about ELCC programs in Nova Scotia. Through understanding their experiences and concerns, and centering knowledge mobilization with the voices of the participants.
  - To build on the confidence and skills of African Nova Scotian and Black educators through visual methods.



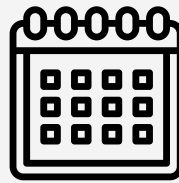
# Participants



A total of 12 participants participated in this study.



3 worked within a historic African Nova Scotian community



Experience in ECE ranged from 1.5 years to 10+ years



All worked in regulated child care or in Pre-primary



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

- To be eligible for this study, participants worked in an ELCC environment with children between the ages of 3 months to 6 years old in regulated childcare, Pre-primary program, family day homes, or before and after school programs.
- Participants graduated either from the Africentric NSCC ECE program or have completed the requirements for the Africentric Accelerated ECE program cohort by February 2024 (*\*students in the second cohort of the in-person program and students who had not completed the course requirements in the accelerated cohort were not eligible*).
- Participants were given the option to select a pseudonym or use their given names. This was an intentional design of the result-sharing process of this work.



# Photovoice Methodology



Photovoice, a participatory action methodology, integrates participant narratives with photography to explore community needs, concerns, and experiences. It is a powerful tool, especially for participants who are from communities that have been historically oppressed as they can reflect on the forces that influence their experiences, and promote systemic change. Photovoice allows researchers and participants to mobilize new knowledge through co-create, reflect, and engage in critical group dialogue. We followed a 9-step approach to this project, as noted by Wang and Burris (1997).

## Step 1: Identify research question

- The research project was identified by one of the community researchers. Community partners were selected based on their involvement in the Africentric ECE program and key roles in the community.

## Step 2: Recruitment of participants

- Participants were directly contacted by the community researchers given their existing relationships.

## Step 3: Introduce photovoice methodology to participants

- Participants were provided with a 'Study Information, benefits, and risks' document. All information regarding the methodology guiding this work was explained.
- Participants were asked to review and note any questions they had for the research team during their informed consent phone calls.

## Step 4: Obtaining Informed Consent

- Following expressing interest in the study to community researchers, the research coordinator and/or the research assistant contacted the participants to obtain informed consent. Participants were explained the research purpose, and the time commitment of the study and were reminded that their participation was voluntary.

# Photovoice Methodology



## Step 5-6: Posing theme for photo taking

- Three workshops were held between May and June 2024.
- In the first workshop, Participants were asked to reflect on how they use photos in their practice, and what Africentric meant to them.
- After this discussion, the guiding questions were introduced:
  - 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.)?

## Step 7: Time for photo-taking

- After the first workshop, participants had about one week to take photos of their practice.
- Participants were also informed that if they already had photos which related to the guiding questions, that they could use them.
- Parent/colleague consent forms were given to participants to distribute to any child's family and/or colleague who appeared in the photo.

## Step 8: Photo discussion

- In workshop 2, Participants shared their photos using the SHOWeD method. (What do you See? What is really Happening? How does it relate to Our lives? Why does it exist? What can be Done about it?)

## Step 9: Knowledge Mobilization

- Participant-led knowledge mobilization is a critical component of the photovoice methodology. In Workshop 3, Participants were asked to brainstorm the audience, location, and how they would like to share their photos and stories. An additional meeting was held in September 2024 to discuss plans for a community event and other ways to share the stories.

# Photovoice Workshops



## WORKSHOP 1 (MAY 27TH)

- Review of project goals with participants;
- Defined 'Our ways of being' for the duration of the project;
- Overview of photovoice methodology;
- Re-established consent;
- Reflective questions;
- Collectively brainstormed key ideas for photo taking;
- Water Ceremony.

## WORKSHOP 2 (JUNE 3RD)

- Re-established consent
- Review of guiding questions for photo-sharing;
- Split into two small groups to share and discuss of photos;
- Participants asked questions about the photos from others and added their reflections.
- Water Ceremony

## WORKSHOP 3 (JUNE 10TH)

- Re-establishing consent
- Review of initial; mapping completed by research team based on previous week's discussion;
- Re-organizing mapping with participant feedback and reflections;
- Discussion regarding knowledge mobilization (how, where, and with whom)
- Closing reflections

# Participant Stories

- The following reflection questions were intentionally developed to focus and support the ongoing reflection of the participants during the photo-taking phase and subsequent discussions in the following workshops:
  - 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.)

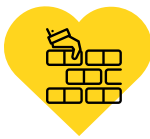
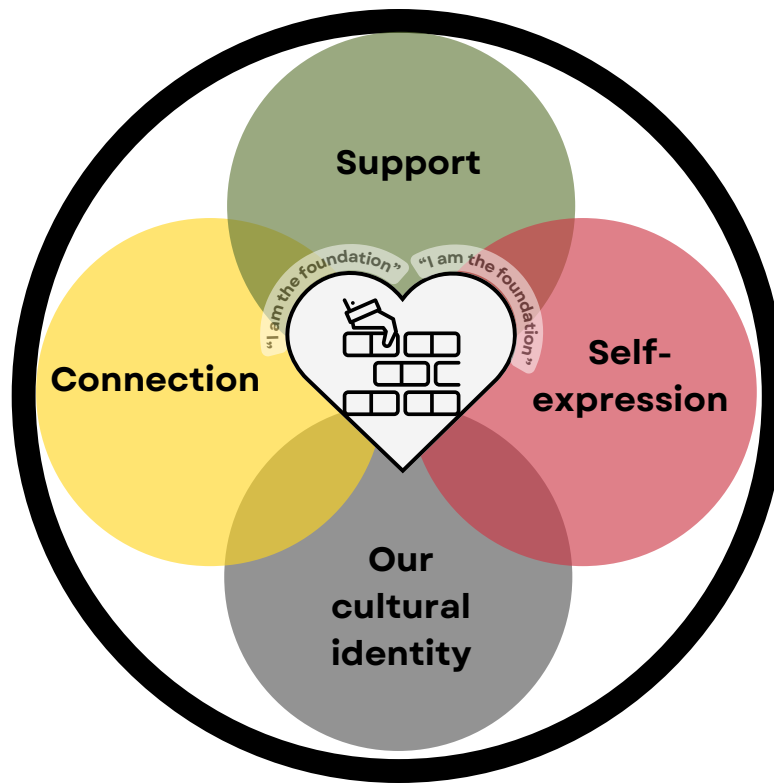
“For me [...] what I do [is] bring in books into our classroom....I look and I make sure that I find books that have children that are in our programs [...]. **From an Africentric lens, it's being diverse versus when you're going from a more Western white-washed lens, it's not about it being diverse 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.**”

- Reflecting on how participants apply an Africentric approach to their practice provided participants with ideas of photos they could incorporate as part of this project.
- Participants were familiar with taking photos to support documentation of children's learning and a sense of belonging for families.
- All participants reflected that not only did their Africentric lens focus on centering Black identity but that it also ensured all identities were represented.



The next section illustrates the themes developed by participants according to their collective stories.

# Our Stories



**I am the foundation:** At its core, participants referred to themselves as the foundation for **creating culturally safe, responsive, and anti-racist early learning environments**. Their pre-service training, centered on Africentricity, was critical to their practice and affirmed their **Black identity as the vehicle to drive change in the early childhood sector**.



**Our cultural identity:** Participants acknowledged that **representation** through themselves and in the intentional selection of materials and resources communicated messages to Black and racialized children (and their families) that **“I see you.”**



**Self-expression:** Participants discussed how their Africentric approach allowed them to freely **express and explore their cultural identity**, enabling them to show up as their **authentic self**, and not conform to the dominant white culture.



**Connection:** The ability to **connect to safe space, culture, nature, and self** was central to participants’ ability to implement Africentric principles and pedagogy. This connection allowed participants to offer children learning experiences that **gave voice and language** specifically around racial and social justice, to enable a practice of **cultural advocacy** in their early learning environments.



**Support:** Participants discussed **receiving support** from those in their early learning programs, from families and the wider community, but also a **lack of support** primarily from program administrators, which influenced **trust**.

# “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*

”



- ‘I am the foundation’, as participants described, reflects their role as Black and African Nova Scotians in applying Africentric principles and pedagogy in their work environments.
- Often times, participants noted that they drive conversations and action related to creating early learning environments that are diverse, inclusive, and culturally responsive.
- Participants emphasized that their ongoing efforts to create such environments occurred whether they had others’ support or not within their programs, as they felt a sense of responsibility and emphasized their presence in programs as foundational.



“

*I worked here for 2 years before I put this in place. **Within the two years I didn't see anything Black history related during the month of February from our director or assistant Director. I just took the initiative.** Something just told me to do it my co-workers didn't really take the time, they're two white women, **they don't take initiative to do anything Africentric unless they ask permission, 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.  
”*

- Participants identified that their identity as Black and/or African Nova Scotian ECEs influenced their selection of materials and resources for children in their early learning environments.
- Participants wanted to foster a sense of belonging among children and families in their programs and often spent time (sometimes unpaid) accessing materials to reflect a diversity of lived identities.



*“  
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.
- Through their self expression, educators were able to challenge the harmful stereotypes of Black identity.
- Participants encouraged children to safely express themselves through play with invitations and provocations.
- Participants also discussed that the intentional selection of materials and resources (especially books), provided opportunities for conversations about difficult concepts with children.



“*“So many of the **children come with their nails painted and compare themselves to me**—like “look my nails are painted.”*”



- In some cases, participants reflected upon the intersecting identities between race and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. 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.

“*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.***”



# 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.** ”



- Participants acknowledged that creating a safe space for all children and families was important as it gave children the permission to be curious about difference, which led to meaningful conversations with children.
- Participants created this safe space through building connection with children.

“**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 [...].** ”



“ **Educator 1:** 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 2:** I see a lot of happiness in the photo.  
**Educator 3:** 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

- 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.”



“**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 2 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.”

- Participants also reflected that children and families were able to gain connection to Black and African Nova Scotian culture through materials.

“**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 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 up...”*

“*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.*”



- Participants highlighted the urgency in having support to implement their Africentric practice from families, co-workers, especially administrators of their programs.
- Participants working in non- African Nova Scotia communities reflected that they felt a lack of support from their administration when it comes to voicing concerns about the children and families they work with, as well as understanding their point of view or understanding their experiences as an African Nova Scotian/Black ECE which led to feelings of being undervalued in their workspaces.
- Educators also discussed often receiving push back from co-workers in certain instances.

“*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.***”



# Moving forward



The participants exemplify the significance of Africentric early childhood education through the photos and stories that were shared. 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.” These educators are creating enriched experiences that help children learn about themselves, each other, and the world around them.

The stories also reveal the challenges these African Nova Scotian and Black educators experience in applying Africentric principles in early childhood education. Especially for those working outside of African Nova Scotian communities, educators encounter microaggressions from colleagues and administrators who fail to recognize and address these issues. These experiences influence the cultural safety and lead to worry about the potential repercussions if they speak up.

The participating educators spoke on how various steps can be taken to work within early learning and child care in Nova Scotia to move towards safe, inclusive, and culturally responsive programs and practice.

## Recommendations

- **Continued Investment:** Supporting Black and African Nova Scotian educators through Africentric early childhood education program is critical. Continued funding and investment in training programs is needed to ensure the incorporation of an Africentric lens.
- **Policy and Advocacy:** Advocate for policy related to Anti-Black racism to protect educators from discrimination and ensure a safe working environment. This includes clear anti-discrimination policies and procedures for reporting and addressing issues.
- **Awareness and Training:** Provide training for all staff on recognizing and addressing microaggressions and implicit biases. This can help create a more inclusive and supportive environment.
- **Professional Development:** Offer professional development opportunities focused on Africentric early childhood education and cultural competency with mandatory training for administrators.
- **Recognition and Appreciation:** Ensure early childhood workforce practices value, and do not tokenize, the talents and expertise of Black and African Nova Scotia educators. Regularly acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of educators.
- **Open Communication:** Establish clear channels for educators to voice their concerns without fear of retaliation. Regular check-ins and anonymous feedback systems can be beneficial.
- **Support Networks:** Create or strengthen support networks within the community. Peer support groups and mentorship programs can offer a safe space for educators to share experiences and advice.

*Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion.*  
~ Bell Hooks.

# Thank You!




Our team would like to express our sincere appreciation to the participants of this study who entrusted our team to share their stories and experiences through research. Our team is thankful to participants who joined us in the evenings, after their long work days, yet eager to ensure their stories were told. This study could not have been possible without the participation of each and every one of you.

We would also like to extend our deepest gratitude to our community researchers and community partners. Their unwavering commitment to this work ensured the research team kept community at the core of every phase of this project.

Lastly, we would like to thank the funders of this project, Inter-University Research Network (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood), who is committed to funding research projects identifying practices which support positive learning environments and opportunities, and have an impact on student achievement and well-being, for African Nova Scotian, Mi'kmaw learners, as well as learners experiencing economic exclusion/poverty in Nova Scotia.

## Want to learn more?

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