Witness the reframe of educational equity : The case for Afrocentric Education

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Sister I: You can't have a single narrative. Equity is more vast. … These are narratives based on migrant students. ... The sisters that are Somali Bantu or from Sierra Leone for example, wouldn't have had to leave if there wasn't a war in their country. So [by bringing Afrocentric education to the forefront, it enables educators], to reckon with the fact that … [they have] been so consumed with the fact that they [migrants] are here, and their assimilation process, which includes English acquisition, that [educators] ... perpetuate the erasure of …[the migrant girls] memories. So I think that first frame has to do with something about the power [of] their remembering. Because if they don't remember, then their quest is going to be to assimilate and to do that so readily, that it damn near makes their teachers feel more comfortable or the school district feel more comfortable because… [educators and the district do not] have to impose the rigor on themselves about if equity looked this way [included African migrant students], then we would understand it from this way. But because equity looks this way [the way it looks currently], we don't even have to think about their migrant stories anymore, cause, guess what, at least they got some clothes or at least they got some English support services. ….

Dr. April: … [O]ne of my mentors, her name is Dr. Cynthia Dillard, wrote this book right here [shows the book]. … It's called, *Learning to (Re)member the things We've*

Learned to Forget: Endarkened Feminisms, Spirituality, & the Sacred Nature of Research and Teaching.

Sister I: Wow.

Dr. April: Ayyye. And when she talks about (re)membering, what she's really talking about

Is to re-member meaning to put back together again. Right. She talks about the importance of us going back...thinking about the power, basically the superpowers that our ancestors have passed down to us, have given to us and how we can use some of those same strategies to help empower us or move us even further**. ...**

Sister I: And the reality also is that, for serious people about African centered education, or equity, justice or whatever you call it …. I am so clear that the success of anything that I do fully hinges on how I engage with Sankofa, which is to remember. But sankofa is more explicit because it's saying reach back, to retrieve, reach back to retrieve, so that you never forget and that's what I hope that these girls will walk away from, like, we want to help you to remember, and all people of color, we have that in common.

As Sister I, a South African migrant who has been in the United States for over 30 years now, works in the educational equity department at a public school district, she has been critical of efforts that attempt to leave out her humanity in conversations around equity. Therefore, she is critical of policies, practices, and procedures that do not include people like herself--migrant, female, Black, and whose first language may or may not be English. She recognizes equity has to be more vast than its current implementation because currently, it does not include African migrants. As a result, it adds to the violence of forgetting and dislocation of those students. We,

Sister I and Dr. April, both recognize that equity requires remembering and engaging Sankofa for African students and ourselves to reach back, retrieve, and bring forth our ancestors' tools, ways of knowing, and wisdom to help us all navigate and solve current issues today.

The above dialogue is an extract of our conversation as we thought about the equity issues that animate and excite our hearts and research focus. Our thoughts always landed on equity, justice, and transformational education for the liberation of Black youth. We went back and forth discussing the problems that Black students faced and knew that they deserved an education that supported their intersecting identities. We dreamed of spaces that affirmed, cultivated, and nourished all Black students and their whole selves so that they could reach their "highest potential" (Siddle Walker, 1996) in all aspects of their lives rooted in their cultural identity. We both knew that schools often look at oppressed communities from a deficit perspective and actively try to erase and demonize their cultures. In our separate spaces and different ways, this was a shared similar fight as educators. We knew this was our work, and as Sister I pointed out, "You can't have a single narrative. Equity is more vast."

Individually, we recognized the limiting ways schools talk about equity work. While some schools and districts may have the language of equity on the surface, the action and how it looks misses the mark. During one of our first meetings in November, Sister I, a P-12 school equity practitioner, noted African migrant girl students face distinct challenges in their district. She observed, while the district uses the language of equity and subscribes to culturally relevant teaching, "culture" usually refers to African American students born in the United States. The cultures of African migrant students live in an English acquisition context. On the other hand, the English as a Second Language program focuses on English acquisition, which again leaves out the culture of African migrant girl students. Consequently, while the district strives to focus on

equity and seeks to use culture as a bridge for academic excellence, the question for Sister I has always been, “What about our African migrant students, especially our girls?”

Sister I critiqued the imbalance of not including African students as a part of the equity ecosystem. We both knew that working with African migrant girl students required listening to and learning from and with them about their intersectional experiences such as, but not limited to, gender, language, ethnicity, class, and religion. This sort of typology requires helping them to “(re)member” or put back together their migrant stories that they may be on the cusp of forgetting. As a result, this requires reframing equity to a more expansive and inclusive approach that not just accommodates their experiences to make room for them, but instead is the foundation from which it stems and allows students to tap into Sankofa, the power of their remembering.

This community autoethnography focuses on reframing educational equity by making a case for Afrocentric education as a more inclusive approach. Together we explore: (1) How two Black women, one from South Africa - Sister I, and one from the United States - Dr. April, conclude that Afrocentric Education (ACE) is the equity work needed for African migrant students and Black students in general; (2) How African migrant girls were influenced by their participation in The Promise of Sisterhood, an equity-based Africana arts-integrated program in Pittsburgh Public Schools; and (3) How using equity-based cultural enrichment opportunities, specifically an Africana arts-based approach, tells the story of migrant African girls and supports their cultural preservation. Together, we demonstrate the efficacy required for educators to expand the notion of equity work and support students in accessing the liberatory power of Sankofa and remembering.

First, we provide background information on Afrocentric education followed by a discussion of autoethnography to highlight our use of bridging cultural curiosities with our personal experiences (Boylorn & Orby, 2014). Second, we share our experiences and how we each came to Afrocentric education as the choice that holistically supports the cultural preservation and overall success of African migrant students. Third, we discuss ACE in the context of our reflections working with the Promise of Sisterhood, a culturally responsive arts-integrative program. Finally, we share the insights for research, educators, and policymakers.

What is Afrocentric Education?

Our reflections distinguish Afrocentric education as expressed by scholars such as, but not limited to, Drs. Molefi Asante, Ama Mazama, Asa Hilliard, Joyce King, Ellen Swartz, Carol Lee, and Chike Akua, as a solution to the limits of educational equity, often viewed from a racialized lens in an attempt to close the achievement gap.

With Brown v Board of Education as the baseline for the discourse and pursuit of racial, educational equity (Jordan, Brown, & Gutiérrez, 2010), academic achievement, i.e., test scores, along racial lines, have primarily been the focus for schools; however, this narrow perspective obfuscates the real issue— racism and the cultural mismatch experienced by all Black students (Shockley & Frederick, 2009), and also misses the mark entirely for those who may be phenotypically Black, but do not share an American cultural identity, such as African migrant students.

While both educational equity and ACE recognize structural barriers and cultural mismatches to academic achievement for Black and other minority students (Jordan, Brown, & Gutiérrez, 2010), they have different philosophical underpinnings. The Council of Chief State School Officers (2018) defined equity as “every student having access to the educational

resources and rigor they need at the right moment in their education across race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, family background and family income" (p. 5). For schools around the nation, educational equity focuses on access and eliminating barriers such as policies, practices, and procedures to create a space for all. ACE recognizes that racism is the root of the educational inequities and focuses on agency and centering Black people in the best of African culture to examine information, meet the needs of students, and solve problems in education (Akua, 2019) as the solution to the miseducation (Woodson, 1933) of Black students. While both recognize barriers for Black students, equity, in part, focuses on the symptoms to address testing scores, and ACE focuses on the root to address freedom and liberation. Shockley and Frederick (2009) write,

> Afrocentric educators view holistic approaches to understanding academic achievement as an issue that is best addressed by applying a black (African) culture to black students, not by attempting to find best teaching practices, but by bringing the academic achievement problems into context, which requires addressing issues of cultural mismatch and racism. (p. 451)

From this lens, the deduction is that if the roots are racist, coming up with or dismantling policies, practices, and programs will place a band-aid on some issues instead of eradicating the many-headed hydra of educational disenfranchisement that Black children face (Smith, 1999). Schools will continuously spend time, money, and resources on a pain point, for the illusion of solving the problem, but analogous to treating cancer, if the root is not directly targeted, treated, and removed, it will metastasize and continue to grow and spread (Kendi, 2019). Instead, Afrocentric education, defined as the "adoption of Afrocentric ideology and cultural relevance for use within classrooms" (Shockley & Frederick, 2010, p. 1212), starts with a fundamental

African worldview to center African students as subjects versus objects and in ways informed by the best of African cultural values and interests (Akua, 2019).

The Roots of Afrocentric Education

> …to handicap a student by teaching him that his black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless is the worst sort of lynching. It kills one's aspirations and dooms him to vagabondage and crime. It is strange, then, that the friends of truth and the promoters of freedom have not risen up against the present propaganda in the schools and crushed it. This crusade is much more important than the antilynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom. (Woodson, C., 1933, p. 3).

Carter G. Woodson's seminal text *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933) names the root problems related to the education of Black people as a result of systemic efforts that devalues Black culture, traditions, and life, and centers European culture and practices at the psychological and cultural expense of Black heritage. The text serves as a forerunner for the principles of Afrocentric education, which places African people as the subjects versus the objects of phenomena (Asante, 1988).

Afrocentric education grew out of the Black community's desire to name for themselves and correct the "miseducation" of Black children by providing an education that supports African and African diasporic ways of knowing. With roots in Black Nationalism, Pan-Africanism, Negritude, Kawaida, Diopian historiography, and Fanonism (Mazama, 2003), ACE builds off the philosophy of leaders like Marcus Garvey. He advocated for Africans to view the world "through our own spectacles" (Wilson, 1972). Seeing through our own eyes gives African students

agency, a critical component of ACE, as it "subsumes a consciousness of victory" toward self-determination and living into their divine power (Mazama, 2003).

Black Americans have sought to exercise their agency in controlling their education at every level, and ACE emerged from this tradition, specifically after the Black Power movement and Black student movement in the 1960s. During this time, Black higher education students demanded that their history be reflected in the curriculum, resulting in Black Studies as an academic discipline. In that same vein, P-12 Black parents and community members sought control of their children's education, resulting in the development of independent Black schools in the late 1960s (Piert, 2015). Finally, in 1988, Dr. Molefi Asante published his book *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, which aided in the theoretical framework for ACE. The purpose of ACE is to start with Black children in mind first, as "No other type of education places a focus on the culture, history, heritage, present-day community needs, circumstances, and situations within Black communities" (Shockley & Lomotey, 2020, p. xxii).

The ACE point of departure, shaped by an African worldview, views "educating children as a shared responsibility to enhance community wellbeing and belonging" (King & Swartz, 2016, p. 1). The following describes the valued elements of the African worldview as described by King & Swartz (2016)

- The ontology, or the study of being and what human relationships look like in a certain context, includes wholeness and interconnectedness.
- Epistemology, or ways of knowing, consists of, but is not limited to, relational knowing, empathy, intuition-reasoning, divination, symbolic imagery, speaking, and listening as expressed through performance and lively interactions.

- Axiology, or values, consists of a commitment to community-mindedness, service to others, human welfare, right action, equanimity, and sacredness of the spiritual and material.
- The virtues, or standards of excellence, can be found in the Kemetic spiritual and ethical practice of Maat, such as Truth, Justice, and Balance.
- The principles are concepts such as those expressed in Kwanzaa—Umoja (Unity), Kujichagulia (Self-Determination), Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility), Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics), Nia (Purpose), Kuumba (Creativity), Imani (Faith)

In this light, ACE calls for educators to view education as a whole versus the parts—test scores, policies, curriculum, etc.—and instead to look at the quality of the educational process by centering African migrant students from an African worldview. Centering African migrant students is the route and root for student agency and self-determination, and our research highlights the ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies of African liberation. As opposed to asking how we can address and eliminate educational disparities, we highlight four of the seven questions from Knarrative's Africana Framework (2021),

1. What social, political, economic, and cultural context do Africans find themselves in during the study period?
2. An ontological question: Who are Africans to each other? What do their relationships look like to each other?
3. An epistemological question: What are African ways of being and knowing?
4. An axiology question: "How does it free us?" (Sanchez, 2010).

Ontology, epistemology, and axiology from an ACE perspective serve to center African migrant students. Through this lens, we looked at how they "be" and relate to one another and

the systems from their cultures. Changing the questions changes the focus of the conversation from test scores to students, from students as objects to subjects, and schooling (Shujaa, 1993) to education for freedom and what is best for them and their communities (King & Swartz, 2016; Shockley & Lomotey, 2020). Equity, on the other hand, focuses on using practices as a means to academic achievement. In contrast, ACE focuses on centering African ways of being and knowing as a part of a liberatory process, and the byproduct is academic achievement. Equity is partially devoted to the goal of achievement for test scores, where ACE centers African beings and processes that support student wholeness, agency, and liberation. Afrocentric education does this with a foundational paradigm depicting that Afrocentricity is "a consciousness, quality of thought, mode of analysis, and an actionable perspective where Africans seek, from agency, to assert subject place within the context of African history" (Asante, 2007, p. 16).

The Debates Surrounding Afrocentric Education

Multicultural education is a commonly accepted theory as a viable way to support all students; however, most schools do not exercise it in practice (Akua, 2020). When schools do embrace more inclusive practices, education centered on African migrants is still out of reach due to assimilationist ideas of citizenship, linked to strong nationalism (Banks, 2018). In addition, an assumption made by multicultural education is that Black and African students arrive with their culture intact; thus, celebrating other cultures further decenters the African child (Akua, 2020). We agree that culturally relevant pedagogy is promising as it asks educators to use culture as a bridge for academic excellence (Ladson-Billings 2006b; Gay, 2000); however, most educators refer to African American culture to the exclusion of African migrant students when thinking about Black students. Additionally, while some may practice Africanity through

acknowledging or engaging, the food, customs, music, and language, Afrocentricity is different. As a foundation for ACE, Afrocentricity is a consciousness that seeks to transform education by centering African students, making them subjects to exercise their agency in the learning process (Asante, 2017).

Lastly, some argue that ACE goes against the democratic goal of American prosperity and promotes a separatist agenda (Gordon, 1994) or is racist (Walker, 2001); however, as Asante (2007) asserts, "Afrocentricity does not valorize itself with degrading others" (Asante, 2017). Instead, Afrocentricity is anti-racist because it "liberates the African from the dislocation that Europeans have created and undermines any sense of European hegemony" (Asante, 2007, p. 6). With any skeptics or critics, Mazama (2003) challenges educators to be revolutionary in thinking, praxis (King & Swartz, 2016), and consciousness by understanding Afrocentricity, the undergirding philosophy, and living and enacting it as a route to freedom and liberation.

Community Autoethnography

Sister I: "I took for granted all of those things."

Dr. April: And that is what autoethnography is, unpacking all of those things that we took for granted.

When we set out to write this piece, we were the researcher and the practitioner; however, as we moved along, we realized trying to write separately was not working for us. Dr. April presented as the consultant, teacher, and more experienced researcher, but one who had not written an academic piece in some years, and Sister I, the more seasoned poet, f(emcee), and community leader, decided that it just made more sense to write together and help each other when we got stuck. After a few attempts, we gave in and embraced the process of literally co-

constructing our collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al. 2012); after all, we were talking about Afrocentric education, which values unity and communal work. Therefore, it was absolutely fitting to work together in real time to unpack experiences and reflections for understanding the socio-cultural phenomenon around equity and African migrant girls. In doing so, we honored the ontology of ACE. We gave voice to ourselves and our "previously silenced and marginalized experiences, answer[ed] unexamined questions about the multiplicity of social identities, instigate[d] discussions about and across difference, and explaine[d] the contradictory intersections of personal and cultural standpoints" (Boylorn & Orby, 2014, p. 15).

We write to learn together about ourselves, each other, the community, and the phenomenon. Our lives serve as the data (Rothman, 2007), and we, the researchers, serve as the researchers and research, where we rigorously unpack our everyday experiences. In our work, we move from the "autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix) because this is how we live our lives, and we agree with the feminist maxim, the "personal is political."

Turning the ethnographic gaze inward on ourselves, we use autoethnography to study and examine the larger context (Denzin, 1997) of equity and ACE. We use our mode of inquiry "to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative, and bring it under the control of reason, logic, and analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). In this vein, we use this mode to push the bounds in education and the understanding of equity and African migrant girls.

Data Collection and Analysis

In October 2020, we met through our participation in the Shifting Power program, a collaborative initiative between Remake Learning and the School of Education at the University of funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. During that time, we were paired as a

researcher and practitioner team to co-develop and implement a research project in the practioner's learning spaces using emancipatory research and design infrastructure (Lovelace, 2020). As a pair, we met weekly for a 60-90 minute recorded Zoom conversation, taking notes during each meeting and completing writing/artistic prompts in between sessions. Our meeting time served as a space to plan, reflect, co-mentor, community build, and heal.

Our conversations centered on the needs of the girls and what might serve them best. As a result of our discussions, we created a paid 6-week series for girls in Sister I's program, The Promise of Sisterhood, focusing on being an African migrant Black girl. The series covered the following topics: "Home," "What it Means to be Black Girl," "African Traditions and the Continent," "Africa as a Continent," and "Names and Identity." One of the leaders gave a brief introduction and then offered the space for sisters to provide their input on the subject. After each session, the girls created an artistic project that exemplified their thoughts and feelings about each topic. Twelve girls volunteered for this unique project of the Promise of Sisterhood program. As a part of this particular project, the girls shared their artwork in a short documentary on the Promise of Sisterhood. Lastly, we participated in a four week learning opportunity working with Dr. Ama Mazama, a leading scholar on Afrocentric education. She provided four 90 minute lectures discussing ACE with us. After journeying through this year-long process, these are our reflections.

Findings

In this paper, we address the following questions:

1. How two Black women, one from South Africa - Sister I, and one from the United States - Dr. April, conclude that Afrocentric Education (ACE) is the equity work needed for African migrant students and Black students in general;

2. How African migrant girls were influenced by their participation in The Promise of Sisterhood, an equity-based Africana arts-integrated program in Pittsburgh Public Schools; and
3. How using equity-based cultural enrichment opportunities, specifically an Africana arts-based approach, tells the story of migrant African girls and supports their cultural preservation.

In the findings below, our reflections reveal: (1) Finding ACE has been a life journey, (2) ACE gives students agency and strengthens cultural preservation for education and life, and (3) educators need an ontological, epistemological, heuristic, and axiological shift to support African migrant girl students.

Two Black Women. A Life Journey To Finding Afrocentric Education (ACE)

Meet Sister I

Migration

In 1981 our escape route to the United States was finalized, marking that it was time to leave South Africa as the apartheid regime remained in a malignant state. Madiba Mandela had many more years of captivity, and the African National Congress (ANC), founded in 1912, led the fight for our dignity from the headquarters in Joburg. In the midst of all of the political unrest and fray, I was a little girl who had one significant anomaly going for her that would become the cerebral talisman for which I would one day thank Cape Town. It was the fence that stood between my home and the Muslim neighbors. This fence would become the anchor for my quest for supporting African migrant students by piquing my curiosity about different South African religions and positioning me to start an enrichment program serving migrant girls in a school district.

The Fence

When I was six, we lived in a community called Grassy Park, Cape Town. Next door to us was a Muslim family. Separating our homes was a fence that had just enough slivered ruptures that I was able to see from one home to another. When I was able to have a moment to myself, while my mother was caring for my baby sister, or my father was conspiring our escape, I would sit like a Hadada ibis, a South African bird, perched and alert, watching and immersing myself in an independent study of our neighbor's Islamic ritual. For example, the Muslim practice of slaughtering a lamb was not something I understood but something I watched. This moment was the beginning of my curiosity and acceptance of religious and spiritual differences, and I would never turn back. At age five and a half, I remember the emotional farewells of my aunties, uncles, cousins and friends, but I can also vividly recall feeling sad, not knowing if I would ever see Muslim people and be able to watch the things they did. I was fascinated that children and adults participated together as a unit while chanting, burning fire, performing rituals, and praying. I found peace in just watching, without negative commentary from anyone, for any reason. It simply was, and I anticipated there would be more to see, hear, and smell; however, our family's migration and departure ceased my exploration and study.

The United States and Princeton Theological Seminary

We lived in the seminary. By the time I was seven, we had been in the states for over a year, and we lived in Princeton, New Jersey, on the campus grounds of Princeton Theological Seminary, an entirely Christian community. At this point, Muslim people were nowhere to be found spatially, and my mind began to wander. My heart felt emptiness because I didn't have the language or voice to express my independent studies. I was alone in this place because, essentially, I had somehow chosen to embrace Islam at an early age, even though it was

forbidden in my family. By the age of six, it was one of those hushed things that little girls hold until they can trust someone with how to probe something so beautiful, but so taboo to Christians. For example, one day, while my family and I were walking through the mall, we entered a boutique where I saw a pair of sterling silver earrings that protracted a crescent and a star. I wanted those earrings badly; however, I was not allowed to have them or even look at them because of their religious representation and association with Islam.

In this community at Princeton, it was a global village. I was fortunate to have had friends and extended family members from all over the globe. This global posse provided me with friendships that had stories of their own and reasons for leaving the home of their own all the while representing Japan, Congo, Papua New Guinea, the Fiji Islands, Indonesia, Kenya, Ghana, Liberia, Australia, Guatemala, Chile, China, and South Africa to name a few. Migrations mean one thing to the adults and caregivers—making choices for their families to leave their countries to pursue education, safety, sacrifice, and freedom. To young migrants, however, immigration means that we were primed to learn the ways of colonization, exodus, changing of allegiance, and settlement as children. As immigrant children, we experienced an unspoken abyss of change that brings about different points of departure from our caregivers, who often had more time in our countries than we did before leaving.

During our stay at the seminary, it just so happened that parts of America were divesting in South Africa because of apartheid. Migrant families were aware of the political effects of our exits, and as such, were engaged in acts of solidarity and community care. Consequently, my formative years in this global community were spent watching and participating in demonstrations, protests, sit-ins, and lectures about freedom, and we were not alone. Naturally, when all of the people came together to fight for freedom, more specifically the liberation of

South Africa, there was drumming, dancing, singing, reverence, and usage of the oral traditions of our lands. These memories and experiences were joyful, energizing, and quintessential to healing the hurts of leaving our countries. But it was the drum's energy and the people's presence in solidarity that felt like being at home even though we were far from home. Children, my friends and comrades, and their parents participated alongside us, and we were able to create a community within a foreign nation. Despite the global dissensions across the world in the early 1980s, it was essential for us to stay literate of the circumstances of our countries. Therefore, we continuously received guidance from our South African leaders: Madiba Mandela, Richard Stevens, Steven Biko, Winnie Mandela, and Bishop Desmond Tutu. These seeds were sown and would follow me through adolescence and adulthood.

I was an immigrant girl, and I didn't have a name for nonnative peoples, only what happened—our departure. My 1981 reference for solidarity helped me make sense and appreciate the goodness that diversity offered while keeping Africa at the center. This epoch established the creative and cultural foundations that would serve as the compass for my community, professional, and spiritual life to relentlessly pursue solidarity with Muslim, African, and Black people, this side of the ocean. What this meant in my life was that I was becoming an emissary, or an envoy, because I gained the social and communal foundation required to focus on resistance, organizing, and unanimity.

From six through eleven, I existed in that close-knit immigrant community at the seminary, which seemed like an anti-Islamic community without African Americans or Muslims, even though I wished they were present. As a result, I held in my mind's eye and memories the sensory experiences that sounded like the Adhan, the call for Muslim prayer, across the mountains and oceans of Cape Town to keep a sense of compassion and respect for people that

differed religiously and ethnically from me. My curiosity was intense, and it wasn't until my father graduated from seminary in Princeton that we would leave the dominant Christian community and integrate with people that lived in subsidized housing.

Knowledge of Self

After living in subsidized housing at Princeton Community Village for four years, our time in New Jersey was sunsetting. My father graduated and was offered a job in Pittsburgh. As the years went on and juvenescence led me towards my twentieth year, Knowledge of Self, coined by the Nation of Gods and Earths, happened in 1995. My learning would encompass grounding in the science of life as taught and learned outside of the classroom. During the 1990s, any setting was a classroom for me to practice the art of being a femcee, or woman-identified emcee. Every scene was an opportunity to write, rhyme, and perform in the lexicon, teachings, and style of the Five Percent Nation. The expectation was to make the knowledge available to consumers of HipHop, and the Black community in Pittsburgh.

Finally, this was the road that enabled me to go back to that sacred yearning to understand Islam, African people living in America, and African American people in ways that formal education could not. The year was 1996, and I was doing HipHop on Pitt's campus, battling with the guys, rockin' shows, and learning Five Percent theology. I spent over the next decade plus among the Nation of Islam, Muslim people, African people, and African Americans, and they are my heart.

Sankofa

In October of 2017. I attended the 102nd Annual Meeting and Conference hosted by the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH). My youngest daughter was an infant at the time, and I was still breastfeeding. Attending the conference meant

that she would need to come with me, and she did. We moved with a caregiver through the conference environment in Cincinnati, searching for Dr. Geneva Gay's session on Culturally Responsive Teaching. I didn't know what she looked like at the time, and she walked past us observing my presence at a scholarly conference with a baby. She smiled and gave me a sense of peace and assurance that we were welcome in her session. Before her session, she noticed me in the hallway, where I explained that I would set up our things in the hallway, blanket and all, so as not to disturb her. She said something to me at that moment that I will never forget, "Dear, look at your baby. Look at her; bless her heart. Always remember to play African drums for her. You let her hear those drums and tell her stories of her ancestors, always." I acquiesced and said, "Yes, Dr. Gay. I can and I will. Asante Sana." Attending her session led me towards re-establishing and taking more seriously having an African community of scholars. That brought me towards Afrocentricity by way of The Diopian Institute for Scholarly Advancement, the Association of Black Psychologists, the Association for the Advancement of African American Life and History, the Shifting Power fellowship, and the University of Pittsburgh as a doctoral student in the school of education.

Meet Dr. April

In 2019, I stood in the Assin Mason river in Ghana. This was The Year of the Return, as proclaimed by Ghana president, Nana Akufo-Addo, and the year to unite Africans across the diaspora to the continent. This river was one of the largest markets to sell Africans into the Transatlantic slave trade. The area was also a market and place of the last bath Africans would take before heading to the door of no return—the last place they would see before a life of slavery in Brazil, America, and the Caribbean. And I cried. I wondered what kind of diabolical people could do this to another group of people. I was mad. My mentor, Dr. Cynthia Dillard,

who I call Mama Cynthia, assured me to feel all of the feelings, and when I was done, to ask myself, "how powerful must we be as ascendant African people to have returned?" While I sat still in my feelings, this question moved me up the emotional and intellectual scale to reexamine my question and open an invitation of discovery and breakthrough thinking in a journey I began a long time ago -- what would be best for the educational liberation of Black students?

I grew up in a Baptist church where we learned about Black leaders in the U.S., understanding that we stand on a powerful legacy of greatness despite slavery. However, in school, we never learned anything about Black history or other people of color. My first significant memory of learning about an ethnic or cultural group came from middle school when I completed a project on Italy. I recall telling my classmates that "I was Italian" because I loved learning about it. However, when I was in the eighth grade, I discovered Richard Wright's book, *Black Boy*, in the school library. After reading it, my appetite was invigorated to learn about Black history, people, and culture, and I wondered why we didn't read and learn this type of stuff in school.

My curiosity was building off of what I learned in church, and was just the beginning of my journey.

When I became a high school English teacher, I brought this curiosity into my classroom. While it was nothing I was formally taught in my Masters of Education program, I made sure to include texts by Black authors, and other cultures, that allowed students to learn about Black and different cultures and perspectives. I taught using what I would later find out was culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 2006b). I wanted students to critically engage in texts that allowed them to think about the world we live in, how we got here, and what we wanted to do about it. I honored students' voices, culture, and traditions they brought to school

and encouraged them to create and critique the world in which we live. So when I learned about CRP, I said, "Yes, this is it!" It resonated in my soul. After all, I knew it to be a way to honor students and use culture as a bridge for academic excellence, because I saw it with my students, and it was how great Black teachers of the past have always taught.

I was on my journey.

When I began my Ph.D. program, I learned that building off the legacy of Black teachers is how Black teachers helped to close academic gaps—attending school, literacy, and attendance (Anderson, 2004). This information gave me great joy in learning that current Black teachers, self-included, are still using practices that Black teachers have always used, and the goal has always been to help students reach their highest potential (Warren-Grice, 2021).

In 2010, I took my first trip to Sierra Leone, West Africa, through a study abroad "research" program. I use "research" because while it was for a research project, months earlier, I decided to go to the continent because deep down inside, I felt I needed to go home. It wasn't enough to go to my father's family house in Mantachie, Mississippi, or my mother's house in St. Louis, Missouri. I desperately needed to go home. I needed to touch the soil, feel the spiritual connection of my ancestors, and walk amongst those who may share my bloodline. I needed to go home-home, and it was my first time centering Africa as my home.

Taken all together, my trip to Ghana brought my journey full circle. At the Door of No Return and Assin Mason River, I remembered that when we (re)member (Dillard, 2012), to put back together again, all of the parts of ourselves, including our ancestral knowledge, culture, traditions, ways of knowing and being, then we can help ourselves, our students understand just how powerful they are and help them tap into their greatness with their whole selves. That trip

ended my search for home and belonging and began the next leg of the journey of assisting others to return home.

When I learned about the Shifting Power program, I was immediately drawn to it because of its emphasis on connecting researchers with practitioners to address inequity in schools. Research and practice was and is my line of work. I believe in the power of collaboration for equity because everyone wins. Consequently, upon meeting Sister I and learning about her work with African migrant girls in the Promise of Sisterhood, I immediately knew that this would elevate and center my journey. In addition, it would deepen my understanding of helping students reconnect to their cultural heritage, and as a result, allow me to also (re)member (Dillard, 2012).

Sister I and The Promise of Sisterhood

My, Sister I's, educational career began informally by entering schools through community-based organizations that offered intervention and prevention programming. This time coalesced with my Knowledge of Self journey and being a femcee, a female lyricist. I had the confidence, readiness, and focus to step inside the cipher, a circle consisting of onlookers and observers, to discuss the principle governing that day. As a result, the Africana-based art fit hand in glove for me. While my foundation as an artist began with HipHop, it progressed with my study of Congolese dance, Ngoma drumming, and a focus on African arts to be a multi-disciplinary practitioner. My practices infuse the same precision and command as an emcee in the cipher and the rhythm of a dancer and drummer. In essence, the foundation of how I used my voice and rhythm from age nineteen, the year I got Knowledge of Self, mimics lyricists' ways of teaching *and* performing. This eventually led me to identify as a cultural and educational thespian specializing in the spoken word.

This multidisciplinary creative license allowed me to use art to support African migrant students who may or may not speak English. The arts provided a universal language that superseded the limited power of words as the only way of expressing self, communicating, and seeing life, and I partnered with artists and teaching artists, Black-led arts and culture organizations, healers, culture bearers, scholars, and activists. This ecosystem allowed students to experience education beyond the traditional sense of schooling and connect to their cultural ways of knowing and being. From this way of working, the Promise of Sisterhood was born.

The Promise of Sisterhood started in 2013 as a sacred sister space that brings together continental African and African American girls in the Pittsburgh Public School District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The sisterhood understands and embraces its membership's beautiful religious, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and communal representations. All religions, languages, ethnicities, migrant stories, and all representations are welcome.

Since its inception, POS has held annual school-based sessions during the school day and offered events and signature gatherings open to the school and community. Events include, but are not limited to, Kwanzaa and Black history month programming, celebrating and acknowledging the leadership and contributions from within the circle, and marriages and births. The sisterhood also explores the importance of the city's Black and African women-led and serving institutions that encourage, expose, and see the girls as contributors to our city and world.

Program features of note include language and religious affirmation, creative expression through art and dance, and financial compensation. Often in the classroom, African migrant girls may be more silent because English is not their first language; however, through the POS, the girls are provided a platform for them to sing the songs of their countries in their native language

and dance. POS affirms the religions of each student, because sometimes students with the most clothes on, from head to toe, feel ashamed to be dressed differently. For example, some of the sisters take off their Kimar, Hijab, or veil, before arriving at school and put it back on before going back into the public and outside of school.

And as an equity practitioner, I, Sister I, say, "my job is to not to police that and say, 'why aren't you covered today?'" Instead, I recognize the difficult place students find themselves trying to navigate their identity in those moments, and POS offers space for students to grow into their own. One student said, "I now feel more comfortable wearing my Abaya and Hijab," which is Islamic attire for women and girls. POS offers a space where the girls can see each other—different ages, ethnicities, religions, etc.—learn more about their identities, and feel comfortable with all of their intersecting identities. POS affirms their culture and identity.

In addition, POS offers a relaxed but intentional place for creative expression through Africana arts, like dance, art, or singing. Through art, students can share their experiences and allow others to witness the stories told. Creative expression through dance also supports the girl's student development. In Islamic culture, dancing is permissible in moderation, with no effeminate movement, gender mixing, and as long as it promotes modesty, is permitted. Therefore, many practicing Muslim girls do not get to dance freely; however, the POS provides an outlet for them to dance in a safe place while also adhering to their religious values. With seven African countries and six languages represented, the arts provide entry points across epistemological expressions and transcend English as the sole lever for communication and countenance.

Lastly, POS offers financial compensation for students who support the advancement of cultural competencies. The program offers $50.00 - $150.00 for the girls' labor and time for

event planning, writing, choreography, action research, ideation, performance, and cultural preservation work. Funding is provided by grants in Pittsburgh's Black arts and culture sector. The purpose of the compensation is reflective of Maulana Karenga's Nguzo Saba principle and the principle Ujamaa (King & Swartz, 2016), meaning cooperative economics, and is a way to invest in the girls who are advancing equity work. This work is an asset to the girls for personal and professional development by engaging them in positive activities and self-expansion. It promotes cultural competencies for the school and community. By paying students for their labor, we acknowledge how cultural preservation works, is often performed by women and goes uncompensated. As a result, POS reframes equity through this acknowledgment and financial compensation.

ACE Gives Students Agency and Strengthens Cultural Preservation for Education and Life

One example of how the arts helped students was when a large fight broke out between 30 continental African girls and African American girl students. The creative side was necessary to address the healing, reconciliation, and restoration of the sisterhood between the two groups. Using the Africana arts approach with the girls revealed their pain, hopes, and agency. One student, Fatuma Noor, wrote a poem reflecting the fight called, "All About Me." In the poem, she discusses the pain she felt and still feels as a result of African American students pulling off head scarves of the migrant Africans and saying disparaging comments like, "You stink," and "Go back to Africa." Fatuma initially performed her poem at the Annual Black History program in 2020.

"All About Me"

By Fatuma Noor

Just because I am African

doesn’t mean I am poor,

doesn’t mean I am dirty.

Just because I am a Muslim girl

doesn’t mean I am a terrorist because of the scarf that is wrapped around my head. doesn’t mean I am forced to do anything.

Just because I am young

doesn’t mean I am dumb,

doesn’t mean I should be judged because of the color of my skin.

When I was in Arsenal Elementary I was always called,

She is African.

She is ugly.

She doesn’t know how to dress

or read, or

sometimes stink.

Know this about me.

I am Black.

I am a Muslim.

I am African.

I am beautiful.

I am intelligent.

And I am enough.

Society doesn’t define me.

The media does not tell me who I am.

I came from overcoming the truth.

I will accept nothing less than the best from myself.

This poem symbolizes her agency to work through the emotional trauma and make sense of what she and the other girls experienced in the fight and surrounding events. Her statement, "Know this about me," reflects her agency to redefine who she is versus just taking what others have said about her and African girls. As she states, "Society does not tell me who I am. … I will accept nothing less than the best from myself," she challenges herself to see and own all of her identities in the last lines. She is Black, Muslim, African, and intelligent, and she is enough.

This poem also serves as the beginning stage for self-advocacy for an education that includes the wellbeing of her and other African students. In 2018, she attended and testified at a public hearing about the potential use of Afrocentric education in the school district as explored in the POS community. At the hearing, she discussed how it feels to be an African Muslim girl in middle school. She emphasized how hard school is when people are mean and talk about them. Her poem and testimony demonstrate her serving as a witness to the need for ACE. Through Africana arts, not only were the students and other girls able to begin to work through their issues, but they were able to use that energy to advocate for what they wanted. She needed a school that saw and supported all of her intersecting identities.

Perhaps one of the biggest insights this poem speaks to is how it illustrates the complexity of Blackness (Langmia & Durham 2007). In this case, tension grew between African American girl students and migrant African girl students due to insecurities and misunderstandings on both sides. They each had negative stereotypes of the other, generally due to the global discourse and media narratives supporting ideas of The United States as a first-world country and African countries as "third world" or "developing." As a result, the negative

stereotypes and lack of positive group facilitation, not only led to illuminating cultural differences but also illustrate how,

> each group negotiates with positionalities with existing structures and discourses of Blackness and Whiteness. African students who come to the United States bear the burden of disproving the image of "backward Africa." In contrast, African American students feel the need to claim their identity of struggle and resistance specific to their experiences in White America. (Asante, Sekimoto, & Brown, 2016, p. 369)

Asante, Sekimoto, & Brown's assertion demonstrates that Blackness is more than skin deep and is much more nuanced than what most equity practitioners ascribe to it. This understanding highlights the specificity needed to adequately support students, because "There is no authentic or universal Black experience, but the "shades" of Blackness fluctuate based on locally specific racial politics, history of White supremacy, and interethnic relations among Blacks (Asante, Sekimoto, & Brown, 2016, p. 369). Therefore, ACE was the mode of inquiry that allowed this nuanced understanding to work with both groups.

Ironically, two years prior, I, Sister I, was called into a school to work with an administrator to help them understand and explore how to better work with African migrant students that identify as girls. This exploratory collaboration was when I began to share my supposition that the unification of African and African American students is one of the highest socio-cultural priorities of urban and public education. This mantra is now the anchor of the Promise of Sisterhood and a permanent concentration for bringing together continental Africans and her children that live in the Americas. Unfortunately, the massive fight still occurred involving many of my students and African American sisters. What this illustrates is that the

notion that one-off professional development opportunities and checking boxes on a form to indicate that a school has met its cultural competence requirements may still systematically and unintentionally perpetuate psychological harm against students by not understanding the context students find themselves.

By understanding the context of the students, I used Afrocentric praxis and infused Africana arts and cultural leadership to create transformative opportunities that allowed the girls to engage Sankofa while remembering a complimentary set of values – "commitments to community mindedness, service to others, human welfare, right action, equanimity, and the sacredness of both the spiritual and the material" (King & Swarts, 2016). This approach positioned the group, both African migrants and African Americans, to experience action research, their entrepreneurial interests, and community planning to emphasize the importance of Ujima--collective work and responsibility, and Ujama--cooperative economics, in the sisterhood. As a result, students are more focused on who they are and the contributions they want to make in their communities.

We offer here that this sort of heuristic inquiry (Sultan, 2018), that affirms students' lives, is appropriate because it centers African migrant students in their religions, ethnicities, and nationalities. This then informs the ongoing necessary shifts in thinking and learning about equity, because it involves looking at students' lifelong experiences in connection to the ways of evaluating phenomenon and seeking solutions to issues.

In order to look at students holistically, including their lifelong experiences, schools must have an equity stance with a philosophical worldview that centers on African migrant girls. Monique Morris, author of *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls*, suggests programmers and practitioners engage in restorative practices -- "a process by which individuals involved in a

crime or harmful incident are brought together to repair their relationship," (p. 226). In doing so, this worldview would require educators to gain specific competencies about African and Black girls, their families, communities in the city they now live in, and the countries from which they departed through the passage of migration. If this were the point of departure, all students would be cared for because the philosophy is open to other ways of knowing or what educational research designates as epistemology.

While this migrant story reveals the influence of the prejudice African migrant girls experience against them, their culture, and their identity and how Africana arts can help them increase their agency, it also highlights how educators must be sufficiently conscious to expand their notions of equity. Educators must hear, see, and witness what is important to these students, so that they can get to the business of academics. This is a first step and requires placing African migrant girls at the center of their experiences.

Similarly, I, Sister I, remember the dumb stuff that people would say to me when I was six. I remember feeling embarrassed when my parents would come to school, because we didn't have much, and we didn't smell as good as everybody else. All of my POS sisters hold similar feelings, but the thing that's different about them is that people can only see their eyes and faces, because they are covered from head to toe in their Muslim cultural attire; therefore, people cannot see the baggage they carry with them. As a result, I have to continually understand where they are coming from and be a contributor to their healing, and a sole focus on the English language and academics is not enough. In this instance, I had to step up my practice and demonstrate my care and compassion once the hurt was revealed.

Another example of how Africana arts helped to share the stories of the girls and their preserve their culture can be seen through the words of Turkano Mada followed by two poems

that she and her sister Madina wrote. Turkano stated, "I benefited so far with poetry; I like to share my words now. I want to get my words out there. It makes me feel more confident with my skin while being in this program which is helpful for me." When I, Dr. April, heard Turkano's statement, I immediately smiled and thought, "isn't this what education is supposed to be about?" Aren't we, as educators, supposed to help students discover who they are so that they may share their gifts with themselves and then with the world? How often are students excited to share what they have learned in school and want to share it? This level of creativity is the learning, application, and sharing of knowledge. For me, this was it, and the poem that she and her sister wrote illustrates how POS supports the girls agency and the cultural preservation of African migrant students.

Unique

By Madina and Turkano Mada

All eyes on us when we speak

Were African, Black, a woman with pride indeed

All eyes on us, you heard?

We rise from the east to the west

We're that African who's proud to be an African

Yeah we got that beauty inside that you don't see

Yeah we got that beauty in our melanin too

Our culture is not just an accessory, it's also a tool

We got that beauty inside, yes that beauty inside

Don't hesitate, I know we just caught your eyes

It's Turk and Madina, what did you expect?

Yo Dina, show em how it's done

Have you heard of the beauty without the beast

It's hips that don't lie

Or the king without the Queen, too powerful for your eyes

With remarkable intelligence and skin on glow

Just like this poem with the beautiful flow

I am an East African Black woman with big ambition

Very rare some might say, and I wear and display that everyday

I'm like the sun because once you stare at me i'll have you surprised

Way too fly like a bird in the skies

Once I rise, I'll have you surprised

Very petite and beautiful you might say

I'm my only kind, filled with confidence and pride

But I still rise

Have you heard the bird in the sky, with a smile that never stops shining

With the face that never stopped glowing

From the middle to the east, I'm an African who's full of peace and believes

But yeah, I will always fly

Fly higher from the west to the east

Embracing my traditional clothes

With this amazing new flow that will have you dancing to every new beat

That's why they say I'm that bird in the skies

I'm like the nonstop beat that will have you rise

I'm that African in the skies, who's a Kenyan queen

Now the beauty and the bird now became the one

Wonder why our poem is called unique?

Cause now it's done

In their poem “Unique,” sisters Madina and Turkano Mada command their audience's attention in the first line of the piece. They don't shy away from their identity, naming both their Blackness and their identity as African people throughout the poem with pride and specifying their East African and Kenyan roots. While some students may feel anxiety around proudly claiming their African identity, the Mada sisters let us know they have pride in who they are and how they view themselves as young African women.

Like many adolescent girls, they are aware of their beauty and physical presentation, acknowledging both their melanin and the adornment that their culture provides. In contrast, they maintain that their culture is not a costume, instead they use it in their day-to-day lives to navigate their reality, or ontology. For instance, when they say, “I am an East African Black woman with big ambition,” this is a reminder of their power and ambition. The use of ACE provides them with the ability to use their way of knowing for cultural preservation as a solution to the issues that they face as African students.

The sisters commitment to using their cultural knowledge to solve problems and navigate the Americanized environment also highlights the reality faced by Black girls that often goes unacknowledged. This reality is that African American girls can not trace their familial, cultural, and epistemilogical lineage beyond a certain point due to slavery. For me, Dr. April, as an African American, this acknowledges an unhealed wound that has been buried only realized when I am in the process of centering myself in my African roots. This insight connects directly to the purpose of ACE, to recenter ourselves in the best of African cultures, values, and interests (Akua, 2020) for the purpose of acquiring agency. How can I become all that is possible if I do not know the power of who I am at my core, roots, and family ways of being and knowing, if I am always searching for home? This is one of my stuck points. While I am pretty connected to my roots dating back to my great grandmothers, I have literally always been searching for my grounding; hence I claimed that I was Italian when completing my middle school country project. This work and this poem is a reminder of how my soul yearns to remember and know the truth of who I am. It is in this light that the sisters' poems illustrate the necessity of cultural preservation and how ACE offers a way to acknowledge and engage Sankofa as a serious method of inquiry for student holistic agency. Both African migrant girls and African American girls need to share their stories and engage their cultural roots.

Madina continues to discuss the "beauty" without the "beast." "Beauty" represents their physical and mental attributes as well as their pride in their East African ancestry and religion. The "beast" represents the demonization of Islam and how they don't need it and operate in spite of it. Using both the repeated word "rise" and bird metaphor, the girls paint a picture of what makes them truly unique. They see themselves as limitless and joyful, with repeated declarations of their identity as queens who have untold potential.

Reality

By Madina and Turkano Mada

Through the pains and sorrows we've crossed and overcome

Looking back to a life with hopes of how we maintain and move forward

indeed, we are powerful as one

Unity, guidance, has brought us as one

Together we are here and we're standing as one

It's hard to forget the past because the future has just begun

People make being African a crime

Enjoying the moments of our history and what has made us greater

Indeed we must keep the remembrance of our roots and cherish our world history, accomplished to light

And i'm here to say that I love being African, not just from the east, not just from the west, but the whole continent got beauty, it just isn't expressed

You show our poverty like that summarizes Africa

We came a long way and this month helps us reconcile moments that are unshared

The month of many different cultures that have many stories untold

Come as one remembering every moment that has made them be who they are as of that

So now I'm here to say, stop the assumptions

Look around, aren't you African too?

Your ancestors originally came from there, so in some way we're originally connected

Only if you knew the true meaning of your history and past

I look at you, i look at her, i look at myself

I mean, aren't we all just one?

I know we are connected in some way

Our skin runs deeper than what you may think

I know I may be a shade darker or ever lighter than you

But that doesn't define our difference when I am your African sister

Who shares many stories just like you

In their poem "Reality," Madina and Turkano Mada take a more somber approach to discuss their identity and experiences as Africans. They speak of "moving forward" and "maintaining," which is a stark difference from the pride and energy and hope of their other piece, “Unique" Even still, they end the first stanza declaring their strength and ability to remain "as one." They write, “Together we are here and we're standing as one,” which illustrates the African value of unity versus resorting to individualism. The next line illustrates them working the idea of Sankofa when they state, “It's hard to forget the past because the future has just begun.” Their refusal to forget the past, acknowledges that they have internalized the meaning of Sankofa and it’s importance in the present. The next line states, “People make being African a crime,” illustrates the struggle and tension that people have with the physical presentation of Muslim African girls, and the idea of centering Africa religiously, ideologically, and pedagogically.

The girls continue this thread of cultural preservation in the lines,

> Indeed we must keep the remembrance of our roots and cherish our world history, accomplished

to light

And i'm here to say that I love being African, not just from the east, not just from the west, but

the whole continent got beauty, it just isn't expressed

These lines highlight how they must keep the remembrance of our roots and cherish every aspect of being African, including the entire continent. They recognize that the continent has much to offer the world.

Lastly they hone in on and address the racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and criminalization that Africans face, by highlighting the image of poverty that has become synonymous with Africa in mainstream media over the decades.

You show our poverty like that summarizes Africa

We came a long way and this month helps us reconcile moments that are unshared

The month of many different cultures that have many stories untold

Come as one remembering every moment that has made them be who they are as of that

So now I'm here to say, stop the assumptions

Look around, aren't you African too?

Together they tie the number of African stories untold with the lack of knowledge about Africa and her people, highlighting the hundreds of cultures that flourish on the continent of Africa. The poets wrote from the experiences of being students of the Pittsburgh Public Schools which called for each to center their values and identities in voices of resistance. In essence, they implore us all to identify with our place as Africans, regardless of what side of the Atlantic we

are born on, citing the original connection we all have. Acknowledging that many of the stories have been intentionally kept from us, they lament what has been lost, stating, "only if you knew."

While "Reality" doesn't have the same upbeat feel of "Unique," it also addresses a critical dichotomy in how African students see themselves concerning the world around them. They write,

I look at you, i look at her, i look at myself

I mean, aren't we all just one?

I know we are connected in some way

Our skin runs deeper than what you may think.

I know I may be a shade darker or ever lighter than you

But that doesn't define our difference when I am your African sister

Who shares many stories just like you

In these lines they clarify that they are as aware of African American sisters' presentations, expressions, and communication styles as they are of themselves. Further, they offer a helpful inquiry concerning the oneness between Africans and African migrants, which is to ask, “aren’t we all just one?” In doing so, they recognize that the physical attribute of their Blackness is the unifier, because we are “African sister[s].”

This piece illustrates that pride and sadness can exist in the same space, and the Mada sisters exemplify that in the juxtaposition between the moods of their two poems as they share their stories and practice cultural preservation.

A final illustration of how the POS supports agency and the preservation of culture can be seen in a session focusing on the importance of names. During one of our sessions with the girls, we discussed the topic of names and identities as a part of the African tradition. As we all,

students and educators, shared the meaning and history of our names and what they meant to us, it was an opportunity for us to engage Sankofa. This section shares our reflections on the importance of names and what the session offered us personally and professionally as educators.

Sister I's Reflection

The term Sankofa asks us to reach back, retrieve, and bring forth knowledge and information. These three steps are prominent and ancient practices that support and advise parents in naming their children. My eldest daughter's full name is Azania IQueen Amina Divine Earth. Her name means "freedom for South Africa" and "mother of Azania/daughter of Azania." We named her in the tradition of one of many African practices, which Mazama (2020) clarified by offering that "naming allows you to exist socially, which is the most important form of existence." The names of my two youngest daughters come from the Khamtic language: Anebana Maat, meaning "by being one with all I have divine justice and protection" and Senasu Sheps Saat, meaning "one who follows divine wisdom and the enlightened ancestor." The meaning of their names are examples of their belonging to our family and the community. I have three names: the name I was born with, the name bestowed on me during my time in the Nation of Gods and Earths, and my African name, referred to as a "Ren," meaning sacred name.

The choices that guide naming oneself and children are supreme examples of how African families express autonomy. Kujichagulia, Swahili for self-determination, is an unyielding reminder for African descendants that the social context of names is the substance of immortality. My two youngest daughters had naming ceremonies and did not have names for the first few months of their lives to allow my husband and me time to think of their destinies and purposes. Upon receiving names in a communal setting, community members chant the child's name with drums accompanying, whispering what is expected of them as they grow. This is the

baby's first lesson outside of the womb, and it is held with and within the community. Concerning the importance of names, Enkamit (1993) asserts,

> During the course of your life, one of the words you will hear most frequently will undoubtedly be your own name. From the cradle to the grave, your name is used to grab your attention, convey feelings, lead-in or follow information, make new friends and/or establish a point of reference. Is that the total value of your name? If not, what other values does it hold? (p. 8)

Placing primacy on the meaning of names, accurate pronunciations, and foresight on where those names come from, teaches communities, including but not limited to schools, that names serve as a way to witness the destiny of a person's life.

Dr. April's Reflections

Azania, Sister I's daughter, was the leader of this session. She discussed not appreciating her South African name growing up because it was different, and people could never pronounce it correctly. In her story, she shared that it wasn't until she was older and someone said that her full name and the meaning sounded majestic that she began to appreciate it. As she shared this, I immediately began to think about my name. I had not fully appreciated my name either. I did like what Shakespeare said about it in Sonnet 98, "Dr. April...Hath put a spirit of youth in everything," because I am a very youthful and spirited person. However, as Azania spoke and we centered Africa by talking about the symbolism and stories about a person, it hit me that my name is/was a gift from my mother. Since my mama transitioned on May 1, 2020, I felt her spirit and this gift with a different energy. Her naming me felt like MDW NTR, meaning "divine speech" in KMT, or Egypt, and the way she said my name was, in fact, MDW NTR, or "beautiful speech" (Hilliard, 1997). Before that moment, before using Africa as the center, I had

never felt so connected to the power of my name. This realization and connection with my name felt spiritual and divine. This was also a moment for me to (re)member that even though she is an ancestor, the African ways of knowing remind me of the interconnectedness of all life forces, and the African ideal of immortality; therefore she is always with me. Even with the very utterance of "Dr. April," or the word "daughter," the last way that she referred to me when she could no longer say my name, she always knew I was her daughter and she was my mother.

When I shared this with the girls, they too had stories or connections to their names. Afterwards, we all wrote and drew images or pictures that depicted the energy and essence of our names. This moment of sharing and reflecting was an example of reclamation of cultural heritage, or as stated by King and Swartz (2016), "[t]he conscious recovery of African history, culture, identity that is grounded in knowledge of the African cosmology, ontology, epistemology, and axiology…." As a result of using ACE, both students and us leaders were able to feel more connected to self, our African identity, each other, and the program. This exercise inspired us to live out the highest and best meaning of names for ourselves, ancestors, and descendants. Through this exercise, we were building community through the Promise of Sisterhood.

As we reflected on the importance of names during our writing process, we realized that this also ties directly to our claim that equity has to be reimagined, and the point of departure has to be different. As opposed to even talking about educational equity, the reframe has to go back, fetch, and bring forth the cultural knowledge of how Africans think about education, which is by educating the whole child--spiritually, mentally, physically, and culturally (Delpit & White-Bradely, 2003). In using Sankofa, this way of knowing calls us to use the ancestors' wisdom as opposed to falling for the "decoys" (Hilliard, 2003) of focusing only on test scores and

quantitative data points representing Black students on a disaggregated Black and white binary. ACE invites us to focus on freedom and liberation and not just merely closing the achievement gap. Therefore, the reframe is to reach back and rename the notion of equity by engaging Sankofa and remembering the ways education is identified and defined from an African perspective in the legacy of the Black intellectual tradition.

Transformation of Research and Practitioner: Educators Need an Ontological, Epistemological, Heuristic, and Axiological Shift

When we were afforded the opportunity to solve an equity issue of our choice, with support and without restriction, we discovered our best work, and a shift in power and transformation occurred. We took what they gave us, and we owned it.

By the end of our Shifting Power fellowship, when it came to writing about our project, we realized that we were experiencing a shift in power and witnessing a parallel reframe of equity through our thinking, writing, roles, and processes. In our reframe, we recognized that our shift was also a reflection of what educators need to have for expanding notions of equity; there must be a reframe in thinking, action, and policies to transform the system and the individuals changing the system.

One of our first transformations occurred in how we thought about ACE. At first, I, Dr. April, suggested that we each write our parts and come together to discuss, edit, and build from that point; however, we both ended up stuck and seemingly running in circles. We realized it would be much easier if we stopped to reflect on the ontology undergirding ACE—collectivity, cooperation, collective responsibility, wholeness, harmony, and interconnectedness (King & Swartz, 2016). After this reflection, we recognized that there was more power in living the ontology, and as a result, we co-constructed our narratives together instead of working on them individually and then regrouping. While it took much longer, we also recognized the power of

the African proverb, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." Together, we were growing deeper and in more meaningful ways, and our analysis was getting more nuanced. We began to embody Afrocentricity in theory and in the practice of writing this co-autoethnography. From that point on, our point of departure would be cooperation and collectivity. This realization changed the approach and momentum of our work and made an even stronger case for using the ontology of ACE to expand and reframe the notion of equity.

This new way of thinking and writing together also transformed our roles and processes and understanding of who would lead the research. The aha moment came when Dr. April was stuck for three weeks—reading articles, asking friends, and watching Youtube videos—on one sentence using the words ontology and epistemology. So, in a moment of transparency, vulnerability, and frustration, Dr. April asked Sister I for help. Sister I then spent the next two hours walking Dr. April through the theoretical and practical application of the terms. I, Dr. April, was elated and could not believe that I finally understood the terms. It reminded me of when I was in the eighth grade and could not understand how there could be anything below zero. It took me a whole semester to finally understand the concept in a concrete manner. For the next few days, and even still, my cheeks hurt from smiling after using the terms every chance I got. This helped me and our work, because it is now a central argument for the reframe of equity. If we did not work together to unpack the term, we may not have reached this level of nuance in our investigation.

In our reflection of this moment, Sister I explains, “after a year of working with each other, we grew into this space where we realized it was not about the structure that Shifting Power set for us, but about what we're making of it.” Sister I continued, "What the shift of power

is about is that sometimes I'm holding you, and sometimes you're holding me, but the majority of the time, we're holding each other."

In Sister I's statement, we realized that the project was no longer restricted or even about the organization's structure to do a research project. Instead, the program provided an avenue for us to both play with our area of focus, Afrocentric education, and experience growth as emerging scholars in an equitable, just, and transformative way, helping us to think differently, support one another, and take turns leading in the areas of our strengths. As a result, there was a transformation and reframe between us, and we could see the change between us as practitioners and researchers. Sister I was becoming stronger as a leader of the research, and I didn't have to know or pretend to know it all, and together, we were letting go of our understanding of who was supposed to lead which areas. This reframe and transformation illustrated an even more compelling case for the use of ACE to expand and reframe the notion of equity.

For Educators

As we had an ontological awakening, we realized the importance of educators taking this approach to better support African migrant girl students. They must also have a point of departure embodying African ontology, which honors the existence, relationships, and multiple ways of knowing African migrant girl students (King & Swartz, 2016) as a way of life. We had an ontological and epistemological shift in how we thought about and approached writing. Educators must reframe how they think about education for African migrant students. They must use an ideological posture, placing African migrants at the center of the conversation instead of on the margins and/or invisible.

To place them at the center requires educators to, as Sister I states, “get their weight up” to understand and apply cultural and religious competencies related to African migrant girls.

Increasing these competencies will help educators become more ontologically and epistemologically congruent with inclusive efforts. For instance, Sister I discusses how educators should also demonstrate rigorous cultural competency standards similar to how students are expected to know and follow rigorous Eurocentric competency standards. In talking about students writing papers, she states, “students have to know the date…. know their [teacher] names. …. but there's not enough reciprocity...." While students have to know and give information according to the expectations of the teacher to receive full credit or participate in the educational process of writing an essay, educators are not required to know and meet any or few cultural expectations of students. By requiring educators to know essential cultural and religious competencies, this, as Sister I states, "sets the stage [for educators] to go a little bit deeper, to go below the iceberg, and to ... say, 'Hey, this is who's here." This acknowledgment is then the beginning of reciprocity and engaging the full humanity of students. Recognizing and acknowledging who is present helps to avoid the erasure when African migrant students are only allowed to check "Black" versus identifying their ethnicity, home country, language, and religion. Therefore, it is incumbent upon educators to see beyond the skin tone of students so as not to box them in a single narrative (Adichie, 2009) or Black and white Binary of equity.

In my, Dr. April’s, perspective, seeing beyond this binary is precisely what makes Sister I successful with the POS. She continues to learn and apply the cultural and religious competencies of her students. Her ontology and epistemology recognizes, acknowledges, and appreciates the beings, relationships, and ways of knowing African migrant girls. While she may have brought some of this into the school space, because she is a Black South African migrant woman, Sister I continues to take the time to learn about Diasporic ethnic groups, cultures, and

religions unfamiliar to her. In this way, she reframes equity, by seeing each sister as whole, and using the ACE ontological and epistemological approach.

Policy

As an equity practitioner, this reframe offers much in thinking about policies that extend the notion of equity beyond the binary to include African migrant girls. School leaders and policymakers must operate from an Afrocentric ontology that welcomes and invites multiple ways of being and knowing. Through this ontology, cultural details cultivate equitable spaces.

Reframing policies related to equity is about inclusion beyond binaries. For example, while many Muslimah girls practicing Islam are required to perform Salat, pray five times a days, only a few schools offer sacred places to exercise their religious obligations. While entire districts observe Christian and Jewish holidays where no classes are held, Islamic holidays are on calendars, but not acknowledged or observed with the same degree of parity. Policies like these define and shape the school culture by what is and isn't recognized. In the case of the African migrant students, their religious faith is not substantiated. While Muslimahs can wear their Hijabs and Niqabs, veils, there is not enough consideration for their required practices beyond Salat. One way to think beyond the binary is to revisit the Knarrative (2021) Africana Framework questions when looking at situations:

1. What social, political, economic, and cultural context do Africans find themselves in during the period of study?
2. An ontological question: Who are Africans to each other? What do their relationships look like to each other?
3. An epistemological question: What are African ways of being and knowing?
4. An axiology question: "How do it free us?" (Sanchez, 2010)

Through this lens, policy makers would see that Islam is a big part of some African migrant students' lives and performing Salat is one way of knowing for them. This is a core value for them and an essential way for them to be their best and highest selves. Extending the same religious opportunities to African migrant students, allows everyone to witness the inclusive nature of equity

Another epistemological way to expand this notion of equity is to draw from Indigenous wisdom and use the seasons as a reference or compass to think about how to honor different cultures. Educators could ask what happens in each season that is significant to African, Indigenous, Latinx, Islamic, and other cultures. While this is one example, the point is, if there is efficacy to a school's culturally responsive strides, there must be evidence reflected in policies that align with a more global approach and show at least yearly incremental growth. Otherwise, schools are simply negligent in their commitment to serving all students.

Through policies, schools demonstrate a sense of accountability to create and sustain an equitable environment and increase the trust from the community to believe that these matters will be taken seriously and addressed. Therefore, educators must think differently about evolving equity and use an Afrocentric ontology and epistemology that values multiple ways of being and knowing. This is the reframe, or as one POS student stated, "[I]f equity is what you all say it is, you all need to show it."

Conclusion

A final point is necessary for true insight into the modern scientific methodology. The experimental method does not necessarily discover more primary knowledge or raw data than any other possible methodology (at least per unit of effort expended), but "its" superiority lies in

the fact that it assumes an obligation to impose reorder on every possible object, whether of immediate relevance or not.

(Carruthers, 1996, p. 189)

In Science and Oppression by Jacob H. Carruthers, he argues that Black people cannot rely on the same experimental methods, such as quantitative metrics alone, that have been used to oppress Black people. In that same vein, educators cannot use the same experimental methods, like standardized testing exclusively, that have been used to oppress Black students to free and liberate them.

If quantitative data is assigned to Black bodies, educators must push themselves to explore supplementary educational research methodologies, otherwise they will knowingly or unknowingly use science as oppression by not knowing other ways of looking at the issue of racially predictable academic achievement disparities. African migrant girls have been left out of the conversation when it comes to educational equity in many schools, because most schools express equity for English as Second language (ESL) through English language acquisition and summative testing milestones. However, as seen in our conversation about ontology, epistemology, axiology, heuristic inquiry, and values, schools have to think more globally. Otherwise, educators and learners remain in the confines of an outdated frame that does not serve students or the community. Instead, educators must engage Sankofa to remember the distinctive ways of knowing to address current issues.

As exemplified by Sister I, “When I don't have the answers to my own facilitation and practice, I just have to do something artistic, because I know what my limitations are, so I don't have all the answers. Sometimes I just have to be in the process to make sense of it.” In this way, what if we were open to other epistemologies and imagined schools as places for all to lead and

grow together, where we could learn from and with African migrant students and families? What would they have to teach us? What could we learn from them and how could we use that knowledge along with cultural knowledge to build a more vast notion of equity that is from a more global perspective. That would be education-- acknowledging and using various methodologies to help reach the desired goal of freedom, liberation, and academic achievement.

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