

5-2-2012

# Towards a Common Center: Locating Common Characteristics of African Centeredness in an Independent African Centered Learning Environment

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TOWARDS A COMMON CENTER: LOCATING COMMON CHARACTERISTICS  
OF  
AFRICAN CENTEREDNESS IN AN INDEPENDENT AFRICAN CENTERED  
LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

by

GARFIELD R. BRIGHT

Under the Direction of Jonathan Gayles

ABSTRACT

As a culturally relevant alternative to traditional public school environments, Independent African Centered schools feature a particular type of culturally relevant pedagogy. This study explored the teachers' and administrator's perceptions and applications of African Centered pedagogy in an African Centered school. Interviews, observations and a document review served as the source of data for this study. This basic interpretive study utilized a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions and application of African Centeredness among the participants.

An analysis of the data revealed categories and themes related to the school's mission and the participants' perceptions and performance of African-centered pedagogy. Three general conclusions were drawn from the findings. Implications for theory, study limitations and recommendations for future research are provided.

INDEX WORDS: African centered education, Culturally relevant Pedagogy, Critical pedagogy

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the College of Arts and Sciences  
Georgia State University

2012

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Garfield Bright  
2012

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ENVIRONMENT

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May 2012

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this to all of the marginalized urban youth in America and throughout the Diaspora. I would also like to dedicate this to The Zelia Stephens Early Childhood Center and to the memory of Silena Long.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Val Bright, Garfield Bright Sr., Annie Bright, Ashley Bright, Tina Bright, Trevor Phillips II, Garfield Bright III, Tairiq Bright, Mizan Bright, Nasir Bright, Dr. Karin Stanford, Dr. Jones, Dr. Umoja, Dr. Gayles, Dr. Davis, Dr. Dunham, Dr. Pressley, The African American Studies Department Staff, The Alonzo A. Crim Center for Urban and Educational Excellence, The Students, Faculty and Staff of Kilombo Academic and Cultural Institute, Black Star Educational Institute and Aya Academy. Thanks for your motivation.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                                                                     |    |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....                                              | v  |
| PROLOGUE .....                                                      | 4  |
| 1 INTRODUCTION .....                                                | 7  |
| 1.1 Background of the Problem.....                                  | 7  |
| 1.2 Problem Statement .....                                         | 9  |
| 1.3 Purpose .....                                                   | 10 |
| 1.4 Significance .....                                              | 10 |
| 1.5 Nature of the Study .....                                       | 11 |
| 1.6 Research Questions .....                                        | 12 |
| 1.7 Theoretical Framework .....                                     | 13 |
| 1.8 Definitions .....                                               | 15 |
| 1.9 Assumptions .....                                               | 17 |
| 1.10 Limitations .....                                              | 17 |
| 1.11 Summary .....                                                  | 18 |
| 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....                                     | 19 |
| 2.1 Cultural relevance, Education and Communities of Color .....    | 20 |
| 2.2 Applying culturally relevant pedagogy .....                     | 23 |
| 2.3 Independent schools as alternatives to traditional schools..... | 28 |

- 2.4 Theoretical framework-Paulo Freire’s Liberatory Approach to Pedagogy..... 35
- 2.5 Freirian Liberatory Education and its Relevance to This Research..... 37
- 2.6 Summary ..... 39
- 3 METHODOLOGY..... 40
  - 3.1 Design of the Study ..... 40
  - 3.2 Sample Selection..... 44
  - 3.3 Site Selection..... 46
  - 3.4 Data Collection..... 47
  - 3.5 Data Analysis ..... 51
  - 3.6 Validity and Reliability ..... 53
  - 3.7 Researcher Bias and Assumptions ..... 55
  - 3.8 Summary ..... 55
- 4 FINDINGS..... 57
  - 4.1 The Participants..... 58
  - 4.2 Overview of the Themes ..... 61
  - 4.3 Summary ..... 94
- 5 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS ..... 96
  - 5.1 Conclusions and Discussion..... 99
  - 5.2 Limitations of the Study..... 108
  - 5.3 Implications for Theory..... 109

|                                               |     |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----|
| 5.4 Recommendations for Future Research ..... | 113 |
| 5.5 Chapter Summary.....                      | 115 |
| REFERENCES .....                              | 116 |
| APPENDICES .....                              | 123 |
| Appendix D- Informed Consent.....             | 126 |

## PROLOGUE

From birth through my years as a preteen, I was reared in the “deep” South, on the heels of the civil rights movement during the seventies. I experienced overt racism by southern whites that would openly use the word nigger to refer to blacks. I remember feeling like my color was second-class compared to whites and, by extension, so was the value of my humanity. Having received my early childhood education (1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> grades) in Montgomery, Alabama on the campus of Alabama State University, I was greatly impacted by the heavy exposure to the combination of black skin and higher education. The notions of black pride, valuing minority upward mobility, and high academic achievement began to shape my identity at an early age. As I experienced racism on a daily basis in the south, Alabama State became, for me, a symbol representing the freedom to be black. It symbolized the ability of blacks to reach for and achieve the best in life despite the negativity in the racist world beyond the campus.

With both parents employed by the University, education, as a means to command respect and uplift the community, was a pervasive theme in the household. The rich foundational experiences of my youth juxtaposed against the southern racist climate in which I was submerged, contributed greatly to the early development of the lens through which I currently view society as an adult. My High school years were spent in Brockton, Massachusetts-“Home of Rocky Marciano.” Segregation was blatant. Capitalism and racism was a cocktail for “black death” in Brockton, as black on black homicide was rampant, partly due to the proliferation of crack in the income thirsty lower income neighborhoods. It was during this time that I became sensitized to the overall plight and present condition of my race.

My eyes opened to the probability that structure was the potential culprit for the reiteration of non-value related to urban environments, particularly in the educational arena. This awareness fueled within me a desire to be of those who contributed to a change in society's racist structure as well as a shift in the consciousness of the black masses. I felt the need to be an agent of change in the community. I was compelled to direct my efforts towards the educational environments in which Black children would develop their social and academic foundations.

I was introduced to The Academic and Cultural Institute about a year before I moved to Atlanta, Georgia to attend the African American Studies Masters Program at Georgia State University. Colleagues of mine at a previous university who knew I had a love for urban education especially in a culturally relevant context, told me about this wonderful little place that was, in essence, a freedom school. After expressing interest in the inner workings of such a liberative, African centered school, I was invited to the school to see it in action. Philosophically, I appreciated that its educational outcomes as stated in the orientation literature stressed the creation of students who are academically and culturally sound agents of social change. I was able to establish a relationship with the director that allowed me unlimited access into the school culture as an "outside insider."

I became enthralled with the potential of such a place that empowered and turned on young black kids academically and socially through a very African cultural setting. This lit the fire within me to want to know what specific elements of culturally relevant environments are the most essential, in terms of impacting the whole student. I wondered how African centeredness was applied in order to achieve the outcomes to which it aspired-particularly the holistic development of the students and their development of a self-perception that embraces their role as change agents for their community.

As part of my academic pursuits in the Masters program at Georgia State, the opportunity arose to actually study this particular environment and explore further what the most potent aspects of this environment are. It also gave me a chance to add to the body of literature on cultural relevancy as related to African centered educational environments. Because exposure to progressive alternative learning environments has had such a lasting impact on me, I felt the need to pursue a more comprehensive understanding relative to how teachers in an African centered school context perceive effective teaching as well as how they understand and apply African centeredness. This work reflects my passion to understand more fully those unique characteristics that are most common to African Centered pedagogy.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This study is focused on an African centered learning environment. This research particularly concentrates on how African centeredness is perceived and applied within an African centered learning environment and what shared core features exist between the teachers and the administrator. This chapter contains the background of the research problem, a problem statement, the purpose and significance of the study. It also contains definitions of salient terms as well as factors that were considered limitations with respect to this study.

### 1.1 Background of the Problem

Much research has shown that in the face of ineffective public school environments, culturally relevant alternatives to traditional school environments are vital in order to potentially reverse the trend of poor academic achievement in the African American community (Ghee, Walker and Younger, 2008; Howard, 2001; Lee, 1994). Venues for alternatives to traditional public school settings include after school programs, charter schools and independent Black institutions. The latter typically features pedagogy and curriculum that cater to an “African centered” approach, often described by the practitioners and creators as “African centered pedagogy” (Lee, 1994). This particular type of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) has been underrepresented in the literature as a viable alternative to traditional public school environments. More, in the scholarship that has focused on African centered education (ACE), there has been a dearth of research on the perception and application of African centered pedagogy by its practitioners.

In response to the need for an alternative educational approach, scholars such as Ladson-Billings (2000) and Lisa Delpit (2003) have spoken extensively to the notion of reform. Their work involves creation of policy initiatives that require teacher retraining for those teachers who

are already in public schools; so that they can be more sensitized to the roles that ethnicity and culture play in the acquisition of skills and knowledge in the classroom. The onus for providing a culturally relevant learning experience, according to this approach, is on the teacher. To a large degree this approach supports the philosophy of educator Alonzo A. Crim who often emphasized that the teacher is the curriculum. This view tends to conflate the notion of “being a teacher” with “being the classroom” at the expense of other elements that facilitate achievement and positively impact African American students. If viewed uncritically or taken too literal, this approach minimizes the importance of the whole learning environment as the primary consideration towards efforts to apply cultural relevance.

Student centeredness and cultural relevance as part of the overall learning environment for African American students, is employed more comprehensively in schools that are exclusively dedicated to building whole environments. By extension, these types of schools influence and reflect community dedication to the notion of culturally relevant education (Lee, 1992). As an alternative to the traditional public school environment, research has shown that African centered educational learning environments have merit and viability and enhance academic and social efficacy. (Ghee, et. al, 1998; Lee, 1992; Watson and Smitherton, 1996).

Despite their success, independent African centered schools have been underrepresented in the literature, especially in terms of how African centered pedagogy is applied in the learning environment. African centered schools, though culturally relevant, have not been studied in terms of those elements or best practices that are commonly employed. Explorative studies that highlight the commonalities and differences in theoretical perception and in-class application of cultural relevance in independent schools are largely absent in the literature. It is therefore difficult to identify and target essential elements across these respective learning environments.



This research could increase successful student outcomes as well as impact the assessment and qualification criteria for what would be deemed effective, culturally relevant teachers.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

In the face of low academic achievement in the public school setting, African centered learning environments have become viable options for those who see value in culturally relevant educational environments. However there is no apparent cohesion necessarily between the various types of culturally relevant academic environments that serve African American students. Many of these independent schools, particularly ones that are African centered, claim to provide a culturally relevant environment for their students. However, the actual application of cultural relevance may vary greatly relative to how it is theorized and practiced. The apparent absence of a central definition of cultural relevance potentially impacts the ability of independent African centered schools to proactively identify themselves as part of a larger network of schools that are like-minded.

This research addressed the varying perceptions and applications of African Centeredness, a particular type of cultural relevance, in independent, African American learning environments. However, towards a more cohesive application of African centeredness within and between schools, this study attempted to pinpoint a common core of applied and theoretical characteristics between administrators and teachers in an African centered environment.

This exploratory, qualitative research project focused on the manner in which teachers and administrators perceive and apply African centeredness in an African centered independent school. A case study is the most appropriate design for observing this venue within the closed setting of its natural boundaries. This project focused on the phenomenon of African centered learning environments. It specifically considered the manner in which African centeredness is

individually perceived and applied by its practitioners within these environments. Thus case study design was the most appropriate for observing this venue wherein different perspectives exist regarding the same phenomena and comingle to create a collective perspective.

### 1.3 Purpose

This is a qualitative study. This qualitative research project employed a case study approach to examine teachers and administrator's perceptions and applications of African centeredness within such learning environments. To this end, a review of documents and records (i.e. syllabi, orientation literature, meeting minutes) that speaks directly or indirectly to the mission statement of the African centered school in the study was conducted. The project also considered teacher and administrative perceptions of what elements are essential to providing African centered learning environments. The study utilized "within case" analysis (Creswell, 2007) to gather the richest data possible. In this case the study consisted of several individuals in one independent African centered school.

### 1.4 Significance

This study builds on prior research affirming the viability of independent African centered learning environments as alternatives to public education, including studies conducted by Kwame A. Akoto (1992), Mwalimu J. Shujaa (1992), and Carol Lee (1992). However, compared to other genres within the field of education there is a dearth of literature regarding African centered learning environments. Further, there is no literature that focuses on the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding African centeredness as a prominent feature of the same environment. This study is significant in that it does not assume that African centered learning environments are homogenous in terms of how centeredness is applied and perceived by its practitioners. Instead, this project examines the individual perspectives that exist

in the same African centered environment and how they inform the application of African centeredness.

Identifying common characteristics between various perspectives relative to African centeredness could be valuable in terms of being a starting point for assessment and retention of those aspiring to be teachers African centered schools. This study could also serve as a springboard into further, more intensive research regarding the academic viability of African centeredness. Future studies would be able to pinpoint elements that lend to deeper connections being made between pedagogy and academic success in these environments. In such cases, models that feature cultural relevance may be better able to consistently produce high academic achievers. This would inevitably increase college enrollment and graduation rates as well as add to the pool of future leadership. It would also add to the body of current literature that speaks to alternative educational solutions for African American populations. Research that could fortify future models by exploring common perceptions regarding African centered environments could also be conducted.

### 1.5 Nature of the Study

This study is qualitative, and utilized a case study approach to collect data. The interviewees are administrators and teachers who represent an African centered school. As a feature of the case study approach, the study included a document review. Syllabi, orientation literature and other documentation that directly or indirectly reflects the mission, was analyzed individually and collectively. The combination of the two allows for a broader composite of how the application of cultural relevance is perceived by the participants in the study. More, it provides a richer source for analysis and identification of themes.

## 1.6 Research Questions

The question driving this research is, “What are the common characteristics of African Centeredness exhibited by administrators and teachers within an African centered independent school?” In order to answer the main research question, several sub questions will be considered. These questions include: “How does the school define African centeredness in its mission statement?” “How do the teacher’s and administrator’s perceptions of African centeredness compare to the school’s mission statement?” “How is African centeredness demonstrated in the classroom?”

Through each of the sub questions I sought particular information that would highlight the distinguishing characteristics of each participant’s perspective regarding relevance in an African centered context. Sub question number one speaks to how the African centered school defines African centeredness through its mission statement. Having such knowledge, allowed for a more meaningful observation of the school’s explicit and implicit references to African centeredness. I located, for purposes of comparison, those salient features from each perspective that indicated how African centeredness was perceived. The method of collection to obtain this data was a review of documentation and records (i.e. syllabi, orientation literature) that speak directly or indirectly to the mission statement of the school participating in the study.

The second sub question engaged the teachers’ and administrator’s perceptions of African centeredness compared to the schools mission statement. The primary method for collecting data to satisfy this question was a formal interview with administrators and teachers. By asking them how they define African centeredness in an African centered environment, I looked at their answers to see how their perceptions of cultural relevance compared to each other as well as to the mission statement.

The third sub question asked, “How does African centeredness look in the classroom?” The primary method of data collection for this question was classroom observation. By observing the classroom setting, I was able to ascertain which characteristics, articulated by the teachers and the mission statement, actually appeared in classroom pedagogy. The resulting data was documented and placed on an observation protocol as well as written down in my field notes. The secondary method of data collection was formal interviews with the teachers. By conducting interviews with teachers, I was able to capture their personal insights as to how they perceived their classroom instruction and how it reflects the cultural relevance expressed in the mission statement. A document review was the third method that was employed to collect data in order to answer the third sub question. A document review added another data source to this research study. These three methods were employed to collect the emic data that was transcribed and analyzed. They also provided the means of triangulation, which enriched the quality of the case study approach.

### 1.7 Theoretical Framework

My decision to employ Freirian Liberatory Education as a conceptual framework is by no means an indictment of other paradigms as inferior theoretical frameworks. Black Feminist Thought and Afrocentricity, among others viable frameworks, could have most certainly been used as a lens to view and weigh the data. However I decided to use Freire’s framework partially because his use of “critical awareness,” as a means to empower or liberate, is very compatible with African centered education’s (ACE) notions of: 1. “Utilizing teaching techniques that are socially interactive, holistic and positively affective”; and 2. “The need for personal study and critical thinking” (Watson and Smitherton, 1996, p. 60). For example Freire posits “I am not interested in having my children imitate their father and mother, but rather in

having them reflect upon our influences and give meaning to their own presence in the world” (Freire 1970, p. 13). Freire adds “To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity” (p. 47).

Another reason I decided to use Freire’s framework is because it is compatible with the African centered notion of circularity with respect to knowledge. By utilizing dialogue over narration, Freire’s model supports horizontal relationships in the learning environment as opposed to hierarchical interactions that are undergirded by deficit based banking models. Freire elucidates this position as he argues:

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students accept their ignorance as justifying the teachers existence—they never discover that they educate the teacher (1970, p.72)

The dialogic approach supports interactive communication and thus “fosters the libratory education in that the learner is an active and able participant” (Jones and Gayles, 2008).

Lastly Freirian Libratory Education supports the notion that education seeks awareness that results in change (Jones and Gayles, 2008). African centered education is compatible with the transformative aspect of Freire’s conceptual model in that it seeks to produce agents of change who will through praxis, apply the libratory principles to their literal reality in order to transform it (Akoto, 1992). Freire’s elaboration regarding transformation, further highlights the connection between ACE and Freirian Libratory education as he (2004) maintains,

To the extent that we become capable of transforming the world, of naming our own surroundings, of apprehending, of making sense of things, of deciding, of choosing, of valuing and finally, of ethnicizing the world, our mobility within it and through history necessarily comes to involve dreams towards whose realization we struggle” (p.7). Freire adds “ For this reason, progressive education, whether at home or at school, must never eradicate the learner’s sense of pride and self worth, his or her ability to oppose, by opposing on him or her a quietism that denies his or her own being (p. 8).

For purposes of this study, I focused on three important interconnected features of Freirian conceptual and curricular linkages. Critical awareness, dialogic interaction, and transformative power are the three components considered in analyzing the common characteristics between participants in the research study in terms of their perspectives on African centered pedagogy. In terms of operationalization of Freire’s theoretical framework, I was not focused particularly on learning outcomes, but I used the above mentioned components as a means to observe the pedagogy relative to teacher competencies.

## 1.8 Definitions

“**Circularity**”-- is a main feature of Afrocentric knowledge in that it characterizes knowledge as diffuse. Everyone contains knowledge which implies intrinsically that everyone has agency and value. African Centered educator and creator of Kilombo Academy, Mrs. Umoja contributes a rendering of what circularity looks like in the classroom in an interview conducted on April 20, 2011, by this author. She maintains “All knowledge is circular. So the teachers learn from the students, the students learn from each other and the students learn from the teacher.”

**“Critical Awareness”**—This term acknowledges “the innate ability of people to know independently and in a way that reflects their lived experiences rather than an externally imparted perspective” (Jones and Gayles, 2008 pg 105).

**“Culturally Relevant Teaching”**—Gloria Ladson-Billings has a definition for the term she created. She maintains that it is the use of the students’ culture as a basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions and conceptualize knowledge. It requires the recognition of African American culture as an important strength upon which to construct the schooling experience (Ladson-Billings, 1990).

**“Transforming Power”**—According to Asante (1998), this power is rooted in historical and cultural experiences. It is the quality of exceeding ordinary and literal experience. It occurs in the African’s response to relationships and nature when personal and collective harmony is achieved. According to Asante the power of the word is transformative and being so, is a great conduit through which teachers can consciously facilitate transformative agency. “Liberative” and “transcending” in this context are also compatible to the term “transforming,” since “from oppression” is understood as the object of the action. “Transformation reflects the action of people who are aware and conscious of their ability to impact their world”(Jones and Gayles, 2008, pg.105).

**“Dialogic Interaction”**—Freire (1994) refers to dialogue as the way by which people achieve significance as human beings. Dialogic interaction is therefore a venue wherein critical thinking is required for true communication to occur. Freire posits that “without dialogue there is no communication and without communication there can be no true education” (p. 93).



## 1.9 Assumptions

Inherent to this study are some basic assumptions. It assumes that African centered schools are viable alternatives to public school learning environments. This research assumes that African centered learning environments are not homogenous in terms of the way in which teachers and administrators perceive the meaning of African centeredness as well as the pedagogical performance of African centeredness. It also assumes that locating similarities in the perception of cultural relevance between teachers and administrators is important knowledge toward gaining a more comprehensive understanding of how African centeredness is defined and applied. Finally, this research study makes the assumption that the identification of common pedagogical elements could facilitate more clarity, regarding the application of African centered pedagogy.

## 1.10 Limitations

There are limitations to this study. The time and funding constraints limit the size of my sample, the length of time and the extent to which I could engage the site in the sample. If given more time I would have been able to immerse myself into the schools' culture. I would have been able to observe classes in more than one school. This would have facilitated a richer more diverse range of comparative data. Another limitation was the use of Freire's Liberatory Education conceptual framework. It only recognizes particular characteristics as important within the scope of each participant's perception of cultural relevance in an African centered context. However, another framework (Black Feminist Thought, Afrocentricity) may have placed more value on other characteristics. Thus, the application of Freire's framework does not necessarily offer a universal depiction of what is significant about locating common characteristics between administrators and teachers in the same learning environment.

### 1.11 Summary

This chapter served as an introduction to the study. The purpose of the study was to locate common characteristics between the perceptions of teachers and administrators relative to cultural relevance in an African centered learning environment. The significance of the study was its assumption that identification of such common elements could facilitate more clarity relative to best practices that lead to high academic achievement. This study viewed the findings through the lens of the Freirian Libratory Educational framework, in order to determine whether or not the core characteristics can be tangible representations of his conceptual model. A list of terms was presented, relative to a clearer understanding of the Freirian Framework. The next chapter will provide a review of the relevant literature regarding cultural relevance and African American learning environments.

## 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of the study was to identify the common characteristics of African Centeredness within an Independent African Centered school. Questions driving this research were:

1. How does the school define African Centeredness in its mission statement?
2. What is the relationship between teacher and administrator perceptions of African centeredness and the school's mission statement?
3. How is cultural relevance demonstrated in the classroom?

For over 25 years scholars have examined the notion of culturally relevant pedagogy for cultures of students of color. Particularly, it has been examined for ways that teaching in a public school context can better match the home and community cultures of students of color who have previously not had academic success. Within that body of scholarship, however, there exists a dearth of current literature, relative to independent learning environments that feature cultural relevance. Specifically underrepresented are those independent environments that are considered "African Centered." The literature pays little attention to the manner in which teachers and administrators perceive and apply "African Centeredness," and thus makes no distinction between these perceptions. An assortment of databases is reflected in this collection of literature, which includes articles and books from scholars across a range of disciplines. The literature review will be presented in four sections.

The first section highlights the evolution of "culturally sensitive" pedagogy and the need for a cultural component in schools regarding children of color. Literature that focuses on some of the approaches to applying cultural relevance will be discussed in the second section. The

third section will discuss independent learning environments featuring those that are considered African centered, in terms of characteristics that distinguish them from other types of culturally relevant, independent schools. The concluding section presents a detailed description of Paolo Freire's liberative pedagogy and its direct connection to the research being conducted.

## 2.1 Cultural relevance, Education and Communities of Color

Cultural relevance, in the context of teaching, as defined by Ladson-Billings (1995), is pedagogy that addresses student achievement, acceptance and affirmation of cultural identity and the development of critical perspectives that challenge inequities that exist in broader society. More specifically, she maintains that culturally relevant teaching “empowers students, intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 18). Although much of the research regarding cultural sensitivity has occurred within the last twenty years, the use of culture as a focus of educational research extends beyond that time frame. Vygotsky (1931) recognized the need for considering culture as a component of education. He posited, “the various psychological tools that people use to aid in their thinking and behavior are called signs.” He further stated, “we cannot understand human thinking without examining the signs that cultures provide” (pp.39-40).

In a more contemporary context, Ladson Billings' notion of culturally relevant pedagogy builds on earlier works of researchers who sought to facilitate more culturally sensitive teaching practices. The literature, in this regard, shows a progression of scholarship leading up to culturally relevant pedagogy. It graduates from deficit models that merely attempt to fit students into a hierarchical academic structure to models wherein cultural relevance includes a component

that fosters academic success as well as students' critical awareness of the inequities that broader society perpetuates, inclusive of public schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

There is a great deal of evidence cultural relevance has been demonstrated. Phillips (1972) examined traditional classroom settings on the Warm Springs Indian Reserve in Central Oregon. He observed that there was cultural incongruence in interaction and participation styles at home and school, between the teachers and the Native American children. Phillips found that low academic performance, conflict, and discomfort resulted from the incongruence.

Mohatt and Erickson (1981) also studied Native American students in a traditional classroom environment. Corroborating Phillips' (1972) work, they found that teachers who used interaction styles and participation patterns that were similar to the students' home cultural style, positively impacted academic performance. Teachers who used "mixed forms" (p.117) (a combination consisting of Native American and Anglo language interaction) were more successful than those who did not employ such an approach. Mohatt and Erickson labeled this type of instruction, "culturally congruent."

Au and Jordan (1981) conducted a study that examined a project designed to teach Hawaiian children how to read by using elements of their cultural background. The Kamahema Early Education Program (KEEP) utilized a method of culture based reading instruction that incorporated Hawaiian linguistic elements in a style similar to what they term "talk story." It was found that this method helped students achieve at levels beyond what was expected on standardized reading tests. Au and Jordan labeled this pedagogy "culturally appropriate."

Cazden and Legget (1981) used the term "culturally responsive" to describe language interactions of teachers with students in a multi lingual classroom. Erickson and Mohatt (1981) in their work featuring Native American children also used the term "culturally responsive" to

describe pedagogy that uses “mixed forms” (Erickson and Mohatt, 1981, pg.117). Building on the work of Au and Jordan (1981) who studied the success of culturally based methods of pedagogy on Hawaiian children, Jordan (1985, p.110) and Vogt, Jordan, and Tharp (1987, p.281) referred to such pedagogy as “culturally compatible.”

Ladson Billings (1995) contrasts the terms “culturally appropriate,” “culturally congruent,” “culturally compatible,” and “culturally responsive.” She maintains that of the four, “culturally responsive” “appears to refer to a more dynamic or synergistic relationship between home/community culture and school culture” (pg.467), while the others “seem to connote accommodation of student culture into mainstream culture” (pg. 467). Up to this point in the literature, culturally sensitive attempts to spur academic achievement tend to place the majority of their focus on speech and language interaction between the teachers and students. However the literature fails to address how the societal inequity from a broader societal perspective impacts the cultural incongruence experienced by children of color in the classroom.

Irvine (1990) created the term “cultural synchronization” to refer to the cultural connection that must be present between the teacher and African American students for maximum academic achievement. Although similar to prior research that focuses on successful cultural connections between students and teachers with emphasis placed on language and speech patterns, Irvine’s research represents a departure from previous studies in terms of scope and population. His study examines African American students and places emphasis on accepting their communication patterns and framing the students’ lived experiences in societal and institutional contexts. His work considers the affirmation of their cultural identity while expanding the context of school failure to include broader structural explanations.

This is the point of departure from previous research that blames cultural disadvantage for academic underachievement. Irvine's work, as a point of departure from deficit models that view the academic underachievement of African American students as a cultural problem that needs to be compensated for, represented a progression in the literature, bringing it a step closer to Ladson Billings "culturally relevant" pedagogy. Ladson Billings' (1995) notion of "culturally relevant" pedagogy adds a socially conscious, critical element to the scope of what defines culturally relevant instruction in the classroom. It is also the primary alternative framework in terms of representing constructivist, theoretical models that pursue academic excellence while promoting critical awareness in the classroom and in society.

## 2.2 Applying culturally relevant pedagogy

Where cultural relevance is represented in the literature, most of the contemporary research focuses on the examination of its application in traditional classroom settings. As a point of origin, Ladson-Billings' (1995) research marks the trend toward scholarship focused on the formulation of best practices, in terms of classroom application of culturally relevant pedagogy.

A precursor to Ladson-Billings' (1995), Lisa Delpit (1992) provided a perspective that recognizes the need to include culturally relevant pedagogy in culturally diverse classrooms. She maintained in her work, *Education in a Multiracial Society: Our Future's Greatest Challenge* that "The question is not necessarily how to create the perfect 'culturally matched' learning situation for each ethnic group, but rather how to recognize when there is a problem for a particular child and how to seek its cause in the most broadly conceived fashion" (pg. 237). The manner in which Delpit speaks of the need for teachers to be sensitive to the ways culturally

diverse children have been placed at risk by schools is full of referents to cultural neglect and non-recognition.

Pointing out the cultural clash between home and school, Delpit provides an understanding of how cultural mismatch and the inherent bias resulting from it could lead to low expectation deficit models, stereotyping, invisibility and what she terms the “messiah complex” (243). Delpit’s initial recommendation of a broad, reductionist approach de-emphasizes cultural sensitivity as the primary solution to cultural mismatch. Contrastingly, her more recent research (Delpit, 1992) gives way to a pronounced recognition of the need for teacher fluency in the ability to culturally relate to students in ethnically diverse classrooms.

Other researchers are more prescriptive regarding how they approach the application of culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. A. Barry Osborne (1996) synthesized ethnographies conducted in North American and in Australian cross cultural and interethnic classrooms. Through his synthesis, Osborne produced nine assertions about culturally relevant teaching in multicultural settings that he maintains should serve as starting points for best practices regarding culturally relevant pedagogy. Osborne argues “culturally relevant teachers need not come from the same ethnic minority group as the students they teach” (289).

However, Osborne contradicts the previously mentioned assertion when he posits “it is desirable to teach content that is culturally relevant to students’ previous experiences, that fosters their natal cultural identity, and that empowers them with knowledge and practices to operate successfully in mainstream society” (289). Osborne’s work represents a theoretical attempt to enhance participatory democracy through educational reform that requires teacher training in order to include culturally relevant pedagogy in multicultural classrooms.



Renee Smith-Maddox (1998) also focuses on multicultural education and the implications for culturally relevant curriculum. Smith-Maddox, in this research also explores the impact of culture on standardized assessments concluding that “research focusing on culture is helpful to standard setters and test developers who must continue to struggle to develop valid and reliable measures” (p.314). In terms of application in the classroom, Smith-Maddox points to low expectations of teachers as the main factor contributing to academic underachievement. She attributes this low expectation pattern to a language mismatch that minimizes effective instruction and positive teacher affect resulting from a lack of cultural synchronization (Irvine, 1990). The study’s findings support the notion of facilitating cultural sensitivity within the teaching and learning environment, but acknowledge the difficulty in trying to capture cultural influences that can be effectively applied to multicultural environments.

In a similar vein, Michele Foster and Triphenia Peele (1999) examine the concrete application of cultural relevance involving the use of African American English and culture. The study was based on the examination of a three- year professional development program wherein teachers were exposed to elements of African American culture and features of African American English with the expectation that they would incorporate this knowledge and thereby raise the academic achievement of their students. Instruction was a mix between traditional and culturally relevant pedagogy. The cultural strategy employed by the program featured “the five R’s (Ritual, rhythm, recitation, repetition and relationships)” (pg. 179). Findings showed that despite professional development, this ethnically diverse population of teachers was not able to “turn concepts inside out” (pg. 185). In other words they were not able to theoretically “reach the understandings necessary to extend and elaborate on what they were learning” (pg.185).

Further research devoted to teacher development, as it relates to culturally relevant pedagogy, includes strategies for teaching ethnically diverse populations with emphasis placed on African American children (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Delpit, 2003). Howard (2003) considers the importance of critical teacher reflection as a prerequisite for developing effective culturally relevant pedagogy relative to ethnically diverse teachers of multicultural student populations “as a means of incorporating issues of equity and social justice into thinking and practice” (p.195). He outlines several strategies that can be beneficial to teacher educators in order to impart the skills necessary to effectively educate today’s diverse student populations.

Ladson-Billings (2000) responds to a gap in the literature regarding research that is expressly devoted to the preparation of teachers to serve African American students. She speaks to the negative perception of African American culture within the schools by administrators and teachers that impacts the educational process and outcomes of the students. She also points out that the dearth of educational literature on best practices geared toward teaching African American students reflects the same negative perception of African American culture.

As it emphasizes immersion in the community and the conscious re-experiencing of one’s subjectivity through autobiographical writing, “this work asks teacher educators to think more carefully about the relationship of teacher preparation to the communities in which they are located and the school populations that their graduates are likely to serve” (pg. 210). Delpit’s (2003) work also points out the need for teachers who are educators of African American students to focus less on standardized test scores and scripted instructional programs that misrepresent their learning capacity and more on pre-integration counter narratives which affirm their intelligence and motivate them to perform academically.

Other attempts in the literature to highlight culturally relevant pedagogical practice that increase academic success focus on reflections of teachers' lived experiences in the classroom as opposed to outcomes of culturally relevant pedagogical training of ethnically diverse teachers (Hastie, Martin and Buchanan, 2006; Delpit, 2006; Brown, 2004; Howard, 2001; Lynn, Johnson and Hassan, 1999).

Marvin Lynn, Charletta Johnson and Kamal Hassan (1999) examined an African American teacher who was considered an exemplary educator by parents and peers. This research, in contrast to Osborne (1996), supports other literature (Foster, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1995) that characterizes African American teachers as typically being a more natural conveyor of cultural relevant pedagogy for African American youth. This research, conducted at an independent, ethnically diverse school with a predominately black student population highlights the relationship between the school's culturally progressive mission statement and the values reflected in the teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices. Included in these practices is an "opportunistic" approach to teaching content. This approach facilitates a critical dialogic style of interaction and uses student ideas presented spontaneously, in the flow of discussion to become the examples that support the content.

Howard (2001) examines four African American women teachers considered to be highly effective teachers for African American Students. Based on their experiences, three pedagogical categories were common to all four educators in terms of importance: "holistic instructional strategies, culturally consistent communicative competencies and skill building strategies to promote academic success" (Howard, 2001). Self reflection as a theme, is represented in the literature (Howard 2003). White teachers who use their praxis regarding culturally relevant pedagogy as a learning/self awareness tool "expand their understanding of praxis beyond

thinking, acting and reflecting to consider the political and social aspects that impact curriculum, pedagogy and students” (pg. 293).

Hastie, Martin and Buchanan (2006) found that two white teachers teaching “stepping” to African American students were able to see that in order to render a successful presentation of culturally relevant pedagogy they would have to be conscious of their “positionality as members of the dominant group”(pg. 304). Included in the findings were accounts by the two white female teachers who attempted to apply culturally relevant pedagogy, suggesting they encountered suspicion of their credibility and intention, which contributed to student skepticism regarding the legitimacy of the teachers

### 2.3 Independent schools as alternatives to traditional schools

Despite Ladson- Billings characterization of culturally relevant pedagogy as one that facilitates critical awareness and preserves the cultural integrity of African American students, contemporary research on culturally relevant educational alternatives is largely absent from the literature. There is a tremendous gap in the literature relative to environments that are exclusively devoted to culturally relevant pedagogy. As a particular type of culturally relevant learning environment that fosters academic achievement and critical consciousness, the literature is virtually silent regarding Independent African centered schools. More, there is even less scholarship that focuses on the manner in which such schools perceive and practice African centeredness.

Potts (2003) research agrees with Delpit’s (1992) and Ladson –Billings (1995) in terms of acknowledging the importance of critical reflection as a tool for understanding and better negotiating the impact of deep biases, but as it applies to African centered learning environments. Potts suggests that the combination of an emancipatory education (e.g. Freire,

1998) and an African Centered education (H. Madhubuti and S. Madhubuti, 1994; M.J. Shujaa, 1995) should be the primary ingredients in school-based interventions where African American students are concerned. Potts (2003) references the long history of emancipatory schools including the freedom schools of reconstruction and SNCC. Also highlighted were “liberation schools of the Black Panther Party, the Malcolm X Academy in Detroit, Sankofa Shule in Lansing, the Institute for Positive Education/New Concept Development Center in Chicago, the Benjamin E. Mays Institute in Hartford, and the schools affiliated with the Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI)” (p. 173).

Potts (2003) research supports the notion that African American students must be motivated to achieve academically in an environment that allows them to critically analyze society’s structures as a means for understanding the role of school and social oppression. This research pairs the concepts of academic success and social change in the tradition of African Centered independent schools. It promotes applying these principles through interventions in a public school context that produces African American social change agents.

Hopson, Hotep, Schneider, and Turenne (2010) explore the absence of an African Centered perspective in the general discussion of educational leadership. Towards building an overall composite to support their preference toward African Centered schools, they reference the vast history of African Centered venues and point out contemporary strategies for applying African Centered education in self contained independent environments.

Hopson et al., point out the impact SNCC’s school building efforts in Mississippi had on the creation of freedom or liberation schools (p. 779). These schools featured political education classes as well as routine discussions of African American history and culture. The authors detail the history of the African Centered Education (ACE) movement giving mention to the following

three foundational freedom schools of the late 60's and early 70's: Freedom Library Day School of Philadelphia established in 1968; Uhuru Sasha Shule of Brooklyn established in 1970 ; and the African Student's Association and the Oakland Based BPP operated Intercommunal Youth Institute established in 1971 (Payne, 1995, Ture and Hamilton, 1992; Van Peebles, Taylor, and Lewis, 1995). With the establishment of the Council of Independent Black Institutions in 1972, Hopson, et al. (2010), maintain that institutionalization of the ACE movement had been accomplished.

Throughout the 80's and 90's these authors maintain that ACE theory had become internalized by an increasing number of advocates whose efforts have been hindered by public school's lackluster commitment towards developing African American potential. However, Hopson, et al. (2010), point out that "the recent emergence of accountability movements has completely altered the terrain of African Centered education and schooling with the increase in schooling options for African American populations" (p. 780). They advise that charter schools are important alternate venues to consider in terms of practicing ACE, citing high levels of academic achievement attributed to them over recent years. They caution that despite recent success three challenges facing new charter schools are "securing a facility, obtaining start up funding, and acquiring the expertise needed to run a charter school" (Hopson, et al, 2010).

Carol Lee (1994) examines African centered pedagogy and what its implementation means in different settings. Lee observes that African centered pedagogy is needed to "support a line of resistance to the imposition of Eurocentric biases" adding that such a pedagogy is needed to foster an ethical character development grounded upon social practice within the African community" (Lee, 1994, p.296). Lee posits that this type of pedagogy presents major challenges

to public schooling. One of the top challenges is teacher training. ACE demands much requisite particular knowledge from teachers who teach in such environs.

Lee points out that public schools at best may be able to: 1. Foster skill development in literacy, math, the humanities and technology 2. Instill citizenship skills based on critical reflection about the political system within which the student exists, compared to the democratic values that should undergird it. 3. Provide historical overviews that highlight contributions of all ethnic groups to “the storehouse of human knowledge” (p.308).

Lee (1994) maintains that even if these three were supported by public school education, the need for African Americans to achieve “ethnic pride, self sufficiency, equity, wealth, and power” (p. 308) would not be met. Lee advocates for independent venues wherein ACE can be fully applied when he observes, “For African Americans to achieve such goals, a collective though not monolithic, cultural and political worldview is required. Public school does not impart such a worldview” (p. 308). Carol Lee (1992) profiles an African centered school as a model for public schools to follow in their efforts to reform, but also to show a concrete alternative in the face of the “dismal failure of public education for African American students” (pg.162). The vision of the school in the study is complimentary to the philosophical foundation of African centered schools. Lee maintains that the vision “is one in which Black people are self reliant, productive, self defining, and firmly rooted in family and community” (pg.161) According to Lee, Lomotey and Shujaa, (1990) philosophically, African Centered pedagogy aspires to:

1. Legitimize African stores of knowledge;
2. Positively exploit and scaffold productive community and cultural practices;
3. Extend and build upon the indigenous language;

4. Reinforce community ties and idealize the concept of service to one's family, community, nation race and world;
5. Promote positive social relationships;
6. Impart a world view that idealizes a positive, self-sufficient future for one's people without denying the self worth and the right to self determination of others;
7. Support cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness;
8. Promote the vision of individuals and communities as producers rather than as simply consumers.] (p. 50)

These philosophical underpinnings represent a clear congruence to Ladson-Billings (1995) definition of culturally pedagogy, particularly their emphasis on critical and social consciousness. Lee (1992) speaks to the issue of whether or not African centered schools are merely separatist institutions that represent anti-American instruction by stating “the proof is in the pudding” (pg. 174). In regards to Independent Black Institutions (IBI's), particularly the school in the study, Lee points out that alumnus have graduated from or are currently enrolled in some of the top schools and programs in the city's school system. He maintains that IBI's “represent the laboratory schools for the development of pedagogy and projects that reflect African world views and interests” (pg. 174) The Council of Independent Black Institutions' (CIBI)(2001) ten point position, regarding the practices of African-centered institutions, reflects the critical nature of Ladson-Billings culturally- relevant pedagogy. It also extends the notion of critique to reflect an intent to struggle for African American liberation through community building that culminates in nationhood.



Watson and Smitherton (1996) examined the philosophy, curriculum and pedagogy at Malcolm X Academy, an independent Black school in Detroit, Michigan. Their research compliments Lee's position, which claims that African American students must seek alternative means to experience the fullness of an African Centered Education. Watson and Smitherton highlight many components and features of the academy, which contribute to its African Centeredness including the mission statement: "Malcolm X Academy was established as an African Centered Program, stressing multicultural, humanistic, and futuristic education. The Academy seeks to create students who will achieve academic excellence, while developing ethnic awareness, pride and high self esteem" (Watson and Smitherton, 1996, p. 58). Complimenting Lee, (1994), the mission statement of Malcolm X Academy directly addresses those previously mentioned unmet needs left by public education.

The authors, referring to Lee and other scholars, show the philosophical comprehensiveness and forethought of ACE as they have outlined the following ten basic principles of An African Centered Pedagogy:

1. The social ethic of African culture as exemplified in the social philosophy of Maat;
2. The history of the African continent and Diaspora;
3. The need for political and community organizing within the African American community;
4. The positive pedagogical implications of the indigenous language, African American English;
5. Child development principles that are relevant to the positive and productive growth of African American children;

6. African contributions in science, mathematics, literature, the Arts and societal organization;
7. Teaching techniques that are socially interactive, holistic, and positively affective;
8. The need for continuous personal study (and critical thinking);
9. The African principle that “children are the reward of life”;
10. The African principle of reciprocity...that is, a teacher sees his or her own future symbiotically linked to the development of students.

The academy’s philosophy “is to fit the curriculum to the child and to create a school climate that deals with the whole child- mentally, emotionally, and cognitively” (Watson and Smithertman, 1996, p. 60).

Watson and Smitherman (1996) also observed academic achievement as determined by the 1992-93 California Achievement Test scores. They found that by comparison with the district average, the percent of students at or above grade level in math and reading from Malcolm X Academy was almost double the district.

Agyei Akoto (1992) looks at the manner in which Eurocentric hegemonic influences are embedded within models claiming to be African Centered. In congruence with Lee, Potts, Watson and Smitherman, et al., Akoto points out that African Centered pedagogy is “ostensibly concerned with teaching” (p.321). He adds that with respect to ACE, “we cannot realistically deal with teaching methodology without first examining the nature of the teacher’s character and the goals of teaching. Akoto examines the goals of African centered pedagogy, the teacher as a cultural representative and the methods of African centered instruction.

As an instrument for African people’s self determination and self sufficiency, and thus societal transformation, African centered pedagogy is more than just a negation of hegemonic

assumptions of Eurocentric pedagogical theory (Akoto, 1992). As a part of Akoto's criticism of the African tendency to concede "to political and economic expediencies" (p.323) where he warns against the "uncritical adoption or continuation of European-systems and philosophies of education, he indicts Paulo Freire's philosophy of liberatory education as retaining a Marxist analysis of social history. This framework, according to Akoto has the same limitations of Marxism itself regarding issues of culture and race. Akoto observes that for Freire "the past is synonymous with oppression and psychic invasion by the oppressor culture" (p.324)

#### 2.4 Theoretical framework-Paulo Freire's Liberatory Approach to Pedagogy

This section provides details of the prominent characteristics of Freirian liberatory pedagogy from as gleaned from Freire's major writings. It also addresses the link between this research and Freire's liberatory framework.

The essence of Freire's liberatory pedagogy is succinctly articulated by Jones and Gayles (2008). They point out that Freirian liberatory pedagogy is characterized by three basic components: "1. It fosters critical awareness; 2. It includes dialogue (as opposed to narration); 3. And it is transformative in nature" (pg. 104).

##### *Critical Awareness*

Freire's philosophical cornerstone, in terms of pedagogy, is the notion that critical thinking is fundamental to the viability of any liberative educational approach (Freire 1970; 2004). Pulling on his lived experiences with his students as well as his children, Freire (2004) demonstrates a mindset that highly regards the application of theory by modeling his own sensitivity toward respecting his children's freedom to critique their reality. He uses personal experience to enhance the legitimacy of the import placed on this notion of critical thought as a sacred component of his liberatory framework.

For example, Freire maintains “I am not interested in having my children imitate their father and mother, but rather in having them reflect upon our influences and give meaning to their own presence in the world” (Freire 1970, p. 13). He adds “ How can I convince my children that I respect their right to speak the word if I display uneasiness as a more critical analysis provided by one of them who, while still a child, legitimately experiments with his or her freedom of expression” (Freire, 1970 p. 13). In Freire’s 1970 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he links education, critical awareness of oppression’s causes and the consciousness to struggle for liberation as an outcome when he posits that “This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation” (p. 48).

#### *Dialogue versus Narration*

Freire’s (1970) constructivist approach which assumes that students already have knowledge upon which to build supports other research (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Lee, 1994; Delpit , 1992; et. al) that acknowledges the importance of pedagogy that adds more value as opposed to depositing knowledge. Freire sees value in establishing a culture of horizontal verses hierarchal behavior in the classroom (Freire 1970; 1973; 2004). A dialogic format assumes that value is shared between those so engaged. In an educational context this horizontal manner of communicating empowers the student and honors their agency and value as autonomous thinkers and thus students/teachers with the capacity to develop their centeredness in the context of a democracy of participation (Freire 1970; 1973; 2004).

Freire denounced the narrative approach as mechanistic and supportive of the denial of creativity and thus the very humanity of the students (Freire, 1970). The banking approach is implied by the narrative method of teaching wherein the teacher who has all the knowledge deposits it into the minds of the students who are considered to possess no knowledge of their

own thus establishing a contradiction between the student and the teacher (Freire, 1970). Paulo Freire frowns on banking and refers to this format of education as an “ideology of oppression” (pg.72). He points out that, “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire, 1970, pg.72). Dialogue facilitates the establishment of a culture of mutual exchange and thus the ability of the students to see themselves as participants in the transformation of their reality and not mere adapters to an imposed reality.

### *Transformation*

Freire (1970, 2004) communicates the idea that transformation is based on the process of doing, on action. The active adherence to ones critical perception of the world is, in and of itself, transformation. According to Freire liberation is the product of transformation. Freire (1970) maintains, “one of the gravest obstacles to liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings consciousness” (pg.51). He adds, “Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of praxis; reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (pg. 51).

## 2.5 Freirian Liberatory Education and its Relevance to This Research

Freirian Liberatory Education is premised on critical awareness through dialogue and transformation (Freire, 1970; 2004). The focus of this research is African centered learning environments, more specifically the manner in which they perceive and apply African centeredness. Lee Lomoto and Shujaa (1990) highlight the fundamental characteristics of African Centered pedagogy:

1. Legitimize African stores of knowledge;

2. Positively exploit and scaffold productive community and cultural practices;
3. Extend and build upon the indigenous language;
4. Reinforce community ties and idealize the concept of service to one's family, community, nation race and world;
5. Promote positive social relationships;
6. Impart a world view that idealizes a positive, self-sufficient future for one's people without denying the self worth and the right to self determination of others;
7. Support cultural continuity while promoting critical consciousness;
8. Promote the vision of individuals and communities as producers rather than as simply consumers.] (p. 50)

Both exhibit a constructivist, liberatory posture explicitly sharing the tendency to promote critical consciousness, and transformation (Freire 1970; 2004). In this regard there is congruence between the philosophical underpinnings of Liberatory Education, African Centeredness, and Culturally Relevant pedagogy. Because of the parallels in philosophy, including the consideration of liberation and transformation as the purpose of education, Freire's lens as an analysis tool, has enough conceptual room to capture and account for what African centeredness is and how it looks in the classroom.

Gayles and Jones (2008) also found utility in Freire's Liberatory Educational framework as a "tool for analyzing the educational philosophy" (pg. 104) of the Black Panther Party. They used the framework as a basis of comparison with the core concepts of the BPP's Oakland Community School. One of the primary common features between the two was the emphasis on horizontal/dialogical instruction. Their research revealed that the BPP's educational philosophy

and praxis showed evidence of a commitment to liberatory education. The use of Freire's framework as a means of analysis by scholars focused on applying education in a liberative manner, legitimates its relevance to those philosophies, including the one presented in this research study, that undergird education intended to facilitate social change.

## 2.6 Summary

This chapter included a discussion of the literature regarding the notion of cultural sensitivity and the various ways it is approached by scholars. It also includes an overview of how the literature treats application of cultural sensitivity based on the variations in scope to achieve maximum benefit of the children who have been impacted by traditional public school education. African centered schools as potential venues for the application of liberatory, critical pedagogy was discussed as well. Freirian Liberatory Education, as a compatible and useful framework for analyzing this research was also presented. The following chapter will address the methods employed in conducting research that focuses on how teachers and administrators in African centered schools perceive and apply "African centeredness."

### 3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the characteristics of qualitative research design, particularly the case study and why it is the most appropriate for this study. The chapter also addresses how I will select my sample, including the criteria to be used in the process. The data collecting strategies will be discussed as well as data analysis methods. Lastly, validity, reliability, researcher bias and assumptions will also be addressed in this chapter.

The purpose of this study was to identify the common characteristics of African Centeredness within an Independent African Centered School. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How does the school define African Centeredness in its mission statement?
2. What is the relationship between teacher and administrator perceptions of African Centeredness compared to the school's mission statement?
3. How is African Centeredness demonstrated in the classroom?

#### 3.1 Design of the Study

Much of the literature devoted to educational reform has focused on culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP). Within that corpus of literature the discussion of culturally relevant pedagogy typically involves its application in a public school setting. There is some literature that focuses on Independent African Centered schools as a culturally relevant alternative to public schools (H. Madhubuti and S. Madhubuti, 1994; M.J. Shujaa, 1995; Carol Lee, 1994 et. al). However, I was unable to find literature that featured the perceptions of teachers and administrators' within African Centered environments. The qualitative studies that were found focused on African Centeredness as a philosophy undergirding a particular type of independent school. Even fewer,



were studies examining the contrast between teacher's perception and their application of African Centeredness in the classroom (Carol Lee, 1994; Agyei Akoto, 1992; Watson and Smitherton, 1996).

The most appropriate design for understanding the participant's perceptions of African Centeredness, as well as the manner in which those perceptions materialize in the classroom is provided by qualitative methodology. This method facilitates a deeper understanding of how individuals in a school setting express their idea of African Centeredness. Researchers utilizing qualitative methods are immersed in the environment of study, as an observer as well as an instrument for data collection. This allows for more depth relative to capturing the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

Cresswell (2007) maintains that the following are the defining characteristics of qualitative research:

1. Natural setting as a source of data-all data are collected in the field with an emphasis placed on the natural environment;
2. Researcher as key instrument of data collection-The researcher experiences the environment and is thus able to articulate the phenomenon occurring within the environment;
3. Data comes from multiple sources, including interviews, observations and documents;
4. Inductive data analysis- the researcher "builds the patterns, categories and themes from the bottom up" (Creswell, 2007 p.38);
5. Focus on perspectives of the participants;

6. Emergent Design. The initial plan is subject to change according to what method is most practical once in the field for capturing data that has the best potential to satisfy the research questions;
7. Theoretical lens;
8. Interpretive inquiry. As an instrument, qualitative researchers interpret what they see hear and understand (p. 39);
9. Holistic account. Qualitative researchers focus on complex interactions in a given situation as opposed to its causes and effects;

Creswell (2007) also suggests that qualitative research approach is most appropriate when:

1. There is a problem that needs to be explored;
2. There is a need for a “complex, detailed understanding of the issue” (p. 40);
3. Empowerment of individuals is an objective of the research. Focusing on the participant’s voice, the researcher facilitates sharing of the participant’s story from their perspective;
4. The researcher prefers to write in a literary style as opposed to an academic style- In this regard, qualitative research demands the use of rich detail in order to substantiate any claims;
5. The research depends on data coming from observing individuals in their natural setting;
6. There is a need to follow up quantitative research, which addresses the “what” with a qualitative study that addresses the “why;”

7. There is a need “to develop theories where partial or inadequate theories exist” (p.40);  
and
8. Quantitative analysis just doesn’t fit the problem.

Based on the characteristics and features of qualitative research outlined by Creswell (2007), I have determined that qualitative research was the most appropriate method to employ in order to explore the perceptions and applications of “African Centeredness” in an independent African Centered school. Specifically I was interested in engaging teachers and administrators in an independent African Centered school environment in terms of how they viewed “African Centeredness,” as well as how they applied what they understood to be African Centered Pedagogy, in the classroom. The literature includes some research on African Centered schools as an alternate option to a traditional setting (Carol Lee, 1992; Watson and Smitherton, 1996 et. al), but there is a dearth of literature regarding the actual ways in which people view and apply African Centeredness in the classroom. Further exploration of this phenomenon is needed in order to gain a truer understanding of the range of African Centered applications that exists, as well as their contrasts and similarities.

As an African American educator and researcher, I have a particular interest in educational environments that positively impact students of color. Creswell’s criteria for when to use qualitative analysis only partially inform my choice of methodology. I also recognize the need to collect data that reflects the internal processes of African Centered environments as a possible step towards maximizing their potential as viable alternatives to traditional settings. Towards this end, a qualitative methodology best facilitates capturing such data.

The specific qualitative approach best suited for this research was the case study. Creswell (2007) maintains that a “case study is a good approach when the inquirer has clearly

identifiable cases with boundaries and seeks to provide an depth understanding of the cases or a comparison of several cases” (p.74). This study treated each teacher’s and administrators unique perspective as a case, exploring and comparing their perceptions and applications of African Centeredness. The venue, an independent African centered school, is the closed setting wherein each case was researched. Creswell (2007) quotes Yin (2003), who posits, “you would use the case study method because you deliberately wanted to cover contextual conditions-believing that they might be highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (p.13).

### 3.2 Sample Selection

Like Stake, (1995), Creswell (2007) suggests that choosing which case to study opens up the availability of purposeful sampling as an option. In the case of this research, I employed purposeful maximal sampling which is a method involving the selection of cases that show different perspectives on the problem, process or event to be featured in the study. Although statistical generalization is characteristic of quantitative research, it is not an objective of qualitative research, particularly a case study. Thus, a case study focuses on themes that reveal the complexities of a particular case.

#### *Sample Selection and Criteria*

Creswell (2007) suggests that since qualitative research focuses on the perspective of the participants, it is important to seek those participants who will provide the richest data, hence the need for purposeful sampling. For purposes of this research each case was reflective of different perspectives on the phenomenon I am attempting to elucidate hence the designation “purposeful maximal sampling” (Creswell, 2006). Regarding criteria, participants in this research were teachers or administrators from an independent African Centered school whowere willing to

provide detailed information, relative to the purpose of the research. The following is an expanded criterion, which was met by all participants:

- Currently employed at the participating independent African Centered School as a teacher or administrator
- Willing to speak freely regarding their perception of what African Centeredness means in theory and how it should look in the classroom
- Willing to be observed in their natural setting
- Willing to be audio recorded during initial interview
- Willing to do a follow up interview if necessary for the sake of clarity

Because it is an African-centered institution, the target sample was limited to the practitioners of African Centeredness within that specific environment. There was no specific age or gender requirement so as to allow for maximum diversity within the closed setting of the school. This diversity will be reflected in the range of perspectives relative to the research question.

The willingness to speak freely about their perspective was very important to the authenticity and quality of the data, relative to capturing the true perspective of the participants. If they expressed feelings of being encumbered and are selected to participate, the data would have been compromised. It was also important that the participants had no aversion to being observed during the course of their normal day of classroom instruction or audio recorded in their formal interviews. Participants needed to be willing to clarify any information in a follow up interview, if necessary. This lent to a more accurate transcription and helped to ensure that the integrity of the data/interview was maintained.

### *Sampling Procedure*

Purposeful sampling was employed in determining who the potential participants were in regards to this research. The pool from which to sample, although limited to a small number of people within one school, was one that was somewhat diverse relative to age, gender, educational background and ethnic identification. This range of diversity is analogous to the effect produced by “purposeful maximal sampling,” as referred to by Creswell, (2006). This type of sampling entails the selection of cases that show different perspectives on the particular phenomena being researched.

In order to recruit participants for this study, I contacted the gatekeeper to set up a meeting at a time convenient for the faculty and the administrator. The meeting was used to provide details regarding the study, including the overall purpose as well as the questions driving the research. Criteria for participation were articulated at the meeting. The potential participants had a chance to ask any clarifying questions about the study. At the conclusion of the meeting, the gatekeeper was given Informed consent forms. It was made clear that those interested parties should see the gatekeeper in order to obtain a form and return it signed by the following week on an agreed upon day. Those who did so by the agreed upon day represented the sample for this research.

### 3.3 Site Selection

The site selected for this study was done so based on a few considerations. Of the several things that were considered, familiarity with the gatekeeper was a major factor. Gaining access is very important with regard to conducting research in a closed environment where the researcher is initially considered an outsider. My prior establishment of a positive rapport with the gatekeeper, who happens to be the chief administrator, increased the feasibility of my gaining

access to this environment for research. This factor impacted my decision to choose this particular site.

A similar study was conducted utilizing this site. However it focused on two African descent teachers relative to how their life experiences informed their epistemological underpinnings (Swain, 2011). For this research, which focuses on locating common characteristics, it was necessary to find a setting that contained an independent African Centered institution. This particular site which is housed on the grounds of an African-centered Christian church, was chosen for this research based on several factors, which have been mentioned. However the fact that the school was in close proximity to the university where I am currently matriculating added to my decision to conduct research at that particular site. The school services approximately 50 students between kindergarten and the eighth grade level. It is small in size consisting of one level and three distinct classrooms.

The selected site was appropriate for this qualitative research because it is an independent, African Centered Educational environment, which was the focus of this study. This site was also chosen as the venue for this case study because it is a closed environment wherein all of the participants are exposed to the same phenomenon (ACE).

### 3.4 Data Collection

Creswell (2007) points out that “ case study research is typically extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information, such as interviews, observations, documents, and audiovisual materials” (75). In this case study, data was collected utilizing several means, including individual, audio taped interviews, observations, and document reviews. These strategies were employed in order to glean information in a manner that lends maximum depth and richness to the data.

Paolo Freires Liberatory pedagogical approach was utilized as a theoretical framework for understanding the characteristics of African-centered pedagogy. His framework was used to gauge teacher competencies as exhibited by their pedagogical styles and not necessarily student outcomes. Freirian Liberatory pedagogy is predicated on three major components: Dialogue verses narration, critical awareness, and transformative power (Jones and Gayles, 2008).

*Dialogue verses narration.* Dialogue is preferred over narration in Freires model. Dialogue assumes that each student brings knowledge upon which to build as opposed to narration, which views the student as an empty vessel in which a teacher pours knowledge. Hence a democracy of participation is established where the students and teachers are conscious of the shared value of everyone engaged.

*Critical Awareness.* Freire maintains, “this pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for liberation” (Freire, 1970). Critical awareness speaks to the ability of the students to question their surroundings in terms of equality and social justice as well as the ability to imagine solutions in general.

*Transformative Power.* Transformative power is a function of praxis. According to Freire, “Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of praxis; reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, pg. 51).

The interviews, observations and document review were administered with Freire’s Liberatory pedagogical components in mind. I was constantly referencing the framework while collecting data in each of the three forms. The interview protocol was designed to capture Freire’s components without leading the participants. For example, question one states, “What is



your teaching philosophy?” This question was designed to capture an honest response about the participant’s personal philosophy in order to see whether the participant’s philosophies exhibited any components of Freires framework. I was primarily interested in locating Freirian components within their responses to all of the questions, if at all present. The observations and document review were approached in the same manner. While collecting the data, I constantly compared it to Freiraian Liberatory pedagogy to see if there were any expressed parallels.

As a type of culturally relevant pedagogy, African-centered pedagogy much like Freire’s model facilitates critical awareness and preserves the cultural integrity of students in marginalized populations (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In this regard the two are similar and were compatible for purposes of this study.

*Individual Interviews: Standardized Open Ended Approach*

Patton (1990) outlines three basic approaches for qualitative interviews including the standardized open-ended interview, the informal conversational interview and the interview guide approach. This study utilized the standardized open-ended approach. This approach required that all the participants answer the same questions and that the researcher restrain from being biased or leading while asking the questions (Appendix A) and (Appendix B). This research was focused on the individual perspectives of the participants. This approach was appropriate and was used because it provided the means for establishing clarity regarding the flow of data per each individual. The rigid line of questioning served to provide a clear but flexible structure wherein clear recognition of the similarities and variation between the perspectives of the participants on specific phenomenon can occur.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into text by the researcher. Interviews were approximately 45 minutes in length. The initial interview took approximately 30 minutes

along with a possible 15-minute follow up interview where necessary. The interviews consisted of several questions that were designed to allow for responses that were able to address any corresponding sub question, towards the overall attempt to answer the primary research question.

#### *Informal Conversational interviews*

Patton (1990) identifies informal conversational interviews as those that happen rather spontaneously in the field. This study reserved the option to employ this strategy to gain clarity at some point after the formal audio recorded interview or after an observation has taken place. This ensured quality control was taking place in terms of accurately capturing what was intended, relative to interviews and properly identifying nuances observed in the classroom. These interviews were not audio recorded as they were informal, but they added to the depth and richness of the data by allowing the researcher and the participants to become co-agents in making sure ideas and perspectives were clearly understood and articulated.

#### *Observations*

One sub question of this research asks, “How does African Centeredness, as defined by the mission statement, operate in the classroom?” The primary method of data collection for this question was classroom observation. By observing the classroom setting, I was able to ascertain which characteristics, articulated by the teachers and the mission statement, actually appeared in the pedagogy and curriculum applied in the classroom. I visited the site and did observations of multiple classes. The teacher and the researcher agreed on a day of the week that was mutually feasible for classroom observation. One focus of the observations was “stand out” elements in the applied pedagogy that corroborated, contradicted or added another dimension to the claims in the documents and interviews relative to the mission statement (Appendix C). The data was recorded by hand.

### *Document Review*

I obtained documentation and records such as orientation literature from the participating school. Once obtained, the contents of these documents were compared and contrasted with respect to how these documents articulate themes related to African Centeredness i.e., its definition, practical applications, and constituent components. Documents as primary data sources add another medium from which to obtain meaning in relation to the principle and sub research questions. This facilitated the expansion of the data sources, which added to the dimensionality of the study and subsequently the validity of the findings.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

This research utilized a case study approach. Each participant in the study represented a unique perspective relative to his or her interpretation, understanding and application of African Centeredness. In this context where there are several variations of one concept, each participant represents a case to be examined. In terms of analyzing these cases, Yin (2003) suggests that one strategy would be to locate issues within each case that transcend the cases themselves. This facilitates a rich analysis of the case within the African Centered setting of the school. Creswell (2007) adds to Yin's suggested strategy, when he indicates that a "typical format is to first provide a detailed description of each case and themes within the case, called a within-case analysis, followed by a thematic analysis across the cases, called a cross-case analysis" (p.75). This two-stage analysis strategy also includes an interpretation of the case's overall meaning.

For this study, a case referred to each participant's perception and application of African Centeredness within the learning environment. These individual cases, which were separately analyzed, also represented the school's collective African Centered perspective. The school's collective expression of African Centeredness was also analyzed as a case.

This study utilized a within-case analysis. This was done in order to capture overlapping themes as well as points of contrast that may be significant to the overall case analysis. In order to generate themes, this study employed standard qualitative first and second cycle coding strategies (Saldana, 2009 p. 46). In compliance with Auerbach & Silverstein's recommendation (2003, p.44), I kept a copy of my primary research concern, theoretical framework, central research question and main goal of the study visually present, as I employed the coding strategies previously mentioned. Based on advice by Emerson, Fritz and Shaw (1995) the following questions were considered as I coded field notes, particularly those that were observation based:

1. What are people doing? What are they trying to accomplish?
2. How exactly, do they do this? What specific means and/or strategies do they use?
3. How do members talk about, characterize and understand what is going on?
4. What assumption are they making?
5. What do I see going on here? What did I learn from these notes?
6. Why did I include them? (p.146)
7. "What strikes you" (Creswell, 2007 p. 18)?

I began the coding process by using an open coding strategy where I read the transcripts from the interviews and the observations as well as the information contained in the documents representing the school's philosophy and assigned a code to the information. These primary codes were themes that reflected the data's relation to the research questions. I followed up that process with a second level of coding that combined similar themes into a broader thematic category. As I collected and coded data I constantly engaged in the process of checking and rechecking it to see if other categories could be formed that would contribute to themes that have been created. Once data was collected, text from interviews, observations or documents were

placed under one of the research questions with the most relevance. This was done in order to manage and focus the data in a manner that facilitated the best preponderance of the data, the participants and the overall phenomenon being observed.

### 3.6 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are addressed in both quantitative and qualitative research as a necessary means to convey to the reader the extent to which the researcher has done due diligence in terms of meeting a certain level of rigor.

#### *Internal Validity*

Internal validity refers to the study's accuracy. Merriam (2002); Patton (2002); and Rossman and Rallis, (2003) are in agreement relative to the various approaches available for enhancing internal validity of a given study. They posit that effective enhancement strategies for internal validity include: an audit trail, reflexivity, a statement of researcher biases, peer review, member checks, triangulation, long-term observation and collaborative research. This study employed six of the listed strategies. To track any potential bias during the research process, I utilized an audit trail. This entailed keeping a detailed account of the steps taken during the research to facilitate tracking and examination of the rationale behind decisions made during the study. I also used the detailed accounts of my thought process to facilitate awareness of personal bias as well as to reflect on all parties involved. By doing so I hoped to ensure that a level of sensitivity to all parties' presence was maintained.

I utilized fellow researchers as well as members of my thesis committee as peer reviewers relative to the soundness of codes that I created from the raw data. I utilized their feedback to ensure the highest standards were considered and met. For similar reasons, member checking was utilized as well by this study. It was important to make sure that those who were willing and

available had an opportunity to validate the accuracy of some of the findings and interpretations of raw data. Data source triangulation according to Mathison (1983) involves the utilization of multiple sources in order to extract information relative to the research focus. In this study, various sources were used to collect data on the phenomenon at the heart of the research. Having multiple sources fortified the study in that the conclusions and findings were more comprehensively constructed.

### *External Validity*

External validity is a measure of the degree to which a study can be generalized. Qualitative research is not premised on its ability to be generalized but on its ability to speak to the inner complexities of a particular phenomenon. According to Cresswell (2007), “researchers are bound not by tight cause and effect relationships among factors but rather by identifying the complex interactions of factors in any situation” (p.39). Therefore external validity in qualitative research depends on the reader. The research is externally valid in so far as the reader can relate to it. Therefore, incumbent on the researcher, is the responsibility of very detailed presentation of the data in a manner that clearly supports the findings. Thus external validity in qualitative research is not set in stone.

### *Reliability*

Reliability of a study, in terms of quantitative inquiry, is contingent upon its ability to be replicated. Because by nature qualitative research is not rooted in positivist thought, replication does not apply in this sense. What does apply is whether or not the results make overall sense and if they are logically connected to the research questions driving the study. Strategies that were used to enhance internal validity are also barometers for assessing reliability; the quality of the design’s construction as well as the amount of time and rigor invested in the research.

### 3.7 Researcher Bias and Assumptions

My interest in African centered environments comes out of my experiences as a youth in a school situated on the campus of Alabama State University, an HBCU. It fed into the Early Childhood Education Program, which offered a unique vantage point to students. By being on the main campus of the university, the students were provided with real life exposure to the concept of higher education for Blacks. My everyday interaction with this environment allowed me to perceive the Black college experience as something very ordinary that was a natural extension of grade school. My passion for education emanates from this exposure, gained in the early part of my life.

My convictions regarding education have led me into the field of education. As an adult, I am an educator, with a driving desire to see black and other marginalized children able to engage in learning within equitable, empowering, critical atmospheres. This sensitivity colored the lens through which I viewed the data. I believe that in lieu of the many well-documented factors that contribute to low academic achievement in African American communities, the time has come for alternative and culturally relevant environments. Further, I believe that these environments should cater exclusively to a particular ethnicity so as to nurture their centeredness and not necessarily their exclusiveness. However, I attempted to be vigilantly cognizant of my beliefs, assumptions and biases through constant self-reflection in order to minimize their impact on the research.

### 3.8 Summary

This chapter discussed the methods used to conduct this research study. It outlined the criteria upon which those interested would qualify as participants, comprising the sample for this study. The selected site for this study was also addressed in terms of why it was chosen and how

it is appropriate for this study. The different methods of data collection for this research were also highlighted in detail. They consist of Interviews, observations, and document reviews. Validity and reliability were discussed in terms of how the applications of these concepts contrast between qualitative and quantitative studies. Finally a section was devoted to researcher bias and assumptions. This concluding section provided background and context in order to reflect how these biases may impact the researchers ability to objectively capture the data.



#### 4 FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to locate *common* characteristics of African-centeredness in an independent African centered school. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How does the school define African-centeredness in its mission statement?
2. What is the relationship between the teachers and the administrator's perception of African-centeredness compared to the mission statement?
3. How is African-Centeredness demonstrated in the classroom?

This study utilized a qualitative design and was conducted from February 2012 to March 2012. During this time, the teachers and the administrator at the African centered school, were notified of the study and asked if they would like to participate. After a formal meeting was held with the administrator and the teachers at the site relative to the study and clarifying questions were asked, three teachers and one administrator signed the consent form. Each of the four participants was interviewed for 30-45 minutes. These formal, face-to-face interviews took place at the site of the research study, in a classroom. All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Three classroom observations were done in each of the teacher's respective classrooms during instruction. I also observed the school's opening ritual, which was collectively practiced by the entire student body and faculty. I observed several school recess periods as well as one school fieldtrip. Lastly, I conducted a document review utilizing the school's orientation packet, which contained several documents that relate to the school's philosophy, mission and vision.

This chapter contains three sections. The first introduces the participants and presents brief profiles of each as well as the setting in which they were interviewed. Pseudonyms were used in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. The second section presents data from the interviews, observations and the document review to support the themes. The last section provides a summary of the chapter.

#### 4.1 The Participants

Three Black women and one Black man who reside in a large metropolitan city in the southeastern U.S. participated in this study. Each of them participated in the individual interviews. The man and the two women who are teachers were also observed in a classroom setting.

##### *Individual Interviews*

The individual interview participants were similar in terms of age with the exception of the administrator. Two of the teachers were 31 years of age including the male. One of the teachers was 28 and the administrator was 53 years of age. The participants were diverse in terms of how they identified their ethnicity. The scope of their ethnic identification ranged from African, African born in America to African American. All of the participants have a Bachelors degree. Baba Kuumba also has a Masters degree. Mama Nia is pursuing a Masters degree and Mama Maat has a Bachelors degree but has taken some Masters level courses.

Below is a detailed description of the participants. Their own words have been used wherever appropriate to provide a more comprehensive sense of their identities.

*Mama Nia.* Mama Nia, 28 years of age, is self-described as an “Afrikan born in America.” She has been an educator for four years and has taught in an African centered environment for the same amount of time. She is a wife and a mother who was raised in an

African-centered environment and was a member of the New Afrikan Scouts-an organization that focuses on imparting African culture and values from a historical, philosophical and social perspective. She is also the daughter of Mama Imani, the head administrator and founder of the African centered school where she teaches.

Her upbeat and contemplative demeanor is most apparent when she discusses her passion-teaching Black children: “ I believe in culturally relevant curriculum for the Black child in particular. In this place we’ve been neglected culturally right? We haven’t been allowed to learn who we were and even those of us who were steeped in it are still learning more and more everyday about who we are because we’ve been so neglected.”

*Mama Maat.* Mama Maat is 31 years of age and has been teaching for ten years but has spent the last seven years teaching in the present African centered environment. She is the lead teacher at the Academic and Cultural Institute. Mama Maat identifies herself as an “Afrikan.” When asked to identify her gender, the response given was “I am a female, a New Afrikan Woman.” On a typical day at the school, Mama Maat can be found dressed in traditional African garb, which in some cases are her own designs. Mama Maat is also married with children of her own but is clear and proud of the fact that she has a motherly rapport with her students. In her very soothing almost melodic speaking voice she conveys her thoughts about being a mama/teacher: “ I think that we are an extension of their family so when they call us mama and baba or sho sho and fa fa, it really is *Mama Maat*. When I talk to babies they forget to add the Maat onto it...they just say mama-mama this and mama that.”

Mama Maat, like Mama Nia, was also a member of the New Afrikan Scouts growing up. She credits that foundation for giving her the drive to be an effective educator of Black children and contributor to the ongoing legacy of Black progress in this country:

I think that the teachers are highly motivated in giving them the best that we can in trying to give them better than what we had, you know. Nia and myself had really good foundations cause we came up in the movement also. And that's one thing we're lacking, that we're trying to fill in and hopefully those who come after us will do what we've done and go beyond us. All of that is couched in an understanding of who we are and our history and our struggle, you know- what contribution we all, even the children, have to make.

*Baba Kuumba.* Baba Kuumba is a 31 year old “African American” male. He has been an educator for five years, three of which have been spent at the Academic and Cultural Institute. Prior to his present experience as a teacher in this African- centered environment Baba Kuumba recalls, “I was able to teach and co teach a couple of classes at Georgia State University, in the African American Studies Department, so I'm coming from that same kind of perspective.” Baba Kuumba dons shoulder length dreadlocks and has a very “preppy” appearance that compliments his approachable, even keeled demeanor. His attire is very neat and often consists of spectacles, argyle sweaters, matching button down shirts and casual slacks or jeans.

Having obtained his Masters degree in history Baba Kuumba expresses his genuine appreciation for the exposure young students at the Academic and Cultural Institute receive relative to historical truths and concepts that often escape most Blacks during their matriculation process: “There are a lot of concepts that our students are familiar with at you know, 7, 8, years old that a lot of people aren't exposed to until you know, 19, 20. You take a college class and then you find out stuff and you say ‘where has that been all my life’-and our students are getting this at 6, 7, 8.”

*Mama Imani.* Mama Imani is the 53-year-old founder and administrator of the Academic and Cultural Institute. She identifies as an Afrikan. Her presence is professional but regal as she always presents herself impeccably dressed in African garb from head to toe. Her demeanor, including an infectious smile, is warm and inviting but simultaneously firm and no nonsense. The school she founded has been operational for seven years but as Mama Imani maintains:

I've taught in an African centered environment probably for over twenty years because I had a supplementary program called the New African Scouts. Before that we had an educational program called Uhuru Sasa. The whole point of the New African Scouts was to supplement public schools because we knew they weren't getting our history and culture in public schools. So we would meet every Friday and they would have African Thought and Political Consciousness class. And we would go camping and have arts and crafts you know-have African dance, African drumming. They would have all these classes that went on, on Friday.

Mama Imani received her Masters degree while living in Los Angeles, California where she spent over 25 years in the public school system before embarking upon a mission to start her own Independent African-centered school. Aside from being the founder and administrator of the Academic and Cultural Institute, Mama Imani is also a highly respected community elder, mother and wife.

#### 4.2 Overview of the Themes

The purpose of this study was to find common characteristics of African centeredness in an African-centered learning environment. Data analysis revealed several overlapping themes relative to how the teachers and the administrator perceived African centeredness. This thematic

overlap, representative of the common characteristics between the participants, was also found to be interchangeable with four of the major categories commonly represented by the orientation packet. The packet included the mission statement as well as other documents reflecting the philosophy of the Academic and Cultural Institute. The four categories that emerged during analysis of the mission statement are as follows: 1. *Cultural relevance*. 2. *Academic Excellence*. 3. *Social Change*. 4. *Global Sense of Community* (See Figure 4.1). There were nine themes that arose from the data reflecting the common perceptions of African-centered pedagogy amongst the participants. These themes were: : a) Divine Learning Capacity; b) Engagement Through Experiences; c) African Self Mirror; d) Love Based Pedagogy; e) I am Because We Are; f) World view through African eyes; g) Education in Action; h) I Will Change the World; and i) Free to be Me. (See Figure 4.2)

These research questions guided the analysis. They are as follows:

1. How does the school define African-centeredness in its mission statement?
2. What is the relationship between the teachers and the administrator's perception of African-centeredness compared to the mission statement?
3. How is African-Centeredness demonstrated in the classroom?

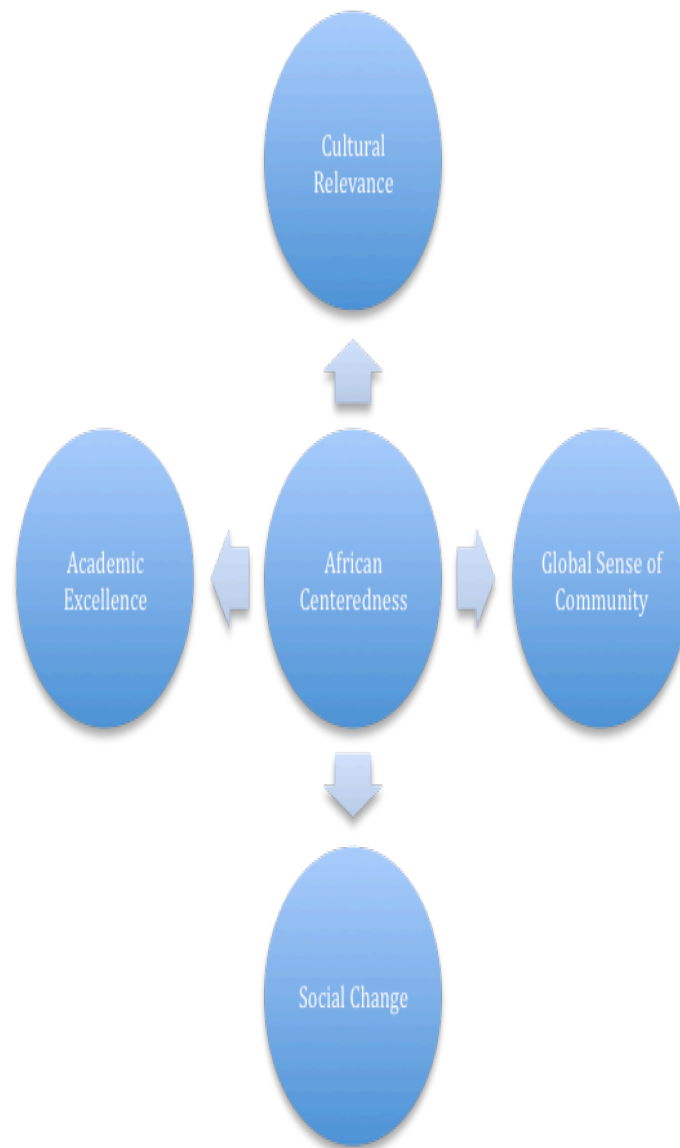


Figure 4.1. Emergent Categories (*“How does the mission statement define African-Centeredness?”*)

*How does the school define African-centeredness in its mission statement?*

This question put differently, focuses on what the school emphasizes as essential components of an African-centered education, as expressed through their mission statement. When examining the mission statement and the components that comprise the vision statement, in response to the research question, “How does the school define African-centeredness in its mission statement,” four dominant categories emerged. The mission statement reads as follows: “The Academic and Cultural Institute fosters an academically excellent and culturally relevant education that produces students who are equipped to succeed globally and are committed to social justice.” From the mission statement of this African-centered school the four categories that became apparent were cultural relevance, academic excellence, social change, and a global sense of community. I analyzed the school’s official definition of African-centered as found in the orientation packet and found that it supported the main themes of the mission statement while explicitly defining the term. I compared the four categories that emerged from the mission statement to those previously mentioned themes that emerged while analyzing the participant’s overlapping perceptions of African-centered pedagogy.

*What is the relationship between the teachers and the administrator’s perception of African-centeredness compared to the mission statement?*

In order to capture the participants’ and the administrator’s common perceptions, they were interviewed and asked five questions. From the answers, themes could then be extracted and compared to see what perceptions of African-centered pedagogy were held in common between them. A document review of the school’s orientation packet revealed the categories



reflective of the school's mission. The categories were then compared to the common themes that arose between the participants (See Figure 4.2). The common themes were a) Divine Learning Capacity; b) Engagement Through Experiences; c) African Self Mirror; d) Love Based Pedagogy; e) I am Because We Are; f) World view through African eyes; g) Education in Action; h) I Will Change the World; and i) Free to be Me. The categories that emerged relative to the mission statement were 1. *Cultural relevance*. 2. *Academic Excellence*. 3. *Social Change*. 4. *Global Sense of Community*.

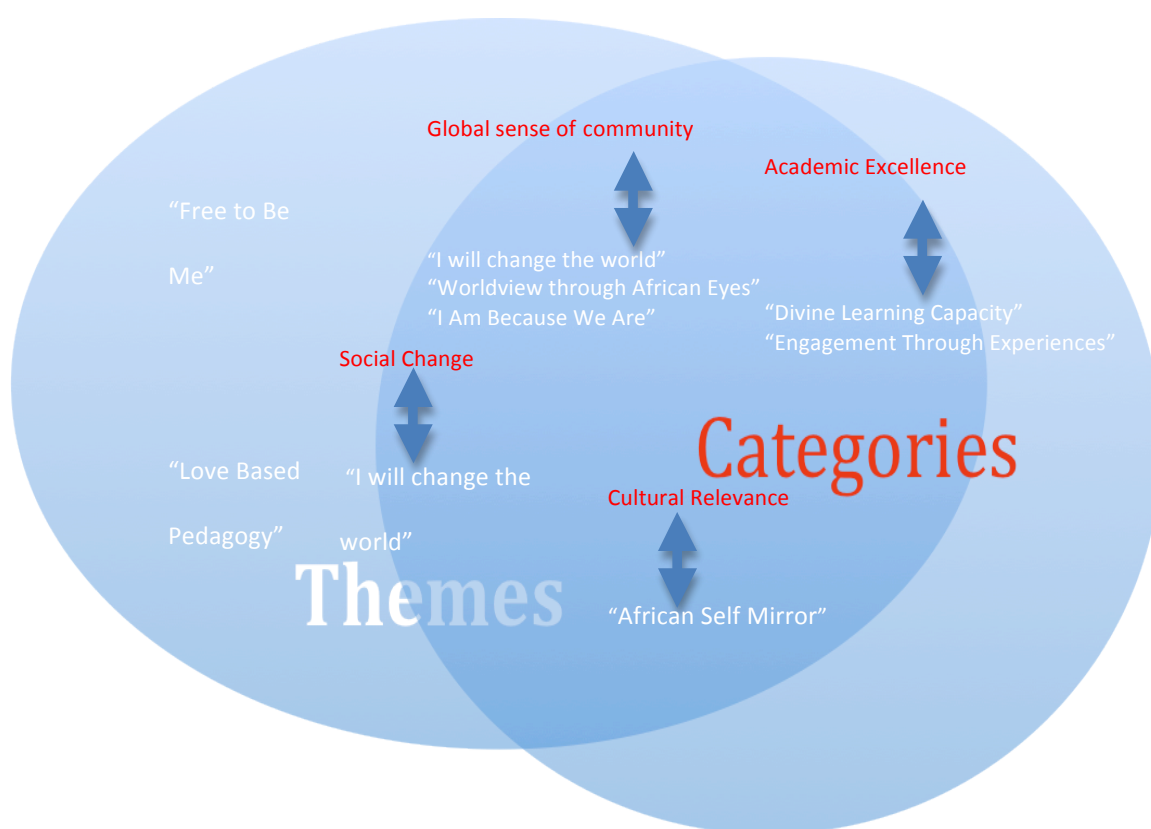


Figure 4.2. Relationship between Participant Themes and Mission Statement Categories  
 (“What is the relationship between the teachers and the administrator’s perception of African-centeredness compared to the mission statement?”)

The following further explains the common themes found between the participants: The participant's personal philosophies, as expressed in their interviews contained two of the common themes: Divine Learning Capacity, and Engagement Through Experiences.

### *Divine Learning Capacity*

The following is the Affirmation at the Academic and Cultural Institute. It speaks to the "Divine Learning Capacity" theme:

"We are African Children. We are divine. We are capable of doing all things..."

Divine learning capacity speaks to the belief held by the participants that each student is African and therefore divine. This inherent divinity underpins the unlimited capacity within each student to strive for and through hard work, reach excellence in any endeavor aspired to by the student. Each of the participants held this belief in high regard, which informed their high expectations of the students. Mama Nia's first words in response to the question, "what is your teaching philosophy," echoes this sentiment: "I believe my teaching philosophy is based on the idea that all children can excel!" Mama Imani supports this sentiment:

I believe that each child is divine and is sent to the Earth with a special destiny-a unique destiny and it is the job of the teacher to help children realize their special gifts and talents. It is our job to encourage them when they hit a brick wall so that they learn tenacity and hard work. It is our job to find out exactly where they are and what their interests are so that we can teach them where they are and bring them up to where they should be."

Mama Imani adds:

You keep working at it and you keep working at it until it's where you want it to be...well children, if they don't believe they can grow intelligence, when they get to a math problem they cant do they just say to themselves I'm not good at math and then they don't try hard and through the not trying hard they don't grow in that area. Its through the trying hard and effective effort-that's the piece right there-an environment that will allow you to master anything that you set your mind to master.”

Mama Maat's belief in the unlimited capacity within the students to excel is expressed within the following quote. She illustrates her high expectations for each student at the school:

We have an end goal in mind that when you leave this place you are committed to the liberation of African people. You believe that you can do anything academically. You are a scholar! Not because you mastered all the content, but because its relevant to you-its important to you-its something you put value and worth in. You have become a lifelong learner.

Baba Kuumba also feels that preparation and hard work, not IQ is requisite for academic excellence. His belief that all his students can learn anything and excel if properly prepared was not explicitly expressed but strongly implied as articulated through his following philosophy:

I talk to my kids all the time about, you know, that no task in and of itself is hard. And in turn, nothing is easy. You know, it's all about your level of readiness. I say if we show one of the kindergarteners your work, to them it's going to look hard. If I show that same work to one of the seventh graders, to them it's going to look easy. The task hasn't changed at all; the task is exactly the same- just one

group is more prepared to reach the task than the other group. I tell them all the time, if you gotta go anyway-cause were gonna take you there!-You might as well go hard!

### *Engagement Through Experiences*

The second common theme, regarding the philosophy of the teachers, was engagement through experiences. Mama Nia, spoke to her belief that pedagogy should promote rigor as well as engagement through creating hands on experiences through which the students can interact with the concepts of the class. She exhibited this sentiment when she stated:

I believe in trying to teach to different modalities-Umm...lots of hands on activities, lots of rigor all at the same time. You can't just have one or the other, like all of it has to be happening in conjunction, right? I believe in structure but some people think, hands on activities and think 'oh the classroom is wild.' I think all of it has to happen, but within a structure."

Mama Imani gave an example of how central the theme of engagement is to her pedagogical sensibility. She strongly expressed her belief that engagement is a vital component to any pedagogy that involves Black students in the following:

I was teaching a reading group and my students are very well behaved in the reading group. But one little girl, she must have been a second grader. But she put her head back, just for a minute. You know like if you were to let your head drop back and hit the chair and come up. And I thought, 'oh my lord, she's bored!' Im gonna have to go back and figure out what happened to her to turn her off. So we take that very seriously-their engagement. We use film, music, rhythm-our

teachers sing quite a bit actually to get the children hyped and engaged about what they're doing.

Mama Maat's example captured a direct transfer of content from book knowledge to real world experience. She recounts:

I've had children read a whole story about a lemonade stand and want to do it.

'Alright lets do it! What we gotta do? We gotta get the lemons, we gotta get the water, we gotta get the sugar, we gotta get the picture, we gotta have straws, we gotta have cups-they literally set them up a little stand and I was like I love this!

But the things that we read about, they are not just left on the page. They want to do it, and they get support in doing it."

Baba Kuumba takes a more holistic approach to learning by using the student's favorite songs from popular culture as a means to facilitate an experience within which the students learn creative ways to put an educational spin on the music:

Every second at the Academic and Cultural Institute is a moment that you should be learning right? As a matter of fact I said a little while ago we do remixes to popular songs. So one of the songs that my students do know is the little Chris Brown song, 'I'm Getting Paper' song right? I'll play that and I'll be like, 'look at us now' and we'll keep saying 'look at us now' and then you know, they'll be like, 'Im getting smarter.'

In terms of philosophy, engagement and belief in the unlimited capacity of the children to excel are two prominent common themes in this environment. Other questions specifically addressed the participants' perceptions of African-centeredness. The participants were asked four questions (2-5) specific to their perception of African-centeredness as a concept (See appendix

A). Analysis of the data revealed that the participants held many common views regarding African-centered pedagogy. They commonly believed in the notion that an African-centered learning environment should foster or exhibit seven qualities as expressed through the following themes: a) African Self Mirror; b) Love Based Pedagogy; C) I am Because We Are; D) World view through African eyes; E) Education in Action; F) I Will Change the World; and G) Free to be Me

*African-self mirror.*

This theme conveys the idea that as a culturally relevant pedagogy for Black students, an African centered pedagogy should facilitate the student's ability to see themselves as Africans. It also conveys the idea that values undergirding African heritage, including its philosophy, culture and history are taught to the students in an African-centered environment. Baba Kuumba captures the essence of the common sentiment amongst all the participants:

African Centeredness is making sure that the young people can see themselves in everything that you're doing. I think its important to have Africa, this huge kind of thought- -this huge land mass and everything that is related to the land mass- So the clothing, the food, the people- All of that is really abstract on certain levels. And so it's important that they understand that when we say Africa is at the center of all things, were really talking about you being at the center of all things."

Mama Maat offers a very similar example of the theme, "African self-Mirror."

Those we've been teaching since kindergarten really don't expect anything other than a culturally relevant classroom-a culturally relevant lesson. They know it is not history that's taught as our story. They are looking to see their faces, people

who look like them, you know. And in the lessons they are taught if they are not there, they are going to want to know ‘like what’s the deal?’”

Mama Nia’s words also reflect this theme. She speaks of how she imagines the expression of African centeredness in the classroom as being the reflection of the student’s African cultural heritage as well as their legacy of Black contribution through images of noteworthy, historical Black faces:

I would say that you cannot come into an African centered classroom without seeing some kind of African Print right? Without seeing Black faces on the wall that affirms the children and who they are-and not just random Black faces- sometimes, just random Black faces! (chuckles) but also faces of Black professionals right?...some kind of African language or African word that somebody would have to ask some question about.

Mama Imani’s expression of this theme includes elements present in all three previous responses. She states, “What makes us different first of all, than most schools is that we’re African-centered. So we teach the child history, language, literature-we teach the child through his or her cultural experience so they are visible in the curriculum.”

African-centeredness according to the participants is the ideal as far as cultural relevance for the Black child. Other emergent themes such as love based pedagogy, further revealed common perceptions between the participants.

#### *Love Based Pedagogy.*

The notion of love is a very present characteristic in the teachers and administrators perception of how African-centeredness is expressed pedagogically, in the classroom. The

participants perceive it as an essential quality that undergirds both curricular and non-curricular interactions between the teachers and the students in an African centered environment. Mama Imani illustrates this theme:

African-centered teaching-its not about hate. Its about loving-loving Black people, you know-and teaching our children who they are –and teaching them the skills they need so one day we would be free and fully self determining.”

Baba Kuumba captures the essence of this theme as well as he reflects:

You know, I think the love aspect of what we do and the respect we try to get the students to treat each other with and treat other Africans with-other Black people with, I think is one of the most important things we do-that we don't necessarily even always acknowledge.

Mama Maat articulates how this love aspect of pedagogy is evident in her approach to disciplining the children. She remarks, “I can scold them in a way that's not demeaning and they know they are still loved.” Mama Nia also echoes this same sensibility to an awareness of love in the environment: “ I would say that an African-centered classroom-I think it feels like love, family right? I think it feels like family-absolutely!” There were yet other emergent themes, reflecting commonly held perceptions by the administrator and the other teachers. We consciousness was the essence of the following theme.

*I Am Because We Are.*

This theme speaks to the impact of African centered pedagogy on the students, in terms of instilling community consciousness. It reinforces the concept of “we” and deemphasizes the concept of “me only.” Seeing oneself as a part of a whole and valuing that whole as one would



value oneself is what this theme connotes. Mama Imani expounds on this development of a “we” ethic as part of the pedagogy:

So with us the African centered classroom begins with prayer and libation honoring our creator and our ancestors-an affirmation-‘We are African children. We are divine. We are capable of doing all things. We belong to the family of Africans worldwide. We follow in the footsteps of our ancestors-we are in the wings of their greatness. Individually we are strong but collectively we are mighty!

She adds, “ the children are taught to cooperate with each other-that competition is not for us-that we’re trying to help each other.” This echoes part of the definition of African-centeredness in the Orientation packet which posits, “cooperation is better than competition...” Another example of this perception and how much value is attached to the “we” ethic emphasized in the school, is contained within the following excerpt by Mama Maat:

The children are really focusing in on ah ‘ok what am I gonna do when I get older, you know. Who do I wanna be? They have to keep at the center of all of that, ‘what am I doing that’s in the interest of my people?’ I never want to put down or squash any of their hopes and dreams or aspirations because I think that all of them can be in some way beneficial to who we are. But...and I need them to clearly define for me what that looks like. If you’re a dancer how is that gonna benefit us, you know-if you wanna be a pediatrician, how is that gonna benefit us-if you want to be a civil engineer, you know, how is that gonna benefit us-a pharmacist-what does that look like for our people? You’re not allowed to

graduate this school and set out on an individualistic track you know what I'm saying? Whatever you do, even though it's for yourself, it is for us as a collective.

A general sense of collectivity and community, as exhibited by the previous example, was expanded in the next common theme. The following theme was characterized by the installment of a global African consciousness within the children.

*Worldview through African Eyes*

African centered education according to the participants should contribute to the development of global awareness within the students. This global awareness should be undergirded by a strong sense of being rooted in African consciousness while perceiving oneself as a global citizen. Baba Kuumba speaks about how this occurs at the Academic and Cultural Institute:

You know, there is African drumming classes, the Spanish classes, the Yoruba classes-You know we've done martial arts classes in the past and all of those things I think, you know, kinda add to, like I said that full view of a world citizen-just you know, understanding that all these things are connected-all of these can be done, you know with your family, your future, your ancestors, your community and mine.

Mama Maat discusses how this African anchored worldview is infused in the curriculum. She speaks about how this global perspective is formed while still centering its formation on being grounded in one's identity as an African:

In stories that we read, even if they are stories about other peoples, other places, we start with comparing it to who we are and what we do initially. So we start by putting ourselves at the center and then we look out from that place. I think that

our children have been very marginalized. We have been. So it takes conscious thought to make sure we redirect and reroute all of that energy-put ourselves at the center and then look outwardly from that place.”

Mama Nia alludes to this international perspective as it relates to students who have been educated in an African centered environment that go on to be adults in the “real” world. In a reflective manner, she expresses her vision of the future of the school, which conveys sensitivity towards a global view being a product of an African-centered education:

This is our seventh year, and so in the long term I believe that we will develop these, you know, professionals who are thriving internationally...so we could really, I believe change the face of education in the world. You know what I mean, changing how Black people are seen in the world-not just these thugged out... Internationally our image is so horrid. I think that schools like us can change that on a macro scale.

Mama Imani expressed this quality of African centered education in much the same way as the other participants with a little more emphasis placed on the political and social utility of developing a healthy “big picture” scope. She maintains:

You might also read literature from other people because you know, one of the things that you want to do is create an appreciation for diversity. To be African does not mean that you dishonor any other culture. To be African just means, that you promote your own history and culture. We want the children to understand who they need to be allies to. So we may read a piece of literature from a Native American or a piece of literature from a Latino-so the children can talk about the

commonalities-what we have in common and our relationship with each other-that this will help us in the total fight for our people.

### *Education in Action*

Education in action represents the notion that an African centered education instills within the students the desire to share their knowledge and values to those outside of the school by actively articulating and modeling them. For example, Baba Kuumba expresses himself:

Our students will hopefully get to a place where they cannot only go and share their knowledge with people but share their manners with people and share their commitment with people and share their love with people because these things are important.

Mama Nia's perspective : "The prayer libation 'we are African, we are divine' - so going beyond just learning African history and culture, but also kind of engraining in you that you are African." Mama Nia further exemplifies the "education in action" sentiment when she recalls, "they'll get into battles in the streets cause children will be like 'We not African'-'Yes you are! 'How do you think your people got here to this place?'

### *I will change the world*

This theme reflects the emphasis placed on the expectation that students will become agents of social change. According to the participants an African centered education is designed to produce advocates for social change in their communities, at home and abroad.

Baba Kuumba sums up this sentiment when he states, "I think, in terms of the future what we're trying to create in terms of the new community, is humane to its cultural core." Mama Nia succinctly echoes this sentiment but speaks to the notion of community from an international perspective. She says that, "I believe we will develop professionals who are at the vanguard of

social change.” Mama Maat is very direct and clear that the students who matriculate at the Academic and Cultural Institute will be agents of change and liberators: “We have an end goal in mind that when you leave this place you are committed to the liberation of African people.”

Mama Aminata goes into more detail as she conveys the idea that the children are expected to be active agents in the uplift of their community. She shares her perspective:

One of the things that our children do-they’re taught that they are freedom fighters and their major job as freedom fighters is to instill love and joy and hope in our people. So we talk to them about how discouraged people can get because of the way things are in the world-they have the power to instill joy and encourage the people to move on.

She further recollects and gives support to the importance of social change as a feature in an African centered learning environment:

So the community benefits because not only are we instilling love and hope but we too demonstrate and give voice to things that are unjust. We just helped the election of Dana Elder, who was a board member for Cox County. We actually went out and campaigned for her so we could have somebody that was progressive and caring about the Black community on the board.

### *Free To Be Me.*

Free To Be Me is an implicit understanding the children have with the teachers that they can be themselves and interact in ways that are comfortable for them in the classroom that may not be acceptable in a traditional school setting. The participants support the notion that the children are literally free to be themselves while they are receiving instruction as long as they are

respectful of others and the teachers. Mama Maat shares this sentiment in the two following examples:

Sometimes it gets too noisy, you know...and I've been criticized. People think it gets a little too free sometimes too. I'm working on that aspect of it. But even that I like. I like it all. I like them.

Um as they've gotten older now they also want to listen to their music and are very assertive about that. I try to be, you know, inclusionary about that. We try to keep it real positive though.

Baba Kuumba represents all participants regarding the theme, "Free to be Me." He says:

We have students that are from half way broken homes and you know, things of that nature. So I think just knowing that 'I am coming to a safe space where I can be who I am as I figure out who I am' is right-So just knowing that 'I can be here and I can be me, you know, even if I don't understand what all of me is, I know while I'm here I can do that.

Having identified common themes between the participants, The second portion of the research question speaks to comparing the participant's perceptions to the mission statement. I employed a document analysis on the mission statement and the school's definition of African-centeredness found in the orientation packet. The following is the mission statement:

The Mission Statement:

The Academic and Cultural Institute fosters an academically excellent and culturally relevant education that produces students who are equipped to succeed

globally and are committed to social justice” (Mission Statement-Academic and Cultural Institute).

In an African-centered context, the most culturally relevant education is an African-centered education. The school defines African centered education as:

An Afrikan-centered educational philosophy founded on the following premises: Afrikan and Afrikan peoples are the mother and parents, respectively of the human family. Afrikan and Afrikan peoples have a vital role to play in the moral, spiritual, intellectual, economic, political and technological advancement of the human family: the development of the continent of Afrika and people of Afrikan descent are of primary importance and concern to the students of Academic and Cultural Institute; Afrikan family values extend beyond the so called nuclear family to all people of Afrikan descent; cooperation is better than competition; life permeates every aspect of existence; spiritual, intellectual, emotional and psychological health are goals worthy of achieving, and attainment of good strong, healthy relationships between and among Afrikan descended peoples must remain a constant objective.

The mission statement of the Academic and Cultural Institute, after analysis, presented four major categories, which were also complimentary to the school’s definition of African centeredness. These categories were reflective of either values or student outcomes. These four categories are as follows: *cultural relevance, academic excellence, social change, and a global sense of community*. The participants, comprised of three teachers and one administrator, were interviewed. After analyzing the participant’s data, according to their expressed responses to the

interview questions, nine themes emerged. These themes were as follows: a) Divine Learning Capacity; b) Engagement Through Experiences; c) African Self Mirror; d) Love Based Pedagogy; e) I am Because We Are; f) World view through African eyes; g) Education in Action; h) I Will Change the World; and i) Free to be Me.

The perceptions of the participants in comparison to the mission statement were very congruent to the categories created from the mission statement. Each category from the mission statement is analogous to at least one of the emergent themes from the participant interviews. Cultural relevance as a pedagogical approach to teaching Black children is synonymous with African centered pedagogy. In this regard the theme “African Self Mirror,” stands out as the most parallel to the notion of *cultural relevance* in that it centers the African student in the curriculum by teaching them African history, philosophy and cultural awareness. Critical thinking is also imbedded into the African Self Mirror theme. A curriculum that centers Black children is itself a critique of traditional learning environments where Black student’s centers are marginalized.

“Education in Action” as a theme corresponds to the *academic excellence* category. It speaks to the ownership of curricular knowledge gained in an academic sense and how the students exhibit the knowledge and values gained in their everyday lived experiences outside of the classroom. Implicit in the ownership of knowledge gained in their African centered environment is the expected ability to connect with and master the content and values rendered pedagogically.

*Social Change* as a category parallels the “I Will Change the World” theme. This theme centers on social change and the development of social change agents as a goal of African centered pedagogy.



*Global Awareness* is a category that speaks to the possession of a global perspective by the students as an outcome of being taught within an African centered learning environment. “I am Because We Are” correlates to the Global sense of Community category because It speaks to the awareness of being an individual in the context of a larger community. “I Will Change the World” although it focuses on transformation and liberation also focuses on Africans in the context of a global community. “Worldview Through African Eyes” also fits in the category of *Global Awareness*. This theme reflects the expectation of students in an African centered environment to be conscious of African centeredness in a context that transcends their local community and allows them to see and respect other centers globally.

*Divine Learning Capacity* is best summed up by the school’s affirmation ritual performed every morning by the school, that includes the following: ” We are African. We are Divine. We are capable of doing all things...” In the context of school where academic excellence is highly aspired to, such a philosophy facilitates the creation of an educational atmosphere with high expectation for the children’s overall success both academically and socially. This theme parallels the Academic Success category.

*Engagement Through Experiences* is a theme reflective of pedagogy that engages through creating pathways for the student to experience the content actively. This theme is complimentary to the mission statement category, “Academic Excellence.”

Two of the themes, “Love Based Pedagogy” and “Free to Be Me,” are not reflected by the categories derived from the mission statement as articulated by the orientation packet. These two themes that represent common perceptions across the participants through their responses are reflective of values such as the development of agency and sensibility to viewing the students

as whole people. In this context African centered pedagogy emphasizes teaching core content but with the infusion of love in order to nurture the part of the student that is human.

*How is African Centeredness demonstrated in the classroom?*

Each teacher was observed in their natural classroom setting during the course of a normal school day. In order to observe the classrooms in comprehensive manner I created four categories with which to observe the class. These four categories assisted the organization of data for the purpose of locating themes that were diverse.. These categories were able to facilitate a clear demarcation of the themes that all of the teachers exhibited in common, as part of their pedagogical performance in the classroom. The following categories were also reflective of the most salient areas of observation relative to the research question,: *The Look of the Room, Curriculum/Pedagogy, Format and Tone* are the categories that facilitated the comprehensive collection of data towards answering the research question: “How is African centeredness demonstrated in the classroom” (See Figure 4.3).

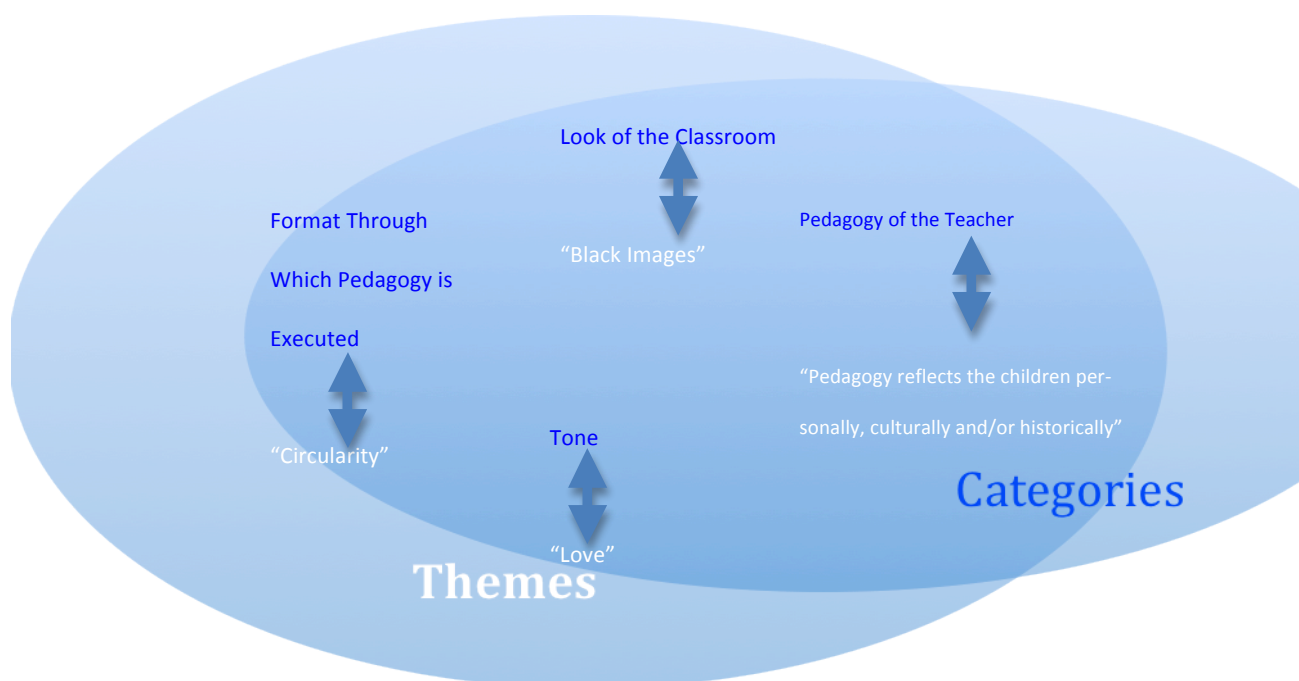


Figure 4.3 Relationship between participant themes and observation categories (*“How is African centeredness demonstrated in the classroom?”*)

The categories and their accompanying themes are as follows:

*Look of the Room* is the category that situates the room’s aesthetic. The emergent theme from the observations most complimentary to that category was “Black Images.”

Look of the Room is category representative of the physical appearance of the classroom-its affectation. The look of the classroom in terms of how it reflected African centeredness was consistent between all three of the participant’s classrooms.. Baba Kuumba’s classroom is representative of the typical look of the classrooms at Academic and Cultural Institute based on observation. Therefore, I will describe Baba Kuumba’s in detail to illustrate how the space is structured:

Baba Kuumba’s class is inundated with colorful images of Blackness, including pictures of Martin Luther King, Jesse Owens, Maya Angelou, Bill Cosby, Alvin Ailey, Mary McLeod Bethune and Langston Hughes. On the walls, there are vibrant Kente patterns framing student work. There is a behavior chart that reads, “Aim for excellence.” Also prominently displayed on the wall is an English to Spanish conversion chart. Pictures of each student have been placed on the wall with a space designated for their exceptional work to be displayed. There is a Muhammad Ali poster which reads “Impossible is nothing,” hanging on the wall as well.

This affective style supports and facilitates an African centered/student centered environment. Values like respect for cultural diversity (English to Spanish conversion chart) and academic excellence are also embedded in this physical landscape that functions as the learning space for the children.

*Content/Pedagogy* is a category that speaks to how the pedagogy is applied in the African Centered learning space. Each teacher was observed with this category in mind. After analysis “content personally, historically, and culturally reflects the children,” emerged as a common theme. This theme encompasses a wide range of specific practices and points of emphasis within the classroom. However all of the variations still relate to the overarching theme designated to capture these common practices.

Baba Kuumba emphasizes establishing a personal connection between the student and the content through his pedagogy in the classroom. As a math instructor, Baba Kuumba places students literally at the center of instruction. His class begins with him placing two word problems on the board. His instructions are simple. He states, “I want to see em both completed.” In the background, Baba Kuumba plays instrumental hip-hop tracks that the students like. As they bob their heads, the teacher encourages them to come up with a strategy on their own to solve the problem. The word problems actually feature students from the class. For example, “Akil rode 12 miles on a bike trail... “Or “Judah skip counted by 7’s to 70. Nina counted by 5’s to 55. Who said more numbers?” The students are literally able to see themselves reflected in the curriculum within this African centered learning context.

Mama Maat also centers the students personally, but as a social studies teacher emphasizes the historical and cultural elements of African centered pedagogy. The lesson she employs to highlight African culture and history and how it relates to the students in a contemporary sense is a lesson on diasporic connections and how certain contemporary behaviors are African retentions based on Africa being the common ancestral root. Mama Maat’s pedagogical style reflects the children in a number of ways as it seeks to reaffirm their Africanness by constantly grounding their identity in Africa, and teaching them to recognize

their true culture and their connection to it worldwide. A day spent in Mama Maat's class feels more like a day spent in the warm security of one's home. She describes the feel of her classroom:

You know there are times when everybody in the classroom has their shoes off and some people are laying on the floor doing their work. Some are sitting at their desk. Some are at the board, you know. Sometimes I have incense burning and music playing...

After she begins this particular class by stating that the essential question of the day is "What is diaspora," she lays out a few blankets for the students on the floor and has all of her students leave their desks and come to the blanketed area. The class is very eager to participate. Peers collectively contribute to the answer. Instruction for this exercise takes place on the floor in the circle, as Mama Maat presents the official answer. She has them read it to themselves and then goes over any unfamiliar words. Next she poses the questions "can you compare Guyana and Africa?" And "How are they alike?" The students respond, "Climate!" "Food!" "Economics!" Mama Maat then, takes out a roll of yarn and tosses the role to a student while holding on to a piece of the yarn. Resembling a game of catch, the class follows suit making sure to hold on to a piece of the yarn before tossing it to a classmate. They are all interconnected through the yarn. Mama Maat then asks, "what does the string represent?" The students reply "A web that holds us together-that connects us."

She then asks the class "Ok, what is it that connects us in real life?" students answer, "Ancestry!" "Identification!" Mama Maat asks, "What do you mean?" the students respond "Climates!" "Language!" Mama Maat, "Yes! We all have a Black version of a dominant language. What else binds you to Africa?" Students respond "Food!" "Religion!" She asks

probingly, “What do you mean though?” The children then say, “Traditions like Catholic-Islam!” She replies “Yes. Traditional religions. Africa has adapted these to fit African values and meanings.” Each student is still holding on to a piece of yarn while participating in this exercise about the African Diaspora.

Mama Maat instructs the students to think about Latin America and speak on how Africa may be present in this region of the world. She then hands the children 8 ½ by 11 sized pictures of slavery scenarios from different places within the Diaspora. She says to the children, “Our experiences here are not unique to this land.” She then asks the students to consider the pictures- “Try to guess the location and then try to imagine how it may be different somewhere else in the Diaspora.” In the circle, a dialogue erupts about the pictures and their meanings, locations and what would be different if they were somewhere else. Mama Maat continuously asks “why,” after each discovery articulated by the students.

Within the circle the students, fully engaged are allowed to sit in a way that they feel comfortable sitting. Some of the students literally prop each other up as they lean up against each other’s backs. As the discussion progresses, the children laugh at a response given by their peer. Mama Maat speaks to them in Twi, a Ghanain dialect, “Ago!” the class at once and in unison responds “Ame!” She then firmly, but in a patient tone speaks, “We don’t laugh at, we offer insight.” She then holds up the picture that she kept. It is of two slaves in the field. Her words to the class are, “This is you and me.” She then allows plenty of time for them to process that picture and offer feedback. They try to relate to that picture by drawing from their own experiences to discuss their feelings about the context of slavery that surrounded the two people in the photo.

The focus shifts from the floor to the computer screen back at the area of the class where there are desks. The students get up and sit at the desks and view a documentary on “Blacks in Latin America.” The desks are pushed close together so the children are huddled as they watch. Mama Matt assigns him or her the task of finding three African retentions captured in the documentary from each place-Peru and Mexico. As the film continues the students witness Mexicans that are dark skinned and have phenotypical features that the students refer to as “Black” features. Afterwards, the homework she assigns is for them to fill in the countries on a blank map of Latin America.

Mama Nia also reflects the children by centering them either personally, culturally and/or historically in her pedagogical approach to the class. Mama Nia sits with the little children in the tables and chairs built for them. The lesson for the day is three-dimensional shapes. The children are seated in a circle on the perimeter of a group of desks placed closely together forming a rectangular shape. Mama Nia gives each of them a sheet with two-dimensional shapes on it. Before they cut out the shapes, Mama Nia announces that they can decorate their shapes any way they feel. On the desk are crayons, color pencils inside of a large plastic container with the top removed, paintbrushes and glue. They all color individually their designs on the two dimensional paper including Mama Nia.

They all cut out the shapes featuring their designs. They follow the directions on the pattern two fold the cut outs into three-dimensional shapes. The cone and its resemblance to a pyramid inspire mama Nia as she takes time to impart some information on the pyramid, including the fact that they were built and designed by their African ancestors. The students begin to help each other with this task unprovoked by the teacher. Mama Nia acknowledges with individual praise, those students who show her their designs or their perfectly folded three-

dimensional finished product. While the children continue to work on their shapes, Mama Nia initiates songs that speak of the shapes' different qualities and the children sing along with her wherever they are at the moment, while cutting, pasting and folding: "Here are the three D shapes-that I know- A sphere-A cylinder-A cube and a cone..." The children are allowed to move around freely as long as they are being productive and working on their assigned tasks.

A disciplinary issue arose while the class was engaged in the shapes lesson. Mama Nia was faced with the challenge of a child who did not wish to participate in the group activity around the table. He was allowed to remove himself from the table but continued crying. Mama Nia continued the activities with the students who appeared to be unphased by the display of displeasure by their peer. She did not affirm or reprimand his behavior. She called his dad and let him talk to his father during class. Ten minutes later he quietly joined the group. Mama Nia started singing the shapes song and he joined in. The children embraced his return to the circle and passed him a bucket of crayons and some scissors so he could fully participate.

In the context of reflecting the students pedagogically, i.e. the use of the unity circle format, she also modeled the importance of respecting individual agency, the value of the student as a whole person and the spirit of cooperation instead of opposition/competition.

*Format* refers to the manner in which the lessons are executed pedagogically. In this case the data revealed a strong employment of "circularity" as a pedagogical format. Circularity describes relationships that exhibit and are based on equal value and mutual respect. In each teacher's environment circularity was a prominent theme. It manifested in varying ways but presented itself consistently whether directly or indirectly. This pervasive theme is also present in the "Principles of Unity," seven principles found in the Orientation Packet that undergirds the philosophy of the school. The following two principals exemplify this theme:



*All knowledge is beneficial-* As African people we have acquired all types of knowledge that is gained from our work and our training. We possess relational knowledge acquired from our experiences and community organizing work and we possess intuitive knowledge that comes from our ancestral and divine connection. All of the ways we know are necessary and are respected. Therefore we expect each member of the institute to apply all knowledge to the mission of the Institute.

And:

*Listen as much as you talk-* We know that each member of our community has something to offer. We listen to each other with an open mind and a humble spirit... We come to decisions through a process of: listening to our Creator and the Ancestors. Reflecting and honoring our own experience, listening to one another and listening to those who have studied and practiced.

Baba Kuumba for example, displayed two word problems on the board, which included the names of some of the students in the class. Since none of the examples included female students a young lady asked Baba Kuumba “Why aren’t there any women on the board?” He responded, “I got you. Next example we’ll use women. I don’t want to be sexist.” This response illustrates respect for and value of the student. Her ability to engage the teacher speaks to the level of comfort she feels in the classroom. He reinforced her agency by acknowledging her request as valid and his oversight as something worthy of correcting. This posture by Baba Kuumba emphasizes inclusion and cooperation, which are characteristics of circularity

Circularity also shows up through peer interaction. A student in Baba Kuumba’s mathematics class injured his shins and couldn’t walk. A young lady, his classmate, took it upon

herself and sharpened his pencil at the pencil sharpener so he could have a sharp pencil with which to work on the word problem like everyone else.

In Mama Maat's class the students literally received their instruction by the teacher while sitting on the floor in a circle. Each person in the circle had an equal voice and opportunity to speak, which was reinforced even more by the participatory nature of the lesson on Diaspora. The teacher was also a part of the circle and not outside of it, which further iterated the purposeful inclusionary posture of the teacher. She consistently emphasized this notion of cooperation and mutual respect as exhibited when she reminded the class "We don't laugh at, we offer insight." Like Mama Nia, Mama Maat incorporated herself into the class by being a part of the lesson. While sitting in a circle and connected by a matrix of yarn to each other as students and then to the teacher creates experiences that reinforces the unity and commonalities between people, but by deemphasizing selfish individuality and competition, promotes respect for humanity.

Mama Nia exhibited circularity in different ways. She delivered instruction while sitting with the children at the tables. She also genuinely did the same task as she assigned to the students, with the students. Mama Nia was having trouble creating the cone shape. One of the female students was quite proficient at connecting the sides, applying the glue and sealing the top of the cone. Mama Nia embraced her strength and remarked as to how the student was better at that than the teacher. She also exemplified circularity while handling the boy who did not want to participate. Rather than scold him or neglect him she let him talk to his father but let him come back as he chose to. Once back in the circle he was embraced for choosing to cooperate and respect the group concept as more valuable than the "I" concept.

*Tone* is a quality that describes the mood or the feel of the atmosphere of the classroom. The synergy between the teachers and the students often results in the atmosphere of the class. In this case the atmosphere exhibited across the classes, that permeated the school atmosphere was an "authentic love" for the children as if they were their own. Baba Kuumba. During instruction remembered that one of his students needed to take some medicine. He told him to go retrieve the medicine and bring him the spoon. During Math class, Baba Kuumba administers the medicine to the little boy much like a father would a son, in plain view of the rest of the class. In this instance love is expressed and felt.

This tone of love permeates the space and spreads to the students. During that same class, one of the female students recognized that her fellow classmate injured his legs and wouldn't be able to use a freshly sharpened pencil for the math exercises. She took it upon herself without speaking or asking for permission to sharpen his pencil and return it to his desk. This exemplified a desire to give her fellow classmate what she wanted for herself. It can be said that this kind act was a product of the ethic of love that permeates the school.

Baba Kuumba, after school, created a space to have a conversation with his male students about anything that was on their minds that may have been troubling them or keeping them from doing their best, while Mama Nia along with Mama Maat bonded with the females in an extra curricular fashion in the other classroom. The males freely shared thoughts and experiences about their feelings; coping strategies and problems that they felt impacted their lives on a daily basis. The females were looking at fabrics for potential designs from which to make garments while participating in a casual conversation amongst one another that included each person's input and questions.

These types of bonding moments reinforce the centeredness of the whole student and the provision of a safe space wherein the students are comfortable. This also exhibits an ethic of caring that transcends teacher/student relationship. Family is what the class and the school resemble. This notion of family is reinforced every time a student refers to a teacher as “Baba” or “Mama.” Undergirding the family element that is ever present is the strong presence of love in the space.

Every morning at Academic and Cultural Institute the tone of love, family and liberation is literally set by the prayer, libation and affirmation:

*Prayer-* To the creator of all things, both Mother and Father, known by many names. Asante Sana, thank you for this day. Asante Sana, thank you for creating us in your image. Asante Sana, thank you for giving us minds to think, bodies to move and spirits to rejoice. Help each of us contribute to the unity of this place. Help us to be kind in word and deed as we move closer to the liberation of our people. Upenda na Uhuru. Love and freedom. Ashe.

*Libation-* Oh Ancestors, blacker than the skies at midnight, brighter than the noon day sun, and all the beautiful shades of Afrika in between, field hands, house servants, factory workers, teachers, preachers, freedom fighters, those who resisted out loud, those whose bones are on the bottom of the Atlantic ocean, those who chose to survive, great ancient priests, warriors and mystic scientists, give us the inspiration to fight a thousand lions. Give us the enlightenment to unravel the mysteries of the universe. Give us the sustenance to travel through the

trackless swamps of disharmony. Praise be your Black Afrikan names. Help us in the time of need.

*Affirmation*-We are Afrikan children. We are divine. We are capable of doing all things. We belong to the family of Afrikans worldwide. We follow in the footsteps of our Ancestors. We are on the wings of their greatness. Individually we are strong but collectively we are mighty. We are committed to excellence. We are committed to community. We are committed to liberation. We are empowered by the Creator and the Spirit of our Ancestors. Nothing can stop us! Freedom is ours! Uhuru Sasa! Uhuru Sasa!

At 8:30 am, the students and the teachers come together in the main classroom and form what is known as an Umoja circle. Four of the older students, a mixture of boys and girls grab the drums in a routine fashion and bring them to the periphery of the circle which includes everyone in the school. The drums beat and the rhythm is established. The adults and the children move and clap in unity. The drums give way to the prayer. Included in the prayer that is emphatically spoken from memory by everyone in the circle, is a passage that states, ‘Help each of us contribute to the unity of this place. Help us to be kind in word and deed.’ The prayer resolves as the voices in the circle say, “Upenda na Uhuru-Love and freedom.”

The libation to the ancestors and the affirmation follows. The affirmation begins with “We are African children. We are divine. We are capable of doing all things...” “We are committed to excellence. We are committed to community. We are committed to liberation.” From that moment forward the energy of unity and love within the circle colors the activities and instruction that occur within the school throughout the day.

### 4.3 Summary

The purpose of this study was to locate common characteristics of African centeredness in an Independent African centered school. The research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. How does the school define African centeredness in its mission statement?
2. What is the relationship between the teachers and the administrator's perception of African centeredness compared to the mission statement?
3. How is African Centeredness demonstrated in the classroom?

In order to understand locate the common characteristics of African centeredness in an African centered school, this study focused on the mission statement of the school, the perceptions held by the teachers as well as the administrator regarding the notion of African centeredness compared to the mission statement and how African centeredness actually appears in the classroom through the pedagogy of each individual teacher. These factors were presented in detail within this chapter and are discussed in the summary below.

After analysis, the mission statement revealed four major categories that represented expected student outcomes and values. These were *cultural relevance, academic excellence, social change, and a global sense of community*. In comparison to the mission statement were themes held in common by the participants relative to their perception of African centeredness.

There were nine common themes among the participants, which emerged from the data including: a) Divine Learning Capacity; b) Engagement Through Experiences; c) African Self Mirror; d) Love Based Pedagogy; e) I am Because We Are; f) World view through African eyes; g) Education in Action; h) I Will Change the World; and i) Free to be Me.

From these themes, it was determined that the four categories representing the mission statement were complimentary to seven of nine of the participant's common themes. The two outlying themes were "free to be me" and "love based pedagogy."

In terms of how African centeredness looks in the classroom, four areas were considered. These included: the look of the classroom, the content/pedagogy of the teacher, the format through which pedagogy is executed, and the overall tone of the class itself. The data revealed that the look of the classes all contained an abundance of Black images and African affects (i.e. Kenta patterns, drums, etc.). Regarding content, the data supported the finding that "Content/pedagogy reflects the children- personally, culturally and/or historically." It was determined that the format, which featured *Circularity/strong unity awareness and commitment to a culture that emphasizes community and family*, fostered a tone that sustained an atmosphere of love in the school. For the purposes of this study, tone and atmosphere were used interchangeably in this regard.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to locate common characteristics of African centered pedagogy in an African centered learning environment. The questions undergirding this study were as follows:

1. How does the school define African centeredness in its mission statement?
2. What is the relationship between the teachers and the administrator's perception of African centeredness compared to the mission statement?
3. How is African Centeredness demonstrated in the classroom?



This study utilized a qualitative design and was conducted from February 2012 to March 2012. During this time, the teachers and the administrator at the African-centered school were notified of the study and asked if they would like to participate. After a formal meeting was held with the administrator and the teachers at the site relative to the study and clarifying questions were asked, three teachers and one administrator signed the consent form. Each of the 4 participants was interviewed for 30-45 minutes. These formal, face-to-face interviews took place at the site of the research study, in a classroom. All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Three classroom observations were done in each of the teacher's respective classrooms during instruction. One observation of the school's opening ritual collectively practiced by the entire student body and faculty was conducted. Several observations were conducted of school recess and one school fieldtrip was also observed. A document review was also conducted utilizing the school's orientation packet, which contains several documents that relate to the school's philosophy, mission and vision. These interviews, observations, as well as the document review were used as the sole source of data for this study. In order to generate themes, this study employed standard qualitative first and second cycle coding strategies (Saldana, 2009 p. 46).

The mission statement of the Academic and Cultural Institute is as follows: "The Academic and Cultural Institute fosters an academically excellent and culturally relevant education that produces students who are equipped to succeed globally and are committed to social justice." After analysis, the mission statement revealed four major categories that represented expected student outcomes and values. These categories were *cultural relevance*, *academic excellence*, *social change*, and *a global sense of community*. Common themes held by

the participants, relative to their perception of African-centeredness, were compared to the mission statement.

Analysis of the data revealed that the participants held many common views regarding African centered pedagogy. They commonly believed in the notion that an African Centered learning environment should foster or exhibit nine qualities as expressed through the following themes: a) Divine Learning Capacity; b) Engagement Through Experiences; c) African Self Mirror; d) Love Based Pedagogy; e) I am Because We Are; f) World view through African eyes; g) Education in Action; h) I Will Change the World; and i) Free to be Me.

From these themes, it was determined that the four categories representing the mission statement were complimentary to seven of nine of the participant's common themes. The two outlying themes were "free to be me" and "love based pedagogy."

In terms of how African centeredness is demonstrated in the classroom, four areas were considered in terms of data analysis. The aesthetics of the classroom, the content/pedagogy of the teacher, the format through which pedagogy is executed, and the overall tone of the class itself, were considered. The data revealed that aesthetically the classes all contained an abundance of Black images and African affects (i.e. Kenta patterns, drums, etc.). Regarding content, the data supported the finding that "Content/pedagogy reflects the children- either personally, culturally and/or historically." It was determined that the strong unity awareness and commitment to a culture that emphasizes community and family fostered an atmosphere of love in the school. For the purposes of this study, tone and atmosphere were used interchangeably in this regard. This chapter includes detailed discussion regarding the general conclusions of the research study, implications for theory and practice in the field of African centered education and limitations of the study. It also includes recommendations for future research.

## 5.1 Conclusions and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the data, three general conclusions were drawn from this study.

The conclusions are:

1) The teachers' common perception and application of African centered pedagogy in this particular environment reflect the core values contained within the school's mission statement.

2) Teachers applied pedagogy in this environment is consistent with their perceptions of how African centered pedagogy should be applied in the classroom

3) African centered pedagogy within this learning environment is not monolithic in terms of its performance and its perception by the participants.

*The teachers' common perception and application of African centered pedagogy in this particular environment reflects the core values contained within the school's mission statement.*

The Academic and Cultural Institute espouses four main values and characteristics regarding its mission. These are *cultural relevance, academic excellence, social change, and a global sense of community*. The participants varied in terms of how they expressed these particular themes. However, the views they held as individuals did overlap thematically to reflect the four salient themes embodied by the mission statement. In this sense, the conclusion can be made that the teachers are "on the same page" relative to the mission statement. Put differently, it can be concluded from the data that the teachers have internalized the mission and express the essence of the mission in theory as well as in action.

The teachers also exhibited two more common themes that were not explicitly stated in the mission statement. These themes, which include "free to be me" and "love based pedagogy," were strongly displayed by each of the teachers in the classroom as well as in theory. Here, the teachers exhibit a sensibility that reflects a wider scope of collective continuity than the actual

mission of the school suggests. To be sure, there is an underlying theme of love that runs throughout the mission statement regarding the expected outcomes. The expectation, held by the school, of producing global change agents as well students who embrace a responsibility to the community implies the development of an ethic of love and caring for others as an extension of oneself.

In one observation the students went on a field trip to support another African centered school's basketball team, which promoted the idea of extended family and community. Recess is another area where the notion of other awareness was observed. The eighth graders included the younger students, including both genders (1<sup>st</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> grades) to play football with them. They were all evenly distributed amongst two teams and were active participants.

The development of other awareness, speaks to a pedagogy that also models that ethic of love and the idea that the community is family. Thus, it is not one of the overt themes that reflect the essence of the mission statement. However, as an outlier, it is a requisite and prominent theme in terms of producing the types of students indicated by the mission statement.

“Free to be me” signifies a deep-seated respect for autonomy within a community system by the teachers who employ this as a pedagogical sensibility. It connotes circularity, value and a very sophisticated respect for diverse learning modalities. In some instances students would be allowed to hold a basketball while receiving math instruction. In other cases, someone may feel like standing up while others are sitting. All of the teachers allowed students to learn in a manner that was comfortable to them as long as they were engaged and participatory.

An observation made was that the allowance of the students to freely be themselves and not strictly beholden to a typical classroom management style, actually strengthened engagement as opposed to negating it. Students exhibited a sense of ownership in their space that allowed

them the agency to navigate the class in their own personal way. This “free to be me” classroom ethic enhanced the students’ willingness to articulate critical perspectives even if it meant challenging the teacher. Thus the experience of freedom, reinforced by an ethic of circularity in the classroom compliments the school’s mission to produce change agents and global leaders. “Free to be me,” as a theme that speaks to agency and liberation, is in support of the mission statement. However, it is distinct from the four categories extracted from the mission statement.

*Teachers’ applied pedagogy in this environment is consistent with their perceptions of how African centered pedagogy should be applied in the classroom*

Teachers in the Academic and Cultural Institute generally do what they say they do relative to their perception of their pedagogy verses their actual performance. Teachers who are clear about their pedagogical objectives tend to model those values or behaviors in the classroom. Each teacher emphasized certain values, some of which were unique and some of which were in common with the other participants, in relation to their perceptions of African centered pedagogy. Some of these were in common and some were unique to one perspective.

Baba Kuumba explicitly expressed the love theme in his philosophy as well as in his answers to the interview questions, which were designed to capture the participants perception of African centered pedagogy. As I observed his interaction style with the class, Baba Kuumba displayed fatherly love in several instances. His physical proximity was always close to his students. He would often sit with them or put his arm around the shoulder of a student as a gesture of encouragement while helping them work through a math problem.

One of the students fell off balance and injured his shins. Baba Kuumba tended to him in a caring way, propping his legs up on a chair and slowly bending his feet up and down to gage how bad the injury was. Baba Kuumba also created an extra curricular circle of dialogue in

order to allow the males to vent personal frustrations that may be impeding their performance academically and their growth socially. His approach to the circle was to be more of a father figure who cared about the whole child enough to give that type of conversation space even within an academic setting.

His constant use of high fives and affirming the students by telling them “good job” when they have given effort also reinforced the notion that he genuinely cares about each student as a person. I expressed in my field notes that trust, respect and love were prominently displayed in his class.

In terms of classroom philosophy, Mama Maat also expressed love of her students as a major component of her pedagogy as well as a strong conscious sensitivity to circularity. When asked about her teaching philosophy, she states, “I love my students. I care about their well-being. I care about what happens at four o’clock when they leave my door and go home. And I think they get that from me.” Mama Maat models this very love and ethic of caring. Everyday, she personally drives several students to their respective homes after school, walks them to their front door and engages their parents before leaving. Her consistent reliability in terms of making sure the children get home safe reinforces their bond. This facilitates a sense of trust and security regarding how the students relate to her on a daily basis inside and outside of the classroom.

Mama Maat was aware of this dynamic and was able to pinpoint specific situations where that bond allowed her to assert her authority as an adult without being perceived as an adversary to the children. She often articulated this awareness throughout the interview. She gives an example: “ I can scold them in a way that’s not demeaning and they know they are still loved-but that my expectations for them are still high.” In her classroom setting her pedagogy often supports this very dynamic. For example, during a lesson on the African Diaspora the

children lose focus and begin to ridicule one of their fellow peers' response to a question posed by Mama Maat. She sternly grabs their attention with the call and response method spoken in the Twi (pronounced "tree") dialect of Ghana. She says "Ago!! (Im calling to you)" and the class responds Ame (I hear you)!! Once she gets their attention, she very calmly, but sternly reminds the class, " We don't laugh at, we offer insight." They listened and acted accordingly from that point on.

Her pedagogy also supports the notion of circularity, which was a prominent theme in her philosophy as stated in her interview responses. Philosophically speaking, she adds, " I believe in equity in my classroom amongst genders-between me and the children. I demand a certain level of respect from them but its not in any way different from the respect that I give them, or that I think they should expect from me. I would say that it's liberative." The above example also illustrates this sentiment in action. The Diasporic lesson, which emphasized connectivity, was designed to literally showcase the circle as an equalizing and horizontal dynamic wherein all participants were equally valued. This example also supports notion of love Mama Maat speaks to in her philosophy. In the context of supporting the value of circularity, Mama Maat sat in the round, even though she was the authority figure in the classroom, making herself an equal part of the whole just like the students. This consistency between philosophy and practice was very evident and integral to the authenticity of the learning environment.

Mama Nia exemplified this same consistency between pedagogical philosophy and actual application in an African centered learning environment. She emphasized experiential learning with loose boundaries infused with culturally relevant pedagogy. She remarks, " I believe in trying to teach to different modalities-lots of hands on activities-lots of rigor-all at the same time. You cant just have one or the other. It all has to be happening at the same time" she adds,

“Obviously, I believe in culturally relevant curriculum for the black child in particular. I believe deeply in cultural relevancy.”

Her pedagogy exemplified her expressed philosophical sensibilities. She designed a hands-on geometrical shape lesson. While everyone including Mama Nia literally interacted with the shapes by cutting them out and pasting them together in a manner that allowed them to be represented as three-dimensional shapes, she also initiated songs about the shapes that they all sang together while performing the activity. She showed a sensibility toward a range of modalities through layers of interactivity. She also allowed the children to move freely and collaborate while performing the task at hand. This allowed for peer-to-peer conversations as to how to properly cut the shapes and achieve the desired three-dimensional outcome. In addition, she gave a mini lesson on the pyramid shape, associating it with the pyramids of Egypt, emphasizing their greatness and how their African ancestors built them. In this regard she was able to mirror the rigor, cultural and experiential aspects of her stated pedagogical approach.

The teacher’s philosophies were often reflected in their pedagogy. One of the factors that contributed to the environment’s authentic and engaging quality is that each teacher understood what allowed them to connect with the students. Each of them was able to do this in several areas within an African centered context. This ability “to do what they say they do” seemed to be predicated on their ability to be clear as to what made them effective as teachers as well as what the needs of the students were relative to achieving specific desired outcomes.

*African centered pedagogy within this learning environment is not monolithic in terms of its performance and its perception by the participants*

This study focused on common characteristics of African centered pedagogy within a particular learning environment. However, there are many themes that were unique to the



individual participants. These unique themes were reflected in their perceptions of African Centered pedagogy as well as in their performances. Starting with the demographic questionnaire, differences in their self-identification became evident. These differences also informed their perceptions and performance of African centeredness.

The teachers individually responded to the question “what is your ethnicity?” Their answers could be viewed as reflecting different points on a continuum. Baba Kuumba stated that he was an “African American.” Mama Nia expressed that she was an “Afrikan in America.” Mama Maat stated that she was an “Afrikan.” This self identification seemed to have informed not only the way they viewed themselves relative to their physical and philosophical juxtaposition to Africa and America, but how they dressed and what they emphasized in the classroom as well.

Baba Kuumba who identified as African American expressed his African centeredness with more emphasis placed on the notion of “centeredness” in an African conscious context. His dress reflected the American aspect of his consciousness. He wore sweater vests, jeans and sneakers instead of traditional African garb. However his dreadlocked hairstyle did reflect an overt link to African culture. In the classroom he clearly displayed a pedagogical style that was premised on circularity, an African value system that respects all parties in an equal manner relative to their experience based knowledge.

His lesson plan on pictographs which included a system that utilized symbols to represent x amount of people was culturally relevant in that it reflected the students and sparked critical thinking (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Students were asked after he drew a pictograph, “what do you see?” and “what is necessary in order to figure out the correct amount of people represented by each symbol? Another part of the lesson plan was focused on solving word problems. He

centered the students by including them in the word problems by using their names thus adding to the relevance of the material. His African centered pedagogy did not necessarily reference African mathematicians or utilize ancient African mathematics techniques like doubling (Lee, 1992). Put differently, because he believes the children are African, literally placing them at the center of a lesson is an example of African centered pedagogy.

All participants were asked, “How would you define African centeredness in an African centered context?” Baba Kuumba’s answer was consistent with his pedagogy and distinctly different from the other participants. He placed more emphasis on modeling the historical and values aspect of African centeredness as opposed to the affective aspects such as the language and the traditional clothing styles. He reflects:

African centeredness is making sure that the young people can see themselves in everything that you’re doing. So it’s important that they understand when we say that Africa is the center of all things, we’re really talking about you being at the center of all things. If we can keep you at the center of all these things, then you don’t necessarily have to think about what’s going on in Zimbabwe or in Ghana-like, those things are important and we’re going to get there as well, but to me African centeredness is all about making sure the students understand that their experience and their family’s experience is at the center of everything we learn.

He adds:

If they are not at the center-if they don’t see themselves at the center, then we can teach them everything about the continent and they might feel like we taught them nothing about them, you know what I mean? African centered is really about understanding your place and understanding how you’re connected to Africa and

all the things that means. We could teach all kinds of stuff about Africa and if you don't see yourself as connected to Africa then what did we really tell you? Like it's great that they wear dashikis and they do this and they carry baskets...and I'm in Georgia, you know what I mean?

Mama Maat on the other hand represents African centeredness in a manner that is distinct from Baba Kuumba. Her perception of African centeredness can also be gleaned from how she identified on the demographic questionnaire. Her response to the question, "What is your ethnicity," was "I am an Afrikan." Her physical appearance consistently reflected the value she places on modeling African culture. She represents Africa in her everyday lifestyle. She wears traditional African clothing. She sews traditional Black clothing. She is a hairstylist who is known for her mastery of natural hairstyles, which reflect African motifs.

Her lesson on the Diaspora was about the prominence of Africa in our daily lives as it focused on identifying African retentions that we see and practice without knowing its African origin. She emphasizes a perspective that places continental Africa and the people throughout the Diaspora at the center of instruction as representing African centered pedagogy. It does not contrast with Baba Kuumba's but it is a broader representation of the notion. Her answer to the question, "How would you define African centeredness in an educational context," also reflects her actual pedagogy in the classroom. Her following response is evidenced by her lesson on the Diaspora, where she centers the students by showing their Diasporic connection to Africa as well as showing them the African influence, culturally and phenotypically in Mexico and in Peru. She shares her perspective:

It means putting Africa, her Diaspora, her people, at the center of all that we do.

So for instance, in stories that we read, even if they are stories about other

peoples, other places, we start by comparing it to who we are and what we do initially. So we start by putting ourselves at the center and we look out from that place. It happens a whole lot in Social Studies as you can imagine, when all those topics come up and I'm required to teach so many things. I think always starting from that place continues to keep it relevant for the children and they find value in what they're learning because they say "ok, essentially all things are about me- you know, the political is personal and vice-versa.

Despite sharing many common characteristics, each teacher brings distinct values and characteristics to the African centered environment. These differences are expressed philosophically but they also come out in the pedagogy. These differences are just as prominent as the similarities, as they shape the character of the learning environment itself.

## 5.2 Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this research are related to the study's methods. Because this is a qualitative exploratory study, the sample is not random and is also not number based so the findings are not generalizable to other populations statistically although the goal of this study was an in depth understanding.

Further, the size of the sample that included four participants in one school may have been larger if other schools were included. The inclusion of other schools may have increased the overall sample size as well as provided the study with variation from school to school with respect to the amount of teachers. This would have given the sample more range in terms of age, educational background, teaching experience and perspective. Consequently the data may have been richer and more comprehensive. More themes may have been created and available for analysis.

This study may have been hindered by time constraints. One formal interview per person was conducted with several informal follow up questions for clarity, which were not recorded. More observations may have also been necessary to capture a more comprehensive composite of the pedagogy of the participants.

Another limitation is the use of Freire's Liberatory Education conceptual framework. It only recognizes particular characteristics as important within the scope of each participant's perception of cultural relevance in an African centered context. However, another framework (Black Feminist Thought, Afrocentricity) may place more value on other characteristics. Thus, the application of Freire's framework does not necessarily offer a universal depiction of what is significant about locating common characteristics between administrators and teachers in the same learning environment.

### 5.3 Implications for Theory

Paolo Freire's Liberatory Pedagogy was used as a theoretical framework in understanding the characteristics of African centered pedagogy. His framework was used to gauge teacher competencies as exhibited by their pedagogical styles and not student outcomes. Freirian liberatory pedagogy is predicated on three major components: Dialogue verses narration, critical awareness, and transformative power (Jones and Gayles, 2008).

Culturally relevant pedagogy, like Freire's Liberatory Framework, is partially characterized by critical awareness and educating the whole child (Ladson-Billings 1995). Ladson-Billings makes more overt references to Academic excellence as being an integral component of CRP while Freire overtly emphasizes educational excellence in the sense that it provides tools to gain more critical insight on oppressive elements in order to transform the oppression into liberation through action. African centered pedagogy infuses both elements. As

a type of CRP, It also stresses Academic excellence, however it goes beyond CRP. Where CRP advocates critical awareness so the student can understand how power dynamics and attitudes inform his/her reality, African Centered pedagogy much like Freire, encourages critical awareness as an informed means toward actively pursuing liberation/transformation.

Though the findings show that African-centered pedagogy does retain all of the elements of CRP and reflects those three components of Freire's framework, there is also more. The literature speaks of Culturally relevant pedagogy as having the capacity to constructively build on the prior knowledge of the students (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Freire, 1970). However, analysis of the data revealed that in this research study two phenomena had a strong impact on the learning environment at the school. The notion of circularity and the notion of love seemed to form a synergy that fostered ownership of the school by all who attend and as well as support the performance of dialogic interaction, critical awareness and action toward social change.

Based upon the observations and interviews of the participants, as well as the document review, the notion of circularity revealed itself as a prominent theme. Circularity is an all-encompassing concept that includes dialogue and is predicated on equanimity and horizontal interaction. This emphasis is complimentary to Freire's notion of dialogic communication. This notion assumes that each student brings knowledge upon which to build as opposed to being an empty vessel in which a teacher pours knowledge. Hence a democracy of participation is established where the students and teachers are conscious of the shared value of everyone engaged.

Analysis of all three forms of data also revealed that the perception and performance of African centeredness by the participants consistently featured opportunities for critical thinking. Observations revealed clear instances where students applied critical thought, even challenging

the teacher in some cases. This is also in line with the Freirian liberatory approach to pedagogy, which maintains that, “this pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for liberation” (Freire, 1970).

Transformative power is a function of praxis. According to Freire, “Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of praxis; reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, pg. 51).

The administrator and all of the teachers share the belief that African centered pedagogy should produce student that are social change agents, not only in their immediate community, but globally. This is a major theme across the participants in theory and in performance as indicated by the analysis in chapter 4.

African centered pedagogy as represented in this environment is complimentary to the components of the Freirian Liberatory Approach to Pedagogy. The three means of data collection for this research study were observations, interviews and a document review. The three components of Freire’s Liberatory approach to education are dialogue, critical thinking, and transformation. Each means of data collection exhibited evidence of all three components of Freire’s Liberatory framework.

Carol Lee, (1994) and others have compiled the following ten point list relative to what components comprise African centered pedagogy:

1. The social ethic of African culture as exemplified in the social philosophy of Maat;
2. The history of the African continent and Diaspora;

3. The need for political and community organizing within the African American community;
4. The positive pedagogical implications of the indigenous language, African American English;
5. Child development principles that are relevant to the positive and productive growth of African American children;
6. African contributions in science, mathematics, literature, the Arts and societal organization;
7. Teaching techniques that are socially interactive, holistic, and positively affective;
8. The need for continuous personal study (and critical thinking);
9. The African principle that “children are the reward of life”;
10. The African principle of reciprocity...that is, a teacher sees his or her own future symbiotically linked to the development of students.

All of the above mentioned items were manifest and exhibited in this research as perceived or performed by the participants. Though the list doesn't explicitly point out the notion of circularity, the first item “Maat,” and last item, which includes the notion of reciprocity in its definition, is complimentary to circularity. More, as comprehensive as the list is and as compatible as it is to Freire's framework, it does not include the emphasis placed on social transformation or the ethic of love that, as exhibited in this research, undergirds every item that appears on the list. This element of love was so present in the school, between students, teachers,



parents and the administrator it seemed to have been the primary catalyst and perpetuator of the effective effort taking place within this African-centered learning environment. This element of love is also understated in Freire's Liberatory Framework, although he alludes to equality and social uplift through education which requires a love for humanity.

#### 5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to explore locate common characteristics of African centeredness in an independent African centered learning environment. A qualitative methodology was used to gain deeper insight relative to the purpose of the study. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed for future research:

1. Repeat this study using a larger sample size.
2. Explore the differences as opposed to the common characteristics.
3. Explore the viability of these common and distinct characteristics exhibited by teachers and administrators relative to African Centered Pedagogy
4. Explore the impact of prior experiential knowledge on pedagogical performance in an African centered context.
5. Explore the role of love as motivation for effective effort and successful outcomes in African Centered environments.

A discussion of each of these recommendations is included below.

*Repeat this study using a larger sample size.*

The purpose of this research study was to locate common characteristics of African centered pedagogy in an African centered learning environment. The findings revealed specific common characteristics between the four participants. However, an expanded sample that includes more African centered schools with teachers and administrators would more than likely

yield a richer set of data in terms of the participants' demographic and philosophic representation. Those characteristics that may be revealed as outliers or differences may actually be common characteristics in the context of a larger sample. A larger sample may reveal additional characteristics that may not be present in this study.

*Explore the differences as opposed to the common characteristics.*

This study was centered on locating common characteristics of African centered pedagogy in order to identify overlapping pedagogical elements utilized by teachers and espoused by administrators, relative to African centered learning environments. However, analysis of the data revealed themes that were not held in common with other participants. These differences deserve to be further explored, as they are also representative of how teachers perceive and apply African centered pedagogy.

*Explore the viability of these common and distinct characteristics exhibited by teachers and administrators relative to African Centered Pedagogy.*

Future research that explores the commonalities as well as the differences in how African centered educators perceive and perform in African centered environments, should also analyze the data relative to how viable these exhibited characteristics are relative to academic success, self esteem and other factors that impact the whole student. This information could lead to retention as well as assessment rubrics as well as the identification of standard best practices for African centered pedagogy in consideration of future models.

*Explore the impact of prior experiential knowledge on pedagogical performance in an African centered context.*

In this research study data revealed that although teachers who work within an African centered context may show common characteristics, they do not necessarily perceive or apply

African centered pedagogy in the same manner. Factors such as prior educational experiences, self-identity, and other personal proclivities may inform and impact how they internalize African centeredness. This should be explored further in order to gain a deeper understanding as to how that impacts the educational environment in an African centered context. The data from such research could also be used towards the development of assessment and retention criteria for African centered pedagogues

*Explore the role of love as motivation for effective effort and successful outcomes in African Centered environments.*

Love was one of the themes that constantly pervaded the classroom. It's presence was felt in and out of the classroom and was identifiable as an impactful component of the overall learning environment. It could be further explored to see how impactful it is in African Centered learning environments. It may be that an environment of genuine unconditional love for the students may outweigh other elements of African-centered pedagogy perceived to be fundamental.

## 5.5 Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to locate common characteristics of African centered pedagogy in an African centered learning environment. The questions undergirding this study were as follows:

1. How does the school define African centeredness in its mission statement?
2. What is the relationship between the teachers and the administrator's perception of African centeredness compared to the mission statement?
3. How is African Centeredness demonstrated in the classroom?

This study adds to the body of literature on African centered learning environments and those pedagogical elements that inform such an environment. It investigated the perceptions and performances of teachers and an administrator relative to common pedagogical characteristics in their specific African centered environment. Three conclusions were drawn based on the analysis of the individual interviews and observations of four participants as well as a document review which was centered on the school's mission statement. They included:

1. The teachers' common perception and application of African centered pedagogy in this particular environment reflect the core values contained within the school's mission statement.
2. Teachers applied pedagogy in this environment show consistency with their perceptions of how African centered pedagogy should be applied in the classroom
3. African centered pedagogy within this learning environment is not monolithic in terms of its performance and its perception by the participants.

These conclusions along with implications of this study regarding theory, limitations and recommendations for future research were provided.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A-Interview Questions

#### *Theory*

- 1) What is your teaching philosophy?

#### *Perception of African Centeredness-meaning*

- 2) How would you define African Centeredness in an educational context?
- 3) What are advantages or benefits gained by students who attend this African Centered School?
- 4) How does the community benefit from students being educated at this African Centered School?

#### *Perception of African Centeredness applied*

- 5) How would you describe the typical look, sound and feel of an African centered classroom?

## Appendix B- Demographic Questions

- 1) What is your ethnicity?
- 2) What is your gender?
- 3) What is your age?
- 4) State the highest level of education you have obtained?
- 5) How many years have you been an educator?
- 6) How long have you worked in a school that promotes an African Centered learning environment?

## APPENDIX C- Observational Protocol

Length of Activity: 60 minutes

Descriptive Notes

Reflective Notes

**What are some physical features of the learning space?**

**How does teacher/student interaction look?**

**What features of the teacher's pedagogical style stand out?**

**What themes are emphasized during class?**

**What is the overall tone of the students during class?**

## Appendix D- Informed Consent

## Informed Consent

Georgia State University

African American Studies Department

**Title: Towards A Common Center: Locating Common Characteristics of African Centeredness In an Independent African Centered Learning Environment**

Principal Investigator: Jonathan Gayles

Student Investigator: Garfield Bright

I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to learn “What are the common characteristics of cultural relevance exhibited by African American independent schools?” You are invited to participate because you are a teacher or an administrator at an African American, independent, culturally relevant school. Participation will require 30-45 minutes of your time.

II. Procedures:

If you decide to be a part of this study, you will participate in a 30 minute interview with the researcher Garfield Bright. This interview will be audio taped. You may be asked to

participate in a 15 minute informal follow up discussion. The follow up discussion will not be audio recorded. If you are a teacher, a classroom observation will be conducted one time, not to exceed one full instructional period.

### III. Risks:

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

### IV. Benefits:

Participation in this study may not benefit you personally. However, I hope to gain information that will facilitate the recognition of a common set of core characteristics between schools that are culturally relevant African American schools. This information can add to the literature that seeks to precise and concretize some of the nuances of culturally relevant education while attempting to pinpoint specific essential characteristics that each school has in common. Each school, in this regard will be a model of what applied cultural relevance looks like and thus become a potential standard bearer for the creation of future models.

### V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

### VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Garfield Bright and Jonathan Gayles will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly like the GSU Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP). We will use alternate names rather than your name on study records. The information you provide will be stored in a locked cabinet. The audio recordings will be destroyed after December of 2011. Your name and other

facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

VII. Contact Persons:

If you have any questions about the study you may contact Jonathan Gayles or Garfield Bright. Jonathan Gayles can be reached by phone at 404-413-5142 or through email at: jgayles@gsu.edu. Garfield Bright can be contacted by phone at 323-635-7315 or through email at: gbright1@student.gsu.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded during the interview, please sign below.

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Participant

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Date



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Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent

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Date