



## The Power of Education Across the African Diaspora: Exploring New Solutions for Old Problems

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## The Power of Education Across the African Diaspora: Exploring New Solutions for Old Problems

### Introduction

The intellectual, cultural, and political contributions of the African diaspora have long gone underacknowledged in educational research. Furthermore, the historical, social, and economic powers of education for global African descendants have been largely under-explored in African diaspora studies. This special issue is motivated by these two interrelated provocations. Well into the 21st century, there is still an urgent need to harness the analytical tools that education studies and African diaspora studies afford to identify new educational solutions for old social problems (Freeman & Johnson, 2012). Strengthening our understanding of the relationship between these two fields of critical interdisciplinary inquiry enables researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners to further develop a distinct intellectual and activist terrain rooted in the liberationist impulses and transgressive possibilities of education for African descendants locally and globally.

Educational research in the field of African diaspora studies adds richness and depth to our understandings of Black people across time, space, and place. Research at the interstices of education studies and African diaspora studies provides us with new and frequently overlooked forms of knowledge on the history, anthropology, and political economy of education across the African diaspora. Furthermore, such scholarship challenges deficit theoretical, methodological, and empirical accounts of African descendants' relationship to education that discount the prevailing structures of inequality limiting the educational advancement of Black people from early childhood education to higher education (Levin, 2005; Wallace, 2019). Recent scholarship at the intersection of education studies and African diaspora studies articulates the resilience, remembrance, and resistance strategies African descendants use in schools and society that cannot be captured—or ignored—by cursory readings of global Black histories. This special issue takes its cue from the power of studying Black education throughout the African diaspora from comparative and international perspectives not only to disrupt dominant, pathological representations and challenge the steady misrecognition of Africa's global descendants, but also to identify the practices that have the potential to positively impact all Black children, young people, and adults across borders (Freeman & Johnson, 2012; Givens, 2016).

We maintain that the sustained study of formal and informal teaching, learning, and schooling across the African diaspora from critical, feminist, and postcolonial perspectives can enrich education studies and African diaspora studies now and in the future. Throughout Africa and the African diaspora, popular leaders and lay officials have long understood education not simply as a social practice for knowledge exchange, but as a technology of power for self-determination, nation-building, and global Black consciousness (Givens, 2016; Msibi, 2012; Nasir et al., 2013). Twentieth-century activists and thought-leaders, such as Anna Julia Cooper, Gisèle Rabeshala, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, Bernard Coard, Rigoberta Menchú, among scores of others, underscored the significance of critical, internationalist perspectives on education for global African descendants as necessary, and not simply ancillary, for social, cultural, and political freedom (Hall, 1997).

Today, Black teachers, school leaders, parents, community activists, and civil society leaders continue to subscribe to the power and promise of education for the upliftment of global African descendants—though some simultaneously decry modern schooling as a project of constraint, co-optation, and control (Dumas, 2014; Dumas & ross, 2016). Still, educational research, particularly in the Global North, has yet to offer

sufficient cross-national attention to the freedom dreams and promising practices of Black formal and informal educators necessary for the transformation of schools and society (Wallace, 2018, 2020; Warren, 2021). With this special issue, we showcase examples of educational research on African descendants and invite critical consideration of complementary educational research in African diaspora studies.

In this editorial, we first outline the power of pursuing educational research across the African diaspora, especially in a context of reckoning with COVID-19 and anti-Black police violence. To complement current educational research on Black education, we then highlight the increasing power of comparative, international, and interdisciplinary perspectives to identify new methodological, practical, and policy solutions to long-standing structural and cultural inequalities in education. We close this piece with brief notes on future directions for the development and dissemination of educational research on global African descendants.

## **Black lives in dark times**

Given the contemporary zeitgeist, research on the social and political stakes of Black lives in the field of education is perhaps more urgent now than it has been in recent history. The twin pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic anti-Black racism in the form of state-sponsored police violence in and out of schools have disproportionately impacted the lives and livelihoods of Black people (Joseph-Salisbury et al., 2020; Pirtle, 2020). This has been especially significant in key regions of the African diaspora, including Brazil, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Colombia, among other countries (World Health Organization, 2020). The health, safety, and economic challenges associated with the twin pandemics have impacted the education of young people around the world, abruptly closing schools throughout 2020 and delaying the start of a new academic year in various parts of North and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Such shifts in the duration and nature of traditional schooling are not without deleterious consequences for Black people and other groups historically disadvantaged by global regimes of racial capitalism, enslavement, colonialism, neoliberal structural readjustment processes, and other forms of marginalization in the political economy (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Fanon, 1986; Hall, 1997). The long-term impact of COVID-19 and anti-Black racism on the educational prospects and psychosocial well-being of Black children and young people will and be fully understood in the decades ahead. In the interim, the contemporary moment necessitates fresh perspectives with which to make meaning of the educational, health, and economic challenges global African descendants negotiate today. Critical, interdisciplinary analyses of education across the African diaspora provide us with some innovative insights urgently needed to mitigate structural and cultural inequalities that continue to devalue Black lives in dark times across the globe (Givens, 2016; Morrell, 2017; Wallace, 2018).

In a context of increased migration flows from North Africa to Europe; the ongoing decolonization movement at universities in Saharan Africa, and Europe, led largely by African descendants; and the expansive cultural and artistic production of African descendants shaping new culturally sustaining pedagogies, critical explorations of the relationship between African diaspora studies and the field of education are both topical and timely (Freeman & Johnson, 2012). Seeing that 2019 marked the 400-year commemoration of African descendants' dispersal to the shores of the United States in August 1619—though the presence and power of African descendants in diverse parts of the Global North and South precedes 1619—this special issue provides important comparative and commemorative analyses on the state of educational participation across the African diaspora.

In this special issue, we seek to bridge gaps in education studies and African diaspora studies scholarship, noting these “interconnected particulars” as central to a fuller understanding of the history and futurity of African descendants around the world (Thomas & Warren, 2017). This project brings together scholars across disciplinary boundaries, national contexts, and methodological expertise deeply concerned with education and Black lives. What is especially promising is that these scholars think about the social, psychic, and material dimensions of education and Black lives within the African diaspora as already part of a larger global phenomenon—linking the relationship between the national and the international, the local and the global (Andrews, 2016; Hall, 2017; Morrell, 2017).

Several key questions animate the works included in this special issue: What is the purpose of education for African descendants within and across nation-states? What historical and contemporary ideologies and institutions shape the nature of primary, secondary, and higher education for people of African descent? To what extent does the pursuit of formal education inform (im)migration and diaspora formation? How does White supremacy figure in the educational experiences of Black students and faculty? Why does schooling endure as a site of social suffering *and* critical hope for Black people across national borders? What accounts for the patterns in the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of African descendants, even in contexts ostensibly committed to “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion”? How can we identify and promote strategies for supporting the academic success, creative innovations, and psychosocial well-being of African descendant youth?

To effectively address these questions, the articles featured in this themed issue build on an appreciation for interdisciplinary engagement with fields such as anthropology, sociology, history, economics, theology, critical geography, and literary studies, along with the creative and performing arts. The scholarly pieces included in this special issue draw on ethnographic, statistical, archival, and theoretical analyses of racial, ethnic, gender, and class inequalities from education scholars in the United Kingdom, the United States, Colombia, New Zealand, Australia, and Canada—many of whom hail from West Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and other parts of the Global South. Such wide disciplinary reach and significant geographical scope are not only empirically significant, they are also political expedient, as together they gift us with layered insights into the nuanced nature of education within the African diaspora. We recognize that failure to appreciate the complex contributions of education to the African diaspora limits the scope and quality of the solutions promoted in educational research, policy, and practice.

### **Diaspora, distinction, and the politics of dislocation**

Before calling attention to the core analyses articulated in the articles that shape this special issue, a brief note about diaspora is in order. The term *diaspora* has long been hotly contested. This is due, at least in part, to the considerable analytical stretching that the term has endured, dulling, as some contend, its once sharp, critical edge (Brubaker, 2005). The competing variations of *diaspora*, along with the universalizing impulses that all too frequently shape the operationalization of the term, raise considerable concerns about the concept’s significance and specificity (Pierre, 2004). Nevertheless, historical and ongoing debates in the fields of Black studies, (im)migration, critical geography, and international relations identify diaspora as an unmistakably political signifier that denotes the processes of dispersion, dislocation, distinction, and transformation to which groups are subjected across time, space, and place by force, choice, or in select cases a combination of the two. To this day, *diaspora* remains to some a reductive label and a polemical formula that bears essentialism as its cardinal feature. Yet, to others, the genealogy of the term points to a still generative mode of meaning and category of practice that simultaneously engages cultural difference and social change. When understood broadly and deeply, diaspora is a descriptive, analytical, and political classification that accounts for the relationship between forced or voluntary migration, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance, along with the places (and people) of departure, arrival, transition, and settlement (Andrews, 2016). The category “diaspora,” particularly in African diaspora studies, attributes value to movement and settlement, contention and collaboration, continuity and change.

The complexities of the African diaspora as a political arrangement and a classificatory scheme are perhaps all too numerous to detail in this introduction. Nevertheless, we offer some definitional clarity of the term for the purposes of precision. In particular, we marshal *African diaspora* here as a necessarily generative invitation to trace the roots, routes, and rationales that shape the lived experiences of African descendants across the world. This definition accords well with scholarship showcased throughout this special issue. In their wider research, the scholars included in this special issue pursue diaspora as both noun and verb (Johnson, 2016). The African diaspora informs their understanding of Black movement and its meaning making, cultural ritual and rehearsal, historical formation, and contemporary reality. The critical and political potentialities of the African diaspora in the field of education require hermeneutics of suspicion that are as attentive to migration and movement building as they are to dispersal and dislocation

and as critical of educational policies as they are of essentialist practices. Such capacious articulations of diaspora generally—and the African diaspora specifically—index a set of possibilities regarding what diaspora was, is, and perhaps will be.

But what, in empirical terms, is the African diaspora? What is the analytical relationship between continental Africa and the African diaspora? According to Pierre (2020) and Manning (2010), the African diaspora comprises one sixth of the human population—with over 1 billion in Africa and over 300 million in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Afro-Brazilians constitute the largest African descendant population outside of Africa, with African Americans being the second-largest group (Assie-Lumumba, 2012; Freeman & Johnson, 2012; Patterson & Kelley, 2000; Rahier et al., 2010). Increased migration from North and West Africa to Europe has renewed intellectual interest in Black Europe as more than a recent sociopolitical and cultural formation. Migration and maritime histories from the 13th century to present reveal a complex relationship between African descendants and Europe (Perry, 2016). This is registered, perhaps most vividly, in the transatlantic slave trade, as Europeans largely led the forced migration of African people through Europe and to the Caribbean and the Americas. With this forced migration of Africans, Europeans trafficked in high levels of cultural falsehoods and anti-Black assumptions delineating what it means to be human and what it means to be free. Such ideological and institutional arrangements sustained a set of conditions that has constrained the purpose and promise of formal education for people of African descent (Hall, 1997; Iton, 2010).

In sub-Saharan Africa, North America, South America, Europe, the Caribbean, and around the world, people of African descent face comparable, seemingly intractable challenges that result in disparities in educational participation, experiences, and outcomes across societies. At the national, regional, and international levels, for instance, discussions frequently surface about “achievement gaps” between Black youth and their White peers, albeit with considerably less attention devoted to the historical systems that for centuries sustained unequal racialized opportunity structures. But what dominant discourses often fail to capture are the practices of resilience and strategies of resistance that Black parents, pupils, teachers, and advocates draw on to challenge the economic, legal, and political systems that limit the educational advancement of Black people. This special issue calls attention to these frequently overlooked dimensions of education across the African diaspora.

## **Educational research across the African Diaspora**

While acknowledging the educational challenges confronting African descendants across wide-ranging countries, this special issue highlights the opportunities for new narratives and innovative solutions in the 21st century. We have sequenced the articles in a fashion that allows newcomers and seasoned scholars to acquire up-to-date information about the nature of education across the African diaspora. Patrick Manning’s introductory piece provides sensitizing contextual information on the scope of the African diaspora. His article, “Education Across the African Diaspora: 1500–2020” offers perspectives on the historical formation and contemporary implications of formal education in the “Old World diaspora,” “New World diaspora,” and sub-Saharan Africa. Manning pays special attention to the historical, structural, and cultural conditions that shape the nature of educational disadvantages in and out of schools, particularly in the United States. Manning’s broad survey inspires critical reflection on Black people’s deep and enduring investments in education as a promise of freedom and a practice of self-determination. Historical accounts like Manning’s that document African descendants’ steady commitment to education, despite formidable legal, institutional, and political barriers, challenge lingering stereotypical assumptions about Black educational disadvantage as a derivative of culture as opposed to social structure.

Ethan Johnson’s piece titled “Understanding Afro-Ecuadorian Educational Experiences” interrogates anti-Blackness as a fixed feature of schooling in Ecuador. Through an analysis of social science textbooks, curricular practices, along with wider literary, visual, and cultural representation in schools, Johnson asserts that “schooling in Ecuador in multiple ways is implicated in the reproduction of anti-Blackness and racial inequality.” For Afro-Ecuadorians, descriptive and substantive representation are often extremely limited (Dawson, 1994, 2001; Greer, 2013). And where such representation exists, the results fall short of

government pronouncements on fair and equal citizenship. Johnson's explications underscore the view that schools often reflect and reproduce racialized social inequalities in society, even as they attempt to resist such inequalities.

But such challenges are not exclusive to Ecuador. According to Nafees Khan, they are in fact prevalent in Brazil and the United States, regions with the largest settlement of formerly enslaved Africans in the Americas. Drawing on a comparative analysis of secondary schools' history textbooks, Khan suggests that in both the US and Brazil, critical explorations of slavery are surprisingly sparse in secondary education. Khan asserts that the history of slavery is usually taught from minimalist perspectives that elide the complexity and ongoing significance of slavery as a political institution. Three central research findings animate Khan's article. First, in both the United States and Brazil, history textbooks summoned slavery to note the racial, cultural, political, and economic power in contemporary society. Second, the histories taught in Brazil and the United States were often highly selective, offering rather limited insights into the experiences of women and indigenous groups. Third, the contextual conditions that shaped slavery are usually misrepresented. Such perspectives matter because they shape political ideologies and the sense of national identity taught in schools. As Khan's work suggests, schools' capacity to address racialized structural inequalities is often contingent on a steady commitment to acknowledging the past to chart a brighter future.

Blanca Zuluaga, Marianella Ortiz, and Aurora Vergara-Figueroa's article "Twice as Hard to Get Half as Far?" provides a rich, intragroup comparison of women in Colombia. Based on the 2014 Living Standards Survey, administered by the Colombian government's Department of Statistics, Zuluaga, Ortiz, and Vergara-Figueroa examine the market returns on education in the gendered political economy for Afro-Colombian women and non-Afro-Colombian women. The results indicate that Afro-Colombian women negotiate a complex paradox in Colombian society along the lines of race, class, and gender. Afro-Colombian women with secondary school diplomas experience lower returns in the marketplace than their non-Afro-Colombian female counterparts. However, Afro-Colombian women with university degrees experience higher returns than their non-Afro-Colombian female peers. In addition to identifying the structural and cultural factors that shape educational and economic inequality in Colombia, Zuluaga, Ortiz, and Vergara-Figueroa assert that the differences in market rewards experienced by Afro-Colombian women and non-Afro-Colombian women is based on the sheepskin effect—a heuristic that attributes disproportionate value to higher education degrees and those who possess them. In a wider educational context where Afro-Colombian women are more likely to have high school diplomas than higher education degrees due to the limits of racialized and gendered opportunity structures, Zuluaga, Ortiz, and Vergara-Figueroa insist that Afro-Colombian women work "twice as hard to get half as far."

But statistics like the ones marshaled by Zuluaga, Ortiz, and Vergara-Figueroa tell only part of the story about the structures of meaning that inform the lived experiences of African descendants. To highlight new narratives with countercultural perspectives that demand not only representation but structural change, affirming and decolonizing methodologies are paramount and powerful. Camille Nakhid and Claire Farrugia highlight the moral consequences and social costs of using traditional research methodologies for indigenous and Black people in New Zealand and Australia. According to Nakhid and Farrugia, affirming and decolonizing methodologies are not simply committed to challenging dominant approaches to data collection and research distribution, but to identifying culturally specific, politically attuned, and contextually appropriate strategies that honor people more than data and acknowledge history in the pursuit of the future. An indigenous epistemology along with a commitment to Black and minoritized people—including the Afro-Caribbeans in New Zealand and Black Africans in Australia—require new, transformative methodological approaches to research and reality.

Like in New Zealand and Australia, discussions of decolonization have increased in scope and significance across the world over the past decade. Decolonization discourse and activism have found renewed and peculiar interest in British universities based on activism that began at universities in South Africa. From the Rhodes Must Fall movement at Oxford University to the more recent protest action near Bristol University that led to the toppling of a statue of former slave trader Edward Colston, decolonization is not an abstract metaphor, but a profound practical challenge to the lingering colonial structures that sustain inequalities. In



the context of the British Isles, decolonization is as much about curricular change as it is about cultural transformation, as much about representation as it is about reparations. William Ackah summons decolonial, Black feminist, and autoethnographic perspectives to examine the limited number of full professors of African descent in British universities. Ackah questions whether or not British universities can meaningfully operationalize decolonization and function as sites of liberation for marginalized and minoritized groups. The extent to which decolonization and liberation function as feasible features of British university life, Ackah asserts, is contingent on building cross-disciplinary coalitions along with global and cross-national alliances that hold the British government and its universities to account.

With complementary analyses on the racialized and gendered structures of the British academe, Nicola Rollock provides a fine-grained analysis of the experiences of Black women full professors in her article titled “‘I Would Have Become Wallpaper Had Racism Had Its Way’: Black Female Professors, Racial Battle Fatigue, and Strategies for Surviving Higher Education.” As of December, 2020, there are only 25 Black female full professors in British universities. The underrepresentation of Black women in the British professoriate is not a consequence of limited interest. Instead, it is emblematic of deep disinvestment in transforming British higher education and limited attention to race in university-based gender equality initiatives. Rollock draws on critical race theory—an emancipationist intellectual and political project currently under attack in Britain and the United States—and Bourdieu’s theory of practice to illuminate the racialized and gendered opportunity structures that constrain the progress and promotion of Black women academics. Rollock’s study reveals the social and political import of understanding Black women’s experiences of isolation, disillusionment, and protective introspection. Black women’s stories, Rollock asserts, are just as important as the change they often demand.

Critical, feminist, and decolonial approaches like the ones that inform Rollock’s and Ackah’s works suggest that there is tremendous analytical purchase in focusing on the power of a single story. Emmanuel Tabi’s article, “Your Story Will Forever Float as Memory: Afrodiasporic Cultural Production and Activism in Black Canada,” pays homage to a long-standing activist leader who Tabi refers to as Efe. Efe died in 2019 while Tabi finalized this article. With Tabi’s piece, and others like it in this special issue, we pour a libation for Efe and the great cloud of activist ancestors who in word, thought, and deed issue love notes to African descendants in contexts of wanton anti-Blackness. Tabi explores the use of Efe’s cultural production as a sign and site of anti-racist activist engagement in Toronto. Efe’s contentions trouble claims of Canada as a progressive, putatively postracial society. Depictions of Canada as an open, multicultural nation run counter to the experiences of racially minoritized individuals like Efe. In as much as Tabi’s article is a commemorative one, it is also a challenging charge. Tabi’s contribution to this special issue demands support for Black young people and all those who serve (alongside) them. His article celebrates Spoken Word and other powerful forms of Black cultural production as practices to uplift Black people. Perhaps most importantly, the piece underscores the power of a single life lived intentionally in the African diasporic community.

The articles highlighted above offer nuanced and sensitizing perspectives into the scope and nature of education across the African diaspora. Through intergroup, intragroup, cross-national, and cross-cultural comparisons, this special issue offers insights not only into what educational research across the African diaspora is, but also why it matters for the global, national, and local pursuits of racial, gender, and economic justice.

## Conclusion

Educational research across the African diaspora is consequential because of its meaningful analytical contributions and its profound political implications. Such scholarship highlights the significance of educational, economic, and political liberation as the goal and the urgent need for educational institutions across the world to commit again to the academic success and career advancement of Black people. Despite the undeniable promise of educational research across the African diaspora, we recognize that strategies for sharing the features and findings of African diaspora studies and educational studies must move beyond traditional dissemination processes like this special issue. It is in this vein that we celebrate the 2020 launch

of a newly approved Advanced Placement course in African diaspora studies based on a partnership with the College Board and the African Diaspora Consortium. After five years of curricular planning and piloting, the scheme is now slated to be rolled out across a wide range of secondary schools in the United States. This means that the analytics associated with African diaspora studies and education studies will not be limited to higher education, but will be signature features of teaching and learning in high schools across the United States, introducing another generation of thought leaders and activists to the sociology, history, economics, and politics of Black education in local and global contexts.

At its core, we regard this special issue as an accessible primer on education in the African diaspora. It does not, and cannot within the confines of a single journal issue, offer a comprehensive, all-encompassing analysis of educational inequalities in Africa and the African diaspora. We urge readers to consider the special issue an invitation to deeper, sustained analysis of education as a technology of power in the African diaspora. We encourage the journal's readership to view the articles curated for this issue as the first in a series of such work to come that offer critical, asset-based explorations of the power and possibilities associated with education in the African diaspora. We believe that future research, including our own, should focus more closely on the political relationship between Africa and the African diaspora, highlight with greater precision the connections between indigenous and Black communities, and address the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement on global organizing against anti-Black racism. Like this special issue, such work will illuminate new solutions to old problems across the African diaspora.

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