EXPLORING AFRICAN DIASPORA LITERACY AS A MODEL FOR EMPOWERING CHILDREN

FOSTERING LITERACY SKILLS

Abstract

In this toolkit, early childhood educators will explore African Diaspora Literacy as an approach for empowering children. An overview of African Diaspora Literacy is provided with samples of exemplar activities to inspire early childhood educators to foster African Diaspora Literacy in their classrooms. Resources and reflective questions are provided to support early childhood educators.

BranchED
Peachtree City, GA
# Table of Contents

What is African Diaspora Literacy and Why Is It Essential for Early Literacy? ................................................................. 3

Examples of African Diaspora Literacy in Action .................................................................................................................. 4
  Resources ........................................................................................................................................................................... 5

Children’s Books ...................................................................................................................................................................... 6

Questions for reflection .............................................................................................................................................................. 8

Example Lesson: Adinkra Literacy Lesson ........................................................................................................................... 9

How Can Educators Foster African Diaspora Literacy? ......................................................................................................... 10
  Develop Cultural Competence ........................................................................................................................................... 10
  Questions for reflection .......................................................................................................................................................... 11
  Resources ............................................................................................................................................................................. 11

Develop Critical Consciousness ........................................................................................................................................... 11
  Questions for reflection .......................................................................................................................................................... 12
  Resources ............................................................................................................................................................................. 12

References .................................................................................................................................................................................. 14
What is African Diaspora Literacy and Why Is It Essential for Early Literacy?

Across all educational spaces, Black children’s brilliance is undermined by narrow, Eurocentric measures of intelligence (i.e., standardized tests) and standards. However, educators have amplified the brilliance of Black children through African Diaspora literacy (Boutte et al. 2021), despite narratives that portray them as intellectually incapable or struggling. Historically and currently, Black children are subjected to a curriculum which fails to reflect Blackness and Africa in positive and accurate ways. Many scholars have come to identify the absence and misrepresentation of Africa in curricula as anti-Black violence. Dr. Joyce King (1992) defined Diaspora Literacy as Black people’s knowledge of their collective story and cultural dispossession. To extend the concept of Diaspora Literacy and to honor the ancestry of Black people, Boutte et al. (2017) added "African" to the term. African Diaspora Literacy refers to the acquisition of knowledge about African diasporic people wherever they reside (Boutte et al., 2021).

When children are engaged in African Diaspora Literacy, they gain access to the rich bodies of indigenous knowledge about African people wherever they are in the world (i.e., Caribbean, U.S., Europe, Brazil) (Boutte et al. 2017). Black children thereby are affirmed by knowing who they are, and in the process, their peers develop cultural competence, by knowing that their Black peers come from a lineage of excellence, despite the messages they receive from society which may say otherwise (Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020). Educators have the power to make a positive, long-lasting impression on the worldviews of children at an early age. Therefore, it is essential that educators embrace anti-racist pedagogies, like African Diaspora Literacy to cultivate equitable learning spaces for children.

Many teachers may interrogate the need for African Diaspora Literacy, but this presents an opportunity for teachers to begin to reflect upon the various ways that classrooms center Whiteness as the norm. Numerous scholars (Gay, 2023; Ladson-Billings, 2021, Love, 2019; Massy & Knowles, 2021; Nightengale-Lee et al, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2014) have produced a vast body of research on culturally relevant, responsive, sustaining and anti-racist pedagogies, which demonstrate that the usage of homogenized literacy methods have contributed to “curricular violence” (Jones, 2020), a phenomenon that fails to acknowledge the important aspects of identity of children, such as race, culture, ethnicity, gender, and language. Unfortunately, this type of cultural assault has been detrimental to the success and overall well-being of Black children, as children experience alienation through various aspects of the curriculum. Consequently, some children may embrace distorted and omitted information and internalize feelings of inferiority, which can negatively impact their literacy engagement and academic performance (Camangian, 2011; Coles, 2016). Likewise, White children may recognize and embrace the same messages of Black inferiority and perpetuate anti-Black violent behavior later in life (Wynter-Hoyte & Smith, 2020). They are exposed to a single story about Blackness and African People so long that they become adults who are oblivious to the notion that Africa comprises of 54 countries; has over 3,000 ethnic groups with more than 2,100 languages; had empires before colonization; around 609 million Africans live in urban area, and that Africa still has kingdoms ruled by Babas (kings). Therefore, African Diaspora Literacy can broaden the worldview of young children which counters the limited and often distorted information they receive about Africans in Africa. African Diaspora Literacy can support young children in becoming
global-minded as they learn to read, interpret, and understand the world through multiple literacies in multiple contexts — in this case, Africa.

When teachers fail to even consider fostering African Diaspora Literacy, they give credence to Carter G. Woodson’s (1933) claim that, “The chief reason why so many give little to attention to the background of the Negro is the belief that it is unimportant” (p. 190). Far too often many Black and Brown children learn that they are unimportant when teachers ignore their sociocultural and linguistic identities. This toolkit will support early literacy teachers with guiding approaches and resources to make initial steps to foster African Diaspora Literacy. It is likely that many early childhood teachers may experience discomfort when discussing race and fostering African Diaspora Literacy, but it is important to recognize that Black and Brown children experience discomfort and nervousness as they strive to navigate inequitable learning and living spaces daily. However, uncomfortable experiences are an essential aspect of the transformational process. Educators should see these experiences as an investment to the personal and professional development that is essential to cultivate equitable early literacy experiences for children.

African Diaspora Literacy is an important way for children to have access African indigenous knowledge. African Diaspora Literacy provides a counter-story to the dominant stories children often hear about the contributions, values, beliefs, and worldviews of White people. When children are taught that Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon, they should also learn about Katherine Johnson’s calculations that contributed to the mission. Katherine Johnson is an African American mathematician who was featured in the movie *Hidden Figures*, which highlighted her contributions to space missions (Melfi, T. 2016). The notion that they are “Hidden Figures” is an example of how the contributions of people of African descent have historically been hidden, stolen, distorted, and erased. However, educators can empower children by using texts that amplify such contributions across the curriculum.

**Examples of African Diaspora Literacy in Action**

African Diaspora Literacy is not a teaching strategy; it is an approach to curriculum that works to empower children by engaging them in the rich cultural legacies of African people from all over the world. Educators must be mindful not to overgeneralize African culture. While Africa has over 3,000 ethnic groups and more than 2,100 languages, the African Diaspora encompasses African people wherever they are in the world, which is a reminder of the comprehensive, intersectional, and diverse nature of African Diaspora Literacy. For instance, there are various types of African drums. A talking drum (a drum that mimics human tones) is known as *tama* in Senegal and as *kalangu or dundun* in Nigeria is a talking drum. When engaging children in African Diaspora Literacy, context is essential. For instance, if an educator is exploring Adinkra symbols with children, it is essential for educators to highlight that they derive from Ghana, which is a West African country. West African Adinkra symbols can be integrated into the classroom in multiple ways. It can be used to teach children about African values and beliefs. Children can then select Adinkra symbols that empower them and discuss why and how. For instance, children can explore the concept of Kujichangulia, which means self-determination and discuss times when they exhibited self-determination. Educators can share examples with children of people of African descent who have demonstrated self-determination. These principles can also be incorporated into classroom
values and child guidance. However, educators must position themselves as learners and embody the willingness and courage to engage in and learn from African Diaspora Literacy to better understand their children and themselves. Educators who foster African Diaspora Literacy use texts as counternarratives to prevailing images, ideas, and concepts. For instance, an educator in the work of Boutte et al. incorporated texts on African princesses to counter the dominant narratives of White royalty, which reminded children of the African empires that existed prior to enslavement (2017). Rather sticking to traditional Eurocentric nursery rhymes, educators can use African folk tales to teach children various concepts. Educators can guide children in comparing texts. Using African songs, chants, affirmations, and images can also be empowering to children as they learn that their culture is valued, appreciated, and embraced.

Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Application</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Song/Chant</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>FUNGA ALAFIA (West African Song) (* indicates a spoken section of the song)</td>
<td>This song can be used to build community with children every morning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Funga Alafia, Funga *Funga Alafia, Funga *Funga Alafia, Funga *Funga Alafia, Funga Funga Alafia, ashe, ashe Funga Alafia, ashe, ashe Funga Alafia, ashe, ashe Funga Alafia, ashe, ashe. Our hearts are pure. Our voices true. With open arms we welcome you!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Book/African Folklore</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anansi the Spider: A tale from the Ashanti By Gerald McDermott</td>
<td>Anansi the spider to teach children about the consequences of making poor choices and the benefits of being courageous and intelligent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maps</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Educators can show children accurate maps that shows how massive Africa is.</td>
<td>Educators can show images that demonstrate how many other continents can fit into Africa. They should also use maps to underscore that Africa is comprised of several countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>African Cloth Exploration</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>To underscore the diversity of Africa, educators support children in comparing African cloths to learn more about cultures in different African countries. Batiks cloths are from Cameroon, Nigeria, and Togo. Kente cloths are made by people in Ghana. Ukara-Ekpe is a traditional Nigerian fabric. Adire is a tye and dye which originated in the Dogon kingdom in Mali (West Africa) dating back to the 11th century. Bogolan is a mudgloth common to the Bambara tribe of Mali.</td>
<td></td>
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### Children’s Books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Book/Author</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Book Cover</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>A is for Africa</em> by Ifeoma Onyefulu</td>
<td>This vivid, photographic alphabet book gives a rich insight into contemporary African culture. Each letter stands for a word in the Igbo language and is linked to a detailed, captivating photo, providing opportunities for discussions on African traditions, geography, and language. A great tool to teach the alphabet while expanding students’ global awareness.</td>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="A is for Africa" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>African, Amazing Africa</em> by Atinuke and Mouni Feddag</td>
<td>This beautifully illustrated book offers a journey through the continent of Africa, highlighting its diverse cultures, languages, climates, animals, and landmarks. It can be used to teach students about the cultural and geographic diversity within a single continent, fostering respect for global cultures and inspiring curiosity about the world.</td>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="African Amazing Africa" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Olu and Greta</em> by Diana Ejaita</td>
<td>The story follows two friends experiencing and appreciating their different cultures. It is a wonderful tool to facilitate discussions about friendship, acceptance, and cultural exchange. A valuable resource for character education and social studies lessons.</td>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Olu and Greta" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name of Book/Author</strong></td>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
<td><strong>Book Cover</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Jambo means hello: Swahili Alphabet Book</em> by Muriel Feelings</td>
<td>This book introduces students to the Swahili language through a beautifully illustrated, Swahili-to-English alphabet book. It is a perfect tool to teach diversity, language, and African culture, and can be integrated into lessons on foreign language or multicultural studies.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Jambo means hello: Swahili Alphabet Book" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Anansi Goes Fishing</em> by Eric A. Kimmel</td>
<td>This entertaining folktale features Anansi, the trickster spider common in African and Caribbean folklore. Teachers can use this book to teach about the oral tradition, folktales, lessons on morality, and to expose students to different cultural storytelling traditions.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Anansi Goes Fishing" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Deep in the Sahara</em> by Kelly Cunnane</td>
<td>A lyrical story that provides a culturally insightful window into Islamic and West African customs. It's an excellent book for teaching about cultural differences, religious traditions, and the universal desire to belong. It can be used in lessons on religion, cultural diversity, or women's rights.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Deep in the Sahara" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Name of Book/Author</td>
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<td>Book Cover</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters</strong> by John Steptoe</td>
<td>This African Cinderella tale set in Zimbabwe teaches about kindness, humility, and inner beauty. It can be used to discuss character traits, and compare and contrast with other Cinderella stories worldwide, or as a part of a unit on African culture or folktales.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughters" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Petty Salma: A Little Red Riding Hood Story from Africa</strong> by Niki Daly</td>
<td>This version of Red Riding Hood, set in a bustling African market, offers opportunities for cultural exploration and lessons on caution and cunning. Teachers can use this for comparing and contrasting with the classic Red Riding Hood story, discussing setting and characterization, and exploring multicultural versions of familiar tales.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Petty Salma" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ana &amp; Andrew: Going to Ghana</strong> by Christine Platt</td>
<td>The story follows siblings Ana and Andrew as they visit their extended family in Ghana. This book is perfect for lessons on family, cultural traditions, and the importance of heritage. It can also serve as a springboard for projects about students' own heritage or family traditions.</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Ana &amp; Andrew" /></td>
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Questions for reflection

- How can you foster African Diaspora Literacy in your classroom?
- What other aspects of African culture can you incorporate in your classroom?
## Example Lesson: Adinkra Literacy Lesson

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>PK-2nd grade</th>
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| **Preparing for this lesson** | **Read**: Cloth As Metaphor: (Re)reading the Adinkra Cloth: Symbols of the Akan of Ghana, 2nd Edition by G. F. Kojo Arthur  
**Watch**: a video *(there are numerous options via YouTube)* on Adinkra symbols to practice the pronunciation of each symbol. Reflect upon what each symbol means to you.  
Determine if you will create or order Adinkra Stamps. If you create them, you can use cardboard to create the stamp. You can trace and cut out adinkra symbols using an X-acto knife on cardboard. Then take the adinkra symbol and hot glue the symbol on another piece of cardboard. Order [Adinkra stamps](#).  
**Pre-read** the book, *Symbols: More than a Word* by M. Mimi Sutton, Joyeeta Neogi (Illustrator) with your particular students in mind. Identify questions that you may ask throughout the book to your students. |
| **Content Area**   | Literacy |
| **Clearly state the objective or purpose of the lesson in a student-friendly language below.** | Students will be able to:  
- Identify what adinkra symbols represent.  
- Create expressive pieces using Adinkra symbols. |
| **Below explain how the concept, skill, or strategy to the class is introduced.** | Show children a picture of a heart and ask them what the image represents. Then show them an image of a high-five and ask them what the image represents to them. Point out that symbols are more than just words. Symbols have different meanings to different people.  
Show children an adinkra symbol and ask them what they believe it represents. Explain to them that that image is of an adinkra symbol. See if children can find Ghana on a map or a globe. Explain to them that the adinkra symbol is used by the Ashanti people of Ghana, which is a country in West Africa. Although the symbols are primarily stamped or printed on special fabric made by the Ashanti people, the symbols can be found on many other items. |
| **Below explain how the concept, skill, or strategy is demonstrated to the class.** | |
Reading (10 minutes)
Read: *Symbols: More than a Word* by M. Mimi Sutton, Joyeeta Neogi (Illustrator). Allow students the opportunity to discuss the book as it is being read. Call children’s attention to the unique characteristics of each symbol. Support them in observing the lines, shape, and other elements of each symbol. Explain to students that adinkra symbols have different meanings. They represent ideas, beliefs, and values. Traditionally adinkra symbols are used to express thoughts or to tell a story.

Reinforcement (5 minutes)
Use visuals or a video on Adinkra symbols to help children pronounce the symbols. Use a play and pause strategy and have the children repeat the pronunciation. Ask children to select adinkra symbols that resonate most with them.

Below share the opportunities for the class to practice the concept, skill, or strategy below.

Provide children with different solid color fabrics and materials to choose from to place their adinkra symbols using the stamps. Use a digital timer to help children visualize how much time they have to create their expressive pieces. Inform children of how much time they have to create their work. Children will share their pieces and express what the piece represents.

Explain how students’ cultural/linguistic background and social emotional needs are considered throughout the lesson below.

Students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as their social emotional needs. Students’ cultural and linguistic background as students are asked to consider which Adinkra symbol resonates with them the most. Students will also be able to express what their pieces represent to them. Students’ emotional needs will be considered throughout the lesson. Students should be provided with a safe space to share their pieces with others. Students will have time throughout the lesson to have discussions with each other.

How Can Educators Foster African Diaspora Literacy?

Develop Cultural Competence
Carter G. Woodson (1933) stated that, “the education of any people begins with the people themselves (p.32).” What if your education did not begin with you? What if most texts you are exposed to fail to reflect your identity? What if you recognize that you are Black and you begin to question where you came from? What will your teacher tell you? What if the lack of culturally relevant texts and materials causes you to question your value? Unfortunately, many children are forced to learn through literacy instruction which ignores their sociocultural and linguistic competencies. Therefore, it is essential that teachers develop cultural competence by getting to know their students, families, and their communities from an asset-based perspective. This is the belief that students, families, and their communities have lived experiences, values, skills, and knowledge that should be valued. Developing positive relationships with children and their communities presents numerous opportunities to gain a deeper insight into the legacies and dimensions of Black culture: spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect,
communalism/collectivity, expressive individualism, oral tradition, social time perspective, perseverance, and improvisation (Boutte, et al., 2017). Educators can then build on Black children’s cultural strengths and create a warm and nurturing environment that empowers children to reach their full potential.

Questions for reflection

- What do you know about children and their families?
- How can you build on their cultural strengths in the classroom?
- How can you incorporate what you’ve learned into your early literacy curriculum?
- What questions do you have about your children and families?

Resources

- Culturally Relevant Pedagogy; Asking a Different Question by Gloria Ladson-Billings and Django Paris.
- The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Students by Gloria Ladson-Billings
- Heritage Knowledge in the Curriculum by Joyce E. King and Ellen E. Swarts
- Revolutionary Love: Creating a Culturally Inclusive Literacy Classroom by Kamania Wynter-Hoyte, Eliza Braden, Michele Myers, Sanjuana Rodriguez, Natasha Thornton

Develop Critical Consciousness

Examine yourself. Reflect upon how your lived experiences, values, beliefs, worldviews, and perspectives influence your decisions and how you interact with people. Reflect upon how you contribute to maintaining inequitable learning experiences? How do you contribute to the exclusion of African Diaspora Literacy in your classroom? It is important to note that people of African descent have historically and are currently working to re-member and re-claim their collective, indigenous knowledge, because it has been stolen, manipulated, distorted, and hidden before and during colonization (King, 2018). To truly engage children in African Diaspora Literacy educators must embody the willingness to learn, reflect, change, and advocate throughout the process. They must be willing to acknowledge social inequities, especially those that manifest in educational spaces and confront the inequitable learning experiences children encounter. One approach educators can take to developing critical consciousness is by raising questions and problematizing critical issues. Rather than passively adopting a single narrative about a topic, a critically conscious educator considers counter-narratives (other perspectives). After an educator asks children to draw images of Africa, the educator would offer other images and texts which present other perspectives of Africa, which could highlight the urban areas of Africa. When engaging in a variety of texts, educators who embody critical consciousness raise questions regarding whose voices are silenced, marginalized, or omitted and why they were? For instance, Broughton (2020) problematized the notion of educators historically drawing from foundational educational theorists who are majority all White males without regard to the contributions of Black people. These Eurocentric based theories inform the curricular decisions of educators, which impacts the holistic learning experiences of children. But how would African Diaspora Literacy shape what is known as educational theories and how would that impact
the learning experiences of Black children (Broughton, 2020)? Herein lies yet another example of why it is essential for educators to continuously develop cultural competence and critical consciousness.

**Questions for reflection**

- What assumptions do you hold about Black children and their families?
- How do those assumptions inform your curriculum and decision making?
- How can you advocate for equitable learning opportunities for your students?
- What do you desire to learn about African and African American culture?

**Resources**

The table below provides a listing of resources that teacher educators can use to further explore African Diaspora Literacy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African Diaspora Literacy: The Heart of Transformation in K-12 Schools and Teacher Education Edited by Lamar L. Johnson, Gloria Boutte, Gwenda Greene, and Dywanna Smith (Book)</td>
<td>This book provides practical applications of African Diaspora literacy in K-12 schools and in teacher education programs. The work shared in this book stems from a Fulbright-Hays Group Abroad project that focused on learning about ways to prepare K-12 teachers on ways to use African Diaspora Literacy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Cycle of Liberation by Bobbie Harro (model)</td>
<td>The Cycle of Liberation is a model for the cyclical process that causes social change to occur.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educating African American Students: And how are the children? By Gloria Swindler Boutte (Book)</td>
<td>This book provides strategies for teachers to use in P-12 settings focused on educating African American students. The book presents research, a framework for teachers to use, and examples of this work from classrooms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching to Transgress by bell hooks (book)</td>
<td>In this book, bell hooks describes the concept of pedagogy as liberation. This book considers the intersections of race, class, and feminism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paulo Freire (book)</td>
<td>This seminal book by Paulo Freire presents theoretical perspectives that focus on oppression and the source of liberation. Freire believes that critical pedagogy should be the purpose of education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom</strong> by Bettina Love (book)</td>
<td>In this book, Love decries the current educational system that she argues has not served African American students. The book calls attention to racial justice issues in the U.S. education system. She calls on educators to enact what she calls abolitionist teaching practices and adopt practices that support freedom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black skin, White theorists: Remembering hidden Black early childhood scholars by Anthony Broughton (Article)</strong></td>
<td>This article is a call to consider how Black Early Childhood scholars have shaped the field of early childhood. The article details the author’s own schooling experiences and his work in teaching in higher education and exposing teacher candidates to Black intellectual thought leaders.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


