

**RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2020**

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**Africentrism, Leadership, and Human Rights at  
Indiana University's African American Dance  
Company**

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# Acknowledgement

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# Abstract

The need to prepare students to lead in a multicultural, global economy is high; yet there is scant research on the right to culturally relevant education and its potential to foster the requisite dispositions. Human rights, distributed leadership, and critical race theories provided the conceptual framework for this interpretive qualitative study. Interview data were collected from members of the first such university academic and dance performance course. Results identified leadership and shared responsibility as key to participants' development as artists and global citizens. Social change implications include increased understanding and collaboration across races and cultures through sustained African-centered education.

*Doctoral Capstone*

## Problem

Globally, human interactions are fraught with racial tensions and conflict which contradicts human rights practices.

Eurocentric educational content devalues other cultures, perpetuating this dynamic.

The U.N. International Decade for People of African Descent with its themes of recognition, justice, and development, is ideal to investigate the context of Africentric education.

Little was known about the experiences of participants in African-centered academic and arts education as a potential reparative justice solution.

Further, there was no research on the target program's 45-year history as the first and only such academic and performing arts entity at a major U.S. university, and scant information on possible alumni retention of benefits from co-curricular service learning while in college.

## Purpose

A basic interpretive qualitative study exploration of the Indiana University (IU) African American Dance Company (AADC) academic course and performing ensemble may yield more understanding of the benefits of Africentric education relative to the identified gaps.

# Significance

The academy benefits when a seminal project such as the AADC achieves its founding mission and is sustainable, as it provides a model.

The university and its stakeholders receive credit when historically significant programs or departments are documented for posterity.

Addressing the knowledge gap may yield learning strategies for positive leadership, human rights, and culturally relevant education to confront tangible problems facing people today, and into the future.

In the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024), this study may advance knowledge in the discipline, expand practice, and/or inform policy decisions domestically and internationally.

# Theory or Framework

The study was grounded in three complementary ideals:

- **Critical Race Theory (CRT):** Respecting the cultural agency of all peoples (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012)
- **Human Rights** relative to CRT: Economic, social, cultural, civil, and political rights (Donnelly, 2013)
- **Distributed Leadership:** Shared leadership and responsibility (Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009)

This framework is appropriate given the learning environment in the AADC ensemble, its parent departments, and the socio-political discourse at this time in history.

# Relevant Scholarship

More than a half century after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (Brown, 1954) legislation mandated fair and equal opportunities in education for African descendants in the United States, lack of equity in schools remains problematic (Asante, 2011).

This dynamic permeates society, influenced by what we are taught about others (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Non-European descendants' cultures and histories are excluded, and systemic barriers remain (Harper, 2012).

These facts compromise the potential to advance humanity in an era requiring mutual respect and collaboration among disparate cultures to resolve critical issues including climate change, global warfare, pandemics, and systemic racism (Donnelly, 2013; Willis & Willis, 2015).

Threats to humanity such as escalating racial conflict and economic upheaval underscore the necessity of documenting, analyzing, and applying effective ways to transform harmful patterns (Thésée & Carr, 2012).

Exposure and instruction with a racial equity lens builds students' cultural sensitivity, emotional development, and adult civic engagement (Stephan & Stephan, 2013; Richard, Keen, Hatcher & Pease, 2016).

Distributed leadership and culturally relevant education can broaden skillsets and dispositions of diverse participants in beneficial ways (Leithwood, Mascall & Strauss, 2009; United Nations, 2013).

## Research Question

**RQ1:** How do the participants and leaders perceive their experiences relative to distributed leadership of and participation in an academic and performance arts learning community that seeks to foster cultural appreciation, social justice and global citizenship through teaching about African descendants and their contributions to the world?

**RQ2:** What methods have AADC leaders and participants used to express the excellence of Black culture through Africentric pedagogy and praxis?

## Participants

Using a purposive sampling strategy, 9 past or present members and leaders of the AADC were recruited via a closed Facebook group.

## Procedures

I collected data from semistructured audio-recorded telephone interviews averaging 75 minutes each.

Instrumentation was a researcher-designed interview protocol of 12 open-ended questions, drawn from the conceptual framework and literature review.

## Analysis

I conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data, using an inductive approach.

# Findings for RQ I

Reflections on Africentric teaching and learning experiences were overwhelmingly positive and attributed to leadership:

- *“it takes a very special person and personality to continue to set the bar high”; “she was the vessel...and the vision was able to continue to grow and grow”;*
- *“Professor had a way of including people”.*

Participants perceived that they were part of something historic and essential on their campus and in the community:

- *“[It’s] a highlight...that has stood the test of time”;*
- *“Oh my God, I’m a part of history”;*
- *“it was [another] significant piece that aired on public broadcasting for 10 years after we created it”.*

Participants reported life-changing experiences through overcoming challenges encountered as AADC scholars and leaders, expressed in human rights terms:

- *“I use that in my life to this day”;*
- *“it provided a safe space for me to explore what it means to be a Black woman...to be biracial...to have this history and this legacy”;*
- *“I was always fighting for human rights just to make the company visible”; “marginalization...it’s still being dealt with now; we still have to fight at different levels”.*

## Findings for RQ2

Valuing Black cultural excellence, and creating a responsive, responsible community of co-leaders was a recurrent theme:

- *“I mean, it was just an honor and a privilege”;*
- *“I was professionalizing them”;*
- *“I had a home”;* *“that was my family at IU...we still have very close connections to this day”;*
- *“empowering all of us to find our truth, live our beauty, and let it shine...”*

Experiential learning including historical background and cultural context ensured engagement and relevance plus retention:

- *“that, in and of itself, was a world of experience”;*
- *“I felt lifting”;*
- *“the spark was ignited for me to have a lens to think about who’s telling the story, whose story [it is], and how it [is] told”*

Methods including expressive arts exploration of African centered values and culture vis a vis self and others, which yielded deep learning:

- *“she’s the director of this dance company that is calling my name!”;*
- *“global travels”, “such a welcoming space [where] I could identify,...be free to express, to move, to be embodied...”;*
- *“[it] showed me what the performing arts has to offer not just the community, but the world”.*



## Interpretation

The results of my study addressed the knowledge gap relative to the right to culturally relevant Africentric education and explored the experience of scholars involved in the IU AADC's unique arts and academic immersion.

My findings affirmed Asante's (2011) assertion that Africentrism and Black performance art represent a powerful tool for healing and educating to resist oppressive, racist constructs.

The findings revealed multiple examples of critical race theory in action and described distributed leadership and human rights lessons from AADC experiences.

This outcome aligned with my conceptual framework.

## Limitations

This study was focused on a program with some unique characteristics, at a particular institution.

Based on the data collection process, the absence of nonverbal indicators may have limited the data obtained.

There was a potential for researcher bias because of my previous experience with the group.

## Recommendations

Develop an oral history archive to document additional AADC experiences and support further research.

Expand the focus to study performance content and audience perceptions.

Disseminate findings to stakeholders seeking to increase student engagement, promote anti-racist praxis, and empower leaders.

Stimulate graduate students' interest in conducting evaluative research on culturally relevant pedagogy and praxis in the arts and academics.

Encourage research on human rights aspects of culturally relevant teaching and learning, to preserve indigenous knowledge and eradicate barriers to non-dominant voices in the literature.

Explore fully inclusive education as a component of reparatory justice.

## Social Change Implications

These findings could lead to strategic human rights solutions in an era of heightened racial tensions, economic instability, and public health challenges.

The idea of reparations to heal historic wounds, includes programmatic and curricular offerings as well as cultural truth-telling, which aligns with the experiences of these participants.

Documenting the first U. S. program of its kind effected change by giving voice to participants who are living examples of lasting benefits, even decades after their AADC experiences.

Social change implications to date also include increased understanding across races and cultures through sustained African-centered teaching and learning.

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