

It takes a village: Investigating the scaffolding strategies of writing development to support early literacy among Nova Scotians of African descent communities.

SYLVIA CHANDA KALINDI
Mount Saint Vincent University

SUSAN BRIGHAM
Mount Saint Vincent University

GEORGE FREMPONG
Delmore "Buddy" Daye Learning Institute (DBDLI)

Abstract

Several stakeholders, such as community groups, government officials, parents, guardians, and educators have shown concern about the achievement gap between Nova Scotia learners of African descent and their predominantly White peers. Using the African proverb ‘It takes a village’ as a framework, this study involved parents, extended family members and caregivers of children aged 4 to 6 years to explore the scaffolding strategies employed as well as the experiences of participants when supporting children’s emergent writing skills during COVID-19 pandemic. Survey and focus group sessions demonstrated how participants frequently scaffolded emergent writing using highly effective strategies including Africentric approaches. The importance of ‘It takes a village’ proverb in enhancing literacy development has also been established.

Keywords: Africentric approaches to learning, literacy competence, parent-child interaction, literacy scaffolding strategies, schooling of Black students.

Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right with a strategic social determinant role for civic participation, health, social mobility, and employment outcomes, among other things. For academic success, proficient reading is a crucial foundational skill. In Nova Scotia (NS), students of African descent, in general, experience disproportionately low reading levels from as early as Primary

¹ through to post-secondary, compared with their White peers (Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [NS DEECD], 2020). This attainment gap must be understood within NS’s historical context of segregation, marginalization, and slavery practices that were legalized. While slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1834 and overt forms of segregation were abolished with the passing of the Canadian Human Rights Act in 1977 (African Nova Scotian Affairs [ANSA], 2023), NS is still governed by racist laws as pointed out by a High Court Judge in a recent ruling ‘... is embedded within the systems that govern how our society operates...’

¹ Otherwise known as Kindergarten outside of NS

(Marsman, 2021, p. 45). Systemic racism is prevalent in various service sectors including education and has contributed to the marked racial attainment gaps between students of African descent and White students (Kakembo et al., 2014; Cameron & Jefferies, 2021). The notion of an achievement gap has been contentious due to insinuations that the gap is the result of certain groups having an inferior genetic make-up (Mayor & Suarez, 2019). In view of the negative implications associated with the term ‘achievement gap,’ we use ‘opportunity gap’ because it emphasises systemic differences not individual differences (for details see, Cox, 2021). To enhance the realization of optimal learning outcomes among students of African descent, several stakeholders have collaborated to address the opportunity gaps in education.

In view of this history of suppression, marginalization, and segregation in the education system, this paper explores the rich literacy experiences used by Nova Scotians of African descent including parents, guardians, and caregivers of young children to support emergent literacy writing skills².

The study

This study aims to understand how parents, caregivers, and guardians support writing skills for NS early learners of African descent. Currently there is a lack of research about the use of the Africentric concept ‘It takes a village’ and other support strategies that NS communities of African descent use to enhance the development of writing and literacy skills in their homes (Hamilton-Hinch et al, 2017). Our overall goal is to understand the relevance of the traditional African concept of ‘It takes a village’ in the active engagement of NS families, parents, and community members of African descent to enhance the early literacy skills development of their children. Thus, we surveyed and interviewed participants about the writing scaffolding levels and strategies they employed, the resources they used—including Africentric approaches, and digital devices—and their experiences with providing literacy support.

Research Context

Results of the NS provincial annual assessments in literacy and numeracy show that learners of African descent often perform below the provincial average. The NS provincial annual assessments demonstrate an opportunity gap for learners of African descent from as early as Grade 3, when annual assessments are first administered (Kakembo, et al., 2014; NS DEECD, 2020). Several factors have been attributed to the educational opportunity gaps, most of which are rooted in the history of NS. NS constitutes the largest multigenerational Black Canadian Community dating back 400 years (Mensah, 2010). These Black communities arrived in different waves from as early as the 1600s to fairly recently in the 1920s (for details see Jean-Pierre, 2021; Marsman, 2021; Pachai & Bishop, 2006).

Compared to White settlers—including White immigrants who arrived in later waves of immigration—Black communities were generally allocated inferior quality of land based on complex and non-uniform land laws which made it difficult to secure land titles, thereby reducing access to land-based wealth opportunities (Marsman, 2021; Williams, 2013). Additionally, Black communities across NS were subjected to forcible relocation, denial of public services including well paid jobs, and other racist

² Note that throughout this article, we focus on writing skills only as a narrow representation of the broader concept of literacy.

restrictions, such as spatial and temporal segregation which were supported by the law (Bernard, 2020; BLAC, 1994; Jean-Pierre, 2021; Marsman, 2021; Pachai & Bishop, 2006; Williams, 2013). Slavery and segregation laws perpetuated poverty, high levels of unemployment, and limited access to opportunities and resources among Black communities in NS (Bernard, 2020; Marsman, 2021; Williams, 2013; Willis et al., 2021). As regards school segregation, according to Moreau (2007) all the Education Acts legislated between 1864 and 1952 formally required education for all children from 5 to 16 years and in 1953, the Education Act proclaimed that education would be free for every person over age 5 and under 21 “in the school section in which he resides” (cited in Moreau, 2007, p. 302). An amendment made in 1865 gave authority to the Council of Public Instructions “to separate departments under the same or separate roofs for students of different races and sexes.” Because of the geographical segregation of Black communities “there were no publicly funded schools built for Blacks outside the city of Halifax” (Moreau, 2007, p. 302). In effect, many Black children had no access to schooling or were schooled in under-resourced schools that were built through funds raised by Black churches (for details see: BLAC, 1994; Moreau, 2007). The last segregated school, in Lincolnville, closed in 1983 (ANSA, 2023; BLAC, 1994). Even while physical racial integration is now in place, access to quality education is still limited through institutional barriers including differential treatment and the absence of culturally relevant course content, among other things (Bernard, 2020, BLAC, 1994, Jean-Pierre et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2021).

Note that this paper also includes other Nova Scotians of African descent not associated with the descendants of enslaved Black communities, such as recent immigrants from various parts of Africa and other parts of the African diaspora. Nova Scotians of African descent have differing levels of access to power and resources depending on conditions through which they came to NS and other factors related to class and economic status (Williams, 2013).

Against this background, we note that opportunity gaps in education are a result of the marginalization of learners of African descent. Historically and currently racial and cultural oppression, as well as inequities in the formal education system have led to disparities in student performance and various barriers have prevented learners from fully participating in society in general and the school system specifically (BLAC, 1994; Cox, 2021; Parris & Brigham, 2010). The opportunity gap has been fuelled by unemployment and poverty in the Black communities. For example, household surveys indicate an increase in children living in poverty in NS, and also that the province has one of the highest child poverty rates where 39.6% of children of African descent live in poverty (Frank & Fisher, 2020). The varying levels of access to power, opportunities and resources accorded to the Black population in NS have clear impacts on the difference observed in literacy proficiency skills. Hence the socioeconomic differences within the population of Nova Scotians of African descent tends to correspond with literacy attainment levels. For example, in a study that disaggregated the literacy performance of non-White students, found that the literacy skills of Nova Scotians of African descent as a general group were significantly better than the African Nova Scotians (ANS) who have generational ties to slavery and segregation in NS (for details see Cox, 2021). It is important to note that the trauma and injury experienced during enslavement have also left intergenerational manifestations of trauma (DeGruy, 2005).

Since 2020, educational disruptions due to COVID-19 lockdowns and the associated mounting learning gaps for disadvantaged students have further exacerbated

existing vulnerabilities of NS learners of African descent (Krause et al., 2022; Whitley et al., 2022). For example, during the first wave of the pandemic, on March 16, 2020, NS implemented a series of public health measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The Chief Medical Officer issued strict mandates such as insisting people stay at home, mandatory wearing of masks in public spaces, and frequent rapid testing for the virus (Communications Nova Scotia, 2020). While these measures helped to keep COVID-19 cases in the province low, the measures led to children doing their schooling at home for various periods between 2020 – 2022, which resulted in very limited instructional hours between the students and teachers. Across Canada, weekly instructional hours ranged from one to twelve for kindergarten to grade nine, and two to three hours for students in grades ten to twelve (Aurini & Davies, 2021). Research shows that the loss of instructional time experienced during the pandemic cannot adequately be addressed by online instruction (van de Werfhorst, 2021), and this was exacerbated by socioeconomic inequalities in some communities and the schools' composition, especially those with a relatively high share of disadvantaged children (Engzell et al., 2021). Coupled with the lack of or limited access to instruction by teachers was the impact on the provision of home literacy support by parents who were required to take on new parental roles and responsibilities during lockdown (Beckman et al., 2019; Garbe et al., 2020; van de Werfhorst, 2021; Whitley et al., 2022). Parents' engagement in their children's education was crucial.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which recognizes that “a person is a person through their relationship with others” (Swanson, 2009, p. 11). In other words, while in many societies, including Canada, differences have been capriciously socially constructed and assumed to be normal, in Ubuntu, a conscious effort is fostered to reverse that idea and instead bring people together with the recognition that we are all inextricably bound up together (Tutu, 1999).

The adage of ‘It takes a village,’ reflects the critical role community and extended family members play in children's upbringing, because raising a child is not the sole responsibility of parents (Chansa-Kabali, 2004; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1984). Across the African continent, the proverb is expressed differently in various languages, but all allude to the importance of the community in a child's upbringing. For example, in Zambia, the Tongas say ‘Mwana ula komezyegwa a munzi woonse’ meaning ‘A child is raised by the whole village,’ while a Swahili proverb says, ‘One hand does not raise a child.’ Generally, ‘It takes a village’ suggests that parents, extended family members, and the community must work together to nurture and support children's development including their learning. In our study, we investigate whether our research participants are aware of this concept and its meaning, especially, regarding early literacy development. In the spirit of ‘It takes a village,’ in this paper, ‘parents’ include parents, extended family members, guardians, caregivers, and community members.

The Africentric³ view of ‘It takes a village’ relies on members of the community to teach complex skills to younger members through direct and indirect instruction and modelling of behaviors deemed appropriate in the community. This view is consistent with Vygotsky's social cultural theory, which asserts that children build complex

³ Mullings et al. (2021) refer to Africentricity as a pillar globally recognized to honour, centre and protect African ancestral knowledge systems, ways of being and practices.

competencies like writing, through scaffolding as they interact with adults. Adults help children by offering comments and explanations as well as demonstrations so that the children can eventually complete tasks that they could not have previously done independently (Skibbe et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1978).

To capture how changes in a society affect parental engagement in children's education (e.g., impact of COVID-19 on home-literacy practices) we incorporated Bronfenbrenner's ecological model which postulates that a child is influenced by everything in the surrounding environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The ecological contexts in the four inter-related systems (i.e., the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem), starting from the child's immediate environment to broader societal contexts influence a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Considering that interactions with the macrosystem impact on the literacy development of children, our focus here is on how the school system, representing the macrosystem, does not adequately support the writing practices of NS children of African descent. Racism and discrimination related to intersecting markers of identity also contribute to the challenges experienced by Black children in the education system.

Parent-child interaction and emergent writing skills development

In a child's life, exploration of print, and making marks begins very early (Levin & Bus, 2003; Puranik & Lonigan, 2011) and the home environment provides many opportunities for developing early writing skills (Aram & Levin 2002; Neumann et al., 2009; Neumann & Neumann, 2010). The home provides the sociocultural interactions (Vygotsky, 1978) through which children learn that print communicates meaning as they engage in a variety of writing activities including pretend writing, name writing, and copying environmental print (Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Levin & Bus, 2003). Research suggests that while writing is a challenging task for children, parents and other adults can play a critical role in supporting writing skill development by providing resources like writing materials (Aram & Levin, 2002; Burns & Casbergue, 1992; Kalindi et al., 2018; Neumann & Neumann, 2010), digital devices, learning apps (Kalindi & Metsala, 2019) and incorporating Africentric approaches (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2017). Also important is the need for parental support to culminate in transfer of responsibility as children increase their ability to work independently on a problem-solving task (Neitzel & Stright, 2003).

While it is well understood that parents are crucial in promoting the literacy development of their children, it is important to evaluate the type and quality of the parents' support strategies, in terms of their effectiveness in enhancing early literacy skill development. Aram and Levin (2002/4) conducted a study⁴ in which they observed Hebrew parents during a writing activity with their children to determine the nature and variety of the scaffolding strategies they used. The authors observed a positive effect on children's literacy skills whenever parents used higher levels of scaffolding (e.g., giving visual cues such as tracing a letter shape with a finger on the table) as opposed to lower-level types of scaffolding during the writing activities. They organized the nature of parental scaffolding into categories such as print mediation and literate mediation. In each category, Aram and Levin (2002/4) developed a scale that ordered the scaffolding strategies from low to high level regarding the effect of the support in

⁴ Participants in this study resided in an Israeli Development town. Such towns typically comprised poor, peripheral settlements of low SES.

facilitating the child's success on a targeted skill. The print mediation scale, the focus of this research, examines scaffolding of letter shapes and ranges from low (parent writes the letter or changes the child writing) to high support (parent monitors and encourages the child to write a letter). In those studies, involving parent-child dyads, Aram and Levin (2002/4) indicated that the level of parental writing support during joint writing activities was positively related to emergent literacy ability. In line with Aram and Levin's (2002/4) findings, studies that used this writing mediation scale in China, US, and Zambia, after making appropriate adaptations, found similar results (Kalindi et al., 2018; Lin et al., 2009; Skibbe et al., 2013). Note that for the study conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, the children were a little older (in grade 2) while 'parents' also involved older siblings, extended family members, neighbours and some community members in line with the Ubuntu philosophy (for details see Kalindi et al., 2018). We therefore used the print mediation scale to determine exactly *how* NS parents of African descent support the writing related literacy activities of their children.

COVID-19 & the home literacy environment

The lock down and closure of schools in mid-March of 2020 and again in April of 2021 impacted the daily lives and routines of Nova Scotian families. While school children had their own struggles to cope with, studies highlight that some of the greatest educational struggles were experienced by parents and caregivers (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2022). On one hand, it is worth noting that some parents felt this was a great opportunity to spend time with the children and connect with their schoolwork (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Garbe et al., 2020). On the other hand, Bernard (2020) indicates how some families from ANS communities could not afford the privilege of staying home or working from home as they hold frontline jobs or manual labour jobs. She adds that considering that generally many ANS families live in small multi-generational homes or shared living spaces, this compounded into what Bernard (2020) referred to as a collision of two pandemics. As regards providing alternative face-to-face (f2f) learning, the rapid shift to remote learning resulted in significant responsibility for learning being placed on parents. Some challenges that impacted parental involvement, especially in remote areas, included a lack of economic resources, lack of internet access, lack of technology and interest in using technology, and having low self-efficacy (Beckman et al., 2019; Garbe et al., 2020). Children's exposure to screens were highest during the pandemic as screens provided learners with access to instruction by teachers, social interactions (e.g., with extended family members and friends), and interactive playtime (Hartshorne et al., 2021). Given these realities, we were interested in determining the possession and usage of digital devices in the homes, including the parents' perceptions of using these resources.

Research Methodology

A mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods enhances uncovering complementarity, convergent, and discord in the findings (Hussein, 2009). To allow for increased and deeper understanding of the 'It takes a village' phenomenon, we used a quantitative approach, which is a measurement of data carried out through scientific calculations derived from a sample of people asked to answer questions in a survey or questionnaire (Creswell, 2010). Some of the survey questions employed were adapted from Home Literacy Environment studies (e.g., Gerde et al., 2012; Puranik et al., 2018) while questions on strategies of writing

scaffolding employed were based on Aram and Levin's (2002/4) writing mediation scale (see also, Skibbe et al., 2013).

Our qualitative data set consists of an interpretive set of material practices by turning the world into a series of interviews, conversations, representations, and recordings, among other things (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative studies allow researchers to view the world from a naturalistic perspective and make interpretations. Qualitative approaches enhance a deeper understanding of a social phenomenon, such as home literacy practices of parents and their children, and research questions involving 'how' and 'why' further heighten one's understanding (Yin et al., 2017).

Recruitment

Participants were recruited with the help of the Delmore 'Buddy' Daye Learning Institute (DBDLI), a non-profit organization advocating for improved learning experiences for ANS learners, as well as other non-profit organizations that have African Canadian members and that serve this community (e.g., churches). Emails were also sent to day care centres, libraries, and schools across the province to raise awareness of the study. We employed purposeful snowball sampling method to recruit parents of children who they identify to be of African descent aged 2 – 6 years old. This means that while some parents were not of African descent (3.6%), their children are. Additionally, parents needed to reside in NS at the time of data collection, and they had to be 19 years or older. Also, the participants needed to have had social interaction with children such as through parenting, or providing childcare, grandparenting or guardianship of children. Due to the unpredictable nature of pandemic restrictions and the requirements stipulated by the research ethics board at Mount Saint Vincent University all data collection had to be done remotely. As a result of this, participants needed to have access to a smart phone, tablet or computer, and a reliable internet connection.

Data collection procedure

University research ethics approval was obtained from our institution. Potential participants expressed interest to participate in the study by emailing the first author who responded by sending participants a Limesurvey link. The Limesurvey link contained additional information about the study and included the option of consenting to be part of this study by checking a box before completing the survey items. The 20-minute survey was completed anonymously and at the end of the survey, participants interested in receiving a token of appreciation (a \$15 Walmart e-gift card) were asked to email the DBDLI stating the time they completed the survey. DBDLI then verified with the first author before emailing the e-gift card to the participant.

For the second stage of data collection, i.e., online focus group discussions (FGD), the first author emailed everyone who had completed the online survey and had expressed interest in participating in the study, inviting them to join an online FGD. That email contained brief information about the study with a Doodle link (a meeting scheduling website) for participants to select suitable time slots. After signing up, participants were invited to a 60 – 90 minutes Teams video meeting for a FGD. Before commencing the FGD, participants were again asked to verbally consent to participating in the study. The FGD comprised open-ended questions drawn from survey responses and participants were asked to share their experiences and give perceptions regarding concepts like 'It takes a village.'

To capture the participants' perceptions of their children's writing level, participants were asked to indicate their children's ability to write their names (see Gerde et al., 2012; Puranik et al., 2018), ranging from minimal knowledge of letters (i.e., 1 = refusal to write; 2 = scribbling; 3 = drawing as writing), writing strategies showing conventional writing (4 = scribble writing; 5 = writing letter-like shapes; 6 = writing that combines at least a letter and letter-like shapes), to demonstrating use of letters when writing (7 = writing that includes 2 or more letters but without letter-like shapes; 8 = all name letters captured but in incorrect order, and 9 = correct spelling of child's name). Participants also rated how often they engaged in literacy related activities before the children were in Grade 1 (e.g., reading books and labels together; writing letters of the alphabet; and the likelihood of incorporating Africentric approaches [such as using African proverbs, games, songs, and art] among other things) on a 6-point scale (1 = never, 2 = almost never, 3 = monthly, 4 = twice a week, 5 = weekly, 6 = every other day).

To identify the nature of scaffolding used when teaching how to print a letter shape, participants rated the degree to which a given description reflected their scaffolding style, on a 5-point scale ranging from '*not at all like me*' to '*very much like me*'. They also had the option of indicating whether the described scaffolding strategy was '*not applicable*' for the child's age. Examples of scaffolding descriptions include, 'I write the letter or change the child's writing myself' and 'I encourage the child to think of clues' (see illustration of scaffolding levels in Kalindi et al., 2018; Skibbe et al., 2013).

Some unstructured survey questions were about the participants' perceptions of Africentric concepts and literacy teaching practices including how they felt COVID-19 affected the teaching or scaffolding process.

Participants

A total of 84 participants who met all inclusion criteria completed the online survey. The participants checked off their gender as follows: 33 female (39%), 28 male (33%), 0 non-binary (0%) while 23 respondents did not disclose their gender (27%). The average age of the participants' children was 3 years 8 months ($M = 51.14$ months, $SD = 15.78$ months) while the age range of participants was 19 to 79 years with the majority (about 78%) less than 40 years old. Participants indicated that 46% of their children were in Day care and Pre-primary programs, 39% were in grade 1, while 12% were in informal babysitting care settings. Furthermore, both male and female participants indicated that 75% used English while 5% used both English and French when speaking to their children at home.

Parent demographic detail showed that more than 45% of the participants had university education (i.e., 45% fathers and 51% mothers). At least 23% engaged in professional work; 18 (21%) of the female respondents were small business owners. The average years of parenting experience was 2.05 on a six-point scale ranging from less than 5 years (1) to over 40 years (6). The majority of participants (79%) had less than 10 years parenting experience. The participants in the FGDs were drawn from the pool of respondents who completed the survey.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 26.0 software. We used descriptive statistical analysis to calculate the frequency, Mean and Standard Deviation

(SD) of parents' demographic characteristics and parent-child joint writing and reading related activities. For qualitative data, during transcriptions of the focus group recording sessions, all participant identifying information was removed. To identify, analyze, and report patterns observed from the data, we used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008). After reviewing the data, the first author generated initial codes, identified themes, and following numerous conversations with the other authors, the themes were refined, and further defined.

Results

In this section, we discuss the resources and scaffolding strategies participants said they used during the adult-child literacy interaction sessions. Then we examine the experiences and struggles of providing literacy support (including during COVID-19 lockdown). Following that, we discuss the participants' understandings of 'It takes a village.' For some survey items, responses are presented quantitatively and qualitatively.

Resources and scaffolding strategies used by participants

Before highlighting the resources and scaffolding strategies parents used, we share the writing ability levels of the children. When asked about their children's abilities to write their names, participants' responses ranged from 19% of them stating that their children have minimal knowledge of letters (i.e., refusing to engage in writing, scribbling, and drawing), 36% said that their children's writing strategies show conventional writing, and 45% said that their children have writing strategies that demonstrate use of letters when writing (e.g., correct spelling of the child's name).

When asked about use of digital devices during the COVID-19 lockdown, participants indicated that most of their homes (90%) owned a digital device for children to use during literacy related activities and about 46% of those homes had 4 to 6 devices per household. Using a 5-point scale ranging from never (1) to very often (5) most participants (35%) indicated using devices (e.g., smart phones, tablets, and computers) very often, while 4% said they have never used such devices.

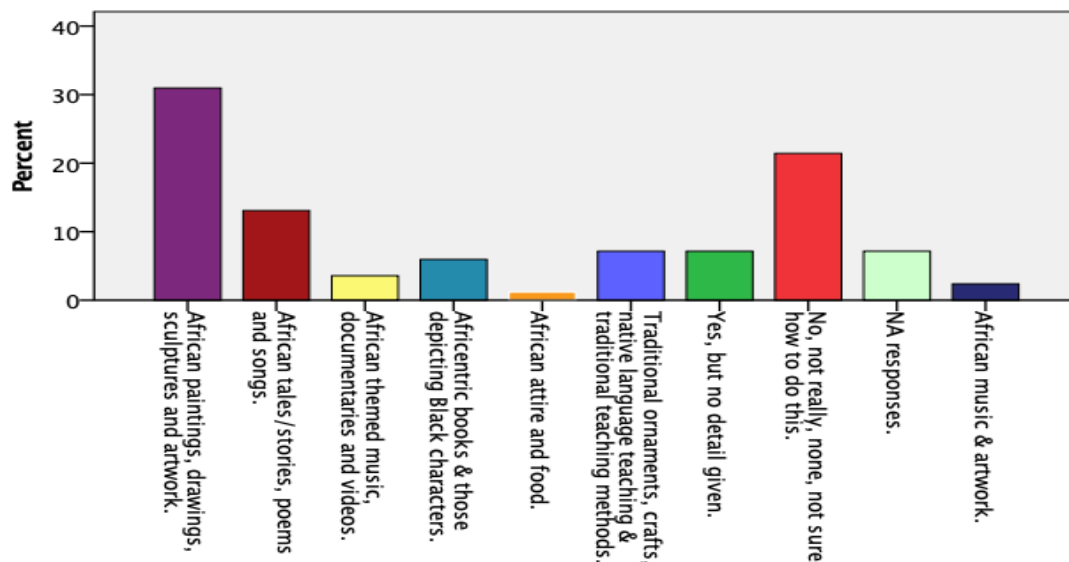
The nature of adult-child literacy interactions informs the types of resources participants use to scaffold reading or writing. Table 1 below, indicates the frequency of participants' engagement with home literacy practices with their children.

Table 1
Frequency of home literacy activities

Home literacy practices: type and questions	Frequency of activity (%)					
	Never	Almost never	Monthly	Twice a month	Weekly	Every other day
Parent helping the child to learn letters of the alphabet	0.0	7.1	10.7	2.4	27.4	52.4
Reading books, signs, and labels together	0.0	1.2	6.0	14.3	39.3	39.3
Play word games	1.2	3.6	11.9	16.7	44.0	22.6
Write letters of the alphabet	2.4	2.4	2.4	8.3	20.2	64.3
Write numbers	1.2	1.2	7.1	7.1	23.8	59.5
Do math related activities (e.g., mazes, number pictures etc.)	0.0	6.0	16.7	11.9	35.7	29.8
Incorporate Africentric approaches (games, songs, proverbs to scaffold literacy).	1.2	13.1	14.3	19.0	40.5	11.9

In view of the frequency with which most parents incorporated Africentric approaches to teach early literacy skills, we were interested in possible associations between this variable and other common home literacy practices (in Table 1, above). Results showed significant small to moderate correlations between Africentric approaches and all other home literacy practices ($r_s = 0.32$ — 0.42 , $p < 0.01$). We were also interested in the specific Africentric approaches and resources used to scaffold writing, reading, oral language and creativity. Participants' responses varied widely (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Responses to a question on Africentric approaches and resources used to scaffold writing, reading, oral language, and creativity in children



While Figure 1 focuses specifically on Africentric approaches and resources used to scaffold writing, reading, oral language, and creativity in children, Table 2 shows the scaffolding strategy levels adopted by parents during all parent-child writing activities. The Table highlights levels of scaffolding strategies (ranging from low to high, in terms of enhancing effective competent literacy skills development), including the likely frequency of employing a particular strategy when helping the child to print a letter shape. Parents mostly adopted high print scaffolding strategies when helping their children to print letter shapes. In separate analyses, we were interested to determine possible associations between the print mediation scale and children’s writing skills. In view of COVID-19 restrictions at the time (i.e., a lack of f2f contact with children), we used the parents’ rating of children’s writing skills as a proxy for children’s writing ability to determine correlations. We observed small to moderate associations ($r_s = 0.24 - 0.53, p < 0.01$) when high strategies of print mediation were adopted during writing related activities such as writing numbers, writing a child’s name, and doing math related mazes.

Table 2
Scaffolding levels preferred by participants during joint reading and writing sessions

Print Mediation practice levels	Frequency of activity (%)					
	Not applicable	Not at all like me	A bit like me	Quite like me	Much like me	Very much like me

1. I provide no assistance because the child writes using invented (unconventional) spelling. (Low).	15.5	36.9	13.1	8.3	16.7	9.5
2. I write the letter or change the child's letter myself.	13.1	22.6	14.3	11.9	17.9	20.2
3. I provide an example of the letter and ask the child to copy it.	9.5	4.8	4.8	16.7	26.2	38.1
4. I give a visual clue such as tracing the letter with a finger on a table or in the air, or verbal hints (e.g., 'P is like a circle with a line attached to it').	3.6	1.2	7.1	19.0	27.4	41.7
5. I encourage the child to think of clues (e.g., 'Do you remember what a V looks like?'). (High).	3.6	1.2	3.6	19.0	23.8	48.8

Note. N = 84. Writing scaffolding strategies presented at high- or low-level mediation of Print Mediation.

Participants' experiences of providing literacy support during COVID-19 lockdown

In view of the shift from f2f learning to remote learning recommended by the provincial Chief Medical Officer of NS, we asked parents how this 'shift' affected their literacy-interactive sessions at home, using the online survey and FGD sessions. In the survey and FGD sessions we asked participants how the COVID-19 lockdown affected their literacy-interactive sessions at home. The survey responses were analyzed thematically, and results were grouped in six themes: parent struggles; child struggles; parent positive feelings; COVID-19 beneficial to children; no significant effect; miscellaneous, e.g., effect not directly related to literacy development. Responses are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Impact of COVID-19 on parents' attempts to support children's literacy development in their homes

COVID-19 impact on parents' attempts to support children's literacy development at home	Frequency	Percentage
Responses capturing parent struggles.		
Priority conflicts between work and home schooling	9	10.7
Adapting to online learning		
Accessing online gadgets/tools		
Responses highlighting children's struggles.		

Wanted to play, bored Always distracted Lazy, needing a lot of cajoling	15	17.9
Responses capturing parents' positive feelings. More time spent with children Was an opportunity to interact, train, and teach	30	35.7
Responses indicating COVID-19 was beneficial to children. They enjoyed using digital devices Their literacy competence improved They had access to a variety of online materials	8	9.5
Responses indicating no significant effect of COVID-19. No effect. None.	14	16.7
Miscellaneous E.g., cited effect not directly related literacy development such as effect on children's social development.	8	9.5
TOTAL	84	100

During FGD sessions, participants highlighted various experiences and struggles they had when trying to support their children's reading and writing. Not surprising, the role of technology and the Internet were what contributed to feelings of connection during lock-down, which enhanced their children's learning. Having access to these allowed children to stay connected to extended family members or to community resources. For example, Sade (pseudonyms are used to protect identity of participants), shared her children's virtual literacy experience with their grandmother using face time on a computer. Sade: "My oldest daughter is very fond of her grandma. She is always telling her the books she is reading. Like, 'Grandma I am going to read this to you, today...Grandma, I learned this today.'"

Zuri, who is relatively new to NS, acknowledged some challenges but expressed appreciation for online learning experiences and the support of family centres in her community that helped lighten the load. She says: "The pandemic affected everything. Children stayed a long time at home. It was boring. But all family centres around me were supportive.... They helped prepare activities. I registered in this activity online and got some papers to do at home. We learnt a lot at home or online."

Amara, who works closely with different ANS households, cited the various struggles she was aware of that families in different circumstances experienced with

lack of access to technology and the Internet, which she suggests ultimately affected children's learning.

Amara: COVID-19 impacted in a negative way for a lot of the households. Both parents having to work meant they couldn't monitor the online schooling. You know, our families are normally bigger, which would mean the household is busier. Maybe we only have one computer and no internet access. For most rural communities, internet may not be, you know, a thing in the household. So, they couldn't do online learning.

Several participants talked about the importance of children socializing and getting outside, which benefit their wellbeing. Therefore, being deprived of these opportunities during lockdown impacted their children's learning. For instance, Zuri, who had ensured her children learned online and benefitted from the family centre in her community, added "but it was difficult, you know? The children need children to play together."

Abina, picking up on the point of the need for children to socialize underscored the dire consequences of social isolation during lockdown.

Abina: It's not even only their literacy, it's their mental health. It's everything. Because our children never got to go out... Most of the kids are emotionally and mentally breaking down right now. Nobody should be learning about anything right now.

Interestingly, one parent, Shani, shared that the lockdown was an opportunity to be more focused on learning at home rather than in school where there are too many distractions.

Shani: I personally feel like it might have been a godsent for some of the children. Because a lot of children learn better when there's less distraction. And helping the children at home, learning at their kitchen tables may have been a better option for them. However, a lot of parents aren't trained to be teachers and they don't have the knack for that. But in terms of impacting literacy, I would say it was in a positive way. Because most of us want our children to learn and we work hard to make sure our children are succeeding.

Ultimately, what participants are generally saying is that connection was critical during lockdown. Having access to technology and the Internet to connect and socialize with family-centres and extended family members enhanced learning. For Shani, the lockdown provided her an opportunity to connect with her children at the kitchen table without the usual distractions her children experience at school. Conversely, participants caution that lack of access to the technology and Internet and hence connections to their teachers and others during lockdown can be detrimental. Amara reminds us that families of African descent may face more challenges regarding access to technology and Internet and one-to-one attention to children, while Shani adds that "most of us (families of African descent) want our children to learn and we work hard to make sure our children are succeeding."

It takes a village

Parents were asked about perceptions of the proverb 'It takes a village' in open ended questions in the survey and it was also a focus group interview question. Survey responses were grouped into four themes: 1) 'family', 'extended family' and

‘community’ support; 2) what is required to realise the benefits of ‘It takes a village’; 3) different understandings of the proverb; and 4) the proverb cannot be realised. See Table 4 below.

Table 4

Parents’ perception of ‘It takes a village’

Understanding of ‘It takes a village.’	Frequency	Percentage
Responses capturing ‘family’ ‘extended family’ or community support.		
Raising a child involves both family and extended family, friends, and community members	56	66.67
Responses highlighting what is needed to actualise the benefits of this Africentric concept.		
Good support systems, love and care, effort and experience, quiet environment, and effective communication among all involved parties	5	5.95
Responses expressing a different understanding of the proverb.		
For example, ‘Let’s go to the village, its simple than the city,’ or ‘A village-like environment.’	22	26.19
Response indicating the proverb cannot be realised.		
It is merely a slogan! Meaningless and far from reality. No one offers to help.	1	1.19
TOTAL	84	100

Comments surrounding the notion of ‘It takes a village’ during FGD sessions were diverse, but all were making a similar point about the value of community learning resources, such as Elders, community libraries, and programs for supporting families. For example, Nala, shared how she and her family have benefited from the concept of ‘It takes a village.’

Nala: I'm of mixed race. Umm, from my White perspective we are very reserved, but from the African Nova Scotian perspective, you know we have literally like the saying ‘It takes a village.’ We have the day-care staff, the community library staff, church staff, ... Elders in the community. In this community we're very family oriented, have access to a Family Resource Centre, so there is a lot of ‘hands-on’ in all different areas of raising a child and supporting you right from, you know, ...right through to school and literacy programs and mentorships and things like that. Everybody knows us. Everyone's willing to, you know, feed us, or play with the kids, or entertain. So, it's very much community led.

Other participants who have not been in NS for very long are looking for ways to develop a collective and sustain a sense of community around their culture, which can support children's learning. For example, Eshe, underscored how the Nigerian community in NS, to which she belongs, is working to support their children.

Eshe: My tribe is kind of getting solidified here in NS. We recently started a women's group where we chat and come up with ideas to teach our kids. Last year we did our new Yam festival where we had our kids dance the 'Igbo' dance, do 'Igbo' games and activities. Everything was done in 'Igbo,' our dialect. This is for our kids to understand our culture and how we celebrate events like Easter back home.

Another participant, Makena, who is new to the province, expressed her wish for community where she could develop trust and belonging to support her child's learning: "I'm finding it quite difficult because I don't know very many people in my community and I don't know if I would trust the people around me, umm, with any sort of help regarding my child."

Discussion

In view of the prevalent opportunity gaps that learners of African descent experience in the school system, it is crucial to understand the value and relevance of traditional African concepts like 'It takes a village.' It is also important to identify the scaffolding strategies parents employ during literacy interactive sessions with their children since their strategies are providing their children with culturally relevant opportunities not acknowledged or utilized at schools.

The findings of this study indicate the importance attached to the Africentric concept 'It takes a village' and also highlights the diverse resources including scaffolding strategies used by Nova Scotian parents of African descent in home literacy instruction. Although a significant number of parents scaffolded literacy using Africentric approaches (e.g., books that reflect people of African descent, African tales/stories, poems and songs) only once a week, it was interesting to note that for the parents (22%) who never engaged in African themed songs, proverbs, or games to teach early reading and writing, explained they did not do so because they were not sure how to do so. Those who did use Africentric approaches were drawing on their own personal experiences and/or knowledge passed down to them within their home (e.g., from parents, grandparents, previous generations) or community (e.g., a local ANS community or Nigerian immigrant community). This points to the fact that certain home and community-based knowledge provide valuable culturally relevant instructional strategies and learning skills reflective of the participants' children, family and community interests and activities. It also reminds us that certain legitimate Africentric knowledge, including languages and cultures, have been systematically left out of the formal school curriculum (Cameron & Jefferies, 2021). Eurocentricity and the 'dominance of whiteness' have crowded to the very edges of the boundaries around the so-called legitimate body of knowledge in schools leaving no room for alternative forms of ways of knowing and being in schools (Dei, 1996, p. 82). If schools acknowledged and valued a broader range of knowledge and pedagogical methods, built connections, and collaborated with families and local communities, parents would be able to share their knowledge and strategies with others (i.e., teachers, other parents/guardians, community educators) to benefit all children, not just those of African descent.

With regards to scaffolding, the majority of parents indicated they employed a high-level means of support strategies (e.g., giving verbal and visual clues as well as urging the child to think of clues) when teaching how to print letter shapes. This is an important finding as studies of parental scaffolding have emphasized adopting strategies that encourage children to assume an active role in the learning process, which is associated to high academic achievement (Neitzel & Stright, 2003). Frequent use of high-level strategies of print support by our participants also points to the likely dedication of the NS parents of African descent to ensuring their children acquire the foundational literacy skills and do well in school. Also, this points to the possibility of our sample being a lot more aware of the processes of emergent writing and reading development.

The participants' experiences with providing literacy support to their children during the lockdown varied and were consistent with other studies (Engzell et al., 2021; Garbe et al., 2020; Fontanesi et al., 2020; Whitley et al., 2022). Factors such as the age, level of education, and gender of the parents/guardians, as well as their socio-economic status, geographical location, and a sense of belonging in a community influence how receptive parents are to new information. For example, research has shown that parents with a lot of formal education can easily navigate new requirements such as engaging in online learning because they are generally well informed on the benefits of such practices (Engzell et al., 2021; Neumann & Neumann, 2010). It is therefore not surprising that 90% of our participants indicated that they had a digital device in their home which they often used to support early reading and writing. The experiences of participants when adapting to online teaching/learning included struggles (such as children's lack of motivation), but also some participants felt that adapting to online learning was beneficial to their children and made the learning experience pleasant. For example, most parents indicated during the FGDs that while COVID-19 lockdown was difficult to endure, they wouldn't have traded the time they spent with their children for anything (see also Fontanesi et al., 2020; Garbe et al., 2020). Other participants also highlighted the challenge of adapting to online teaching when families lived in shared multigenerational homes and engaged in jobs that required them to work through the lockdown (Bernard, 2020). For example, frontline workers had to work long hours during the pandemic implying they had no time to provide support for online learning for their children.

It was interesting to note regarding the proverb 'It takes a village,' most participants identified with it and expressed an understanding of what it implies. Also, some participants described conditions under which the proverb can be enacted and can be beneficial for their children's development, for example in an environment where all parties trust and communicate effectively with each other. Descriptions from about 25% of our participants indicated they did not have a clear understanding of 'It takes a village' proverb, while one response questioned the 'reality' of the proverb saying it was 'merely a slogan.' Since child development does not occur in a vacuum but thrives best through the interactions established within social cultural contexts (Vygostky, 1978), we feel it would be beneficial to support efforts that enliven this concept and enhance good social interactions, which is also important for people's general mental health.

Some of our participants explained how 'It takes a village' was enacted on a virtual platform where parents, siblings, extended family members and friends actively

engaged in reading with children, doing writing activities together, and engaging in virtual literacy related games, stories, and songs (Miyata et al., 2022). The lockdown did not allow for f2f interaction but the fact that people sought alternative means of accomplishing these goals (e.g., via online platforms) shows that more can be done to strengthen the concept of 'It takes a village,' even in a pandemic.

Conclusion

The Africentric concept 'It takes a village' enables different stakeholders to work together to support and ensure competent development of appropriate skills like writing/literacy in young children. Since the Nova Scotian parents of African descent in our study are keen to use and learn about other ways of scaffolding literacy skills using Africentric approaches, more research should be done to understand the value of Africentric literacy intervention materials which could inform educational policy and the development of educational resources for use in families, communities, and schools.

The proverb 'It Takes a Village' elicited diverse interpretations from participants, such as a call to communal responsibility or a mere slogan. Understanding the different interpretations and applications of the 'It Takes a Village' concept could provide valuable insights for community-based early literacy programs. More should be done by schools to work more closely with communities to identify how some vulnerable families could be better supported by the 'village.' Our findings also highlight the important role of community and technology in supporting literacy development, specifically, writing skills in children. They also underline the challenges parents, specifically parents of African descent, face when circumstances disrupt regular learning routines, such as a pandemic. Particularly, because, as noted above, some ANS families could not afford to stay home or work from home because of the nature of their work and some live in small multi-generational homes (Bernard, 2020). Further research could explore how to more effectively harness community resources to support early literacy development. For example, how digital devices could be optimized to promote literacy development using Africentric approaches. This is crucial for Nova Scotian communities of African descent as it allows for a more relatable curriculum.

The study has provided a snapshot of the literacy practices among households of African descent with preschool-aged children. It offers valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and community leaders in supporting early literacy development within the community context. The findings also underscore the resilience and resourcefulness of parents of African descent in ensuring their children's literacy development amid challenging circumstances, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In conclusion, literacy development is a communal effort, and it truly does take a village. More importantly, it takes an understanding and responsive village to ensure that every child can develop their literacy skills in a supportive and nurturing environment. We argue that this understanding through intentional applied research can serve as a useful transformative tool to dismantle the ongoing racist education system.

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Author Biographies

Sylvia Chanda Kalindi obtained her PhD degree in Developmental Psychology and is an Instructor at the Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). She worked in different portfolios as a postdoc fellow and is a recipient of the Mitacs Accelerate Fellowship - Industrial Postdoctoral Fellow. Focusing largely on child development, Chanda's research interests include exploring literacy development and early literacy support, in the form of parent/family/community support including support rooted in Africentric views as well as technology related support. She conducted and presented her research in Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America. Her work has been published in journals such as *Frontiers of Psychology*, *Reading Research Quarterly* and *Computers and School*.

George Frempong, Ph.D., is the inaugural Director of Research at the Delmore "Buddy" Daye Learning Institute (DBDLI), a Non-for-Profit Organization in Nova Scotia, Canada, with expertise in Africentric research. Over the past five years, he has provided exemplary leadership for the institute, developing Ubuntu-inspired vision and collaboration, leading to several transformative research initiatives. Dr. Frempong received his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, and his M.A. in Mathematics Education, both from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Over the past three decades, he has worked as a classroom teacher, university professor and researcher with publications in accredited journals that have provided an understanding of how education systems should function to provide opportunities for all learners to succeed.

Susan M. Brigham, PHD is Full Professor in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). Her research interests include adult education, higher education, immigration, critical theories, and arts-informed research methods. Susan has conducted research and presented her work in North America, the

Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Europe. Her co-edited books include *Adult Education and Learning in Canada: Critical Legacies* (2021); *Building on Critical Traditions: Adult Education and Learning in Canada* (2013) and *Africentricity in Action* (2012). She is associate editor with the *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, the *Alberta Journal of Educational Research (AJER)*, and *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*.