

# “Ain’t I Got a Right to the Tree of Life?”: Examining Special Education through the Application of Afro-Humanity

Joy Banks, Kmt Shockley and Courtney Wilkerson

Volume 28, Number 2, 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082921ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082921ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Banks, J., Shockley, K. & Wilkerson, C. (2021). “Ain’t I Got a Right to the Tree of Life?”: Examining Special Education through the Application of Afro-Humanity. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 28(2), 138–149. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082921ar>

Article abstract

*In this manuscript we chart the intersection of dis/ability and Afro-humanity. We propose that Afro-humanity is a contextual paradigm within African-centred ideology that can be applied to explore the ways in which disability may be perceived differently when applying a specific, cultural philosophical lens. We also explore the process of decolonization, whereby African American parents, with a child identified with an intellectual disability, reorient themselves to a way of thinking that is more emancipatory. The parents act in a way that challenge concepts about human cognitive variance and notions of dis/ability in school settings. Drawing on such a model as Afro-humanity, we argue for a more equitable approach to community and educational engagement for Black students labelled with dis/abilities.*

## *“Ain’t I Got a Right to the Tree of Life?”: Examining Special Education through the Application of Afro-Humanity*

---

JOY BANKS  
George Mason University

KMT SHOCKLEY  
University of Houston

COURTNEY WILKERSON  
Howard University

*In this manuscript we chart the intersection of dis/ability and Afro-humanity. We propose that Afro-humanity is a contextual paradigm within African-centred ideology that can be applied to explore the ways in which disability may be perceived differently when applying a specific, cultural philosophical lens. We also explore the process of decolonization, whereby African American parents, with a child identified with an intellectual disability, reorient themselves to a way of thinking that is more emancipatory. The parents act in a way that challenge concepts about human cognitive variance and notions of dis/ability in school settings. Drawing on such a model as Afro-humanity, we argue for a more equitable approach to community and educational engagement for Black students labelled with dis/abilities.*

There is no doubt that Black studies has struggled to acknowledge disabled experiences as a continuum of the Black experience; similarly, disabilities studies has been slow to integrate the experiences of those who exist at the intersection of disability and race (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Goodley, 2013). The absence of philosophical explorations of culturally specific intersectional identities within the literature allows us to ask the question, “Ain’t I got a right to the tree of life”? The title of this article, “Ain’t I Got a Right to the Tree of Life?” is also the title of an African American spiritual. The proposed question is both a metaphorical and a political query which challenges us to consider the importance of equity and inclusion for people of African descent. It is in this same spirit that we examine the intersection of philosophical knowledge embedded within African-centred theory as it relates to the conceptualization of disability. Moreover, we challenge readers to consider the ways in which disability is interpreted differently when examined through a cultural paradigm. For Baglieri and Shapiro (2017), recognition of our paradigm can enable us to identify points of conflict between dominant perspectives and other paradigms.

Such recognition can lead to critical reflection that exposes the ways in which traditions and proximity to the dominant paradigm benefits those with dominant belief structures. For example, African people brought with them to the Americas deeply rooted cultural knowledge. This included the cultural conceptualization of the baobab tree. The African baobab tree is a noteworthy species found in sub-Saharan Africa. It is distinctive due to its size and lifespan. Moreover, it is exceptional because of the way in which it grows multi-fused stems and the way in which its bark grows in between these

stems, which provides an appearance that is unique to the baobab tree. The application of Western knowledge of typical growth patterns of trees may lead one to describe the baobab tree as “awkward” or “physically deformed.” Yet, the African baobab tree is also heralded as the “tree of life,” due to its multifaceted uses and its ability to produce fruit during arid and dry seasons. Similar to the baobab tree, many marginalized disabled students also face the consequences of socially constructed notions of able-bodied normalcy and the subversion of their cultural identities. The intersection of these concurrent marginalized identities has led to their overrepresentation within special education classrooms in the US and abroad. In our analysis, the metaphor of the tree of life represents the significance of ensuring that the philosophical perspectives of disabilities include culturally specific frameworks – particularly those grounded in an African ethos. We also advocate for the development of praxis that will ensure the implementation of pedagogies that are in concert with the cultural mores of Black families and children, while also increasing access to quality education. Therefore, we believe that acknowledging the complexities of intersectional and cultural knowledge ensures that persons of all abilities will have a right to the tree of life.

### **Culture and Disabilities**

Multiple theoretical frameworks have been applied to challenge the historical dilemma of disproportional representation of students of colour who are placed into special education classrooms. In much of the literature, the topic of racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education has been addressed through the theoretical framework of culturally responsive pedagogy. Scholars who explore special education through the theoretical lens of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies have revealed the need for school personnel to increase their awareness about cultural and linguistic differences among school-age children (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014). Likewise, special education scholars have advocated to promote culturally sustaining pedagogy as a methodological approach to enhance educational outcomes for diverse students identified with disabilities (Ford, 2012; Griner & Stewart, 2013). Disability critical race theory is another philosophical framework that has been widely applied to examine disability in a diverse society. Proponents of disability critical race studies have argued for an intersectional perspective of dis/ability that includes an examination of the nuanced way in which race/ethnicity, gender, and social class converge in schools and communities (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). Researchers, in both philosophical groupings, highlight a worthy point of contention. They assert that contemporary approaches to disability minimize the complexity of the lived experiences that occur at the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and dis/ability. While one can find numerous sociocultural perspectives related to diversity and overrepresentation in special education, it is challenging to identify literature that addresses cognitive disability through a philosophical lens that centralizes the worldview of people of African descent and their culture. If we are to expand our understanding of how disability is and might be experienced in various cultural communities, we must contemplate the application of alternative sociocultural philosophies. The process of viewing disability through a complex cultural lens is critical during our current era of identity politics and lends itself to the possibility of constructing more culturally inclusive theory and praxis related to disability studies.

Generally, we know more about Western culture’s relationship with the world, with people, and philosophies than we do about African people’s relationship to the world. However, what has not been discussed are the ways in which specific non-Western perspectives about dis/ability causes one to think differently about characterizations of “otherness.” Perhaps an additional area of philosophical expansion for special educators is to consider the application of culturally specific, non-Western frameworks that can be applied to the lived experience of students of colour labelled with dis/abilities. Despite attempts to apply the lens of intersectionality as a conceptual framework, by failing to acknowledge non-Western ideological approaches to human difference, researchers in culturally responsive pedagogy in special education and dis/ability studies risk perpetuating the notion that Western philosophical beliefs about human diversity (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, dis/ability status) are

universal. Consequently, the topic of cognitive disabilities has not been discussed in a way that centralizes the role of African people as knowledge producers and African-centred philosophies have been absent from contributions and characterizations of disability identities.

The application of an African-centred philosophical framework allows scholars to challenge the boundaries of existing scholarship about disabilities. Bent-Goodley, Fairfax, and Carlton-LaNey (2017) propose that African-centred philosophical approaches, “utilize African philosophers, history, and culture as a starting place of interpreting social and psychological phenomena to create relevant approaches to personal, family, and community healing and societal change,” and, moreover, “theory development is a necessary scientific process for scholars to engage in, ... to respond to concomitant factors that impact members of the extensive African Diaspora community (African Americans, continental Africans, Caribbean Americans, African Latinos, African Canadians)” (p. 1). When an African-centred theoretical framework is applied to the topic of disabilities, we see how the potential to offer new contextualized paradigms can lead to emancipatory and anti-oppressive understandings of human difference. There are areas of dis/abilities that include multiple broad categories such as learning disabilities, autism, and attention deficit disorders. The development of disability labels causes us to question the ways in which cultures elect to construct a continuum of human difference. Examining characterization of disability through a cultural lens allows for increased understanding of conceptualizations of perceived personhood, community inclusion, and issues related to historical exclusion. Additionally, Goodley (2013) proposes that disability studies scholars are in a “key position to challenge a host of oppressive practices associated with dominant hegemony of able-bodied society” (p. 634). Therefore, we elect to apply the tenets of Afro-humanity (King & Wilson, 1995) to challenge assumed practices in dis/ability education studies and special educational practices.

Drawing on Afro-humanity, we argue for a way of viewing disability that is aligned with social models which generally accept human variance in cognitive and physical functioning as natural occurrences within the human experience (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). Afro-humanity helps us imagine a more inclusive society that embraces disabled and cultural identities “rather than shun, fear or oppress them” (King & Wilson, 1990, p. 10). This article charts the intersection of disability and a culturally specific theoretical framework. We aim to demonstrate the ways in which the philosophical approach of African-centred ideology promotes “equitableness based upon horizontal human exchange of diverse abilities and disabilities” (King & Wilson 1995, p. 278). Afro-humanity promotes what King and Wilson (1990) describe as true freedom – that is, the ability to “learn to nourish well-being and differentness in self and other persons” (p. 9). In those few moments in the literature in which disability and race/ethnicity have converged it is because of similarities within conditions of oppression, segregation, and notions of intellectual inferiority. We argue that the cross-sectional framing of critical disability studies and African-centred philosophies elicits new, liberatory possibilities for theory, practices, and educational engagement.

### **Theorizing Disability through an African-Centred Lens**

In this section we critique the notion of special education and European-centred or “Eurocentric” theory and philosophy. It is our contention that special education as we know it is a cultural artifact, and cultural creations that are designed for or by a cultural group are best understood using the lens of the cultural group that created the artifact (Patton, 1998). For example, there is a cultural artifact called “Kindezi” that was created by the Kongo people in Central Africa. Kindezi is, in fact, a set of behaviours, ideas, songs, and rituals that provide instruction for anyone who will be raising a child in that cultural community. In that sense, Kindezi is an African artifact that has been created by African people. Kindezi is best understood when viewed through an African lens.

Our task to view a European cultural creation through an African-centred lens is both important and challenging. It is important because all too often European creations are thought of as being “universal.” That is, they are thought of as being what “we” all know to be true best practice, when it is also often quite clear that the worldviews of other groups are either completely left out or have been

almost unrecognizably distorted so that they are suitable for audiences, understandings, beliefs, tastes, and preferences which are oriented toward a Western/European/White American philosophical point of view. Special education is a “preference” that Western societies have implemented as an analytic to understand human phenomena. While analytics are useful, they are not the only way to understand phenomena, and among Africans and other cultural groups, they are not even preferred. Educational psychologist Asa Hilliard (1997) points out that one of the reasons Black children struggle in schools is because, “In general, Black children are more relational, but schools reward analytical thinking” (p. 35). Hilliard further explains that people of African descent “tend to respond to things in terms of the whole picture instead of its parts. [Whereas] European [descendants] tend to believe that anything can be divided and subdivided into pieces and that these pieces add up to a whole” (p. 42). What Hilliard and other African-centred psychologists and psychiatrists (such as Wade Nobles, Janice Hale, Na’im Akbar, and Frances Cress Welsing) offer is a very important understanding that the way we think about schools, society, and learning is psychologically and culturally “ordered.” That is, the ways we currently think about learning, schools, and society is not an agreed upon “science,” and the appearance of agreement is the result of worldwide European hegemony (Ferguson, 2012). In that sense, throughout the world, Western societies offer rewards for the acceptance and normalization of their culturally specific understandings and punishments through marginalization, ignoring, and individual/national embargos for nonconformity.

Critiquing European cultural artifacts such as special education is challenging for someone using a non-African lens to critique Kindezi. On the one hand, the artifact was most likely created for the people who created it, and therefore outside perspectives are “foreign” and “alien,” but on the other hand, when others are negatively impacted by the artifact, critical perspectives on the artifact become important (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Patton, 1998). In that sense, the ways that European societies (including North America) are impacting Black people, and namely Black children, is causing global devastation for Blacks worldwide. When understandings that are culturally specific are mistaken for being universal, it leads to chauvinism. What’s more is that gazing at another cultural group with the combination of an opposing cultural lens and the power to act upon them negatively can be culturally debilitating to the objectified group, and can also create conditions in which they are physically unsafe. Eugenics is, in fact, an intellectual partner to the disproportionate incidence of Black children being placed into special education classes. In his foundational work *The Measurement of Intelligence*, renowned psychologist Lewis Terman (1916) provides groundwork to justify today’s disproportionality:

The fact that one meets this type (feeble-minded individuals) with such frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew and by experimental methods. Children of this group should be segregated in special classes and be given instruction which is concrete and practical. They cannot master, but they can often be made efficient workers, able to look out for themselves. (pp. 91–92)

Terman’s gaze mimics the gaze of many educators who, although they may not outwardly call Black children (or Latino/as or Native Americans) feeble-minded, act upon an internal urge that has the net effect of making Terman’s wishes a reality. It is, indeed, the case now that children seen as “feeble-minded” or “intellectually inferior” are disproportionately segregated into special classes and are given instruction that is concrete and practical. Special education is a cultural product that serves European/North American societies in the same way any other European/North American cultural product serves those societies. It is a tool that is as helpful as it is detrimental. For those reasons, from an African-centred perspective, special education fits into the pantheon of other culturally foreign artifacts that get simultaneously normalized and weaponized against African descendants (King & Wilson, 1995).

While colonialism has impacted the “indigenous”-based African ethos, there are still remnants and there is still information (i.e., theory) and practice in many remote locations. In relation to that, there are clear distinctions between an African ethos and a European ethos. Compared to what special education offers, Fu-Kiau (2000) describes the Kongo people’s Kindezi as the art of touching, caring

for, and protecting children and their environment. It serves as a systematic way to involve the community in raising and nurturing the child, and the precepts of Kindezi help contribute to the child's overall development. The concept of Kindezi is not only about good parenting; it also clarifies that family and community are the greatest assets that must be used in raising children.

What is emphasized in an African cultural context is creating culturally based systems for connecting children with their cultural group and community. The opposite of connecting children with their cultural group and community is segregating them from their group and community. Some African-centred education scholars have pointed out that children simply have different strengths and weaknesses, and an African-based approach to education allows people to make a contribution to society from the perspective of their strength. In that sense, someone who might be labelled as a "special education student" in American society would be labelled (or seen) simply by their name, and their strengths would be noted and encouraged by the community as opposed to the focus being on their weaknesses. While this is true, different cultural groups have different ways of thinking about "difference," so it is important to figure out to whom we are appealing (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999). If we write about an African-centred perspective of special education to mainstream European/North Americans, are we asking them to place their cultural ethos aside and adopt an African-centred one? By doing so, we would be committing the same cultural "offence" as those we critique. African cultural notions, behaviours, and ideals are not universal. Hence, our idea is to present cultural offerings that are useful for students of African descent in the hopes that all children can benefit from what works for African children.

An important outcome of employing an African-centred perspective is that people with dis/abilities would be viewed as people who are part of the human (African) family, and who may have insights that others might not be able to access, as opposed to being viewed as people who are problematic objects, and who are perceived, under the gaze of a hierarchical educational system, as being in need of "fixing." The purpose of African-centred ideology is to reconnect people of African descent with who they are as Africans, as opposed to maintaining connection to the foreign and alienating dominant (European) culture (Shockley, 2008). Therefore, from an African-centred perspective, the oppressive social conditions that exist within society are thought of as being culturally ordered. That is, the way that the current educational system operates is viewed as a sort of "pseudo necessity" that has been created by people of European descent with the subsequent need to promote a human hierarchy. In that sense, African-centred ideology goes beyond being a tool with which to challenge oppression; it provides a rationale for why oppression exists and encourages people of African descent to think within their own cultural frames of reference when considering solutions to oppression. Since the overall focus of African-centred ideology is to act as a tool for reconnecting people of African descent with their cultural foundation, a new orientation to data is required, including our orientations to disability and impairments. A reorientation that is centred on the needs and interests of people of African descent would have liberatory outcomes for people of all abilities.

### **Culture, Disability, and Family Perspectives**

It is probably impossible to pinpoint the exact moment when families from culturally diverse backgrounds realize the contradiction between their cultural philosophical perspectives and those of the school system. Without question, the intention of the inclusive classroom is to provide instructional benefits to students who may exhibit cognitive and behavioural disabilities. It is also easy to see how the implementation of special education philosophical principles within the US may reinforce beliefs about difference that reinforce the medial model and strengthen social stigmas related to disabilities. Therefore, the assessment and identification process may provide evidence of the moment when Black parents are forced to confront inherent inequity and oppression in American schooling. The conversation below is taken from an informal discussion that took place with African American parents of a child who was identified with an intellectual disability:

We noticed a language delay in our son when he was in preschool. The speech pathologist came to our home regularly. We thought nothing of it because we know how Black students are misdiagnosed. In third grade, we noticed that he had difficulty reading and didn't want to read ... by the time he entered fifth grade he was done with school; he just didn't like it. We didn't want to have testing done [to determine his eligibility for special education]. [The teacher] told us his reading scores were three grade levels behind the other kids and he wasn't developing in other [ability] areas ... He was narrowed down to a test score; they placed a label on him and pushed him out [the class]. He contributes a lot to our family and our community. He's not just a test score.

The parents' narrative provides insight into the challenge of accepting a disability label as a standardizing and all-encompassing reality. Their experience also demonstrates the ways that special education practices reinforce racial and ability injustice. Their acceptance of a disability label would affirm elements of Western epistemology that construe difference, in general, as illegitimate (King & Wilson, 1990). The scenario also highlights the ways in which the assessment for special education is a particularly crucial moment in which schooling practices have the potential to become a destructive sociocultural process that reinforces societal standards of who is at the top of racial/ethnic and intellectual hierarchies and who is at the bottom of those hierarchies. By proxy, assessment practices in special education legitimate historical US notions of human difference that are grounded in inequity – a history in which African Americans and people with disabilities are perceived as intellectually inferior and in need of social and academic “intervention.”

The parents continued with the following statement:

We decided to homeschool. He is in classes with children from other families in our community [African centred] and the students are a little older and a little younger than him. He's an excellent drummer so he teaches the younger kids how to drum. The older students help him with reading. He can be a whole person.

Furthermore, the parents' narrative also demonstrates the importance of culture frameworks. The account provided by the parents relates their decision to rebuff paradigmatic assumptions of what counts as sociocultural truths related to intelligence, citizenship, and schooling (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). Instead, the parents embraced a more relational, culturally specific philosophy. The son in this example is perceived as a valued citizen who contributes to the sustainability of an African-centred community. The parents' decision demonstrates the pivotal turning point in which parents – in fact, all parents and teachers – must determine whether to place their faith in Western systems of human variance or to adopt a positionality of what one may consider decolonization. Decolonization is the practice of undoing processes and artifacts that are remnants of Westernized practices (Fannon, 2019). In special education the process and tools applied to assess a child with a suspected disability are artifacts of Western ideologies. Therefore, the practice of being assessed and labelled as a student with special needs requires that the parents become complicit in the act of marginalization, which may be influenced by their racial/ethnic status as well as the presence of a disability.

Professionals, family members, and students who find themselves subject to the categorization procedures within the discipline of special education may be familiar with the situation described in this illustration. From the vantage point of the parents, we are able to acquire insight into the emancipatory possibilities of applying an African-centred framework in special education. African-centred ideology as a theoretical framework in school settings ensures that one's worth is connected to one's contributions to the group or community, not one's connection and relationship to able-mindedness, socio-economic status, or proximity to positions of power. In that sense, the application of Afro-humanity is another way to express the word “African-centred” when the focus is on the humane-ness emanating from an African cultural ethos. The framework of Afro-humanity further highlights the importance of participating in human complementarity. Human complementarity requires that educators and community members are aware of the dynamics of human connections and value, and connecting one's human-ness with those who are “different” or who exhibit characteristics of human variance (King &

Wilson, 1995). Indeed, what is unusual about this example is that the parents were able to apply an epistemological framework that affirmed their son's multiple intersecting identities. Perhaps through the lens of Afro-humanity, educators and researchers in special education are similarly able to interrogate contrived cultural notions of human variance and to better service people identified with dis/abilities who are from culturally specific backgrounds.

### **Exploring Elements of Afro-Humanity**

The overall emphasis of Afro-humanity is to assure an equitable societal landscape that fosters non-oppressive and non-defensive uses (not misuses) of the diversity of all people. King and Wilson (1995) propose Afro-humanity as a culturally specific philosophical framework that allows educators to learn to nourish strengths and differences within themselves and others. That is, Afro-humanity should be viewed as an epistemological framework based on the principles of equitableness that connotes horizontal human exchanges of diverse cultural differences and dis/abilities. King and Wilson (*ibid.*) caution that dominant schooling practices often distort, silence, and de-legitimize the perspectives of non-Western philosophies and people. The absence of culturally specific frameworks within the day-to-day practice of special education reifies the everyday "truth" that people from racially/ethnically diverse and dis/ability backgrounds are worthy of marginalization, segregation, and assignment to isolated classroom environments. For this reason, we regard with skepticism the willingness of schools to categorize and label students as "different."

Multiple educators working from a culturally responsive perspective in special education have advocated for education that incorporates the cultural, linguistic, and familial variables that include the holistic life of students (see, for example, research by Beth Harry, Donna Ford, and Cathy Kea). James Patton (1998) proposes that our Western epistemological beliefs of difference contribute to the structural flaws which reinforce ethnocentrism within special education. Patton argues that the cultural knowledge of the African American community is required to establish a "system of special education that nurtures, develops, and allows for the voices of an African American knowledge producer to be heard, confirmed, and affirmed" (*ibid.*, p. 27). Moreover, "new structures, systems, and paradigms are needed that allow for new knowledge producers in special education to make their voices heard and to approach the task of analysis and problem solving in honest ways" (*ibid.*, p. 27). That is, these scholars emphasize the importance of cultural connectivity that centres the values of people from diverse backgrounds and allows for all people to be viewed as contributing members of their community. The application of the tenets of Afro-humanity aid in the regeneration of knowledge about equitable schooling, which may include viable options for Black children and may inform diverse ways of thinking about the industry of special education.

The task of African-centred education is to help us learn useful principles of human existence. Therefore, the application of a culturally specific paradigm that reflects the cultural ways of knowing about Black children and their families can provide more insight into the multiple intersecting identities, cultures, and communities in which the people labelled with disability exist. Black children belong to a global community of people of African descent. Many African people were removed from the continent of African and redistributed across the globe as a result of the European project called enslavement. Yet, many of those of the African diaspora (African Americans, continental Africans, Caribbean Americans, African Latinos, African Canadians) have maintained many elements of their African identities and cultures (Ford, 2012; Ogbu, 1992). Teachers who gain insight about African culture may enhance their understanding, knowledge, and practice as it relates to Black children throughout the diaspora (Ford, 2012). This insight aids in forming a worldview that is inclusive of cultural perspectives such as African perspectives, and serves as a foundation for what it could mean to view dis/ability through an African-centred lens. As a conceptual framework, Afro-humanity provides seven conceptual paradigms that facilitate equitable interactions for biosocial needs within school settings and communities: social-emotional engagement, facilitating human interaction, electing



continuous self-reflection, engaging in the regeneration of knowledge, seeking truths and wisdom, participating in human complementarity, and living out an equitable philosophy.

*Social-emotional engagement* is the “willingness of persons to approach and not avoid differentness” (King & Wilson, 1995, p. 274). Implicit within the US system of special education is the assumption that people identified with cognitive differences should be labelled and provided specialized instruction (Cornnett & Knackstedt, 2020). Teachers should be prepared to recognize that African American families of students with dis/abilities may approach disabling conditions through a social emotional lens (Harry, Rueda, & Kalyanpur, 1999). A social emotional lens may cause parents to exhibit heightened concern for the students’ emotional well-being, thus minimizing differences and creating a welcoming space in the home, community, and religious community of the family.

*Facilitating human interaction* “stresses making human contact and human attentiveness to difference despite ambiguity, absurdities, conflicts, and confusions in a willingness to touch and to care” (King & Wilson, 1995, p. 275). African-centred philosophies include the promotion of individual and collective interconnectedness, with the recognition that people are interdependent. For example, concepts within special education often emphasize independence and being self-sufficient. Therefore, teachers may misinterpret as inappropriate and overbearing a family’s decision to allow a student with a disability to remain dependent upon family members. The decision of the family may appear to be inconsistent with the expected outcomes of independent living, which are embedded in transition practices for students with disabilities.

*Electing continuous self-reflection* requires community members to “reflect on one’s predispositions and prejudgments” (ibid., p. 275). Western values foster concepts of vertical human ranking, which translates into deficit perceptions about those from racially/ethnically diverse and dis/abled backgrounds. Teachers may have to engage in self-reflection to identify racist or stereotypic assumptions related to cultural difference, and, simultaneously, parents may be required to assess their ableist understandings of disability and impairments.

*Engaging in the regeneration of knowledge* “involves owning one’s biases and stereotypic knowledge and behaviors and offering one’s testimony without guilt or defensiveness” (ibid., p. 275). Similar to the above proposition, there is a need to engage in collective reflection in which people acknowledge their new understandings of “difference” and request others in the community to engage in continuous sharing of personal experiences which have transformed their knowledge about conceptualizations of “difference.”

*Seeking truths and wisdom* requires attentiveness to and inquiring about factual narratives related to cultural difference, and simultaneously promoting affirming narratives about students from diverse backgrounds. King and Wilson (ibid.) propose that true freedom entails the emancipation of human knowledge from anti-human normative discourse that subjugates others. The pursuit of truth among special education professionals requires teachers to acknowledge the existence of multiple “truths” within our professional practices. In doing this, it helps family members, educators, and people labelled with disabilities learn to apply African-centred truths to advocate for equitable educational practices that restore practices of non-Western ideologies.

*Participating in human complementarity* “entails being conscious the dynamics of human connectedness and valuing and connecting one’s humanness with different persons and people; learning about diverse traditions and caring about eliminating oppression” (ibid., p. 274). The ability to respect “different” persons and care for diverse peoples is an important facet of an equitable existence.

*Living out an equitable philosophy* entails a commitment to being equitable in spirit and behaviour – not holding “authority over” another, not enacting dominance over another through denying them choice and self-determination, not being imperialistic, and not desiring to oppress or be a victim. Instead, an equitable philosophy is the aspiration to create space for all people of varying dis/abilities to exist in harmony while also finding worth in varied cultural perspectives.

It is imperative for researchers and educators to investigate how Black children and families may engage in human complementarity in the absence of Western notions of difference. The application of Afro-humanity encourages an education that nurtures “cognitive autonomy” and moves beyond unconscious, or European-derived, traditional habits of mind. In other words, Afro-humanity is a

conceptual framework that engages with notions of human complementarity and diminishes any philosophical commitments to hierarchical relationships. Instead, people are encouraged to adopt a “freeing education for sociopolitical, cultural, spiritual, and economic liberation” (King & Wilson, 1990, p. 13). Overall, the cultural tenets within Afro-humanity should not be viewed as universal beliefs for all Black families and children. The Black community is not a monolithic community of people. Instead, an African-centred perspective emphasizes that there is a need to envision disability as it may exist beyond the academic status in our Western schools. True emancipation from existing racial and disability-based hierarchies requires that we establish emancipatory human knowledge, embrace cultural understandings, and empower notions of personal and cultural agency. These underlying principles of Afro-humanity, and other critical pedagogies, are the “gist” of true emancipation.

### **Methodological Steps for Applying Afro-Humanity in Inclusive Educational Settings**

We have found scant writings from African-centred authors who have made it their purpose to shed light on what an African-centred conceptualization of disability might look like. There is African-centred psychology, African-centred social work, African-centred sociology, and other fields in which people of African descent have deemed it to be important to reconnect themselves with the foundation of their African identity. African-centred education (ACE) is one “arm” that is connected to the umbrella framework of “African-centred” or “Afrocentric” theory and philosophy. ACE includes ACE private schools as well as ACE literature which advance the education of children of African descent. Students who would be considered “special education” in the conventional school systems do, in fact, attend ACE schools. However, the label of “special education” or “disability” does not exist within these spaces. Afro-humanity is one theoretical framework that aligns with ACE. Afro-humanity challenges notions of scientific objectivity related to disability and can expand our understanding of human variance. Afro-humanity may also assist educators in reflecting upon their deeply conditioned beliefs about dis/ability and diversity. Therefore, Afro-humanity achieves three goals. As a philosophical framework it expands our understandings about culturally responsive pedagogies, social constructions of dis/ability, and inadvertent corroboration by teachers in solidifying systemic race and dis/ability-based hierarchies.

**Extending Critical Pedagogies to Centre African Theory.** Multiple scholars have identified the ways in which cultural funds of knowledge influence our interpretation of data in our daily lives and within the classroom environment. According to Hale (2016) and Hilliard (1997), Black children enter classrooms with preferred ways of being and learning. Further, Hale (2016) and Hilliard (1997) purport that educators must implement classroom pedagogical practices that align with the preferred cultural norms of the student. The purpose of Afro-humanity as a pedagogical lens, then, is to centre Black children within instructional practices that acknowledge their African heritage along with the philosophical beliefs that continue to inform ways of knowing. Instruction strategies must include creative methods assessment which allow for mastery of content knowledge and communication skills both in and out of the classroom (King & Wilson, 1995). In this regard, Afro-humanity becomes an extension of critical pedagogies (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris & Alim, 2014) when applying educational practices through the lens of global Pan-Africanism. John Ogbu (2002, 2004) describes the concept of shared group identity as a “collective identity” that forms and is expressed as a culture distinct from the dominant culture. Furthermore, Ogbu (2002, 2004) contends that the “collective identity” of Black children includes a global Pan-African sharing of racism, discrimination, and educational disenfranchisement. The application of Afro-humanity allows researchers and educators to holistically examine the cultural heritage and historical legacy of Black children and construct curriculum which meaningfully empowers and uplifts the cultural ways of knowing with diverse communities found within the African diaspora.

**Social Construction of Disability and Cultural Contexts.** Afro-humanity may assist disability studies scholars in expanding notions of social constructivism related to dis/ability. Working from the

presumption that the intersection of race and disability causes unique and distinct lived experiences, as compared to when each is experienced in isolation (or through a racially privileged body), scholars can examine the complexities of cultural influences and contextual differences related to race and disability (Delvin & Pothier, 2006). Afro-humanity, as an arm of African-centred philosophies, has the potential to increase our knowledge of how dis/ability is socially constructed within the African diaspora. As scholars we must develop a deep understanding of the complex ways that historical, societal, and political stereotypes and contextualized assumptions about human difference influence our student's lived experiences. These intersecting oppressions will change as the student enters the school, community, and workplace. Many students will need to learn to appropriately navigate around and aptly respond to racial and ableist discrimination in our society. The absence of a culturally specific understanding of disability disempowers students and diminishes their ability to express valued cultural differences.

Lee (2005) further explains that in "African traditional philosophical systems and socialization practices ... there was great value placed on the idea of individual's sense of self being connected to kinship networks, a relational sense of self" (p. 804). Therefore, Black parents who represent the diversity found within the African diaspora may provide insight for researchers and practitioners to better understand the nuanced ways dis/ability is lived within diverse cultural contexts. Desimone, Finn-Stevenson, & Henrich (2000) maintain that involving parents in the decision making of student learning "demonstrates the interactive relationships of program components which in turn interact to affect student outcomes" (p. 273). By empowering parents and caregivers as partners, they become active participants in unearthing cultural perspectives related to dis/ability. Moreover, people identified with disabilities and family members may take an active role in deconstructing Eurocentric special education practices which reify deficit and difference. To address the specific cultural needs of Black children, disability scholarship must assume a communal posture for people of African descent and with the intent of restoring the cultural ways of knowing for the child, family, and community. Culturally contextualized understandings of disability may reduce negative stigma associated with disability and promote notions of inclusion and equitable existence in educational settings. An outcome of this is the holistic development a child's whole self and varying skills that contribute to their community.

**Culture and the Conflict of Assessment in Special Education.** Ford's (2012) research highlights the critical need to examine the "all-too-common false-positive presence of Black and Hispanic students in special education" (p. 392). Ford (2012) argues that this false positive narrative perpetuates "the albatross of disproportionality and/or overrepresentation" (p. 398). The learning characteristics exhibited by Black children may be misinterpreted as disability, rather than cultural difference (Ford, 2012). Therefore, Black children who are identified as dis/abled are disproportionately impacted by the identification process and ideations of standardization. Furthermore, Ogbu (2002) concludes that important contributors to Black children's low performance in US schools are societal and structural forces that unyieldingly discourage expressions of cultural difference in the classroom. As a result, the international presence of an academic "achievement gap" has emerged because Black children are assessed and categorized based on their adoption of or opposition to White able-bodied culture. The academic "achievement gap" then becomes a glaring measure of cultural differences between Black and White able-bodied children. An African-centred curriculum can inform the creation of multi-dimensional metrics to assess Black children of all abilities. Tenets of Afro-humanity provide a foundation for the construction of comprehensive assessment and instructional strategies allowing Black children to have equitable opportunity to demonstrate mastery of critical thinking skills and understanding of complex content.

The development of multidimensional metrics can include a variety of opportunities for students to demonstrate mastery of learning, and promote high academic achievement for Black students with a disability. This requires schools to reframe the assessments used when determining eligibility of specialized services or diagnosing a disability. Shields (2012) examines the necessity of having leaders to engage in equitable leadership by advocating for students furthest from the mainstream culture as a means to improve academic achievement for all students; however, Afro-humanity calls for methods

specific to Black children and children who are erroneously socially or medically defined as disabled. These notions of culturally specific assessment further validate Hale's (2016) conclusions that "though educational entities may have data, when there is no culturally appropriate interpretation of the achievement data and patterns, there is no subsequent creation of effective remedies and interventions" (p. 116).

## Conclusion

If we are to return to the image of the baobab tree, we can now see the ways in which our worldview influences our understanding of this sub-Saharan baobab tree. We can see how the tree has culturally specific value for some. Alternatively, the baobab tree may appear unfamiliar and awkward to others. Much like our potentially divergent views of the baobab tree, the philosophical tenets of African-centred thought and culturally specific ways of approaching disability may challenge some readers. Other readers, however, may acknowledge that the goal of understanding disability through a cultural lens is aligned with the democratic values of constructing an equitable and inclusive society. Educators and researchers who embrace the theoretical framework of Afro-humanity may come to realize that an epistemology of human vitalness involves an awareness that "I and you ARE worthy human beings" (King & Wilson, 1995, p. 18). Moreover, we all have a right to our diverse cultural perspectives which contribute to the intricacies of the proverbial tree of life. Consider how this notion of collective identity might shift concepts of deficit, otherness, and disability in schools. The conceptual paradigms of human equitableness may also help educators to reflect upon their deeply conditioned beliefs about dis/ability and diversity, which often reinforce notions of marginalization (Ferguson, 2012). Our expectation is that this article will start a conversation about suitable philosophical approaches for students from diverse cultural backgrounds. These critical conversations begin with an exploration of how disability is defined and experienced by families of African descent and through the application of an African centered philosophy.

## References

- Annamma, S., Connor, D., & Ferri, B. (2013). Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the intersections of race and dis/ability. *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, 16(1), 1–31.
- Baglieri, S., & Shapiro, A. (2017). *Disability studies and the inclusive classroom: Critical practices for embracing diversity in education*. Routledge.
- Bailey, M., & Mobley, I. A. (2019). Work in intersections: A Black feminist disability framework. *Gender & Society*, 19–40.
- Bent-Goodley, T., Fairfax, C. N., & Carlton-LaNey, I. (2017). The significance of African-centered social work for social work practice. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 27(1–2), 1–6.
- Blanchett, W. J., Klingner, J. K., & Harry, B. (2009). The intersection of race, culture, language, and disability: Implications for urban education. *Urban Education*, 44(4), 389–409.
- Carrell, P. L., & Eisterhold, J. C. (1983). Schema theory and ESL reading pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17(4), 553–573.
- Cornnett, J. & Knackstedt, K. M. (2020). Original sin(s): Lessons from the US model of special education and an opportunity for leaders. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 58(5), 507–520.
- Delvin, R., & Pothier, D. (2006). *Critical disability theory: Essays in philosophy, politics, and law*. University of British Columbia Press.
- Desimone, L., Finn-Stevenson, M., & Henrich, C. (2000). Whole school reform in a low-income African American community: The effects of the CoZi model on teachers, parents, and students. *Urban Education*, 35(3), 269–323.
- Fannon, F. (2019). *Black skin, white masks*. Penguin Classics.
- Ferguson, R. (2012). *The reorder of things: The university and its pedagogy of minority difference*. Wisconsin Press.

- Ford, D. (2012). Culturally different students in special education: Looking backward to move forward. *Exceptional Children*, 78, 391–405.
- Fu-Kiau, K. K. B. (2000). *Kindezi: The Kongo art of babysitting*. Black Classic Press.
- Goodley, D. (2013). Dis/entangling critical disability studies. *Disability & Society*, 28(5), 631–644.
- Griner, A. C., & Stewart, M. L. (2013). Addressing the achievement gap and disproportionality through the use of culturally responsive teaching practices. *Urban Education*, 48(4), 585–621.
- Harry, B., Rueda, R., & Kalyanpur, M. (1999). Culturally reciprocity in sociocultural perspective: Adapting the normalization principle for family collaboration. *Exceptional Children*, 66(1), 123–136.
- Hale, J. (1986). Black children: Their roots, culture, and learning styles. *Young Children*, 36(2), 37–50.
- Hale, J. (2016). Learning styles of African American children: Instructional implications. *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*, 5(2), 109–118.
- Hilliard, A. G. (1997). *Annotated selected bibliography and index for teaching African-American Learners: Culturally responsive pedagogy project*. American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.
- Kalyanpur, M. & Harry, B. (1999). *Culture in special education: Building reciprocal family-professional relationship*. Paul Brooks.
- King, J. E., & Wilson, T. L. (1990). Being the soul-freeing substance: A legacy of hope in Afro-Humanity. *Journal of Education*, 172(2), 9–27.
- King, J. E., & Wilson, T. L. (1995). Being the soul-freeing substance: A legacy of hope in Afro-humanity. In M. J. Shujaa (Ed.), *Too much schooling too little education: A paradox of Black life in White societies* (pp. 269–294). African World Press.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3), 465–491.
- Lee, C. D. (2005). Taking culture into account: Intervention research based on current views of cognition and learning. In J. King (Ed.), *Black education: A transformative research and action agenda for the new century* (pp. 73–114). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Ogbu, J. (1992). Understanding cultural diversity and learning. *Educational Researcher*, 21(8), 5–14, 24.
- Ogbu, J. (2002). Black-American students and the academic achievement gap: What else you need to know. *Journal of Thought*, 37(4), 9–33.
- Ogbu, J. (2004). Collective identity and the burden of “acting White” in Black history, community, and education. *Urban Review*, 36(1), 1–35.
- Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique. *Harvard Education Review*, 84(1), 85–100.
- Patton, J. M. (1998). The disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education: Looking behind the curtain for understanding solutions. *Journal of Special Education*, 32(1), 25–31.
- Shields, C. M. (2012). *Transformative leadership in education: Equitable and socially just change in an uncertain and complex world*. Routledge.
- Shockley, K. G. (2008). Africentric education leadership: Theory and practice. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, 3(3), 1–12.
- Terman, L. M. (1916). The uses of intelligence tests. In L. M. Terman, *The measurement of intelligence* (pp. 3–21). Houghton Mifflin.

### About the Authors

Joy Banks, PhD, is an associate professor at George Mason University. She conducts research in the area of intersectionality, race, and dis/ability through a DisCrit lens.

Kmt Shockley, PhD is a professor at the University of Houston. He conducts research in the area of school leadership and Afro-centred curriculum development.

Courtney Wilkerson, MA, is a doctoral student at Howard University.