African Centre for School Leadership

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AFROCENTRIC SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:
An ACSL Practice Framework for School Leadership and Professional Development in Africa



Practice Framework
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Introduction

Quality leadership is widely recognised as a key driver of school effectiveness and student success (Leithwood et al., 2004). Evidence indicates that more than one quarter of the variation in student learning outcomes can be attributed to the quality of school leadership (UNESCO GEM Report, 2024a). Beyond influencing academic achievement, school leaders play a central role in shaping the conditions under which teaching and learning occur. They foster school environments characterised by peace, tolerance, equity, inclusion, cooperation, and high expectations, while also contributing to improved teacher retention and job satisfaction, increased student motivation, reduced dropout rates, and stronger parental engagement.

Across Africa, the practice of school leadership is shaped by diverse geographical, historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts (Otunga et al., 2009). Within these varied settings, education plays a pivotal role in developing human capital, reducing poverty, and driving socio-economic transformation (African Union & UNESCO, 2023). Over the past six decades, the continent has recorded measurable progress, including increased enrolment of girls, expanded access to tertiary education, and improved completion rates across all levels (Mwambe & Elamin Omer, 2024). While these achievements reflect significant system-level progress, they have also intensified expectations placed on schools, thereby elevating the importance of effective leadership as a mechanism for sustaining and deepening these gains.
Emerging evidence positions school leadership as a critical lever for navigating these pressures. Lopez et al. (2024) demonstrate that school leaders in Sub-Saharan Africa operate in complex and resource-constrained environments yet exhibit notable resilience and agency. Through innovative strategies, strong community engagement, and inclusive decision-making, they are able to navigate systemic constraints, support teachers, and promote learners' holistic development. This suggests that leadership in these contexts extends beyond administrative management, encompassing relational, moral, and community-oriented dimensions that are essential for school improvement.

However, the transformative potential of school leadership remains uneven and often constrained by systemic limitations. Persistent challenges—including inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and insufficient access to high-quality professional development—continue to undermine school effectiveness. These constraints are further exacerbated by policy incoherence, restricted school-level autonomy, and entrenched gender disparities (Anulika, 2022; Baranshamaje et al., 2022; Bush et al., 2022; UNESCO GEM Report, 2024b). As a result, while individual leaders often demonstrate innovation and adaptability, their ability to drive sustained and systemic change remains contingent on broader enabling conditions.

At the same time, the conceptual frameworks that inform school leadership continue to be largely derived from the Global North. Although research on school leadership in Africa is growing (Makore et al., 2022; Pansiri et al., 2021; Purinton & Khalil, 2016; Ugwu et al., 2022), dominant leadership models often fail to capture the social, cultural, and political realities of African schools (Purinton & Khalil, 2016). As Lopez & Rugano (2018) observe, education leaders in developing countries encounter challenges that differ markedly from those faced by their Western counterparts, highlighting the need to contextualise leadership theories and practices to reflect local realities.



In this context, Afrocentric leadership offers a valuable framework for reimagining educational leadership within the African context. It emphasises leadership approaches grounded in African cultural values, communal traditions, and indigenous knowledge systems (Asante, 2003). It challenges conventional Western-centric models by prioritising collective responsibility, respect for elders, participatory decision-making, and the interconnectedness of individuals within the community (Achebe, 1984; Toendepi & Cele, 2024). Applied to education, this approach encourages leaders to draw on local knowledge, traditions, and social norms that have proven effective to foster inclusive, culturally relevant, and sustainable educational practices. By aligning leadership strategies with African values, Afrocentric leadership not only supports academic outcomes. It also strengthens ethnic identity, belonging and social cohesion among learners, teachers, and communities (Toendepi & Cele, 2024; Uleanya & Naicker, 2024).

This practice framework builds on ongoing work by the African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL) to better understand and strengthen school leadership across the continent (Bush et al., 2022; Lopez et al., 2024; Pansiri et al., 2026). Central to this work is the concept of Sankofa, a Ghanaian philosophy symbolised by a bird that looks back while moving forward. Sankofa captures the idea that meaningful progress requires drawing on the past to inform the future. Within this perspective, Afrocentric school leadership is approached as a process of reflecting on historical practices, engaging critically with present realities, and shaping future directions in ways that are both contextually grounded and forward-looking. Afrocentric leadership is therefore not presented as a singular or prescriptive model but as a reflective and adaptive approach that enables leaders to navigate complexity with purpose.

It provides a practical and structured guide to implementing Afrocentric school leadership. It offers clear recommendations, strategies, and illustrative examples of how African cultural values and social perspectives can be meaningfully integrated into school leadership and the professional development of school leaders. In doing so, it aligns with the aspirations of the African Union's Agenda 2063, which calls for the recognition and promotion of African cultures and values within development efforts (African Union, 2013). By situating leadership within African realities, this work seeks to contribute to more relevant, inclusive, and transformative approaches to school leadership across the continent.

Evidence review

Afrocentricity is defined by Asante (2003) as

> The theory in which the centrality of African interests, principles, and perspectives predominates.

It positions African knowledge systems and worldviews at the core of analysis and practice, thereby affirming African agency in the interpretation and organisation of knowledge (Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2022). In this sense, Afrocentricity challenges epistemic marginalisation by reasserting the validity and legitimacy of African ways of knowing. Traditional education in Africa has long been grounded in the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, norms, values, behaviours, attitudes and skills, with the primary aim of preserving and sustaining cultural identity (Samkange, 1980). Learning was embedded in everyday social life and orientated towards preparing individuals to contribute meaningfully to the wellbeing and continuity of their communities. This approach reflects a deeply relational and communal understanding of education, where knowledge is both practical and moral in nature. As captured in the African proverb, *"Wisdom is like a baobab tree; No one person can embrace it"*; it emphasises that knowledge is collective and that learning is strengthened through collaboration.

The diversity of the African continent further enriches this epistemological landscape. With over 3,000 ethnic groups, each possessing distinct historical, cultural, political, and religious identities, Africa represents a plurality of knowledge systems and worldviews that defy homogenisation (Thelma et al., 2024). As Masango (2002) notes, Africa possesses a rich and varied heritage of leadership practices, shaped by differences in community structures, historical periods, and geographical contexts. This diversity underscores the importance of situating leadership within specific cultural and contextual realities rather than universalised frameworks.

From an Afrocentric perspective, leadership is not an individualistic pursuit of authority or status, but a collective endeavour rooted in care, mutual respect, and reciprocity (Asiimwe, 2023; Masango, 2002). Leaders are expected to act as moral custodians and facilitators of shared purpose, guiding, mentoring, and uplifting others through empathy and collaboration rather than control or dominance. Within this framework, leadership legitimacy arises from its service to others and its capacity to strengthen communal bonds (Adejumo-Ayibiowu, 2022). Accordingly, leaders in Afrocentric traditions are accountable to their communities and are judged by their capacity to nurture collective growth, cohesion, and moral order (Kriger & Seng, 2005; Nahavandi, 2000).

Although Afrocentrism has often been discussed primarily within Sub-Saharan contexts, similar recognition of indigenous values, ethics, and worldviews emerges across North Africa. Amghar (2022) observes that educational leadership in North African countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia draws on Islamic and Arab-Amazigh intellectual traditions that emphasise collective decision-making, ethical leadership, and service to the community. Practices such as shura (consultation), ta'āwun (collaboration), and ta'āzur (solidarity) reflect deeply embedded cultural principles of shared responsibility and collective wellbeing (Aabed, 2006; Abbasi et al., 2010; Bajunid, 1996; ElKaleh & Samier, 2013). These principles align closely with the Afrocentric emphasis on relational, participatory, and morally grounded leadership.

Across the continent, Afrocentric leadership is guided by the philosophical concept of Ubuntu—expressed in various local languages such as gimuntu (Angola), bantu (Congo), medemer (Ethiopia), biako ye (Ghana), utu, munto, or mondo (Kenya), Botho (Botswana), ubumuntu, ubuntu (Rwanda) and umunthu (Malawi) (Brubaker, 2013; J. Mugumbate & Chereni, 2019; J. R. Mugumbate et al., 2023). This concept expresses the interconnectedness of individuals within their communities and the moral–ethical obligations that sustain social harmony. They reinforce the idea that leadership is not an individual pursuit, but a collective endeavour rooted in care, respect, and reciprocity (Asiimwe, 2023; Lopez et al., 2024; Masango, 2002).

Other African philosophical concepts complement Ubuntu and enrich the Afrocentric leadership paradigm. In East Africa, the Swahili concept of Ujamaa extends communal values into socio-economic and educational practice, promoting collective progress, equality, and social responsibility (Nyerere, 1987). In West Africa, the Akan philosophy of the Sankofa bird—literally *"return and get it"*—underscores the importance of learning from the past to guide present and future actions, highlighting leaders' obligation to draw on cultural memory and ancestral knowledge (Slater, 2019). Similarly, in Sotho-Tswana societies, Serithi conveys a metaphysical understanding of human dignity and moral presence, suggesting that authority derives from character and integrity rather than positional power (Vellem, 2013). Collectively, these philosophies expand the Afrocentric leadership paradigm by offering culturally diverse yet thematically coherent pathways for reimagining leadership in African schools and communities.

Afrocentric leadership in dialogue with established models

Afrocentric leadership does not exist in isolation from established leadership theories. It shares important complementarities with transformational, servant, and distributed leadership.

Servant leadership emphasises ethical behaviour, prioritising others' needs, mentorship, and participatory decision-making, contributing to improved school climate and teacher morale (Makirimani & Naicker, 2025).

Transformational leadership inspires collective purpose, models integrity, fosters innovation, and supports individual growth, enhancing school effectiveness and teacher motivation (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999).

Distributed leadership promotes shared responsibility and collaborative problem-solving among teachers, parents, and communities, supporting professional growth and organisational collaboration (Harris, 2013).

Integrating Afrocentric leadership with these evidence-based models allows African school leaders to combine culturally grounded values with proven practices, fostering inclusive, effective, and sustainable learning environments.

Characteristics of Afrocentric leadership

Afrocentric leadership is grounded in African cultural values, indigenous knowledge systems, and communal philosophies that emphasise the collective over the individual. While expressions of leadership vary across the continent's diverse cultural landscapes, based on this literature, several defining characteristics can be highlighted:

- **Communalism and collective responsibility:** This refers primarily to the social and organisational structure of leadership. Leadership is viewed as a shared social function rather than an individual pursuit. Leaders derive legitimacy from their ability to serve, unite, and advance the collective good through participatory decision-making and community dialogue (Masango, 2002; Toendepi & Cele, 2024). In the context of discipline, child protection, and minority rights, communalism is relevant because it reflects how African societies balance individual rights with communal responsibilities and social harmony (Letseka, 2013).
- **Ubuntu philosophy – relational humanity:** This operates at a philosophical and ethical level. Central to Afrocentric thought is Ubuntu, the belief that "a person is a person through other people». Leadership rooted in this philosophy emphasises empathy, compassion, interdependence, and mutual respect, cultivating belonging and social cohesion within communities and schools (Uleanya & Naicker, 2024).
- **Moral and ethical stewardship:** Afrocentric leaders are moral exemplars who model integrity, humility, and ethical conduct. Their legitimacy depends on their moral standing and their capacity to act in the best interests of their community (Asiimwe, 2023; Kriger & Seng, 2005).
- **Service and responsibility to the community:** This refers to the practical obligation and moral duty of the leader toward societal wellbeing. Leadership is understood as service (servant leadership). Leaders are accountable to the people and use their influence to uplift, empower, and protect others. Their effectiveness is measured by the wellbeing and satisfaction of the community rather than personal achievement (Nahavandi, 2000; Aabed, 2006).
- **Participatory and dialogical decision-Making:** Afrocentric leadership values open consultation and collective decision-making. Practices such as shura and ta'āwun in North African contexts reflect inclusive governance and shared ownership of outcomes (Amghar, 2022; Hammad & Hallinger, 2017).
- **Intergenerational respect and mentorship:** Respect for elders and mentorship of younger members are integral to leadership development. Storytelling, proverbs, and oral traditions serve as key pedagogical tools for transmitting values and nurturing new leaders (Masango, 2002; Asiimwe, 2023).
- **Spiritual and cosmological connection:** Many African traditions view leadership as a sacred trust that integrates moral, spiritual, and communal dimensions. Leaders are expected to maintain harmony with ancestral values and the spiritual order, embodying holistic responsibility (Achebe, 1984; Asante, 2003).
- **Contextual relevance and cultural grounding:** Afrocentric leadership draws on local wisdom, language, and customs, resisting the uncritical adoption of Western models. It promotes leadership practices that resonate with African socio-cultural realities and educational aspirations (Purinton & Khalil, 2016; Mpofu, 2023).

Afrocentric school leadership in practice

Effective school leadership grounded in Afrocentric principles can play a pivotal role in addressing persistent challenges and building on opportunities within African education systems, including inadequate infrastructure, limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, insufficiently qualified teachers, and low parental engagement (Bush et al., 2022; Lopez et al., 2024; UNESCO GEM Report, 2024a). Recognising that the effectiveness of school leaders is primarily measured by their influence on teaching and learning outcomes (Kirezi et al., 2024), it is essential to align leadership practices with the pathways through which such influence is exerted. These pathways include developing an organisational vision, culture, and structure; improving instructional programmes; supporting teacher professional development, well-being, and retention; and building strong family–school partnerships (Bush et al., 2022; Leithwood et al., 2020). In addition to these pathways, gender and social inclusion aspects are also added as key to reach equitable learning outcomes. In this way, Afrocentric school leadership can be both conceptualised and operationalised through these key pathways.

1. Developing organisational vision, culture, and structure

This pathway consists of how effective leaders shape school outcomes by establishing a shared vision, fostering a collaborative culture, and structuring equitable workloads (Day et al., 2020; Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2023, 2024). Communicating a clear vision enables alignment of human resources and initiatives toward shared goals, while promoting collegiality, safety, and productivity enhances teacher and student outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020; Day et al., 2020).

In the Afrocentric lenses, considering the school as a community, here the leader guides the formulation and the implementation of a common goal for the school (Masango, 2002). Since it is a communal interest, the school leader ensures that all the community including students, teachers, non-teaching staff and parents are involved in a dialogue for decision making to ensure that the goal or vision is aligned with the needs and culture of the community (Amghar, 2022; Mpofu, 2023; Purinton & Khalil, 2016). This also helps in identifying key challenges in the school community and identifying solutions together (Lopez et al., 2024).

It involves developing equitable structures for teachers and students. Creating a culture of collaboration, raising expectations and accountability helps maximize the impact of limited infrastructure and human resources (Elonga Mboyo, 2019; Lopez et al., 2024; Toendepi & Cele, 2024).



2. Improving teaching and learning outcomes

This pathway focuses on how effective school leaders strengthen teaching and learning outcomes by aligning pedagogical practices with the school's shared goals and vision. Leadership influence on learning is exercised through guiding curriculum implementation, supporting pedagogical innovation, and fostering reflective teaching practices (Hallinger, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2020). Through direct engagement with teachers, leaders help refine the curriculum implementation, manage resources efficiently, and monitor student learning to ensure continuous improvement. The systematic use and interpretation of data are critical for identifying learning gaps and informing evidence-based decisions (Grissom et al., 2021).

From an Afrocentric perspective, improving teaching and learning outcomes entails a holistic understanding of education that integrates intellectual, emotional, moral, and social development (Asante, 2003; Masango, 2002). This aligns closely with cultural and heritage-based curriculum principles, which emphasise integrating local needs, community engagement, cultural practices, practical skills, environmental sustainability, and indigenous knowledge systems—anchored in values such as hard work, respect, and communal responsibility (Battiste, 2014; Makuvaza, 1996). Within this lens, teaching and learning are collective efforts aimed at nurturing the full potential of every learner.

An Afrocentric approach positions school leaders as custodians of culturally responsive pedagogy. They encourage approaches grounded in African epistemologies—such as storytelling, proverbs, and experiential learning—that transmit both knowledge and values (Amghar, 2022; Purinton & Khalil, 2016). Storytelling and proverbs have long stood at the heart of how societies teach, learn, and make sense of the world. Across generations and cultures, they have served not merely as forms of entertainment, but as powerful educational tools that carry knowledge, values, and collective wisdom (Dei & McDermott, 2019; Dei et al., 2018). Through storytelling, people craft narratives that allow listeners to connect emotionally with ideas and lived experiences, while proverbs distil complex insights into short, memorable expressions that invite reflection and interpretation (Yankah, 1989). Together, they form a rich pedagogical approach that nurtures critical thinking, cultural understanding, and moral reasoning (Ashliman, 2004; Asimeng-Boahene & Baffoe, 2018; Dei & McDermott, 2019). Leaders also guide teachers to design lessons that affirm learners' identities, connect classroom content to community life, and foster moral and spiritual growth alongside academic achievement (Mpofu, 2023; Toendepi & Cele, 2024). Even in resource-limited settings, effective leaders draw on community knowledge and local resources to strengthen instructional quality and sustain learner engagement (Lopez et al., 2024).

a) Storytelling

Storytelling, one of the oldest forms of communication and education, is deeply rooted in oral traditions across cultures (Ashliman, 2004; Asimeng-Boahene & Baffoe, 2018; Dei & McDermott, 2019). It involves using narrative to share experiences, transmit knowledge, and explain complex ideas in engaging and relatable ways. Stories often include characters, challenges, and resolutions that illustrate important lessons about life, relationships, and decision-making. In educational settings, storytelling helps learners connect abstract concepts to real-life contexts, making learning more meaningful and memorable (Asimeng-Boahene & Baffoe, 2018; Dei & McDermott, 2019). When students engage with stories, they visualise scenarios, empathise with characters, and retain key lessons more effectively.

Through storytelling, learners develop communication skills as they listen, interpret, and retell narratives. They also enhance creativity and imagination by constructing their own stories based on personal or cultural experiences. Proverbs, meanwhile, foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills because learners must analyse their meanings and apply them to different contexts. This interpretive process encourages discussion, multiple perspectives, and deeper understanding—key elements of competency-based learning (KICD, 2017; Wanjohi, 2019).

Storytelling also conveys lessons about leadership, cooperation, responsibility, and respect for others. Through stories about animals, heroes, and historical events, learners gain insights into social norms and community values. These approaches mirror CBC's focus on experiential and contextual learning, where knowledge is not only acquired but applied in real-life situations (KICD, 2017).

b) Proverbs

Proverbs are concise expressions of wisdom that communicate general truths through metaphor, symbolism, and imagery (Yankah, 1989). Although brief, they carry deep meaning that encourages reflection and interpretation (Dei, 2013). African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, proverbs are central to traditional education and are commonly used in conversations, community gatherings, and decision-making processes. Elders often employ proverbs not to provide direct instructions, but to stimulate critical thinking and guide younger generations toward deeper understanding. For example, the proverb, *"Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no one person can embrace it,"* emphasises the collective nature of knowledge and the importance of collaboration in learning.

Within the framework of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) adopted across African education systems, storytelling and proverbs align closely with the development of competencies such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and citizenship. Proverbs encourage learners to analyse meaning, interpret ideas from different perspectives, and relate lessons to real-life experiences (Ng'asike, 2019). The proverb, *"Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter,"* for instance, highlights the importance of perspective and representation, thereby supporting CBC's aim of nurturing independent and reflective thinkers. In addition, proverbs contribute to values and citizenship education by communicating moral principles, social norms, and ethical responsibilities.

In modern CBC classrooms, proverbs can be integrated into teaching through discussion-based learning, reflective exercises, and creative activities. Teachers may introduce lessons using a relevant proverb to make concepts more relatable and culturally meaningful, while learners may interpret proverbs, discuss their significance, or create their own sayings to express personal experiences and ideas. A practical example is the Embu proverb, *"Yaganahwa iri iria yakua,"* meaning *"One's good deeds are known after death"* (Dei, 2013). Learners can analyse its meaning and connect it to themes such as perseverance, responsibility, and long-term success. Through such activities, proverbs strengthen learner engagement, cultural identity, and meaningful understanding while supporting the broader goals of competency-based education.

c) Symbols and symbolism

Symbols play an important role in African knowledge systems as carriers of philosophical, historical, educational, and moral meaning (Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al., 2016). Across African societies, symbols appear in art, textiles, architecture, artefacts, and social practices, where they preserve and transmit knowledge across generations. Unlike proverbs, which communicate through language, symbols convey meaning visually and materially, making complex ideas accessible and memorable. Their interpretive nature encourages learners to reflect critically, explore multiple meanings, and connect abstract concepts to their own lived experiences.

From an educational perspective, symbols support culturally responsive pedagogy by grounding learning in locally meaningful contexts. Within an Afrocentric framework, they reinforce cultural identity, affirm indigenous knowledge systems, and promote creativity and imagination. Learners are better able to relate classroom content to their communities when instruction incorporates familiar cultural symbols and artefacts. School leaders and educators therefore play a significant role in encouraging the use of local visual representations and cultural materials as teaching resources, particularly in contexts where conventional educational resources may be limited.

A practical example of symbolic learning is the Agaseke basket in Rwanda, which symbolises peace, unity, and social cohesion (Nshimiyimana & Achtenhagen, 2026). In some educational settings, this symbolism has informed collective contribution initiatives where students support peers in need, thereby promoting values of solidarity, mutual support, and collective responsibility within the school community (Pansiri et al., 2026). The integration of symbols and symbolism into teaching and learning therefore reflects a broader Afrocentric approach that values multiple forms of knowledge representation and creates more inclusive, engaging, and contextually relevant educational experiences.

3. Supporting Teacher Professional Development, wellbeing, and retention

Teacher shortages and low retention remain persistent challenges across many African schools. These issues are often compounded by under-resourcing, high workloads, and limited professional growth opportunities. School leaders who practise relational care and mentorship (Nguyen et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2022) can play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges by creating supportive environments where teachers feel valued, empowered, and connected.

Effective leadership practices for improving teacher development and retention include providing instructional support—such as classroom observations, mentoring, and constructive feedback—and facilitating professional development that addresses teachers' real-world challenges(Barbieri et al., 2019; Cann et al., 2021; Kim, 2019; Kraft et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2021). Collaborative approaches to problem-solving and shared professional learning also enhance teacher engagement, satisfaction, and commitment to remain in the profession (Luo et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023).

From an Afrocentric perspective, leadership that is relational and community-oriented is central to sustaining teacher well-being and commitment. Afrocentric leadership is grounded in the principles of trust, care, moral responsibility, and relational accountability (Aabed, 2006; Nahavandi, 2000). Leaders model these principles by fostering inclusive and participatory decision-making (Amghar, 2022; Battiste, 2014; Hallinger & Hammad, 2019), ensuring that teachers are active contributors to the school's vision and improvement processes.

Professional development should also equip teachers to respond to the diverse learning needs of students, adapt the curriculum to local contexts, and embed moral and cultural values in their teaching. Within this framework, the school leader acts as a mentor—providing guidance, fair and constructive feedback, and emotional support that strengthens professional trust and morale.

By nurturing teacher well-being and retention, Afrocentric leaders cultivate a "family-like" school environment defined by communal solidarity, mutual respect, and shared responsibility for learning and development. In doing so, they not only enhance teacher effectiveness but also reinforce the moral and cultural foundations of the school community.

4. Building family-school partnerships

Low parental engagement remains a major challenge across many African education systems. Afrocentric leadership principles of community engagement and reciprocity (Leithwood et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020) emphasise shared responsibility for children's learning and development. By actively involving parents and communities, leaders can enhance student support beyond the classroom, mobilise additional resources, and create stronger networks to address educational inequities.

School leaders influence student learning by fostering effective family–school partnerships, including home-based involvement and two-way communication (Jeynes, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). While parental engagement supports both academic and socio-emotional development, its effectiveness often depends on students' active engagement in school activities, underscoring the importance of leadership in shaping inclusive policies and practices (Martinez-Yarza et al., 2024).

Afrocentric leadership values community participation, reciprocity, and interconnectedness. In rural contexts where literacy levels may be low, schools can involve parents in the teaching of cultural knowledge—for instance, through storytelling, using traditional crafts for teaching and learning materials, or oral histories—thereby honouring community expertise. Building effective partnerships requires trust, mutual respect, and co-responsibility—core Afrocentric values that strengthen the bonds between schools and the communities they serve.

5. Gender equity and social inclusion

Promoting gender equality and social inclusion in schools creates an environment where all learners have equal opportunities and strengthens communities. learning In many African contexts, however, educational equity is constrained by poverty, limited infrastructure, teacher shortages, disability-related barriers, and social prejudice (Akinpelu et al., 2024). Afrocentric leadership addresses these challenges through principles of dignity, justice, relational accountability, and collective wellbeing. From this perspective, inclusion is not treated as an additional policy concern, but as a shared moral and communal responsibility.

Traditional African education systems emphasised practical skills, moral development, social responsibility, and cultural continuity through apprenticeships and community participation (Makuvaza, 1996; Ramose, 1999; Samkange, 1980). Although some practices reflected gendered roles, these systems also promoted cooperation, dignity, and collective responsibility. Contemporary Afrocentric leadership therefore engages critically with tradition by preserving values that strengthen community while challenging practices that reinforce exclusion or inequality.

In practice, Afrocentric school leaders promote inclusive and culturally responsive learning environments by encouraging equitable participation, addressing discrimination and bias, supporting identity-affirming pedagogies, and strengthening partnerships with families and communities. Inclusion also involves ensuring equitable access to resources, leadership opportunities, and participation in school life for learners of different genders, abilities, socio-economic backgrounds, and cultural identities. By embedding inclusion into everyday leadership practices, Afrocentric leaders strengthen social cohesion, ethical responsibility, and collective wellbeing within schools.

Socio-economic and cultural inclusion is addressed by ensuring equitable access to resources, learning opportunities, and participation in school life. By embedding inclusion into everyday practice, Afrocentric leaders create environments where all students and staff can thrive, reinforcing cohesion, moral development, and shared responsibility. Inclusive leadership fosters equitable, culturally responsive, and cohesive learning communities where all students and staff can thrive.

a. Gender Equality

Traditional African societies often organised education through apprenticeships, mentorship, and participation in community life, with gender influencing roles and learning pathways. While these systems supported cultural continuity and social cohesion, some practices reinforced unequal educational and leadership opportunities for women and girls.

Contemporary Afrocentric leadership therefore promotes values of dignity, justice, and mutual respect by creating school cultures where both girls and boys can participate fully in learning and leadership. School leaders support equal access to educational opportunities, encourage girls' participation in leadership and STEM-related activities, and address gender-based discrimination and violence. Gender equality is also reflected in equitable participation of female and male teachers in leadership, mentoring, and decision-making processes.



b. Disability Inclusion

Inclusive education reflects the Afrocentric principle that every individual possesses inherent dignity and value. Learners with disabilities often face barriers such as inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate learning resources, discriminatory attitudes, and limited participation opportunities.

Afrocentric leaders promote inclusion for learners with disabilities through adapted curricula, accessible infrastructure, differentiated instruction, and collaborative problem-solving with teachers, parents, and communities (Loreman, 2017; UNESCO, 2020). Inclusive leadership also seeks to transform school culture by fostering respect for diversity and recognising learners for their strengths and potential. In this way, disability inclusion contributes to caring, equitable, and socially responsive school communities.

c. Socio-economic and Cultural Inclusion

Many learners experience barriers to education due to poverty, marginalisation, language differences, or cultural exclusion. Afrocentric leadership views addressing these inequities as a collective responsibility grounded in relational care, reciprocity, and shared wellbeing.

Socio-economic inclusion involves reducing barriers related to school fees, transport, meals, learning materials, and participation in school activities through community support and partnership. Cultural inclusion involves affirming diverse identities, languages, histories, and indigenous knowledge systems through culturally responsive teaching approaches. By promoting equitable participation and respectful relationships, Afrocentric leadership helps create inclusive school communities where all learners can participate, contribute, and thrive.

Afrocentric professional development

In considering the organisation of professional development (PD), it is essential that the content aligns with the core characteristics of Afrocentric leadership, reflecting the practices and values of Afrocentric leaders. Similarly, the delivery of PD programmes should embody approaches consistent with Afrocentric perspectives. Effective professional development for school leaders is contextually relevant, collaborative, applied, and grounded in clear professional standards, ultimately aiming to improve leadership practice, teacher retention, and student learning outcomes (Campoli et al., 2022; Lauterbach et al., 2025). Investing in leadership PD builds the capacity to address systemic challenges. PD for school leaders can reflect Afrocentric leadership by emphasising mentorship, communal problem-solving, and learning from elders or experienced peers.

PD that enhances relational, ethical, and community-oriented leadership aligns with Afrocentric principles of collective wisdom, moral leadership, and servant leadership (Leithwood et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2023). Afrocentric-focused PD emphasises mentorship, collective wisdom, and culturally grounded problem-solving, enabling leaders to innovate within constraints, optimise resource use, and implement inclusive policies that address infrastructure gaps, overcrowding, and teacher shortages.

1. Alignment with professional standards

Effective PD aligns with national professional standards, ensuring relevance to school leaders' responsibilities. This alignment is particularly important for induction programmes for novice leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Sutcher et al., 2017). PD for school leaders should reflect the cultural, social, and educational realities of African contexts. Aligning PD with local professional standards ensures that learning is relevant to the specific responsibilities and expectations of school leaders in their schools and communities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, 2022).

From an Afrocentric perspective, this alignment also involves grounding leadership learning in indigenous knowledge systems, communal values, and locally relevant practices(Mpofu, 2023; Purinton & Khalil, 2016). By contextualising content in this way, PD reinforces leadership practices that resonate with African traditions such as participatory decision-making, collective responsibility, and ethical stewardship.

2. Individualised mentoring and coaching

A key component of effective PD is individualised mentoring and coaching. Tailored guidance supports leaders' personal and professional growth within their specific school contexts (Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Levin et al., 2020). This aligns with the Afrocentric principle of intergenerational mentorship, where experienced leaders model ethical, relational, and community-centred leadership for emerging leaders (Asiimwe, 2023; Masango, 2002). In this reciprocal process, senior leaders share wisdom and experience, while younger leaders contribute fresh perspectives, emerging issues, and digital competencies—helping to bridge generational divides and challenge stereotypes (Rahman Khattak et al., 2021; Together, 2024). Mentoring thus provides a relational framework that fosters moral development, ethical decision-making, and practical leadership skills, reflecting the Afrocentric emphasis on care, reciprocity, and guidance.

3. Collaborative learning and networking

Collaborative learning is another central feature of effective professional development. PD that promotes peer learning through communities of practice provides safe spaces for reflection, sharing good practice, and addressing leadership challenges (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Sutcher et al., 2017). Communities of practice allow school leaders to share experiences, reflect on challenges, and exchange effective strategies in supportive environments. This practice aligns with the Afrocentric value of communalism, which emphasises collective responsibility and shared problem-solving (Masango, 2002; Toendepi & Cele, 2024). By fostering collaboration, PD not only builds professional networks but also strengthens social cohesion and mutual accountability, cultivating leadership that is relational, inclusive, and responsive to community needs (Lopez et al., 2024).

4. Applied learning

Effective PD bridges theory and practice, enabling leaders to apply learning to real-world challenges through action research or practitioner enquiry projects that leverage contextual knowledge to inform decisions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

Applied learning and experiential approaches are critical in Afrocentric PD, as they enable leaders to connect theory with practice and respond to real-world challenges in their schools. Integrating ICT tools into these processes enhances leaders' capacity to collect, analyse, and use data effectively, supports innovative teaching and learning approaches, and enables virtual collaboration across schools and regions. This mirrors the Afrocentric principle of service-oriented leadership, where leaders act as moral custodians and facilitators of collective well-being, using their knowledge and influence to uplift the community (Asiimwe, 2023; Nahavandi, 2000).

5. Focused content on value-based leadership

Afrocentric professional development places values at the centre of school leadership, recognising leadership as a moral, relational, and socially situated practice. Drawing on African philosophies such as Ubuntu, Botho, Seriti, Ujamaa, and Sankofa, value-based PD emphasises empathy, interdependence, collective accountability, and ethical stewardship (Amoah, 2011; Uleanya & Naicker, 2024; Vellem, 2013).

Effective leadership involves shaping the goals, motivations, and actions of others through shared values that align personal beliefs with organisational and social purposes (Begley, 2001; Prilleltensky, 2000; Van Niekerk & Botha, 2017). Within an Afrocentric framework, PD therefore supports leaders to cultivate inclusive and collaborative school cultures that reflect community values and respond to local contexts.

PD programmes grounded in these value systems support school leaders to move beyond technical and administrative competencies towards leadership that nurtures inclusive, collaborative, and culturally responsive school cultures. As Van Niekerk & Botha (2017) argue, leadership involves shaping the goals, motivations, and actions of others; this influence is most effective when it is anchored in shared values that resonate with the professional, organisational, and social contexts of the school. Similarly, Begley, (2001) and Prilleltensky (2000) emphasise that values-driven leadership requires alignment between personal beliefs, institutional goals, and the broader social purpose of education.

Within an Afrocentric PD framework, value-based leadership development therefore focuses on cultivating empathy, moral courage, collective accountability, and respect for diversity. This includes strengthening leaders' capacity to enact gender-responsive and socially inclusive practices, ensuring that schools are safe, equitable, and affirming environments for all learners and staff. Integrating ICT competence within this values-based approach further enables leaders to support participatory decision-making, transparent communication, and data-informed reflection, while remaining grounded in ethical and community-oriented leadership practices.

By embedding Afrocentric values alongside professional standards and practical leadership skills, PD programmes prepare school leaders to act as custodians of both educational quality and social cohesion. Such leaders are equipped not only to improve teaching and learning outcomes but also to foster school communities that reflect shared moral purpose, cultural relevance, and collective responsibility for the well-being and success of all members.

6. Facilitating CPD in an Afrocentric approach

Ensuring that professional development is Afrocentric requires careful attention not only to content but also to facilitation. Afrocentric facilitation is grounded in principles of community, participation, humanity, compassion, and cultural relevance, and it positions learning as a relational and collective process rather than a top-down transfer of knowledge (Asante, 2003; Vellem, 2013). Central to this approach is the creation of spaces where participants can connect, share experiences, and co-construct knowledge through dialogue, reflection, and storytelling, drawing on Africa's rich oral traditions and communal learning practices (Masango, 2002; Uleanya & Naicker, 2024).

While these principles apply in a blended modality, their implementation differs in important ways between in-person and online environments. In in-person settings, Afrocentric facilitation can more readily leverage physical presence to build community and reduce hierarchy. Practices such as circle seating, collective reflection, and embodied activities—including role play and the use of music or performance—support participation and foster a sense of shared ownership of the learning process (Toendepi & Cele, 2024). Cultural expressions such as proverbs, metaphors, and storytelling can be more organically integrated, enabling participants to engage cognitively, socially, and emotionally.

In contrast, online facilitation requires more intentional design to sustain these relational and participatory elements. Building community in virtual spaces depends on structured opportunities for interaction, including small-group discussions, breakout rooms, and guided reflection activities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Facilitators need to create deliberate moments for connection, such as personal check-ins, storytelling prompts, and opportunities for participants to share experiences from their own contexts. While storytelling remains central, it must be adapted to digital formats to ensure inclusivity and engagement.

Attention to context is particularly critical in online environments, where disparities in connectivity, access to devices, and digital literacy can shape participation. Research on professional development in low-resource settings highlights the importance of flexible, accessible design, including the use of low-bandwidth tools and blended communication approaches (Lauterbach et al., 2025). Afrocentric facilitation therefore requires adaptability, for instance through asynchronous engagement platforms such as messaging applications, which can support continued dialogue and peer learning beyond synchronous sessions.

Across both modalities, reflection and dialogue remain central to the learning process, enabling participants to interrogate assumptions, exchange perspectives, and generate contextually relevant insights (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). However, in online settings these processes often need to be more explicitly structured through prompts, shared documents, or moderated discussions, whereas in-person environments allow for more spontaneous and emergent interaction.

Crucially, Afrocentric facilitation in both contexts maintains a strong focus on practical application, linking learning to concrete actions within schools and communities. This aligns with experiential and practice-based approaches to professional development, which emphasise the application of knowledge to real-world challenges (Campoli et al., 2022). Whether through collaborative planning sessions in person or structured action-oriented assignments online, the emphasis remains on translating learning into meaningful change.

Underlying both approaches is a relational understanding of learning rooted in the philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasises interconnectedness, mutual respect, and shared responsibility (Uleanya & Naicker, 2024; Vellem, 2013). In this sense, Afrocentric facilitation is not simply a methodological choice, but a normative stance that repositions learning as a collective, human-centred process oriented towards both individual growth and community wellbeing.



Conclusion

This practice framework presents Afrocentric school leadership as a compelling and contextually grounded framework for strengthening education systems across Africa. Rather than positioning leadership as a purely technical or administrative function, it reframes it as a relational, ethical, and community-oriented practice rooted in African philosophies such as Ubuntu, Ujamaa, Botho, and Sankofa. These traditions foreground collective responsibility, moral stewardship, and interconnectedness, providing a coherent foundation for leadership approaches that are both culturally resonant and practically effective.

Importantly, the analysis highlights that the relevance of Afrocentric leadership lies not only in its cultural authenticity but also in its capacity to respond to persistent systemic challenges. In contexts characterised by resource constraints, policy limitations, and social inequalities, leadership that mobilises community assets, fosters trust, and promotes inclusive participation becomes a critical lever for school improvement. Afrocentric leadership therefore strengthens key pathways of impact—including shaping school culture, improving teaching and learning, supporting teacher development, and building meaningful family–school partnerships—while also advancing gender equity and social inclusion.

At the same time, this practice framework emphasises that Afrocentric leadership model should not be understood in isolation from broader leadership scholarship. Its value lies in its ability to complement and extend established models such as transformational, servant, and distributed leadership by grounding them in African epistemologies and lived realities. In doing so, it addresses a critical gap in global education discourse, which has often overlooked or marginalised context-specific knowledge and practice.

The implications for professional development are equally significant. Strengthening school leadership at scale requires approaches to professional learning that are themselves aligned with Afrocentric principles—collaborative, practice-based, contextually relevant, and rooted in shared values. By integrating mentorship, communities of practice, applied learning, and culturally grounded facilitation, professional development can move beyond knowledge transmission towards fostering reflective, adaptive, and community-responsive leaders.

Ultimately, advancing Afrocentric school leadership is not about replacing existing models, but about reclaiming and repositioning African knowledge systems as legitimate and essential resources for educational transformation. In line with the aspirations of Agenda 2063, this approach contributes to building education systems that are not only effective in improving learning outcomes, but also meaningful in sustaining cultural identity, social cohesion, and collective wellbeing. By situating leadership within the realities and aspirations of African societies, Afrocentric school leadership provides a pathway towards more inclusive, relevant, and sustainable education systems across the continent.

Next Steps

The African centre for school leadership (ACSL) is developing a Blended Exchange and Learning Trajectory (BELT) for professional development providers. The first topic will focus on Afrocentric school leadership practices and professional development. The trajectory is designed as a Community of Practice, fostering continuous engagement among participants through shared reflection, exchange of experiences, and co-creation of knowledge and resources. It places particular emphasis on integrating Afrocentric perspectives and African knowledge systems into professional development, ensuring that leadership practices are culturally relevant, contextually responsive, and rooted in local realities. By bringing together practitioners from diverse contexts across the continent, the programme also contributes to building a more connected and collaborative school leadership ecosystem.

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