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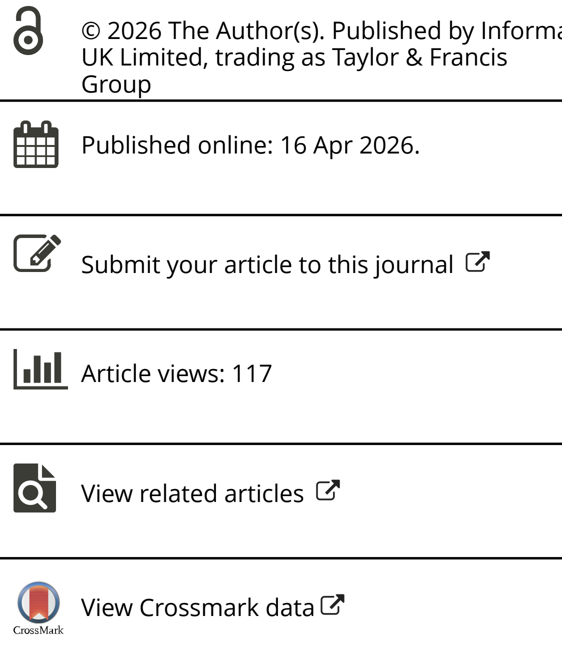

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PACTS: critical dispositions necessary for a culturally responsive and transformative school, family, and community partnership for Black Pan-African immigrant students and families

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ABSTRACT

This study highlights a culturally responsive transformative school, family, and community partnership in the Western Region of the United States. The partnership served over 100 students and 300 parents of Black Pan-African immigrant descent responding to persistent school alienation. Using Critical Race Theory, Community Cultural Wealth, and a critical participatory action research design, we explored the structural forces shaping these experiences and the community-based responses that sought to resist them. Data sources included professional development sessions, counter-storytelling, Theater of the Oppressed, asset mapping, and semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed key partnership members centered five dispositions—Prophetic Activism, Asset-Based Ideology, Critical Consciousness, Trust, and Solidarity—collectively theorized as PACTS, in response to multiple forms of alienation intersecting Black Pan-African families experienced in schools. These dispositions represent a spiritually, culturally, and politically grounded praxis that disrupted systemic marginalization and help reimagine school, family and community partnerships as sites of collective care, resistance, and justice. Theoretically, we advance "spiritual wealth" as a justice-contingent extension in Community Cultural Wealth. Methodologically, we recommend Black Indigenous approach's centering African knowledge producers. Practically, we provide an audit tool to assess weather partnerships are transformative.

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Black; Pan-African; immigrants; school-family-community partnerships; culturally responsive; cultural navigators

We highlight a transformative, culturally responsive school, family, community partnership developed in collaboration between two nonprofit organizations—the African Community Development Association (ACDA) and the Refugee and Immigration Center for African Newcomers (RICAN)[1], a mid-sized urban university, and three urban school districts in Green Valley (GV)[2]—a city in the Western Region of the U.S. Serving over 100 students and engaging more than 300 parents, this partnership sought to

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co-construct a justice-oriented model that affirms the cultural assets of Black African immigrant families while addressing the structural school conditions that have historically marginalized them in schools and the broader GV community. This model helps expand the line of inquiry on transformative and culturally responsive, school-community partnerships deepened by Critical Race Theory (CRT), Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), Black immigrant diaspora studies, and participatory praxis in Black education.

At its core, our study responds to the ways refugee and immigrant Black families—particularly those of Pan-African heritage in the United States—have been historically sidelined by family engagement models that sanitize partnership into race-neutral, compliance-driven forms, or further by not distinguishing them from "African American." By co-theorizing a spiritually and politically grounded praxis with Black African immigrant families, this study challenges institutional norms that erase their epistemologies, spiritual identities, and communal forms of resistance.

Guided by the core tenets of CRT, particularly its emphasis on structural racism and intersectional oppression in the U.S., the community-based partners foregrounded the persistent alienation Black African students and families faced within schools. We viewed these experiences as shaped by enduring logics of white supremacy in Western culture. At the same time, the partnership intentionally centered the cultural capital, and epistemologies present within Pan-African communities, drawing on Yosso's (2005) framework of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) to elevate how aspirational, social, familial, linguistic, navigational, and resistant capital operated as tools for disruption and survival amid an overarching oppressive system. Scholarship on anti-racist partnerships (Bryan et al., 2025), community equity frameworks (Scheurich et al., 2017), and faith-based activism (Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Nimmo, et al., 2019) further informed our conceptualization of our partnership as a spiritual, political, and cultural intervention—one that challenges power asymmetries and restores agency to historically marginalized Black African students and families.

We drew from qualitative data collection: observations and reflections from 14 professional development sessions; ecomaps generated through counter-storytelling activities; Theater of the Oppressed activities to expand on ways students and families were alienated; four 60–90 minute semi-structured interviews with CN's and leadership team member, and a document analysis of school and district policies related to participants' narratives. Data were triangulated with feedback from over 300 parents drawn from a broader study, while policy documents reviewed illuminated the structural barriers reported. Asset mapping and counter-stories revealed the ways students, families, and the community-based partners mobilized CCW to navigate the varying forms of alienation experienced. We expand on school-level alienation, but it should be noted that the community organizations addressed broader societal alienation as well to help cement the partnerships transformative brevity.

Our findings are twofold. First, Black African newcomer families and students experienced persistent intersectional alienation—especially across linguistic, racial, and religious-spiritual domains. Linguistic alienation included the absence of interpretation services, bureaucratic acronyms, like IEP (i.e., "Individual Education Plan"), and delays in accessing resources due to lack of translation into a family's home language. In terms of racial alienation, students and families experienced anti-Blackness and cultural erasure. Several families described this as a "racial awakening" to their

marginalization. Spiritual alienation manifested through societal Islamophobia, and within schools themselves. The lack of prayer spaces, exclusionary calendars, inappropriate meals misaligned with *halal* practices, and harassment of Muslim students were reported as alienating. Second, the community-based component of the partnership responded not only by mitigating school harm but by enacting practices of disruption. From this work, five critical dispositions emerged—*Prophetic Activism, Asset-Based Ideology, Critical Consciousness, Trust, and Solidarity*—collectively conceptualized as the PACTS praxis framework. PACTS expands our understanding of transformative and culturally responsive school-community partnerships by centering the agency of those most impacted by systemic oppression.

Through prophetic activism work, our study advances spiritual wealth as a justice-contingent extension of CCW, revealing how spirituality functions as a collective resource sustaining resistance amid alienation. However, while CRT and CCW provided essential analytic tools, our findings also revealed their limits. CRT helps frame racialized and intersectional power and CCW foregrounds community assets, but neither framework fully captures African embodied ways of knowing. We therefore argue for Black Indigenous approaches that center African onto-epistemologies and position Black Africans as key knowledge producers. Finally, we offer a practical audit tool (Table 2) to help practitioners assess whether partnerships are engaging families and communities in culturally responsive and transformative ways and standing with them in shared struggle.

Table 1. Participant demographics of the research practice partnership.

Name	Role	Ethnic heritage/ Race	Immigrant generation/ Refugee	U.S. Born	Languages spoken in addition to english	Gender	Age range
Lee	CN	Somali	2nd gen	yes	Somali, Arabic	F	24–32
Lila	CN	Somali	2nd gen	yes	Somali, Amharic	F	24–32
Kinna	CN	Somali	1st gen/ref	no	Somali, Oromo	F	24–32
Shakira	CN	Somali	1st gen/ref	no	Somali, Mai Mai	F	24–32
James	CN	Ethiopian	1st gen/ref	no	Somali	M	24–32
Maxamed	CN	Somali	1st gen/ref	no	Somali	M	24–32
Nala	CN	Somali	1st gen/ref	no	Somali	F	24–32
Omar	Leadership Team	Somali	1st gen/ref	no	Somali	M	34–55
Ciara	Leadership Team	Somali	1st gen/ref	no	Somali	F	34–55
Mandy	Leadership Team	Euro-American White	N/A	yes		F	34–55
Author	Researcher Partner	Euro-Australian White	1st gen	no		M	34–55
Author	Researcher Partner	African-American	N/A	yes		F	34–55

Table 1 reflects participants in this RPP. The seven Community Navigators (ages 24–32) are predominantly Somali, with five identifying as first-generation immigrants or refugees and two as second-generation U.S.-born; all are multilingual, and the group is majority women (five women, two men). The Leadership Team (n = 3), was composed of two first-generation Somali immigrant/refugee leaders and one U.S.-born Euro-American woman (ages 34–55), while the two Researcher Partners—a first-generation Euro-Australian White male and a U.S.-born African American woman—extend this cross-racial, transnational partnership within the study's design and implementation.

Table 2. Culturally responsive and transformative school–family–community partnership audit tool.

Analytic dimension	Guiding question	Partnership orientation	Data sources / Artifacts	Sample reflective indicators
Prophetic activism	Whose dignity, safety, and cultural survival are currently at risk in our school community, and what moral obligations does this create for partnership action?	Justice-oriented action grounded in moral and spiritual obligation; leadership aligned with community-defined justice rather than institutional logics; partnership as counterspace where spiritual, cultural, and political resistance converge; resistance to technocratic logic that obscures spiritual and political dimensions of partnership work	School Improvement Plans; vision/mission statements; meeting notes with justice framing; public statements; policy shifts; narratives of who "showed up" during harm	Do we draw on community cultural and spiritual frameworks to ground advocacy? When crises arise, do we respond with urgency or institutional timelines? Do we explicitly honor traditions motivating activism? Do we resist reducing partnership work to technical compliance?
Asset-based ideology	What cultural, linguistic, spiritual, and diasporic assets are students and families already mobilizing in pursuit of racially and sociopolitically just outcomes?	Affirmation of cultural practices, language maintenance, kinship, faith, and transnational ties; recognition of hidden engagement; resistance to deficit narratives; identity-affirming counterspaces; positioning families as epistemic agents and co-theorists rather than supporters of school priorities; rejection of white, middle-class involvement norms as the standard for engagement	Partnership artifacts reflecting asset recognition; family/student feedback on whether expertise is valued; PD materials naming community cultural wealth; outreach engaging informal networks	Do we provide professional development to recognize community cultural wealth? When students struggle, do we investigate context before assuming deficit? Do we see translation labor as strength while reducing burden? Do we recognize family protection as care? Do we engage elders and informal networks? Do we treat families as knowledge producers or as recipients of school expertise?
Critical consciousness	How are racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, sexism, and linguistic marginalization operating structurally?	Collective analysis of harm; counter-narrative development; refusal of individual blame; structural framing of problems	School, community, spiritually aligned/accommodating calendars and meals; Counter-stories shifts from achievement to opportunity framing; disaggregated data; participatory analysis spaces; creative methods that help to surface exclusion or opportunity gaps	Do partners reflect power and institutional harm together? Do we ask, "what policy caused this?" Do we examine programming for hidden bias? Does analysis lead to action? Do we build relationships across marginalized groups? Do we name anti-Blackness and white supremacy as structural contexts shaping family engagement?
Trust	What policies and practices shape students' and families' sense of safety, and how are these communicated?	Transparency, consistency, reciprocity, and repair after harm; acknowledgment of historical violence shaping engagement; antiracist, relational approach that resists depoliticized models of reform	Communication artifacts; timelines of responsiveness; family/student trust accounts; partnership documentation in trusted community spaces	Do we do what we say consistently? Do we meet families where they are—physically, linguistically, culturally? Do we partner in spaces families already trust (e.g., mosques, churches, community centers, homes)? Does staff reflect family diversity? Do we invite dialogue when concerns arise?

(*Continued*)

Table 2. Continued.

Analytic dimension	Guiding question	Partnership orientation	Data sources / Artifacts	Sample reflective indicators
Solidarity	Are partnerships structured as shared struggle or service provision?	Student, family, kinship, and community-led decision-making; coalition building; resistance to transactional engagement; redistribution of power; positioning families as co-architects of educational structures moving beyond symbolic inclusion to shared decision-making power	Evidence of shared campaigns; community decision-making power; narratives of working "with" rather than "for"; cross-sector collaborations	Do we build coalitions across sectors? Do partnerships address housing, health, and safety as interconnected with education? Do students see culture affirmed when schools erase it? Are family's decision-makers or service recipients?

This audit tool operationalizes the PACTS framework to assess whether school-family-community partnerships move beyond transactional engagement toward justice-contingent practice. Grounded in community cultural wealth and critical race scholarship, it examines how partnerships support cultural survival, dignity, safety, collective critique, and structurally informed trust among Black Pan-African immigrant families (Bryan et al., 2025; Farah, 2025; Gil & McClure, 2025; House, 2019; Jordan & Wilson, 2017; Smith, 2023). Table 2 evaluates whether partnerships simply engage families or actively stand with them in contexts shaped by structural alienation and oppression—moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward redistribution of power, epistemic agency for families, and collective liberation (Bryan et al., 2025; Smith et al., 2023).

Literature review: the necessity for a transformative and culturally responsive school, family, and community partnership for Black Africans in America

The substantial rise in Black African immigration into the U.S

A substantial share of the U.S. Black population has "recent immigrant connections" (Pew Research Center, 2022), meaning many Black Americans have parents, grandparents, or other relatives who have immigrated relatively recently. More specifically, one in ten are Black immigrants, and one in five are children of immigrants with African origins (Pew Research Center, 2022). Pew's (2022) report on immigration details this substantial rise as it concerns immigrants with African ties, noting within the first two decades of the 21st century, Black African immigration grew 250%, from 600,000 to two million. Thus, although Black newcomer origins span regions across Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean, the fastest-growing foreign-born Black population in the last 20 years in the U.S. derives from Africa (i.e., 42%) (Pew Research Center, 2022).

From school to societal alienation: the Pan-African U.S. experience

Schools, particularly those housed in gateway cities (Singer et al., 2008), like that of Hamtramck, Michigan, a Muslim-majority city or rural Islamberg, New York, a mostly African American settlement upstate, have been historically serving first and second-generation immigrant children and families with direct ties to African communities. Yet, despite long-standing ethnic enclaves and the surge of Pan-Africans in the last 20 years, these students have confronted a homogeneous educator population that identifies as mainly white, middle-class, and women (Gichiru, 2012) who have had very few personal encounters with African immigrants in general. The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reported that approximately 79% of U.S. public school teachers identified as non-Hispanic White, while only 53% of public school students were students of color. This demographic imbalance along with a very white-washed and sanitized curriculum, underscores that the "overwhelming presence of whiteness" (Sleeter, 2001, p. 101) continues to characterize the education profession and school-centric logics.

Another compounding and impeding issue that Black African students largely experience in the US, are that educators often hold deficit views of these newcomers (Georgis et al., 2014; Roy & Roxas, 2011). Paraphrasing Valencia (2010), deficit beliefs are reincarnated forms of white racism, centering children and families of color as problems. These victim-blaming beliefs often have the trickle-down effect of stifling educational attainment and the socioemotional well-being of learners. These beliefs can further undermine efforts to form collaborative relationships with vital school-community members, like students and families, as Gichiru (2012) details the extent of deficit thinking harbored by educators claiming that one major theme in their study was that teachers "were predisposed to think of the majority of their Somali students not only as economically disadvantaged but also relatively unaware or ignorant of the greater scope of the world outside of their immediate environment" (p. 58). Gichiru concludes with describing Somali students as being the center of a

complex narrative of teachers linking problems of failure with "at risk" notions or an extension of a perceived culture of poverty among the Somali community, yet never being exposed to Somali-life in general. Compounding on deficit perceptions of Black African key school members, students from these communities have reported experiencing frequent school discrimination (Birman & Tran, 2015), often intersecting across racial, cultural, religious, and linguistic oppressive experiences (Basford, 2010; Harushimana & Awokoya, 2011). Oppressive experiences range, but for this study, given its location in the U.S., it should be noted that a distinct marker in school experiences across Pan-African youth has been the problem of racialization. For example, the polarization between whiteness and Blackness in America and the disparate treatment often forces Somali youth to reduce their social identity to the singleness of race (Mason, 2016). Mason (2015) reports that Somali American youth provided they resist an "acting Black" persona to the point they deny their overall Black experience in America. In Mason's study, evidence suggests that students may even shrink their authentic cultural and racial selves in schools due to the way race is portrayed in their U.S. schools. Mason concludes these dynamics lead to conflating Africanness with Blackness, and as a result Pan-African students, like Somali Americans, often endure a subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) process, alienating them from their racial, cultural, religious, and multi-linguistic historical mores.

Unfortunately, schools have been known to alienate Black African immigrant parents as well (Moultrie, 2016). Several studies found that parents were often silenced by educators, and educators' beliefs stifled their children's academic potential in their school. (Moultrie, 2016) reported how educators dismissed a Kenyan-born father's claims that his child should have been nominated for advanced placement in her high school science courses. He felt his daughter's status as a child of Black African immigrant parents played a role in teachers not recognizing her straight-A status and high standardized test scores in science, as he explained why she was passed over for the opportunity to join advanced placement. Even outside the U.S., we see these patterns of school alienation among Black African immigrants. For instance, Matthiesen (2016) discusses the relationship between Somali diaspora families in Danish public schools, detailing that they are often systematically silenced. Matthiesen reported that during parent-teacher conferences, Somali parents were often stifled when sharing their opinions and knowledge. This was mainly due to the top-down structure in schools, where teachers often acted as authority, although parents had their own views about their child's education.

Unfortunately, deficit perceptions, including age-old poverty paradigms, the lack of awareness of the rich culture and education among Black African communities, and the silencing of these students and families, are just one side of the spectrum of alienation faced. In the U.S., these students and families often confront a range of sociopolitical oppression outside of schools simultaneously. During the time of our 18-month study, national reports of anti-immigrant and anti-Black sentiment (Human Rights First, 2022) surged. Black African immigrants often reported being criminalized for minor infractions, resulting in deportation—a phenomenon referred to as "crimmigration" (Stumpf, 2006)—adding to their vulnerability. Harmful immigration policies targeting Black Africans emerged as well, particularly with the campaign

and election victory of U.S. president, Donald Trump in 2016 and again in 2024. During his first term, and within the first week of office, Trump made good on his campaign promise to continue former President Barack Obama's restrictions on travelers from Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Syria, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen. However, Trump expanded restrictions to an unreserved ban focused on one's religious affiliation, calling for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" as argued in *Doe v. Trump,*(2017), based upon Executive Order No. 13769.The Executive Order removed Iraq and Sudan from the list, but added the African countries Chad, and later in 2020, Eritrea, Nigeria, and Tanzania, altogether creating mayhem, hardships, and traumatic separation of families among Black African communities. But in sum, this is not new. Contemporary U.S.-Africa relations have been shaped by political marginalization and intensified militarization, positioning African nations and its people, primarily through the logics of racialized securitization, counterterrorism, immigration control, anti-Blackness and Islamophobia. Within the U.S., violent extremism targeting this group has been on the rise. In 2015, a Galway, New York resident with ties to the Ku Klux Klan planned to use a "radiological dispersal device to target unsuspecting Muslim Americans with lethal doses of radiation" (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, 2016, para. 3). In October 2016, the Crusaders, an anti-Muslim white supremacist group, plotted to target Somali Muslim communities and bomb them "Timothy McVeigh…style" in Garden City, Kansas, a gateway city for these newcomers. Not only was the Garden City attack planned to be brutal, but the Crusaders' plan included kidnapping, rape, and even shooting Muslims in the head with arrows dipped in pig's blood. Abdi (2020), details how these acts of violence, from harmful policies to murder plots, had a spiraling effect on Somali American students and parents, resulting in fear of reprisal and *cuqdad*—a Somali term meaning "internalized insecurity and is often associated with feelings of rejection, exclusion, and confusion" (p. 280).

From critique to transformation: re-imagining school, family, and community partnerships as a spiritual, political, and cultural intervention

The purpose of this partnership was to address systemic issues of oppression facing families and students as they engaged with their schools on one hand and help them draw from their community's cultural wealth to assist in navigating, resisting, and eventually transforming their education circumstances on the other. However, traditional school, family, and community partnership models that attempt to engage students and families (see Epstein et al. 2018) are often criticized for their cultural narrowness and limited transformative potential. Traditional frameworks typically emphasize parent behaviors that align with white, middle-class norms of involvement, thereby reproducing deficit ideologies and reinforcing school-centric expectations (Lachney, 2017; Leo et al., 2019; Yamauhi et al. 2017). More exactly, rather than disrupting systems of exclusion, traditional models often enact symbolic inclusion in schools without redistributing power or co-constructing the meaning of what's necessary to engage authentically with schools. Holistically, families are often positioned as supporters of school priorities rather than as epistemic agents and co-leaders in

their own child's educational process. In this way, these models function within a technocratic logic of school improvement that obscures the spiritual, cultural, and political nature of partnership work within communities that have drawn from such grounded interventions. Moreover, what is even more unhelpful to marginalized groups, particularly as it concerns African Americans and Africans in diaspora in the U.S., using a traditional school, family, and community partnership frame can often obscure and perpetuate the structural conditions that inhibit participation among students and families in the school, and it may fail to recognize the intersectional oppression they routinely encounter because they are Black beings living in a system that leverages anti-Blackness to support white supremacy.

In response to these critiques, a growing body of scholarship offers frameworks that reimagine partnerships as sites of collective liberation and structural transformation. Bryan et al. (2025) propose an antiracist school, family, and community partnership model that directly addresses white supremacy in educational partnerships. Their approach urges schools to dismantle exclusionary practices and center families of color as co-architects in shaping educational structures. Other scholars have argued for structural transformation through Research-Practice Partnerships (RPPs) that are community-rooted and justice-centered. Smith et al. (2023) critique the technocratic nature of many RPPs and offer instead an anti-racist, relational approach that resists depoliticized models of reform. In the realm of faith-based engagement, Jordan and Wilson (2017) describe prophetic activism within Black church–school partnerships as a vital counterspace where spiritual, cultural, and political resistance converge to support holistic student success in urban schools. Some models attend to intersectionality and cultural responsiveness as well, as seen in Miller (2019**)** who proposes a transdisciplinary model for families of students with disabilities, grounded in ecological resilience and cultural wealth, while House (2019) stresses partnerships should account for the lived complexity of minoritized family identities across race, language, and ability.

Collectively, these frameworks help guide partnership paradigms from transactional and compliance-based models to those that are transformative, justice-oriented, and culturally sustaining. They redefine school, family, and community partnership as a political act, one that demands a redistribution of power, a centering of community consciousness, and the affirmation of families as co-theorists and co-designers of their educational futures.

Study context and setting

This study was situated in GV, a city in the West Region in the U.S., that had experienced a significant increase in African immigrants and refugees—numbering over 20,000—making them the city's fourth-largest immigrant group after Slavic, Latino, and Asian populations. This demographic shift reflected broader national patterns in the U.S. (see Anderson, 2015), with states such as Minnesota, Utah, Nevada, and Arizona also witnessing substantial growth in Black immigrant populations. Most of the families served by the partnership were Somali but broadly included other East and West African-born members. In terms of citizenship status, some reported to be refugees or immigrants, or children of immigrants and were naturalized citizens. In

this study, we use generation markers to describe participants' relationship to migration rather than as an identity label. "First generation" refers to individuals who were foreign-born and immigrated to the U.S., while "second generation" refers to U.S.-born individuals with at least one foreign-born parent. Although many participants and families migrated under conditions of forced displacement, the term *refugee* was not used as an identity descriptor. However, in discussions about the refugee experience, participants did self-identify as refugees in this way. Therefore we, described participants as African immigrants, reflecting shared experiences of racialization, migration, and diasporic belonging.

Overall, the two partnering organizations, ACDA and RICAN, worked with multilingual African immigrants from over 28 countries, reflecting diverse ethnicities and religious affiliations, including those from Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, and other African nations. Some children identified countries of birth in East and North Africa (e.g., Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Egypt) due to being born in refugee camps, underscoring the transnational and diasporic nature of participants' experiences. For these reasons, our partnership focused on Black-African students and families. Still, we paid particular attention to Somali experiences throughout the study due to the sizable number of Somali patrons served within the partnership. While ACDA and RICAN were founded as nonprofit organizations to serve the growing Somali community, both organizations' missions are rooted in a Pan-African approach. We therefore strive to balance attention across all Pan-African communities represented. Overall, the epistemic knowledge—spanning cultural, spiritual, linguistic, and political domains—derives significantly from Black African diasporic traditions, though Somali and Muslim onto-epistemologies meaningfully shaped the findings.

The research practice partnership, study participants, and positionality statement

This research practice partnership was co-led by three key groups. The first group were employees of two culturally specific non-profit organizations in GV—ACDA and RICAN—both had longstanding relationships with Black African immigrant and refugee families. Within this team are key positions titled the Cultural Navigators (CNs) and members of the leadership team. CNs were community-rooted professionals, often from Black/East African immigrant backgrounds, who served as critical interventionists between families, schools, and broader social systems. Positioned within the partnership, CNs brought lived experience, linguistic fluency, and deep cultural and spiritual knowledge to support newcomer families as they navigate educational institutions that often marginalize them. Rather than acting as institutional liaisons alone, CNs acted as cultural strategists and advocates, alongside the leadership team members, helping students and families understand the alienation experienced while promoting racial, cultural, linguistic, and faith-based affirmation. As part of the partnership, the CNs and leadership team members co-analyzed qualitative data with researchers, as well as co-facilitated professional development. As part of broader grant, they participated in university credit-bearing programs in child development, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, and family engagement strategies.

The second group consists of the leadership team, who were primarily Somali. Their work centered on the inclusion of students and families within the schools, but attending to affirming their cultural integrity and transforming the conditions of systemic alienation that Black/East African immigrant communities often face. Their role was to supervise and support the work of CNs but also to establish and continue to support the community-partner structure between the three urban public-school districts.

The third group consisted of a public urban university, with two researchers serving as co-principal investigators. The urban-public university also offered the credit-bearing aspect of the partnership. In terms of data collection and analysis, these researchers brought expertise in community-based participatory research, anti-Blackness in education, educator preparation, immigration experience into the U.S., and culturally relevant family-school engagement.

Study participants

The main participants consisted of three members of the leadership team, including the founder and part-time director of ACDA, a first-generation Somali immigrant man who also worked full-time outside of the social services field. In addition, the team included the lead CN, a first-generation Somali immigrant woman completing her master's in social work. These first two team members were Muslim and spoke Somali as their heritage language. In addition to the founder and lead CN, the leadership team consisted of one program director with responsibilities across the two community organizations. She identified as a White English-speaking woman with an MSW and PhD in psychology. These leaders serve as co-authors. In their role, they checked details, offered insight into data analysis, and peer-reviewed the findings. The executive director of RICAN, also a Somali immigrant, contributed to the study's purpose, methodology, and funding application but did not join in the various research activities.

There were seven CN participants that served patron families in the school partnership at ACDA and RICAN. As a group, five were first-generation refugees or immigrants from Eastern Africa (Somalia and Ethiopia), entering the US during their primary and secondary school years, and, in a few cases, from intermediary countries, including Egypt and Kenya. Two were second-generation, whose parents were from Somalia. In addition to English, CNs were multilingual, representing Somali, Oromo, Arabic, Swahili, and Amharic as their first languages. The remaining two CNs, born in the US, spoke English as their first language and Somali as their second. Six of the CNs had Somali heritage and identified as Muslim, while one had Ethiopian heritage and a Christian background. The CNs' ages ranged from 24 to 32. Five CNs identified themselves as women and two as men. Four CNs had bachelor's degrees in the social sciences, one had a degree in social work, and two had completed high school and were in post-secondary education programs.

Researcher positionalities

As part of our collaborative approach, the research team co-constructed the study design and professional development sessions alongside the leadership team and

Somali cultural navigators. The first author, an African American woman and professor of educational leadership, brought deep expertise in anti-racist praxis and racialized student, family, and community engagement. Her positionality informed the study's intentional focus on racialized experiences, particularly given the partnerships emphasis on addressing the educational concerns of African American communities within the GV's State Department initiatives. However, her framing expanded beyond a monolithic view of Blackness to include a Pan-African in America lens, one attentive to the complexities experienced by Black African families, particularly Somali families in this case, and then more exact on the intersections of race, culture, religious, language, immigration, and citizenship status that are often erased in traditional African American discourse. Her work drew from CRT and Yosso's (2005) CCW framework to recognize families as knowledge holders and resistors of systemic marginalization in Black education. The second author, a White male immigrant professor, also contributed to this partnership through his own research in culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy, but also his experiences of citizenship and cultural transition. While recognizing his heteropatriarchal privileges, but also his immigrant background, offered insight into the distinct but intersecting challenges faced by students and families navigating U.S. educational systems as perceived "outsiders." Together, their research enabled an intersectional analysis that accounted for both structural racialization and the differentiated experiences of Black families shaped by migration, religion, and cultural and linguistic identities.

Additional members of the research team provided reviews of the findings and helped devise sections of our literature review. These additional members include a Central Asian Muslim male from Kazakhstan, whose knowledge of Islam and geopolitical identity as a non-Western scholar informed cultural interpretation. Another was an East Asian male graduate student from China, whose perspective as a racialized international scholar helped frame our reflections on foreignness, belonging, and school-community relations. A fifth researcher, a White woman from a low socio-economic background and an anti-racist professor of educational leadership, contributed to the manuscript development and peer review, offering reflections on the intersections of race, academic power, and school-community partnerships.

Importantly, we like to add that it was the Somali CNs and ACDA and RICAN leadership team members who drove this body of knowledge. Holistically, they were not merely participants but co-constructors of this research. They informed our interpretations, shaped emergent themes, and validated findings through multiple member checks, once after the data collection cycle and again before manuscript submission. As researchers, we acknowledge our power to elevate narratives and prioritize data, and we remained accountable to the community partners throughout the process. This collaborative approach reflects our commitment to a transformative, culturally responsive school, family, and community partnership and honors the community's knowledge and right to co-author their own stories.

Trustworthiness techniques and community-guided methodology

In alignment with Wilson et al. (2023), we intentionally structured our research design to center the voices and cultural knowledges of East African, Somali, and broader

Black Pan-African immigrant communities in the Pacific Northwest. Our approach was grounded in transformative organizing principles and a commitment to storytelling as both method and praxis—a way to document and challenge injustice, rather than merely observe it. As university researchers, we were mindful of the extractive tendencies of traditional academic research and the potential for harm embedded in university-led reporting (Wilson et al., 2023). We acknowledged the limits of our positionalities and discipline training in fully comprehending the lived experiences and nuances of Black Pan-African immigrant diasporic experiences. Recognizing that race, religion, language, and migration status intersect in ways we could not authoritatively interpret alone, we structured our work as collaborative inquiry—where community members guided meaning-making, validated interpretations, and shaped the analytic framing of findings.

To ensure the study was authentically guided by community needs, we co-developed a shared research protocol with ACDA and RICAN leadership and the CNs. This protocol detailed how data would be collected, interpreted, and used. The protocol also positioned CNs and organizational leaders as co-analysts and co-theorists and it included mechanisms for iterative interpretation, collective meaning-making, and community validation. Specifically, after each key event (e.g., monthly meetings, professional development sessions), we conducted rapid debrief sessions with the leadership team and CNs within 24–48 hours. These debriefs involved reviewing written field notes, digital images, and audio recordings; engaging in reflective dialogues to clarify key themes; discussing how the findings aligned with or challenged the aims of the partnership; and raising clarifying questions to refine our interpretations. This process preserved the immediacy of experience and maximized the integrity of community reflection. Furthermore, our iterative analysis supported real-time adjustments to PD sessions, expanded our understanding of institutional alienation, and sustained the co-construction of the overall partnership strategy. Through these techniques, we sought to build a study that was not only methodologically trustworthy but also culturally responsive, community-led, and politically intentional in its resistance to extractive research logics.

Theoretical framework used to guide study and partnership

Our framework draws broadly on CRT, recognizing the pervasive nature of race and racism in US schooling contexts, the social construction and intersectionality of social identities, particularly the roles of religion, immigrant/refugee status, and language, and the urgency of foregrounding the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities through counter-storytelling/narratives (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). CRT enables analysis and rejection of the deficiency model of education that places the blame for achievement "problems" on students and families and instead shifts the focus to structural and institutional forces of oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

We also drew from CCW (Yosso, 2016), an extension of CRT, to help shape the school-community partnership driven by the two culturally specific community organizations. CCW helped us explore how the community partnership used an asset-based ideology when collaborating with students and families, and their broader school

community and activity networks. In this model, Yosso (2005; Yosso, 2016) shifts the common deficit view of historically marginalized and strategically undervalued communities to an asset-based frame that recognizes the various forms of capital BIPOC communities possess. Yosso's (2005) CCW model identifies six forms of capital: linguistic, familial, aspirational, navigational, resistance, and social capital. Combining both frames, we explored students' and families' experiences with schools using CRT on one hand, and then, on the other, how the leadership team and CNs leveraged the forms of CCW to support families and students throughout the grant period.

Research questions

We developed two central research questions to guide us in exploring the ways the partnership serves Black African students and families:1) What forms of structural alienation (e.g., racial, linguistic, religious) did students and families encounter? 2) How did the cultural intervention partnership facilitate resistance and contribute to transforming the conditions students and families experienced?

Research design

We applied Kindon et al. (2024) Critically Engaging Participatory Action Research (CEPAR) model, grounding our approach in a praxis that interrogates power, centers marginalized knowledge systems, and prioritizes relational accountability. Following Wilson et al. (2023), we approached the research partnership as a prefigurative space—one where social justice was a lived practice enacted through shared power, co-learning, and mutual accountability. Following Jordan and Wilson (2017) framing of prophetic activism, our study was also animated by the moral and spiritual dimensions of resistance. What Jordan and Wilson term "faith-based partnerships," is where advocacy rooted in Islam spritural commitements informed their community action.

Partnership structure and context

This collaborative design—among CNs, ACDA and RICAN leaders, and university researchers—was shaped by community knowledge, and responded to historical and emergent harms facing Black African families. We integrated participatory methods to support critical consciousness and collective action. We used three primary methods—counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), ecomapping (Hartman, 1978), and Theater of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979)—within 14 professional development (PD) sessions. These were complemented by four semi-structured interviews with CNs and one leader. Group interviews with CNs and an additional individual with the Lead CN, deepened the counter-storytelling process; while allowing participants to articulate the spiritual, emotional, and political labor they performed within the partnership. We triangulated these data with planning notes, PD artifacts, and reflections from ongoing leadership team meetings to ensure the findings reflected co-theorization rather than extraction. As Wilson (2019) reminds us, transformative school-community

partnerships must be co-constructed, grounded in cultural responsiveness, and anchored in the ethics of care and justice. Comprehensively, this methodology helped shape a design process that was spiritually, politically, and culturally accountable to the Black African communities we served.

Data generation: professional development sessions

There were 14 PD sessions conducted throughout the duration of the partnership. PD sessions ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. The leadership team and researchers pre-planned initial activities and topics for the PD sessions with the focus on developing an asset-based view of families drawn from CCW (Yosso, 2005). PD sessions also captured the varying forms of injustice that occurred among student family sets (i.e., religious linguistic and racial alienation in schools). Although PD sessions were designed as intervention spaces, they also functioned as structured participatory data-generation sites.

Altogether, the partnership revolved around responding to varying forms of injustice by leveraging assets that students and families often turned to for assistance when alienation occurred. Using the knowledge from an asset-based view to address social justice implications, CNs, ACDA and RICAN leaders, and researchers co-constructed PD sessions in efforts to serve students and families as they experienced forms of injustice identified. In the next section, we provide a description of the main methodologies used in the PD sessions we extracted data from—counterstorytelling, eco-mapping, Theater of the Oppressed, and semi-structured interviews.

Data sources and collection procedures

Counter-storytelling

Drawing from Solòrzano and Yosso (2002), we employed counter-storytelling to expose how racism, white supremacy, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and other interlocking systems of oppression were experienced and actively contested within our partnership. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) describe counter-stories as narratives that "cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (p. 144). Similarly, Dixson and Rousseau (2005) contend that counter-stories not only include the personal narratives of racially minoritized individuals but also critique hegemonic ideologies such as meritocracy, colorblindness, and the neutrality of law—ideologies deeply embedded within education institutions.

For our study, counter-storytelling was used throughout the 18-month study to help document the lived experiences of Black African immigrant students and families, as well as those of the partnership team members—especially community-based leaders and CNs—who engaged with these families and with local schools. Counter-stories captured how alienation was encountered and how families and community leaders mobilized to support students across racialized and other socially unjust school and community contexts.

While the initial focus of counter-storytelling was to surface exclusionary school experiences, CNs and community leaders emphasized that these experiences were deeply entangled with broader structural forces. Stories emerged about interactions

with healthcare providers, housing agencies, law enforcement, and religious institutions—contexts that shaped how families engaged with school systems. These out-of-school experiences were not viewed as separate, but as extensions of the same intersecting systems of oppression. As such, we included them in our analysis to illuminate the full ecology of alienation. These accounts helped clarify how ACDA and RICAN community members enacted critical care that worked to transform the systemic conditions the families faced, not just within schools but across institutional boundaries.

Counter-stories were collected during PD sessions, organizational meetings, and an additional formal semi-structured individual and group interview to clarify stories told in sessions and meetings. One university researcher facilitated a two-hour focus group conversation with two CNs and two organizational leaders, as well as one separate 60-90-minute interview with several organizational leaders at the project's midpoint. Drawing on CCW, this data generation process challenged deficit-oriented perspectives about the community and instead elevated the linguistic, familial, navigational, and resistant capital present among families.

Furthermore, participants were engaged in a cyclical, reflexive process where counter-storytelling directly informed the partnership's evolving practices and strategies (Miller et al., 2020).

For example, one CN described how both students and adults in her community underwent a "racial awakening" upon arrival in the U.S., encountering anti-Blackness and racialization for the first time. In her home country, she explained, people did not primarily identify as "Black" but as Nigerian, Somali, Ghanaian, and so forth. In response to these narratives, the partnership facilitated PD sessions to explore the implications of racialization and Islamophobia within the local school context, equipping leaders with tools to better support African immigrant and Muslim identifying families. Altogether, the use of counter-storytelling, then, was not only a method of data collection but also as a tool of transformation—one that clarified the political conditions families faced and fueled collective efforts toward justice-oriented change.

Eco-mapping

Eco-mapping, a tool commonly used by social workers, was an important method used to invite participants to counter-storytelling that helped center the wealth and strength observed among and between student-family sets. An eco-map is a visual illustration of informal and formal ties surrounding the life of an individual or family (Hartman, 1978). Ecomapping was introduced, conducted, and re-visited during three PD workshops and adapted so that it assisted the partnership in community asset-mapping strategies. The goal was to encourage counter-storytelling by inviting participants to visually represent the strengths of the families and their community (McCormick et al., 2008) but also to capture the daily work with families performed by ACDA and RICAN through visualizations (see Figure 1). For example, in one eco-mapping PD session involving CNs, each participant silently drew their eco-map using colored markers on a large sheet of paper. Participants responded to the prompt, "Think about a specific time when you felt progress or success in your work with students and/or families," placing the student and family members at the center of their map and using literal and metaphorical representations and symbols to indicate relationships, events, and key members involved. Participants then shared and reflected

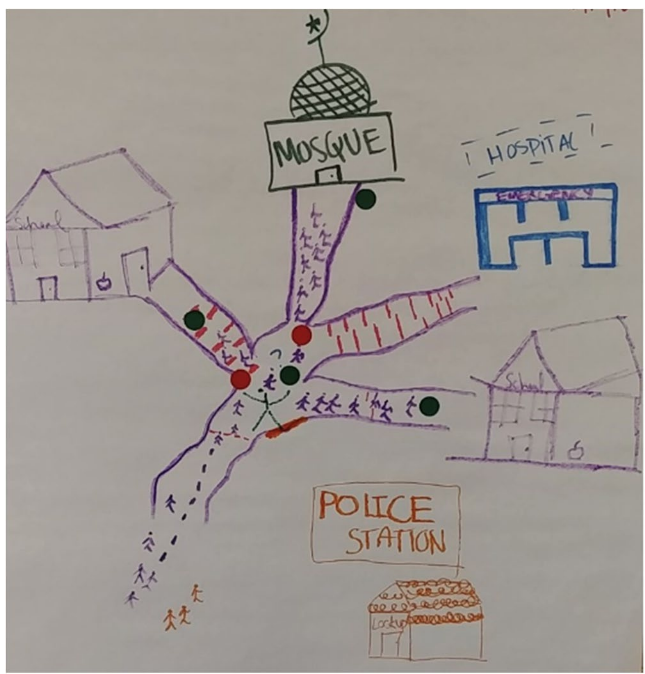

Figure 1. The figure is an example of a completed ecomap co-constructed by two CN's, and a leadership team member. The stick figures represent families and students interacting between the health care (*hospital*), education (*school*), and criminal justice (*police station*) systems. Red dots and hash marks denoted stories of gatekeeping and alienation. Green dots denoted stories that reflected assets and strengths within the community used to transform alienating conditions, which were later interpreted collaboratively as forms of community cultural wealth in professional development discussions.

on their stories with a partner using three prompts: 1) "Tell the story of your journey engaging with families"; 2) "Think about your actions as CNs as part of your journey,"; and 3) "How do you see the cultural wealth families bring?" Participants used red stickers to designate barriers, gaps, and gatekeepers, and green stickers to represent assets drawn from the wealth and knowledge among students and families.

The above drawing is an example of a completed ecomap co-constructed by two CNs, and a leadership team member. They detailed drawings of stick figures representing families and students interacting between the health care (hospital), education (school), and criminal justice (police station) systems. Red dots and hash marks denoted stories of gatekeeping and alienation. Green dots denoted stories that reflected assets and strengths within the community used to transform the system.

Theater of the oppressed

In response to an emerging theme regarding the CNs' struggles with reconciling their own experiences of racism and religious discrimination with that of the children and families, the researchers engaged the CNs and their ACDA and RICAN leaders in exercises drawn from Boal's (1979) Theater of the Oppressed during the final PD workshop. Participants represented their experience with varying forms of "oppression" with their bodies. Members of the leadership team and CNs selected one story, and then the author of the story "staged" and chose participants to play key roles and guided them through the scene. In this exercise, the scene was run multiple times

with participants having the opportunity to halt the action at any point to take the role of any player other than "the oppressor" to help create a more liberatory solution. Each replay of the scene was followed by a debriefing by the participants. Like the use of eco-mapping, Theater of the oppressed offered another medium for engaging in shared counter-storytelling and offering viable strategies to disrupt, dismantle, and help students and families navigate the forms of oppression they faced leveraging the CCW harbored in their communities.

Semi-structured interviews

We conducted four semi-structured interviews: one two-hour focus group with two CNs and two leaders, and three individual interviews with leaders (60–90 minutes each). These interviews deepened counter-narratives of institutional harm and advocacy—including disciplinary practices targeting African girls and school policies misaligned with Ramadan and halal dietary needs—findings elaborated below.

Data analysis

Over the 18-month study, we collected data from 14 professional development (PD) sessions and 14 formal leadership team meetings. Data sources included transcripts from all 14 PD sessions; transcripts from four semi-structured interviews (including one two-hour focus group); leadership meeting notes; PD artifacts (ecomaps and Theater of the Oppressed scripts); planning documents; reflexive analytic memos; and fieldnotes documenting stories shared by families and students during community events. Our analytic process unfolded in four stages: (1) familiarization and open coding, (2) focused coding using CRT and CCW constructs, (3) collaborative analytic dialogue with partnership members, and (4) synthesis into the PACTS conceptual frame. The first two stages incorporated Braun and Clarke (2006) three-phase thematic process of data familiarization, coding, and theme development within a broader participatory analytic arc.

To better understand how students and families were underserved, narratives documented intersectional forms of oppression reported by school patrons, ACDA and RICAN members, and CNs who served as intermediaries between schools and families. Because the school-community partnership emerged from state-level efforts, including funding for CNs, that focused on serving "African American students and families" in response to documented experiences of being underserved in public schooling, our analytic entry point involved examining (1) how structural underserving occurred and (2) how the partnership responded to those conditions. Data collection and analysis were therefore designed to capture both dimensions of this two-part inquiry.

Data were manually coded using an iterative, multi-stage process (Naeem et al., 2023). Drawing from this analytic process, we developed the PACTS conceptual frame (prophetic activism, asset-based orientation, critical consciousness, trust, and solidarity). Within this four-stage analytic arc, we incorporated Braun and Clarke (2006) three-phase thematic process of familiarization, coding, and theme development.

Initially, the research team conducted open coding to identify recurring concepts and tensions across the data. "False American promises to refugees," "Mistreatment," "violating," "[schools, educators, society] lacks awareness," "lack of resources," "turned away," "just us," and "we do it ourselves" were examples of initial codes that emerged

across these tensions. In our second phase, as a research and leadership team, we moved into more focused coding by refining categories that aligned with CRT-informed constructs such as racism, cultural erasure, and structural alienation. We also attended to intersectional dynamics, including how immigration status, language, race, and religion co-constructed families' experiences with school systems. Using CCW, we focused on varying forms of capital, like familial, cultural, and resistant capital, to help organize the wealth reported across data sets that expanded on more focused codes, like "self-determination."

In line with CRT's call for participatory and counter-narrative-driven inquiry, the university-partners, CNs, and leadership team, conducted periodic analytic dialogues to reflect on emerging and focused themes. These collaborative sessions helped us challenge researcher-dominant interpretations and surface counter-stories that revealed forms of alienation on one hand, and CCW on the other.

To support analytic trustworthiness, we triangulated themes across data sources and maintained reflexive analytic memos documenting our positionalities, dilemmas, and evolving interpretations. Our analysis ultimately revealed how systemic neglect, cultural dissonance, and deficit-based logics were routinely resisted through community-led engagement strategies rooted in Black Pan-African cultural traditions and Pan-African solidarity, while simultaneously revealing how such logics continued to operate within broader institutional contexts.

Data integration

Data were triangulated across sources to ensure themes reflected patterns rather than single methods. Counter-storytelling and interviews primarily informed findings on alienation; ecomapping surfaced community assets; Theater of the Oppressed generated insights into disruption strategies. The PACTS framework emerged from collaborative analysis across all data sources.

Findings and discussion

Intersectional alienation and partnership response

In our analysis, we found that students and families encountered persistent, overlapping forms of alienation and exclusion across their PK-12 schools and the broader urban context. According to the community partnership team, these alienations were not incidental, but patterned and systemic—rooted in language, race, and religious difference. From school leaders to peers, students and families reported being met with ignorance, indifference, or overt hostility—often shaped by the intersections of anti-Black racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia.

Our findings provide an overview of these threats, but we then illuminate how the community dynamic of the partnership paid particular attention to the cultural wealth of the students and families, and then effectively responded with an eye toward the strengths and struggles experienced by partnered students and families. We then go on to discuss ACDA and RICAN community-based responses, which really employed five critical dispositions necessary to address the struggles and draw from student and family strengths. These responses resulted in some ways transforming

the system for Black African school-community students and families despite an inherently alienating school-community and societal context. When working with families, the key members of the partnership adopted a *prophetic activist disposition* and an *asset-based ideology*. Moreover, to understand the strategic ways schools and other out-of-school entities may undervalue and further alienate Black Pan African students and families, they began actively seeking critical knowledge, growing their *critical consciousness*, in hopes of helping the partnership navigate school-level and broader intersecting forms of sociopolitical alienation. The partnership also worked to build *trust* and often strived toward working in *solidarity* with other historically marginalized and strategically undervalued groups (e.g., African American girls in PK-12 schools, unhoused newcomers). Altogether, these dispositions (i.e., PACTS) helped the partnership effectively navigate, resist, and disrupt some systemic education and societal inequities that resulted in transforming the conditions and empowering Black African students and families.

Intersectional alienation in the schools and the city

Linguistic alienation: communication impasse–from lack of translators to untranslatable "tech talk"

Students and families in the partnership comprised a diverse, multilingual African immigrant community. Parents often communicated in Somali, whereas most of the students identified English as a second or third language. Regardless of students having the ability to communicate in English, the lack of translation services presented a persistent challenge to parents. The community organizations reported a shortage of translators. Only one served across the three districts in which their schools were partnered during most of the 18-month study. The scarcity of translators provided by the schools resulted in extended wait times for translation assistance, hindering timely communication between the schools and Somali-speaking families. One CN, Aaden, recounted during a semi-structured interview the waiting period for translators nearly grew to two months for one special education case conference. It resulted in delayed, but needed, services to the student. Aside from the lengthy waiting periods, several CNs noted that English-language terminology and school-related information often posed significant translation difficulties for families in general. Electronic dissemination of school communications in English and Spanish only exacerbated the issue for non-English-speaking Black African school communities. Beyond access, the very language used by schools—full of acronyms like IEP—created an impenetrable "tech talk" barrier for families. These bureaucratic codes, presented without much explanation, led to communication impasse. Parents unknowingly consented to major decisions without fully understanding their implications, compounding feelings of alienation and helplessness. Students were often asked to interpret sensitive information for their families. Having to constantly translate placed an undue burden on students. Some students, however, avoided sharing negative school experiences, but not out of avoidance of getting in trouble, as some educators believed, but rather out of protection of their caregivers. Some caregivers were undocumented, and students feared if they came to the school, their parents might be outed. The result was

a cycle of social isolation, under-communication, and unintentional disengagement faced by students and their families.

Racial alienation: anti-Black xenophobia and the racial awakening of Black African youth

Many families arrived in the U.S. with little prior experience of anti-Black racism, only to be thrust into racialized dynamics that criminalized their children and erased their ethnic identities. Several CNs described this as a racial awakening, where African youth came to understand themselves as “Black” in America—subject to the same systemic dehumanization long experienced by African Americans. CNs often shadowed assigned students in school to help bridge the disconnect between the teachers, school personnel, communication, and so forth. There were multiple reports from CNs of disproportionate consequences comprehensively among Black students. CNs detailed incidents where teachers and school leaders assigned harsher punitive consequences in comparison to their White peers. During an eco-mapping session, the story of Hassan was discussed. Omar recalled Hassan, a young Somali student, was asked by a White peer if he was carrying a bomb. Hassan’s angry response led to suspension, while the instigating student faced no consequence. Despite advocacy from his family and the partnership team, the incident was dismissed by school leadership. This created a stir within the broader Pan-African community and among ACDA and RICAN patrons with children. The double standard, for them, made clear that Black African youth were seen through a lens of suspicion, while their harassers remained protected by whiteness. Supportively, Greer (2013), discusses how, “The understanding of race for black newcomers is that racial formation and construction is a largely unique phenomenon applicable to the United States.” (p. 8). To add, like Greer, we noticed that these incidents often created “a complex duality in defining race, place, and status in American society” (p. 8). These racial awakening experiences illustrate the nuanced position Black immigrants hold, navigating between racial and ethnic identities in the American context. In response, the community component of the partnership decided to hold PD sessions to explore this racialization process, helping CN staff and leaders contextualize the emergence of “Blackness” for newcomer communities and interrogate how anti-Blackness manifests within local school and community culture.

Religious and spiritual alienation: when schools, society, and Islam clash

Islam represents the third-largest faith-based community in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2015). Despite a significant and consistent presence of students and families practicing Islam, schools in GV often neglected to recognize and accommodate their religious beliefs, sometimes even exhibiting hostility towards their Islamic practices. Challenges such as conflicting school calendars, inadequate dietary school meal options that fail to adhere to Islamic guidelines, a lack of designated prayer spaces within the school, and instances of harassment against students wearing hijabs contributed to a pervasive sense of alienation among Black African families from their schools. One leadership team member, Ibraahin, vividly described this ongoing struggle as “the school and the mosque are at odds with how to treat a child.”

Furthermore, students and families reported widespread apathy among school personnel regarding their spiritual and religious needs. Beyond individual incidents,

local and national cases exacerbated the sense of insecurity felt by many Muslim students and families. For instance, during the study, a community member was tragically harassed for wearing her hijab, resulting in a deadly outcome. Additionally, the Somali community in GV faced significant challenges in fearmongering from politicians. Notably, during the first tenure of President Donald Trump (2016–2020), the implementation of a controversial "Muslim Travel Ban" targeted several countries in Africa, including those from which many community members hailed (Executive Office of the President, 2017). As conveyed by CNs and their ACDA and RICAN leaders, such discriminatory policies heightened real fears within these communities, with grave concerns that more violent incidents may transpire.

Toward a dispositional response: PACTS as a transformative means for school, family, community partnership

Together, these three forms of alienation—linguistic, racialized, and religious/spiritual—created a landscape of institutional disengagement. Yet, what emerged from the community component of the partnership was resistance. Drawing from Miller et al. (2020), through collective strategic advocacy and deep cultural knowledge, CNs and ACDA and RICAN organizational leaders developed intentional dispositions to approach student and family needs. Centering community knowledge to shape our findings, we organized their dispositions as "PACTS." From this co-construction, we felt that the PACTS (see Figure 2) encapsulate the five critical dispositions employed by the partnership to support and empower Black African newcomer students and families facing alienation within and outside of their school environment.

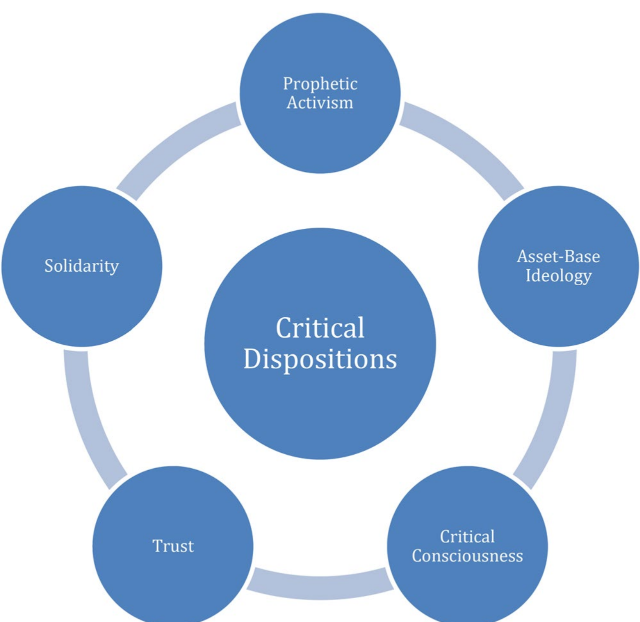

Figure 2. PACTS model.

The conceptualization of each PACTS disposition (see Figure 2) was informed by data collected across key partnership members, including professional development activities (e.g., Theater of the Oppressed, eco-mapping), interactions with students and families, and observations of Cultural Navigators and the leadership team. While PACTS may not exhaustively capture every disposition deployed by partnership members, we offer it as an evolving framework. It provides education practitioners and school-community partnerships with a strategic foundation for cultivating culturally responsive, transformative relationships—particularly for Black Pan-African school communities in the U.S.

Within this model, the partnership:

1. Embraced a *prophetic activist* ethos or spirit of almsgiving, with the intent of global justice as it concerns families, students, and schools.
2. Prioritized an *asset-based* ideological approach in their engagement with students and families, fostering a culture of appreciation for their strengths and contributions.
3. Actively cultivated a *critical consciousness* of intersecting oppressions and biases, enabling community partners to recognize and address systemic injustices faced by marginalized communities.
4. Fostered *trust* by building relational infrastructure through consistency and integrity.
5. Strived towards *solidarity* among historically oppressed and strategically undervalued groups, by advocating for equitable opportunities and resources within the school community and across GV.

Prophetic activism: a spiritual and justice-oriented disposition of zakat

Prophetic activism, was characterized by a deep moral and spiritual obligation to serve. The spiritual obligation to serve is rooted in the Islamic pillar of *zakat* (i.e., almsgiving). *Zaka*t is one of the five central pillars of Islam requiring Muslims who meet a minimum threshold of wealth (*nisab*) to give a fixed portion—typically 2.5%—of their accumulated wealth annually to designated recipients, including the poor, indebted, and others in need. While commonly interpreted as almsgiving, *zaka*t functions far beyond monetary charitable giving. Rather, it is a mechanism of wealth redistribution, one rooted in the ethic of justice, equity, and communal responsibility. As such, it affirms that wealth is not an individual possession alone but a trust from God to be used in ways that uplift the collective, particularly the most marginalized (Oktapiani, 2025). In educational contexts, particularly within African and diasporic Muslim communities, *zakat* also represents a culturally and spiritually grounded model of mutual aid that can inform more holistic, justice-oriented partnerships between families, communities, and schools. This model aligns with traditions of care and reciprocity, and challenges neoliberal logics of individualism and meritocracy that dominate Western schooling systems.

Because ACDA and RICAN understood *zaka*t as a broader ethic of care, encompassing emotional labor, advocacy, and relational support, their actions reflected an interpretation of activism that extended beyond giving material resources. It included

the giving of time, knowledge, and spiritual presence. This interpretation of *zakat*, guided the community leaders and CN's toward helping students and families reach their education goals. As Nala, a leadership team member, expressed, "I tell them, 'I'm just here to help you and your child be successful'. I'll talk to teachers, be a second ear, a vent, a connector. I'm just a resource for them."

Guided by *zakat*, the partnership enacted a prophetic model of activism rooted in justice, care, and moral responsibility. Moreover, their prophetic activism extended beyond school-based challenges. In moments of crisis, navigating inaccessible health-care, untranslated school documents, or unmet dietary needs in schools—CNs and community leaders embodied a sense of prophetic urgency. As Xirsi shared, "We have to respond refugee-style… Get resources by whatever means necessary—24/7, no matter what. We can't drop the ball." The community partners frequently invoked a collective understanding of the Prophet Muhammad's life, particularly his compassion for the poor, the displaced, and the socially marginalized. Several CNs emphasized that their work aligned with the Prophet's example of standing with the oppressed as a form of charity. A number of CN's reflected that supporting families through bureaucratic school systems felt like "doing what the Prophet would do"—centering justice, humility, and human dignity. Ciara, one of the community-leaders over the CNs made it a point to expand lessons from her Islam background, stating that "the Prophet says there are other ways to show charity." She thought of her work as activating a kind of spiritual wealth that was "greater" than the traditional wealth within a capitalist society.

The idea of prophetic activism is not a new phenomenon among people of African descent. Prophetic activism in African American communities has been broadly recorded as well. Drawing from African American communities, Jordan and Wilson (2017) assert, "prophetic activism is a form of social justice leadership rooted in a moral and spiritual obligation to serve marginalized communities" (p. 93). Similarly, in our study, *zakat* and Prophet Muhammad's teachings were the central moral imperatives guiding spiritual and activist labor with newcomer students and families. In summary, the connection between Islamic teachings, spirituality, and advocacy illustrates how the disposition of prophetic activism emerged and was interpreted as a call to action to accompany families in struggle and to disrupt systems of injustice with steadfast faith and moral clarity.

Asset-based ideology: resisting deficit frames

A central practice in the partnership's work was actively resisting deficit ideologies commonly projected onto Black African students and families. Teachers and school personnel often misinterpret behaviors, cultural practices, or home dynamics as signs of apathy, ignorance, or lack of care. Once PD sessions started to address cultural wealth, CNs and organizational leaders began to evolve in their dispositions. For example, there was a consistent push back against deficit assumptions by foregrounding the strengths, strategies, and cultural capital of the communities they served. Several CNs began reporting that teachers assumed a student's failure to submit homework stemmed from laziness or disengagement, without

understanding the broader familial responsibilities placed on the student. As Lila, a CN, explained:

> I've been noticing a lot of these students have a lot of siblings and they come from a single parent home… where they have to be responsible for them. So, they're not even getting the work done that they're supposed to get done, like homework, at home. But teachers are not understanding their responsibilities… they're not bad students because they're not doing their homework… they just got stuff going on.

Instead of investigating the context of students' lives, educators often thought the worst of students. Lila continued, "Teachers are just taking it the wrong way… thinking they're just not doing the work because they don't care. That's not the case at all." Such misinterpretations placed Black African students in a double bind: responsible for caretaking at home and misjudged at school. But it might be more important to share why students often were unable to complete homework. CNs and ACDA and RICAN leaders reported that many newcomers, particularly Somali refugee families resettling in the U.S. confronted systemic barriers that significantly influence their engagement with educational institutions. These challenges include prolonged family separation and disrupted transnational kinship networks resulting from restrictive immigration policies such as the Muslim and African Bans, which have left children unable to meet their parents (Garrity & Crnkovich, 2020). Additionally, pervasive surveillance and securitization practices have fostered mistrust toward public institutions, including schools, as Muslim communities have been constructed through racialized logics of suspicion (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019). Language barriers further exacerbate these issues, with many families lacking access to adequate translation services, leading to misunderstandings and feelings of exclusion within educational settings, heavily relying on their children for translations (McBrien, 2005). These structural obstacles, rather than cultural deficiencies, often shaped the interactions and perceptions of Black Pan-African students and families. The partnership named these misreadings as deficit thinking and intentionally countered them with asset-based orientations, using CCW to guide inquiry, professional development, reflection, and action to disrupt deficit perceptions at the school level.

A strength of CNs and the leadership team was recognizing students multi-linguistic capital. Students were often called on to translate school communications for their parents. While this created role strain, it also reflected multilingualism as a family asset. Lee, a second-generation multilingual CN, pointed out that teachers depended heavily on students to deliver information home, revealing how schools relied on youth linguistic labor without acknowledging its burden. Students also demonstrated familial capital—caring for siblings and navigating the household in ways that supported family survival. As Lila, a CN noted, students protected their families by concealing the full extent of their home responsibilities. Rather than seeking accommodation or understanding, students often chose silence to shield their parents from school scrutiny. This protective stance—what CNs identified as familial sacrifice—underscored how deeply students were embedded in intergenerational responsibility and showing respect for their family. When CNs felt it safe to share with assigned teachers, they worked to disrupt the apathetic misreading by acting as cultural mediators between the school and the family, noting the broader immigration

and refugee struggle that students and families were experiencing. The community partners shared that articulating their reality helped demystify deficit teacher perceptions of the students and families.

Finally, CNs and leaders highlighted navigational capital—strategies families used to work around systemic barriers. One such example was "family conversations," described by Maxamed, a first-generation multilingual CN. He stated, "A lot of the ways that communication and information get out there in the Somali community is often through their family conversations. So, one parent has a good experience with an organization or a bad experience with an organization, and then everyone knows." These informal networks allowed families to share strategies, alert one another to institutional behavior, and navigate complex systems together. Recognizing this dynamic, the partnership intentionally engaged these networks in their programming. By naming and cultivating these forms of cultural community wealth, the partnership not only countered school-based deficit narratives but also offered a model for how school-community partnerships might build capacity by honoring the lived expertise already present among Black African newcomer families and their communities.

Critical consciousness: defining, building collective consciousness, and concrete outcomes of disruption

Third disposition, critical consciousness, involved the ability to define experiences, buildcollective consciousness, and then analyze and name structural oppression. Moreover, CNs and leaders moved beyond individual interventions to interrogate the institutional policies and routines that sustained educational harm. For example, one CN, James commented during the PD session:

> The system is expecting all compliance and change and [they do] not make changes. We [the partnership] want to support bi-cultural development—we need to look at the systems and identify what needs to be supported. This systemic racism – like how Black students are experiencing racism, expelled or disciplinary actions - it's larger than the individual developing an understanding of written and unwritten policy…[B]ut often we don't know where it [school policy] comes from and its dependent on who implements policy. We need to find the source of the policy!

Through Theater of the Oppressed activities and PD sessions, the team then surfaced hidden forms of institutional racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia, like selective discipline enforcement or unwritten exclusionary practices. Importantly, this critical collective consciousness was not abstract. It informed concrete advocacy—pushing school leaders to revise policies and to recognize the racialized double standards facing Black African students.

Importantly, this critical consciousness was not assumed among CNs or community leaders; rather, it was actively built through community partnership work across ACDA and RICAN spaces. These sites functioned as collective learning environments where CNs and leaders reflected on lived experiences, confronted dominant narratives, and developed shared analyses of power, race, and institutional harm. For example, the partners described a deliberate shift toward a more family-focused approach, which included involving boys and girls as part of the

community-advocacy collaboration. Within this decision the CNs and leadership team unearthed gendered assumptions within both community and school spaces. As Omar, a Leadership team member, recalled, the organization began asking, "Why are we only working with boys?" For proceeding weeks, the community organizations reflected on how Somali boys were often encouraged toward independence and visibility, while girls were framed as fragile and in need of protection. Rather than accepting these assumptions as cultural givens, the CNs and leadership team used them as entry points for building structural agency and creating opportunity within Pan-African communities deliberately expanding support for young Black African girls.

These dispositions unfolded into a reality that translated into concrete outcomes. The partnership created youth-centered spaces. CN's Kinna and Maxamed reported sustained gatherings of 15–20 girls representing both Somali and Bantu backgrounds participating in their mentoring program. Fieldnotes captured that the girls expressed pride in their culture, and in a follow-up interview, Kinna emphasized the importance of saying their full names, and articulated aspirations related to college and scholarships. Kinna noted, "They were expressive. They talked about who they are. They talked about college—what they want to do." These moments functioned as counterspaces where identity affirmation and future orientation laid the groundwork for deeper structural analysis.

Confronting school-based narratives

In school-based contexts, however, CNs confronted persistent deficit narratives that framed unjust school systems as something students needed to cope with rather than disrupt. While working in the two partnering school districts, CNs described how defict ideology—both implicit and explicit—was deeply normalized. Ciara observed that without intentional intervention, CNs themselves risked absorbing dominant explanations that located problems in families rather than institutions. School responses often defaulted to statements such as "we've tried everything," which obscured structural conditions and shifted responsibility away from policy and leadership. The RPP paid close attention to interrogating these narratives. Reflecting on a partnership workshop, Ciara explained the result of focusing on these unexplored notions that everything has been done in schools to help students, "Today helped us begin to disrupt…—this idea, that the problem is the families." We noticed that CN's begin to shift in their dispositions, from the social pressures of victim-blaming to confronting deficit notions.

Omar served as an examplar when he extended these school-based narratives by reframing institutional conflict as a question of power and partnership rather than failure. Reflecting on district pressure and a stalled memorandum of understanding, he asked, "What is the gain and what is the loss?" He noted that schools often sought training without genuine collaboration, explaining, "They want us to do everything, but not take leadership, not have funding, not be partners." This reframing marked a shift from individual frustration to structural critique—a key marker of developing critical consciousness.

This disposition also enabled cross-racial solidarity. In one district, CNs organized with African American families who experienced similar school crimmigration (Stumpf,

2006), illustrating that critical consciousness opened the door to shared political struggle. We discuss more on how this evolving critical consciousness across varying forms of alienation often resulted in the partnership working in solidarity across groups with the intent to disrupt and destroy the common guise that oppresses them.

Trust: building relational and institutional integrity

Recognizing the historic betrayal many families felt from institutions confronted in the U.S., the partnership approached building trust as a key dispositional commitment necessary to work with students and families. CNs and leaders emphasized consistency, honesty, and cultural integrity in their engagements to help build trust. Ciara, a leadership team member explained, "If you ask a refugee to trust a resource and it isn't effective, you lose the community. We must be consistent and follow up. Resist over-promising. Be clear about your role." Trust was built through small, sustained acts: face-to-face conversations, home visits, calls in heritage languages, and gatherings in familiar spaces like mosques and apartment courtyards.

There was great attention paid to building trust within the represented infrastructure of the partnership. CN's and community leaders ensured language, citizenship status, gender representation, and age ranges, that mirrored their family patrons were present. For example, in terms of meeting the language needs of patrons, ACDA and RICAN ensured Somali, Mai Mai, Oromo, Amharic, Arabic, and Swahili, languages were also represented in daily communication, spoken and written. This relational infrastructure the community-partnership built made it possible for students and families to re-engage with schools, not because they trusted the system, but because they trusted the people within the community-side of the partnership, that were assisting them to navigate schools.

For CNs and leaders, institutional trust—spanning from school sites to state agencies—emerged as a central site of tension. Students' and families' trust in schools was closely tied to how decisions were made, whose knowledge was valued, and whether schools followed through on commitments. For example, Omar raised concerns about how Somali students were identified in state data sets, noting that last names were often used as proxies in ways he described as "problematic." When these issues arose, rather than deferring to state definitions, the partnership emphasized participatory approaches, including dialogue with educators, as a strategy for rebuilding trust. This approach ensured that the data shared with families reflected lived realities rather than isolated institutional interpretations.

Institutional trust was further negotiated through conversations about school leadership practices. Ciara, Lead CN, observed that some schools framed community involvement as unnecessary, suggesting they had "already done the work," in contrast to what she described as a more "effective principal" who admitted, "I don't know what I am doing." This admission was interpreted not as weakness but as an act of trustworthiness, signaling openness to shared leadership and collaborative learning with community partners. Mandy extended this insight by proposing a strategic assessment of which principals were already functioning as allies. She suggested that partnership efforts could be deepened where relational humility and mutual trust were already present.

Solidarity: fostering wrap-around justice

The principles of solidarity, specifically, fostering unity and empowerment within the Pan-African community, were found throughout the partnership. ACDA and RICAN's mission and vision, "to serve all families across a Pan-African Diaspora," with particular attention to human crises, from resettlement to racism, helped the partnership home in on global justice, much of which built upon critical consciousness and then drove their solidarity work. Altogether, the community organization itself leveraged its multi-sector partnership involving community-based organizations, K–12 school systems, institutions of higher education, and public education agencies serving Black African immigrant students and families in the west to provide wrap-around justice for their student and family patrons.

School-based collaboration occurred across multiple public school districts, where CNs supported students and families experiencing racialized, linguistic, and religious marginalization. University partners contributed to participatory research design, professional learning, arts-based and counter-narrative methods, and institutional review processes. The partnership also engaged with a state-level public education agency as a funding and dissemination partner, with the goal of informing broader policy and practice beyond the local context. Additional collaboration included civil rights organizations, local youth-serving agencies, and philanthropic partners supporting leadership development and community-based programming. Together, these partners formed a community-anchored infrastructure for advancing ethically grounded, justice-centered school–family–community collaboration.

Borrowing from Brysk & Wehrenfennig (2010) framing around what defines solidarity efforts, it is work conducted by an oppressed community around common broader struggles that includes their ability to take hold of educational, political, financial, symbolic, and/or legal resources vital for their empowerment. We observed several events driven by the community component of the partnership, exemplifying a high level of solidarity, organized around common struggles faced by the broader Black African community. Internally, solidarity was expressed through PD sessions addressing anti-Black Islamophobia and school discipline policies. For example, the incident involving Hassan's suspension led to deeper collaboration with African American families, pushing for an end to exclusionary school discipline practices and an adoption of more culturally aware interventions on the part of schools. The Somali Education Taskforce, a community-driven initiative engaging elders, parents, and youth would take on this project. In a local partnering school, an African and African American girl mentoring group formed, derived to address their personal struggles with ongoing harassment. The partnership was eventually received grant funding to support approximately 20 girls focused on mentoring, leadership, and advocacy.

Externally, recognizing that educational justice cannot be separated from housing, health, and safety, the partnership organized vaccine clinics during the COVID-19 pandemic and sought funding for immigrant housing. Curricular efforts also embodied solidarity. Community leaders and CNs created and implemented Somali and Pan-African cultural curricula within their own community events—attempting to correct school erasure by affirming student and family identities. Altogether, solidarity often united common struggles against systemic oppressive issues across several sectors:

criminalization in schools, problems of practice impacting Black girls in school, acculturation through curriculum, an unhousing crisis, and a global health pandemic. Moreover, solidarity efforts were found to broadly impact multiple local communities across GV.

Implications for research

This study illuminates the intersecting forms of alienations experienced by Black African immigrant students and families in GV schools—alienations that were structural and consistently centered on linguistic, racialized, spiritual or religious exclusion. These experiences were embedded within a broader architecture of anti-Blackness impacting students and families (see Phelps et.al, 2025 for example), Islamophobia, and sociopolitical structural divestment and retrenchment, shaping schools and public institutions. The school, family, community partnership responded with prophetic activism, an asset-based ideological stance, critical consciousness, trust, and solidarity. Rather than functioning as abstract principles, PACTS dispositions emerged as a lived and evolving praxis guided in the community cultural wealth of a predominantly Islamic, Somali, and broader Pan-African community in the U.S. These were enacted by community-based leaders within the partnership. Their prophetic activism, informed by Islamic teachings such as *zakat*, framed advocacy as a sacred duty. Their resistance to deficit ideology, particularly an asset-based stance, helped name and disrupt misrepresentations of school students and families. Their cultivation of critical consciousness enabled the partnership to see beyond isolated incidents to the systems producing them. Trust was not assumed but earned through sustained, relational and respectful integrity. Finally, solidarity transcended individual advocacy, linking school-based struggles to broader racial, socioeconomic, housing, health injustice, and so forth. In summary, our work prefigured a justice-oriented partnership informed by research and critical theoretical constructions—and became one that lived its values rather than simply studying them.

This study has important implications for school, family, and community partnership scholarship. We centered the beliefs, orientations, and dispositions of community-based actors—particularly community leaders and cultural navigators (CNs)—who supported immigrant families, as critical analytic sites as the participant and force that responded to structural alienation Traditional partnership frameworks are often developed through Western, institution-centric lenses that privilege school-defined notions of engagement and success (Scheurich et al., 2017), while overlooking culturally grounded practices that sustain dignity, identity, and safety for immigrant families. Research grounded in these dominant-centric frameworks risks reproducing one-centric logics that obscure how support is enacted in practice. By contrast, this study foregrounds the epistemic authority of the community partners themselves who occupy a dual positionality as both community members and institutional navigators within and beyond schools, enabling them to interpret institutional demands while remaining accountable to the families and communities they serve.

Next steps: advancing theory, methodology, and practice for Black Pan-African school communities

Building on our arguments of what counts as epistemic authority, who can interpret institutional demands, while remaining accountable to the liberation of the community,

the continued utility of CRT helped illuminate how Black Africans in the U.S. experience schooling in relation to, yet distinct from, African American contexts. CRT enabled us to surface intersectional forms of alienation, with racism operating as a pervasive organizing force alongside xenophobia, Islamophobia, citizenship precarity, linguistic marginalization, and cultural exclusion. At the same time, CCW provided a critical framework for documenting the multiple forms of capital embedded within Black African school-community members' networks and communities. Through CCW, we identified how students, families, and community partners mobilized cultural knowledge, relational resources, navigational strategies, and resistant practices to support student and family engagement in schools, sustaining *thrival* amid persistent alienation.

Advancing theory: spiritual wealth—building on Yosso's frame

This study makes a theoretical contribution by advancing spiritual wealth as an empirically supported extension of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework, offering a more complete analytic account of how Black Pan-African families and community partners sustain moral obligation, collective care, and justice-oriented action within school–family–community partnerships. While CCW has been foundational in challenging deficit-based frameworks by naming aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant forms of capital, the findings of this study indicate that these categories do not fully capture how spirituality functions within Black Pan-African communities.

Across the partnership documented here, spirituality operated not as a private belief system or individualized coping mechanism, but as a collective organizing epistemology that shaped how families and community partners interpreted injustice, enacted responsibility, and sustained long-term resistance under conditions of structural alienation. In this sense, spiritual wealth functioned as a durable cultural resource that activated and sustained other forms of CCW toward justice-centered action.

This conceptualization aligns with scholarship calling for acknowledging religious funds of knowledge (see Nimmo et al., 2019), and expands on critical spirituality, which positions spirituality as an ethical and political foundation for transformative leadership and collective resistance. Dantley (2010) argues that critical spirituality calls leaders "to serve as organic intellectuals and civil rights activists" engaged in "critical self-reflection, deconstructive interpretation, performative creativity and transformative action" (p. 214). He further emphasizes that spirituality operates as collective sustenance, serving "not only as a motivation but also as a source of sustenance, in the midst of an alien and racist surrounding culture that sought to destroy their [Black] culture" (p. 216). In the present study, this sustaining function was evident in how community partners persisted in advocacy despite institutional exclusion and sociopolitical retrenchment.

Research on Islamic educational leadership further demonstrates how spirituality functions as a justice-oriented and action-producing resource. Brooks and Ezzani (2022) describe spirituality as a "critical catalyst" that in their study "created and sustained a learning environment that purposefully connected spirituality to issues of justice" (p. 328). These authors concluded that critical spirituality informed and influenced Islamic school leadership practice. These insights parallel how spirituality functioned in the present study through prophetic activism, where advocacy was framed

as a sacred duty grounded in Islamic teachings such as *zakat* and enacted through collective responsibility to families and students.

At the same time, advancing spiritual wealth within CCW requires analytic care. Spirituality can function as a resource for liberation while also being mobilized to justify domination, exclusion, and harm—particularly toward people of Color, women, LGBTQ+ communities, and those living in poverty. In conversation with Yosso regarding the inclusion of spiritual wealth within CCW, the lead author raised this tension, noting that in the U.S. religion has historically operated as both a site of resistance and a mechanism of oppression. Yosso's response—"speak to the contradictions" (T.J. Yosso, personal communication, September 18, 2017)—offers a critical directive for further theorizing this form of capital in reference to CCW.

Accordingly, this study conceptualizes spiritual wealth as justice-contingent rather than inherently emancipatory. What distinguished the forms of spiritual wealth observed here was explicit alignment with racial justice, collective care, and moral accountability. These expressions echo Black prophetic traditions across Christian and Muslim communities, where spiritually grounded leadership has been inseparable from struggles for racial liberation, as seen in figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. In this framing, spiritual wealth is neither neutral nor universal; its analytic value lies in how it is interpreted and enacted in ways that resist oppression rather than reproduce it.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that spiritual wealth strengthens CCW's explanatory power by capturing ethical, historical, and ontological dimensions of partnership work that are central to how Black Pan-African communities navigate, survive, and resist institutional harm.

Advancing methods: Black Indigenous and community-engaged knowledge production

While CRT and CCW provided essential analytic tools, our findings also revealed their limits. CRT centers racialized power and CCW foregrounds community assets, but neither framework fully captures African historical consciousness, diasporic memory, spirituality, and embodied ways of knowing as articulated from African standpoints. As Farinde-Wu et al. (2025) caution, dominant qualitative and critical frameworks—when untethered from Indigenous African onto-epistemologies—risk reproducing Western interpretive boundaries that render African meaning-making partial or unintelligible, raisingthe question: How do we study Black African diasporic experiences without forcing them into frameworks that were not built to hold them?

Our response was methodological. Drawing on critical participatory action research (Fine & Torre, 2021), counter-storytelling (Singer et al., 2008), Theater of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979), and eco-mapping, we positioned CN's and community leaders not as informants but as epistemic agents—community members whose dual positionality enabled them to interpret institutional expectations while remaining accountable to the communities they serve. Rather than fitting experiences into pre-existing categories, we privileged relational knowledge, spiritual epistemologies, and community-defined meanings as legitimate sources of insight. This stance resists extractive research traditions and treats knowledge production as a relational, ethical, and politically situated practice.

Building from these commitments, we argue that scholarship on school-family-community partnerships involving Pan-African communities must advance toward Black Indigenous methodological approaches. Grounded in Afrocentricity, relational ontology, and spiritual epistemologies (Asante, 2007; Dei, 2012; Farinde-Wu et al., 2025), these approaches honor African pasts and collective memory as legitimate sources of knowledge—surfacing dispositions, relational logics, and partnership ethics that Western epistemological norms often obscure. The method, in other words, must match the meaning it seeks to understand.

Advancing PACTS as practice: toward a culturally responsive and transformative school, family, and community partnership for Black Pan-African immigrant students and families

Recent scholarship supports the need for partnership frameworks that move beyond academic metrics to address cultural survival, dignity, language maintenance, and safety among Black Pan-African immigrant families (Farah, 2025). Research further demonstrates that identity-affirming collective spaces enable Black African youth to develop shared critiques of racism and solidarity rather than navigating harm in isolation (Gil & McClure, 2025), while trust emerges as a structural condition shaped by policy, history, and institutional behavior (Farah, 2025). Situated within political contexts marked by racialized exclusion and anti-immigrant discourse (Gil & McClure, 2025; Smith, 2023), these findings inform the PACTS audit by clarifying the justice-oriented conditions partnerships must assess if desired to advance PACTS as a practice. Accordingly, Table 2 operationalizes Prophetic Activism, Asset-Based Ideology, Critical Consciousness, Trust, and Solidarity to evaluate whether school–family–community partnerships merely engage Black Pan-African immigrant families or actively stand with them. Partnerships may use this audit tool to identify gaps between espoused commitments and enacted practice and to guide next steps, including revising partnership goals, redistributing decision-making power, strengthening culturally sustaining supports, and aligning school improvement efforts with community-defined visions of safety, dignity, and success.

Notes

1. African Community Development Association (ACDA) and the Refugee and Immigration Center for African Newcomers (RICAN) are pseudonyms used to protect the organization and will be referenced as ACDA and RICAN.
2. Green Valley (GV) is a pseudonym that represents the urban city this study takes place.

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