Rethinking "Educación Diversificada" for Afro-Descendants in Costa Rica

Dianala M. Bernard

School of Education, University of the People, 595 E. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91101, USA
dianala.bernard@uopeople.edu

Abstract

Costa Rica is a Central American country known for its commitment to education and environmental conservation. *Educación Diversificada* in Costa Rica refers to a system of education that offers a variety of options and programs, seeking to accommodate the diverse interests, needs, and abilities of students. Despite these efforts, challenges remain, including limited funding, inadequate infrastructure, and a lack of awareness among students and their families about the benefits of a diversified education. Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus that a diversified education system is crucial for the long-term development and competitiveness of Costa Rica. This paper provides an overview of the variations in educational attainment in Costa Rica and points to differences in socioeconomic status (SES) as a significant contributor to disparities in academic success. However, historically, the research suggests multiple dimensions of inequality and captures relevant but limited aspects of this phenomenon. Research is needed that will comprehensively illustrate the critical factors that impact educational success for people of African descent in Costa Rica and how these factors combine to affect the economic success of Afro-Costa Ricans. Immigration and migration history, for example, have been important predictors of the educational success of Afro-descendants in Costa Rica. Further research is needed to highlight the complex ways in which SES, race, migration, and immigration combine to affect educational success. Fully capturing the role of race in education also requires examining the conditions under which racial discrimination in education persists. The paper identifies research priorities in all these areas.

Keywords: Ethnic and Racial Studies, Education, Costa Rica, Social Anthropology, Social Sciences, Afro-Descendants

1. Introduction

Academic success in high school has significant consequences for future socioeconomic status (SES) and overall well-being in adulthood (van Zwieten et al., 2021). Not only are educational systems charged with imparting knowledge, socializing students, and creating opportunities for future success, but they also bestow credentials recognized by institutions of higher education, employers, and others. The importance of equal access to educational opportunities has long been recognized as critical to future SES. Yet, the challenge of achieving it for marginalized communities in Costa Rica has defied policy efforts toward educational equity. Historically, structural racism has relegated a substantial percentage of the people of African descent in Costa Rica to remain in the Caribbean/Atlantic region of the country with inadequate educational resources and limited labor market opportunities. Additionally, there is a concern with the impact of grade repetition and dropout rates. If continuously ignored or left unchallenged, these limitations will become hard-edged obstacles, making it extremely difficult for people of African descent in Costa Rica to gain access to quality education at significant rates and to enjoy a full economic life (Baiocchi, 2022; Balutet, 2019; Bradley-Levine, 2021; Hurtado et al., 2020; Lennox & Minott, 2011; Means et al., 2019; OCHA, 2022; OECD, 2017; Ross et al., 2020; Smagorinsky, 2022; Venegas et al., 2016; Wright, 2019).

Researchers have long examined the educational system of Costa Rica; still, significant gaps in the literature exist. Over the last 75 years, studies have been dominated by efforts to meet educational mandates sponsored by organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Office of High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR), the World Bank, Amnesty International and others (Booth et al., 2020; Dávila, 2018; Mentan, 2020; Meyer, 2019; Smith-Cannoy, 2019). While there has been some movement during the last two decades towards initiatives to provide more educational opportunities for students in the Caribbean/Atlantic region of Costa Rica (the opening of Colegio Científico de Limón, for example, in 2002), a more critical approach that raises questions about the impact of race, gender, class inequalities, and immigration status, have not become normative. Moreover, other relevant disciplines such as social anthropology, economics, political science, and sociology may contribute to new ways of thinking about high school completion and successful transition to higher education for people of African descent in Costa Rica (de Campos Mello, 2020; World Bank, 2021a, b).

Less often discussed in educational literature about Costa Rica are the critical aspects of high school completion, including, but not limited to the secondary school experience; programs for university preparation; the university years; and post-university outcomes for people of African descent in Costa Rica. The first area, the secondary school experience, represents a point of intersection for seventh through eleventh graders or twelfth graders (related to vocational/technical schools) and higher education, is perhaps somewhat neglected because of the success of schools like Colegio Científico de Limón, resulting in relatively little research on the pathways leading to university for students of African descent attending other secondary schools.

Secondary school attendance patterns or what occurs in those critical years of preparation for the *bachillerato* is understudied, due partly to a lack of clarity regarding educational opportunities available nationally and internationally for students, inadequate teacher and counselor support, and an absence of effective communication about the educational pathways, especially for Afro-descendant students in the Caribbean/Atlantic region of Costa Rica (OECD, 2017; Venegas et al., 2016). Afro-descendants also make up a disproportionately large share of the poor, according to the report, *Afro-descendants in Latin America: Toward a Framework of Inclusion* (Paulk, 2016; World Bank, 2018a, b). Also, the research from Minority Rights Groups International (2022) draws attention to how Afro-Costa Rican areas traditionally receive a disproportionate investment relative to the rest of the country, asserting that Puerto Limón, for example, is ranked as the second most disadvantaged province in Costa Rica.

Recognizing the importance of an educated society, the role that knowledge plays in economic stability, and downward shifts in demographic patterns from the Caribbean/Atlantic region of the country, underscore the need for educational initiatives which address the increasing rate of children dropping out of school (INEC, 2021; OECD, 2017). Central to school retention initiatives is the belief that educational institutions have a social contract to fulfill by ensuring that all students are prepared to participate and contribute to a country's economy (Cheung et al., 2019; OECD, 2017). However, limited labor market opportunities for people of African descent in Costa Rica continue to impact the progress of that population. Research from Minority Rights Group International (2022) points to the scarcity of employment opportunities for Afro-Costa Ricans, especially in the country's Caribbean/Atlantic Coast area, due in part to a limited economy and racial exclusion. To address these issues, there is an imperative to approach the complexities surrounding education, social justice, and political influences, including educational governance (Aznar Sánchez, & Rodríguez Elizalde, 2021; McCoy-Torres, 2016; Poblete Melis, 2019).

2. Educational Access in Costa Rica: The History

Studies concerning people of African descent and education in Costa Rica have developed over the years into a wide range of views on the diverse ways students of African descent integrate into Costa Rican schools (Balutet, 2022; Lim, 2015; Muñoz-Muñoz & Senior, 2021; Wade, 2010; World Bank 2018a, b). Historically, Costa Rica has been framed in cultural, political, social, and educational discourse as an exceptional nation that abolished its army on December 1, 1948, giving birth to the *Segunda República*, and diverting those resources to educational initiatives, as a beacon of social progressiveness, and with pride in a high literacy rate (Harvey-Kattou, 2019; Müller-Using & Vargas Porras, 2021). The same year, the United Nations General Assembly approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, establishing in Article 1 that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Dávila, 2018, p. 154). What is both astonishing and sad is a failure to fully recognize a painful past of discrimination and exclusion that exists even today, in some respects, and threatens the future of the Afro-descendant population in Costa Rica. Correspondingly, Balutet (2019) noted,

> Europeans and their descendants have often succeeded in imposing themselves at the expense of other populations. Faced with these situations of discrimination and even segregation, which haven't all disappeared today, ethnic outsiders have adopted various strategies to actively fight for the recognition of their rights. (p. 1)

For years, there were focused efforts to ensure that Costa Rica was seen as racially white and culturally linked to Spain (McCoy-Torres, 2016). The steps to dismiss the existence of people of African descent with the establishment of *Puebla de los Pardos* or *Puebla de los Ángeles* in Cartago, the contributions of West Indians drawn to Costa Rica starting in 1872 to build the railroad system between the Caribbean Coast and the Central Valley region of the country, and the workers of United Fruit Company, which became the leading exporter of bananas from Costa Rica to the United States and other countries starting in 1911, cannot be ignored (AAREG, 2022; Diaz Rojas, 2020; Miller, 2012).

By the 1920s, the Black population in Costa Rica had improved its economic status and some began to acquire land to make their stay in the Caribbean/Atlantic region permanent. In the 1930s, however, because of the region's prosperity and since Black people were not considered citizens of Costa Rica, many white Costa Ricans moved to the Caribbean/Atlantic region and dispossessed Black people from their land and demanded the jobs Black people occupied. Many of the Black people in the region moved to Panamá and other countries. For those who remained in Costa Rica, and their descendants, even after winning full citizenship almost two decades later, while some began to enjoy some prosperity, it was not at a significant enough rate as other racial groups in the country. It

remains puzzling how a country that identifies as racially white has a patron saint affectionately called *La Negrita* or *La Virgen de Los Ángeles* (AAREG, 2022; Balutet, 2019; Booth et al., 2020; Dávila, 2018; Lim, 2015; Lohse, 2016; McCoy-Torres, 2016; Paulk, 2016).

Accordingly, since the immigration of Black people from the Caribbean to Costa Rica, discrimination and isolation have played critical roles by challenging the racial democracy myth of Costa Rica as a constitutional government centered on independent principles and respect for human rights; instead, exposing racism as a significant factor in inequalities. Furthering the divide between Black people and other racial groups were incidents of travel restrictions for Black people to the Central Valley region of the country. Since the early part of the 1900s, the African descendant population of Puerto Limón even established their own schools with ties to their British roots as Costa Rican schools for their children were not an option (McCoy-Torres, 2016; Muñoz-Muñoz & Senior, 2021). Discrimination was also evident when a need surfaced for workers to build the Panamá Canal and Black people of Caribbean descent in Costa Rica answered the call. Fearing Afro-descendants would marry Panamanian women led to widespread discrimination. Thus, as Herman (2020) asserts, "the Panamanian government ordered consular officials to stamp the passports [for entry] of only those recruited workers who appeared white or Mestizo" (p. 469). Not surprisingly, Cook and FitzGerald (2019) questioned why policies against people of African descent [immigration and otherwise] seem similar across countries. As Blain (2022) contends, "The fight against racism has always been global" (p. 159).

Today, Costa Rica, with a population of approximately 5.2 million in 2022, and estimated to increase to 5.3 million by the end of 2023 and to 5.5 million by 2027, is growing increasingly diverse (O'Neill, 2022). The data suggests that people of African descent will represent the most substantial growth in the population (United Nations, 2021). According to 2011 Costa Rica population and demographics records, roughly 100,000 Afro-descendants represent about 1.1 percent of the Costa Rican population (Costa Rica, 2022; World Factbook, 2022). However, research from AAREG (2022) reflects that the current Afro-Costa Rican population is at 3 percent. The same researchers claim that in the Guanacaste Providence, a sizable portion of the population is a mix of Amerindian, African, and Spaniard descendants. Therefore, the accuracy of the population distribution is arguable, since who identifies as an Afro-descendant may not be correct because the documented inaccuracy of census data and vital statistics and services by ethnic groups has always added to the complexity in reporting the country's demographic data (Minority Rights, 2022). For example, based on 2011 estimates, Costa Rica's ethnic group distribution is as follows: White or Mestizo 83.6%, Mulatto 6.7%, Indigenous 2.4%, Black, or African descent 1.1%, other 1.1%, none 2.9%, unspecified 2.2% (Costa Rica, 2022; World Factbook, 2022).

3. Current Realities: Inequities in Academic Preparation

The first modern secondary school opened in San Jose, Costa Rica, in 1887. By 1970, approximately 24% of students attended secondary schools. In 1980, the student attendance rate increased to 40% in secondary schools. By 2021, a little over 220,000 students attended 342 secondary schools in Costa Rica. While education through the 11th or 12th grades has been free and compulsory since 2011, it is not enforced sufficiently, explaining the 96% attendance rate at the primary school level. Still, the attendance rate drops to 80% for the lower secondary school level, and for the upper secondary school, it falls considerably to 46% of age-appropriate children attending secondary schools. In INEC (2021) research, students gave the causes for dropping out of school between 15 and 17 years of age, with the top related to: A disinterest in formal education, lack of funds to pay for studies, and inadequate access to the educational system.

The disparity in attendance rates is due partly to a history of grade repetition in schools. Also, demographic differences in high school completers and higher education readiness rates are of particular concern. There are persistent racial and socioeconomic gaps in high school starting rates, high school completion rates, and even more troubling, higher education enrollment rates for Afro-Costa Ricans. In 2009, however, Costa Rica revisited the historical rules and regulations around grade repetition and implemented new policies aimed at increasing the rate of students who remained in schools and ultimately graduated. Six years later in 2015, the launch of *Yo me apunto* (I am in) represented an innovative approach to raising completion rates, targeting schools most in need of improvement in seventy-five of the most vulnerable areas identified by the National Development Plan under Costa Rica's Second National Integration Plan 2018-2022 (OECD, 2017; OCHA, 2022; UNDP, 2015).

Secondary to the disparity in school participation and completion rates, the exam requirements to graduate high school and qualify for university entrance are even more troubling. However, the Ministry of Public Education of Costa Rica or *Ministerio de Educación Pública* (MEP) discontinued the exam requirements in 1973, the same year, Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica was established under the administration of Jose Figueres Ferrer. By 1988, because of students' gross unpreparedness in the four areas of the exam—math, science, Spanish, and social studies, Minister of Education, Francisco Pacheco, reinstated the exam requirements (Cliff & Montero, 2016; Education Encyclopedia, 2022; Mirabueno & Boyon, 2020; OECD, 2017).

Moreover, there is a requirement that students pass all four areas of the exit exam. A failure of any part of the exam means a failure of the entire exam. In regions outside of the Central Valley, students pass the required high

school exit exam at far lower rates and do not graduate. What is important to note, in addition to the high school exit exam, admission tests are also required for entrance to tertiary institutions like the Universidad de Costa Rica. For example, in the most recent 2022 school year, a Chilean-born student with maternal roots in Costa Rica entered the University of Costa Rica with the highest marks for admission (Cerdas, 2022; Education Encyclopedia, 2022). Therefore, for marginalized students in Costa Rica, Cliff, and Montero (2016) suggest an examination aimed at identifying students who have the academic and cognitive potential for higher education but come from environments with educational and other disadvantages and whose abilities are underestimated because the traditional admission exam and evaluations are employed in determining their higher education admission. Others agree that more deliberate efforts toward educational equity, especially for marginalized students, would be a better approach (Cheung et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2017; Valdés & Fardella, 2022; Wallace et al., 2004).

Ensuring successful high school completion is necessary and immediate, especially for Afro-Costa Ricans. Historically lower levels of education challenge them due to racial disparities and discrimination and limited access to resources and school programs that ensure successful educational experiences (Šafránková & Zátopková, 2017; Smith-Cannoy, 2019). The research on school performance points to several general factors that impact people of African descent in Costa Rican schools—historical, social, economic, and political factors affect the success of Afro-Costa Ricans in schools (Alves & Candido, 2020; Poblete Melis, 2019). Rumberger (2020) posited that dropout rates are not a consequence of a single factor; instead, the causes of school failures are like those responsible for poverty, such as job loss, family instability, illness, and teenage pregnancy. The data from INEC (2021) supports Rumberger's contention.

Frequently, students are simply academically underprepared for secondary school (OECD, 2017; UNDP, 2015), and even worse, often, students are grossly underprepared for entry to higher education institutions (Reed & Jones, 2021). In other cases, disadvantaged and minority high school students are more likely to receive secondary schooling in vocational/technical environments rather than academic tracks (OECD, 2017), take fewer math and science courses (Mirabueno & Boyon, 2020; Mora Badilla, 2021), and attend smaller schools lacking pre-college/university preparation programs and counseling (Ryu et al., 2021; Wright, 2019). Another consideration relates to Afro-descendants' identification to two or more races potentially affects the accuracy of the Afro-Costa Rican population as reflected in national census records (McCoy-Torres, 2016; Telles, 2017).

In low-income households, parents and students are less likely to receive information about higher education entry programs and are deterred by perceived high college/university costs. Therefore, students fail to academically prepare themselves for higher education while in high school, reducing their postsecondary opportunities substantially (Crawley et al., 2019; Gale, 2021). Also, students trust their high school counselors, mainly because their parents and siblings may have little to no experience with higher education preparation and unlikely to know how to guide and support them in the higher education preparation process (Amaro-Jiménez et al., 2020). How prepared are counselors to guide and help their students when their schools receive fewer resources and are staffed with under-prepared educators? Have high school counselors bought into the notion that there is no point in working toward a strong high school finish for the possibility of college/university entry? Gonzales and Storti (2019) and Mora Badilla (2021) have hypothesized that, like teacher preparation programs, counseling programs should be strengthened for the benefit of underrepresented students. Also, there is literature suggesting that high school students would benefit from earlier notification of higher education preparation programs, including financial aid eligibility, during the Basic/lower secondary years or *Educación Básica* (seventh through ninth grades) versus during the Diversified/upper secondary years or *Educación Diversificada* (tenth and eleventh grades) or twelfth grade for vocational/technical settings.

4. Emerging Themes: The Role of College/University Preparation Programs
While analysis of public education in Costa Rica has increased in recent years, educational studies have not fully incorporated models to explicate the impact of higher education preparation programs on graduation rates (OECD, 2017). Effective schools are characterized as promoting learning for all students (OECD, 2017). Other elements of the effective schools, as defined by Kauchak and Eggen (2021), are a clear mission and strong leadership; a safe environment; a high degree of parental involvement; efficiency; accountability for continuous learning through high levels of interaction with students; and mechanisms in place for monitoring progress and in making informed decisions. Support for guidance counselors can also play a significant role in reshaping the dialogue about initiatives for the educational success of Afro-Costa Rican students (Wright, 2019).

Commitment to educational reform and excellence needs the participation of all stakeholders, leading to patterns of symbolic representation, where local officials can build trust, respect, and engender a culture of shared goals with educational stakeholders. Through collaborative leadership, all stakeholders can dialogue the policy initiatives needed to effect change for Afro-Costa Rican students. In particular, all stakeholders should be involved in the goal-setting process, establishing a shared vision, cultivating awareness of attitudes and perceptions, practicing positive group interaction, and understanding interdependency and change. Educational leaders must be innovative and creative as they model the way for educational reform. Specific to these mandates, the research

points to the following characteristics for quality education and effective higher education preparedness approaches:

1. Develop expectations for student achievement and clearly defined goals that offer quality guidance and support (Albright et al., 2017).
2. Cultivate a collaborative relationship with the community to establish a strong communications structure to inform and engage students (Crawley et al., 2019; Ghazzawi et al., 2019; Jackson et al., 2020)
3. Create opportunities to take courses or complete degrees for free or below cost (Espinoza et al., 2022).
4. "Social support from trusted adults is an important protective factor for adolescents who have been exposed to risk" (Gale, 2021, p. 391)
5. Partner for change initiatives with existing organizations. For example, university to work opportunities and others (Amaro-Jiménez et al., 2020; Morrison, 2016; Ramirez, 2021)
6. Encourage peer support (Means et al., 2019)
7. Develop teacher/educator support systems (Kolluri et al., 2020; Means et al., 2019)
8. Establish family higher education awareness and outreach programs (Amaro-Jiménez et al., 2020)
9. "Enroll them all" - Make higher education available for all (Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2020; Santelices et al., 2019; Smith, 2021)
10. Consider the role of college/university counselors (Ryu et al., 2021; Wright, 2019)
11. Ensure gender equity (Warren et al., 2021)
12. Consider study abroad programs (Whatley, 2021)

5. Outlook for Afro-Descendant Students in Costa Rica

Historically, people of African descent and other minority groups are underrepresented in Costa Rican society. This imbalance holds considerable implications for the future of Afro-Costa Rican educational success, especially as businesses are moving operations to Costa Rica at exponential rates. With the location of international companies in the country, educational initiatives should encourage global awareness (OECD, 2020). Besides, a better-educated labor force will be critical for increasing living standards, so just having a literate labor force will not ensure having a workforce equipped with 21st-century skills needed to navigate a highly globalized economy. Therefore, even if the literacy rate for Costa Ricans is near 100%, close to 50% of secondary school students do not graduate, and students of African descent graduate at even lower rates. Unlike other groups, a rapidly growing population in other parts of the country obscures the Afro-Costa Rican educational experience. While this has long been true in the Caribbean/Atlantic region, other areas of the country are now experiencing similar increases in Afro-descendant populations, resulting in pressures to diversify structures such as schools (OECD, 2017; Sohn, 2013).

Like other countries worldwide, inequality concerns are widening the achievement gap and threatening the economic stability of Costa Rica. After all, that education systems operate in a constantly changing world is a given. Yet, crises such as COVID-19 and associated variants may disrupt any progress made in recent years, which is just as certain. In addition to the history of discrimination, perpetuating inequality, oppression, and marginalization, which affect both girls and boys, Afro-Costa Rican girls are confronted with other hurdles that place women at a disadvantage and in gendered roles. Thus, women face multiple and entrenched barriers to opportunities educationally, politically, socially, and economically (Muñoz-Muñoz, 2021; OHCHR, 2018; Paulk, 2016; Wallace et al., 2004).

Educational practitioners concerned with social justice initiatives need to ensure marginalized student success. Currently, researchers are working on how to increase quality education and student educational outcomes for marginalized groups around the world (Cheung et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2017; Wallace et al., 2004). Yet, at the onset, it is unclear what constitutes quality education. There are also more profound questions for educational and political leaders to address. For example, what role does academic success play in the greater context of the lives of marginalized groups around the world? Do the current secondary schools in Costa Rica offer marginalized groups opportunities beyond high school? Although the article does not address these questions directly, one decisive way to approach these concerns is through research that includes students' voices to understand better how students make sense of their environment and are better positioned to develop goals to achieve academic success and, by extension, success in other aspects of their lives (OECD, 2017; UNDP, 2015).

As of 2018, one in four Latin Americans identifies as Afro-descendant, equating to 133 million people, with the largest population concentrated in Brazil and the rest unevenly dispersed across the remaining Latin American countries (World Bank, 2018a, b). The Afro-Costa Rican population is currently at 1.1% (World Factbook, 2022). In Costa Rica, as in many other Latin American countries, people of African descent continue to face substantial barriers to quality education (OECD, 2017; OHCHR, 2018; UNESCO, 2014). Quality education in Costa Rica is only a part of the history. Still, a central and vital role is urgent to confront a long past of social inequities, political institutions, and economic inequalities for Afro-Costa Rican communities. But that painful history also includes a sense of pride for the near 100% literacy rate (Harvey-Kattou, 2019; Müller-Using & Vargas Porras, 2021).

In 2020, the United Nations celebrated its 75th Anniversary, launching a bold initiative calling for global cooperation in shaping the future we hope to see in the world. The mandate, titled, Decade of Action, centered around seventeen goals—No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health and Well-Being, Quality Education, Gender Equality, Clean Water, Affordable and Clean Energy, Decent Work and Economic Growth, Industry Innovation and Infrastructure, Reduced Inequalities, Sustained Cities and Communities, Responsible Consumption and Production, Climate Action, Life Below Water, Life on Land, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, and Partnerships for the Goals, and requiring the deliberate "cooperation across borders, sectors, and generations" (UNDP, 2015). Of these seventeen goals, a focus on Goal #4, Quality Education, will ensure the success of the other goals. While a quality education should be a priority for every nation, sector, and generation, the Costa Rica educational system that has been touted as the best in the Central American region needs a revisit to respond effectively to rising expectations for 21st Century skills nationally and internationally.

Costa Rica faces substantial obstacles in the realm of education, and particularly for Afro-Costa Rican students. Access to high-quality education, equity, cultural relevance, teacher training, and funding are paramount issues that must be addressed to enhance the educational outcomes for these students. The resolution of these challenges necessitates a cooperative effort between the government, educators, communities, and international organizations. Through diligent collaboration and a steadfast commitment, Costa Rica has the potential to make substantial headway in enhancing education for Afro-Costa Rican students, thereby creating a more inclusive and equitable society that is vital for personal and professional development and promoting equality and inclusiveness in the country. Addressing these obstacles will not only contribute to the general development of the region but also aid in creating a brighter future for all citizens of Costa Rica (Baiocchi, 2022; Balutet, 2019; Bradley-Levine, 2021; Hurtado et al., 2020; Lennox & Minott, 2011; Means et al., 2019; OECD, 2017; Ross et al., 2020; Smagorinsky, 2022; Valdés & Fardella, 2022; Venegas et al., 2016; Wright, 2019).

6. Conclusion

In December 2014, the United Nations General Assembly declared the International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024). Within that context, education initiatives are an urgent priority. After all, education transforms lives (UNESCO, 2014). While Costa Rica has supported progressive initiatives for quality education, especially for students in the Caribbean/Atlantic region of Costa Rica, a more critical approach that raises questions about the impact of race, gender, class inequalities, and immigration status has not become normative. Furthermore, increases in the Afro-Costa Rican population demand a central place in policy discourse and bring to the forefront how people of African descent continue to suffer systemic discrimination, perpetuating inequality, oppression, and marginalization. Since Afro-Costa Ricans tend to cluster in the Caribbean/Atlantic region, the implication of Afro-Costa Rican leadership and empowerment in the country also necessitates inquiry (OECD, 2017; UNDP, 2015). The pressure to diversify means that political representation structures must change as demographic patterns alter traditional bureaucratic structures. The current educational climate mandates that Costa Rica promote opportunities for African descendant youth to be productive members within their communities and their country overall by providing better access to quality education. Given that education contributes decisively to economic growth, Costa Rica will fully recover the investments made in the future of Afro-Costa Ricans, particularly in the Caribbean/Atlantic region of the country. Access to quality education, equity, cultural relevance, teacher training, and funding are all critical issues that need to be addressed to improve the educational outcomes for these students. A collaborative effort is required between the government, educators, communities, and international organizations to ensure that Afro-Costa Rican students receive the support and resources they need to succeed. Addressing these challenges will also contribute to the region's overall development and help create a brighter future for all citizens in Costa Rica, leading to a more inclusive and equitable society essential for personal and professional development, and promoting equity and inclusion in the country.

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Dianala M. Bernard, EdD, MBA is a global academic whose writing and research interests include teachers-as-researchers, examining ethnic identity, biculturalism, development of children of color, social and cultural theory, Latino and Afro-Latino studies, race, and ethnicity (with a focus on Afro-descendants in and from Latin America), urban sociology, education policy, organizational leadership, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and transition to college/university initiatives.

She earned a doctorate degree in Educational Leadership and Curriculum & Instruction from the University of Phoenix in 2013. The focus of her dissertation was on the impact of education on Latino students from a representative bureaucracy perspective. She also holds a Bachelor of Science in Technology and Management and a Master of Business Administration in International Management from the University of Maryland University College earned in 1999 and 2005, respectively. Her areas of expertise are in Humanities and Social Sciences. She also has extensive experience in training, and specializes in career management, mentoring, tutoring, and transition to teaching initiatives. Additionally, she has direct work experience in corporate organizations, higher education, and K-12 settings with diverse groups, teaching English Language Learners, and facilitating graduate-level courses in Master of Education programs in Bilingual Education and advanced teaching.