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SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCES IN MATERNAL ATTITUDES TOWARD THE
TEACHER AND THE SCHOOL.

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A STUDY WAS MADE OF MATERNAL BEHAVIOR AS IT AFFECTS THE
CHILD'S COGNITIVE FUNCTIONING, ATTITUDES TOWARD LEARNING, AND
ROLE CONCEPTION. MOTHERS' RESPONSES TO TWO TASKS WERE USED TO
ASSESS THEIR ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOR. THE FIRST TASK WAS TO
ANSWER A QUESTION ABOUT WHAT THE MOTHERS WOULD DO IF THEY HAD
THE POWER TO CHANGE EDUCATION IN THE SCHOOLS, AND THE SECOND
TASK REQUIRED AN INTERPRETATION OF A PICTURE OF A MOTHER AND
A TEACHER SEATED IN A CLASSROOM. THE SUBJECTS WERE 163 NEGRO
NONWORKING MOTHERS OF 4-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN, FROM FOUR SOCIAL
STATUS GROUPS--MIDDLE CLASS, UPPER-LOWER, LOWER-LOWER, AND
LOWER-LOWER RECEIVING PUBLIC ASSISTANCE. IN CONTRAST TO THE
MIDDLE CLASS MOTHERS, THE MOTHERS IN THE LOWER CLASS GROUPS
SHOWED AN INABILITY TO COPE WITH AND LITTLE CONCERN FOR
PROBLEM-ORIENTED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SCHOOLS. THEY DEFINED
THEIR ROLE WITHIN THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AS PASSIVE, INEFFECTIVE,
OR DEFENSIVE. THESE ATTITUDES REFLECT THE MOTHERS' OWN SCHOOL
EXPERIENCES, AND IN TURN INFLUENCE THE LOWER CLASS URBAN
CHILD TOWARDS A SIMILARLY PASSIVE OR DEFENSIVE RELATIONSHIP
WITH HIS SCHOOL. THE FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY SUGGEST A NEED
FOR THE RESOCIALIZATION OF THE ENTIRE LOWER CLASS FAMILY.
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PROBLEM

There is ample agreement among psychologists and educators that many urban working-class children enter school poorly prepared to meet its academic demands. In the Cognitive Environments Project at the University of Chicago, we have become concerned with another aspect of the obvious social class differential in preparation for school: compared with middle-class children, the urban working-class child enters school also unprepared for the non-academic demands made upon him. We believe that the process involved is not so much a lack of exposure to middle-class ideas and ideals as it is a subtle but active socialization during the preschool years into a pupil role which differs from the role assumed by the middle-class child and expected by the school.

In a paper at the AERA meetings in Chicago last winter,

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we presented an explanatory model for the inability of many lower-class children to successfully execute the role-demands made by the current educational system: mothers' attitudes toward education and toward their role within the educational system provide a model for young children; in their everyday interaction with their pre-schoolers mothers convey their attitudes and beliefs about social institutions; they define for their children the role a child is expected to play within such an institution as the public school.* This role includes expectations and learned responses which structure the child's interaction with his teacher, with the tasks and materials of the classroom, with the rules of the institution, and with his classmates/peers. Most generally, the role adopted by the child can be an active, assertive one, whereby he embraces the educational process and becomes attached to its components and symbols, or it can be passive and compliant, with the child feeling alienated and a stranger in a strange surrounding.

Our major concern in the Cognitive Environments Project has been to specify and understand maternal behavior as it influences, guides, and shapes the child's cognitive behaviors,

*Social class differences in maternal attitudes toward the school and the consequences for cognitive development in the young child. Roberta Meyer Bear, Robert D. Hess & Virginia C. Shipman, AERA, Chicago, 19 February, 1955

his attitude toward learning, and his conception of the role of pupil. In the earlier paper, we reported social class differences on a measure of maternal orientations toward education and the public school system; we found that poor attitudes toward the schools, specifically a feeling of inadequacy in dealing with the authority of the institution, was significantly related to the child's poor task-performance and to disruptive behavior during a testing session.

PROCEDURE

The present study reports mothers' responses to two simple tasks which assess their attitudes toward the present educational system and their description of the mother's role within the school system. The subjects were participants in the Cognitive Environments of Urban Preschool Children Project, 163 Negro non-working mothers of 4-year-old children, from four different social status levels: 40 upper-middle, parents having college education and fathers in professional, executive, or managerial positions; 42 upper-lower, parents having some high school and fathers skilled blue-collar workers; 40 lower-lower, parents having no more than tenth-grade education, the majority having attended only elementary schools, and fathers semi-skilled or unskilled workers; 41 lower-lower,

* Some subjects were not administered one of the tasks, thus there is a discrepancy in N for the four groups.

with fathers absent from the home and families supported by public assistance funds.

Mothers were asked: "If you had the power to do as you wished about education in the public schools, what would you do?" Responses were categorized as:

a) standard suggestions calling for improved curriculum, physical and administrative changes such as more classrooms and smaller classes, better discipline of pupils, and better-prepared teachers;

b) improvements concerned with the school as a social-political institution, such as integration, more and better parent-teacher interaction and improved school-community relations;

c) vague, general responses such as "prevent dropouts," and statements of non-concern or "don't know" responses.

The second task required mothers to tell what was happening in a photograph of a mother and a teacher seated in a classroom. This semi-projective measure was scored in three areas:

1) Initiator of the meeting, categorized according to whether the mother was called in by the school; mother had requested the meeting; this was a non-problem visit such as a registration conference or friendly chat; or a "don't know" or lack of specification in the response.

2) Purpose of the meeting, categorized according to whether there was a stated problem, described as academic or behavioral in nature, or both; an indication that this was not a problem-oriented visit; or a vague statement to the effect that a problem existed, but without specifying the nature of the problem.

3) Relationship between mother and teacher: descriptions ranged from a statement that the two were working as equals and cooperating for the child's benefit through mother having come to an authority, to friction either resolvable or left unresolved; in addition, some responses were vague or did not touch upon the relationship.

Both tasks were given during a home interview. Responses were recorded and transcripts later scored by two independent judges according to the above categories. Inter-rater reliabilities were above .90 and all differences were discussed and resolved prior to analysis.

RESULTS

Because some respondents mentioned suggestions for the schools in more than one scoring category, the data were scored for presence of a response in each of the three categories. Tables I through III show the use of each category by each of the four social class groups. Chi-square* is significant

*Quinn McNemar, Psychological Statistics, New York: Wiley, 1962, Chapter 13.

at less than .01 for each matrix: lower-class mothers gave more commonplace and vague responses; middle-class mothers gave as many social-political responses as the three lower-class groups combined.

Chi-square was also computed for each of the three response-areas for the Mother-Teacher picture, as shown in Tables IV through VI.

The majority of mothers in the four groups did not specify the initiator, and there is little difference among the four groups in mentioning mother vs. school or teacher as the initiator. More middle-class mothers described the meeting as a regularly-scheduled conference or friendly chat; but overall social class differences were not statistically significant.

Differences in the purpose ascribed to the meeting are significant in the direction of greater specification of a problem by the three lower-class groups, middle-class mothers' responses being vague and generalized or specifying that no problem existed.

Finally, a significant social class difference is found in the type of relationship ascribed to the two women: both more equality and less friction are described by middle-class mothers, and more passivity on the mother's part is described by lower-class respondents.

DISCUSSION

The response of lower-class mothers to the question of improving the schools suggests a more commonplace definition of school than that held by middle-class mothers who may view it as an instrument of potential social change and political force, as well as an academic system with physical and administrative properties. Lower-class mothers also manifest less ability or inclination to be involved in and concerned with such problems. A not-uncommon type of response is this one, given by a mother in the public assistance group: "I don't know what I'd do, because I'm not current on anything," or the statement by a lower-lower class mother who has three children in school, that she knows "nuthin' about the schools," or the public assistance mother who "can't say because she had the opportunity to finish and feels that schools are now no worse than then and then they were OK."

This failure to take effective action in dealing with a hypothetical situation involving the schools is seen again in the large proportion of lower-class respondents who describe the mother in the photograph as having gone to the teacher for a solution to a problem. This tendency contrasts sharply with the middle-class mothers' description of the two women as persons equally concerned with, responsible for, and qualified to discuss the child and to deal with his problems.

Finally, many more lower-class mothers mention unresolved friction between the two; such responses often suggest a "chip on the shoulder" defensiveness on the mother's part.

To illuminate this distinction, let us look at a middle-class mother's description of the photograph, which assumes that mother and teacher share equal concern and responsibility for the child:

"Well, it seems to me there is something very serious they are talking about and I imagine it's a child. Perhaps he has some problem learning some particular thing or work in school, maybe it's math, because it seems to be a big problem nowadays. Maybe the child has a problem with shyness. And she's there explaining to the teacher her child, trying to make her understand why he is as he is, his shyness and that he has always had a problem with math. She's interested and she would like to know what she could do to help and if there is anything that she can do to help him, she is assuring the teacher that she has her cooperation in anything that she can do. She looks as if she is really trying to explain..., you know, Johnny does this, and he's like that because of such and such."

To the interviewer's question about the outcome, the mother continues:

"As a result the teacher is able to see that the mother is concerned and perhaps from what the mother has told the teacher, she has a better insight into the problem and she can understand better and she probably will work just a little harder to help this child. Sometimes it helps to know that the parents are behind the teacher."

Contrast this with a response from a mother in the public assistance group, who tends to view the mother's position as

a defensive and passive partner in the mother-teacher relationship:

"The mother seems to be explaining something to the teacher. The teacher's listening."

To the same question about the outcome, this mother continues:

"Well, she seems like she might be a little upset, rather angry. So at this point it might be the child's behavior that has her in this situation. But I think she might go along with the teacher, whatever the situation is."

CONCLUSION

In our research group, urban working-class mothers, as contrasted with middle-class mothers, show lack of ability to cope and/or little concern with problem-oriented questions about the schools. The lower-class mother defines her role in interaction with the school system as a passive, ineffective, even defensive one. These differences between middle-class and lower-class respondents reflect the mothers' own experiences in their relationship with the schools. Lower-class (and especially lower-class urban Negro) families experience genuine powerlessness and frustration in dealing with major social institutions. The resulting attitudes, expressed in everyday dealings with the preschool child, describe parental expectations for his behavior as a pupil, and this role-definition is expected to interfere with the child's successful adaptation to the demands of the school environment.

Educators are concerned today with the special problems presented by the lower-class urban child. We contend that the

solution to these problems goes beyond academic enrichment and even beyond socio-cultural enrichment. The problem of the lower-class urban child merely reflects the problem of the lower-class urban family and the lower-class urban society. A successful intervention program must do more than fill in the gaps in the child's cognitive and social experience; it must accomplish an active resocialization involving not only the child but the entire family and environment within which his attitudes and expectations are formed. Such resocialization is necessary before the lower-class urban child can be expected to deal effectively with key social institutions such as the public schools.

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A. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE SCHOOLS

TABLE I - STANDARD SUGGESTIONS

(curriculum, physical, administrative, discipline, teacher preparation)

	M	UL	LL	LL(A)	
yes	28	28	15	18	89
no	12	14	24	23	73
	40	42	39	41	162

$\chi^2 = 12.293 \quad .017p > .001$

TABLE II - SOCIAL-POLITICAL SUGGESTIONS

(integration, teacher-parent and school-community relations)

	M	UL	LL	LL(A)	
yes	14	5	7	2	28
no	26	37	32	39	134
	40	42	39	41	162

$\chi^2 = 14.057 \quad .017p > .001$

TABLE III - VAGUE, "DK" RESPONSES

	M	UL	LL	LL(A)	
yes	5	11	19	21	56
no	35	31	20	20	106
	40	42	39	41	162

$\chi^2 = 18.394 \quad p < .001$

B. MOTHER-TEACHER PICTURE

TABLE IV - INITIATOR

	M	UL	LL	LL(A)	
School	7	8	13	7	35
Mother	8	12	13	11	44
None	5	0	2	2	9
DK, NR	19	18	10	18	65
	39	38	38	38	153

$\chi^2 = 12.951 \quad p > .10$

TABLE V - PURPOSE

	M	UL	LL	LL(A)	
Problem Specified	13	26	21	23	83
No Problem	13	2	9	10	34
Vague	13	10	8	5	36
	39	38	38	38	153

$\chi^2 = 15.797 \quad .02 > p > .01$

TABLE VI - MOTHER-TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

	M	UL	LL	LL(A)	
Equals/Cooperating	23	16	8	12	59
Mother Passive	4	9	15	9	37
Friction	9	11	9	12	41
Vague, NR	3	2	6	5	16
	39	38	38	38	153

$\chi^2 = 17.940 \quad .05 > p > .02$