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ABSTRACT

There should be little doubt in the mind of the educational researcher that many of the past research efforts in the black community have resulted in an enormous disservice to the children residing there. However, the future for educational research in the black community has the potential to be infinitely better and ultimately more beneficial. To provide a more definitive perspective on the current dilemma it is necessary to consider some of the major problems confronting us as white researchers seeking answers to many of the continually pervasive educational issues. First and paramount among the present problems for the white researcher is the desperate need for a deep understanding of an appreciation for the cultural make-up of black children and the black community in which they reside. A second issue is the reaction of the black child to the white researcher. The third major concern which must be considered by the white researcher is the use of research instruments and the interpretation and use of research results. Flaws in previous research do not warrant a cessation or a moratorium on research by the white researcher in the black community. Through teaming with black researchers, our efforts can be productive. The caution flag must be rung up, or must be rung up, however, so that continued comparisons are not made between white and black children.
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THE WHITE RESEARCHER
IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY:
A DILEMMA

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THE WHITE RESEARCHER IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY:

A WHITE PERSPECTIVE

Anton T. Lahnston

There should be little doubt in the mind of the educational researcher that many of the past research efforts in the Black community have resulted in an enormous disservice to the children residing there. Unfortunately, numerous examples can be found where the research that has been conducted in the Black community was either misdirected, mismanaged, poorly conceived, erroneously interpreted, or some combination of these factors. However, many of the past mistakes are the result of an honest zeal to perform scholarly research that should aid our understanding of the abilities, achievements, attitudes, perceptions and values of Black children. On the other hand, many of the past research efforts have been prompted by a "missionary" attitude of research do-gooders that is certainly open to severe criticism. The past does appear bleak. However, the future for educational research in the Black community has the potential to be infinitely better and ultimately more beneficial. As educators we have argued for many years that the schools should exemplify the notion that the various groups in our society need to live and work together. The

research community in education must adopt this argument and continue to work toward that end.

To provide a more definitive perspective on the current dilemma it is necessary to consider some of the major problems confronting us as white researchers seeking answers to many of the continually pervasive educational issues.

First, and paramount among the present problems for the white researcher is the desperate need for a deep understanding of and an appreciation for the cultural make-up of Black children and the Black community in which they reside. The literature today abounds with evidence of the cultural dissimilarities between racial groups and in this case specifically between the white and Black cultures. It makes very little sense to admit to the notion that cross-cultural understanding can not exist and therefore the white researcher, due to his lack of cultural understanding, must cease to work within the Black community. The situation in the past appears to be obvious, i.e. the white researcher has attempted to be scholarly in the methods of research but out of tune culturally in relation to the population involved. Consequently, the Black community has a right to expect and certainly demand that the white researcher manifest his knowledge and appreciation for the cultural inheritance of the Black child. Certainly this expectation is not unrealistic and it could provide vital understandings that would potentially go far beyond the domain of the research itself.

The second issue of vital concern is the reaction of the Black child to the white researcher. From the experience of researchers, the Black child many times reacts differentially to the white researcher when

compared to the Black researcher. Naturally, this is a most important issue and yet a very sticky one to resolve. In research situations where the white researcher visually confronts the Black child an obvious experimental bias can enter into both the data collection and the ultimate results that are forwarded. To resolve this problem it should be possible to incorporate both Black and white researchers into experimental situations. This seems to be a viable alternative for several reasons. First, the teaming approach should provide an opportunity for greater cross-cultural understanding between members of the team themselves. This is always a desirable goal. Secondly, the effects of the experimenter (in this case Black or white) provide continual information about the very nature of the effects of the experimenter on research data being collected. This should make it incumbent upon the white researcher to more accurately interpret the results of the research efforts.

What is being advocated here is a modified support for the white researcher in the Black community. Specifically when the white research person goes into the Black community, it must only be within the context or the arrangement of a partnership with a Black researcher or researchers. I am convinced that the white researcher alone, without the direct partnership of a Black researcher has no place in the Black community.

The third major concern which must be considered by the white researcher is the use of research instruments and the interpretation and use of research results. There is considerable confusion at this time as to what constitutes "culture-fair" instruments or testing situations. In this vein, the inadequacy of many previous research endeavors results from the fact that we have not had adequate cultural understanding, which

was the first argument, and furthermore, we have not encompassed proper partnerships from within the Black community to conduct the research. If the idea of greater cultural understanding, which I have suggested previously, is subscribed to, then the total design for the research should have a good foundation with the necessary safeguards built into it. Also, if the teaming approach suggested here is adhered to, then additional integrity is provided for reducing and hopefully eliminating the dangers of the improper use of instruments and hopefully the improper interpretation of data. Certainly, if this issue is not resolved then the white community is indeed doing a gross injustice to the Black child and in a larger sense to all children.

Of course, the question must be asked, "Why should be the white researcher go into the Black community?" To me, the suggestion of a moratorium means that investigations by both Black and white researchers would cease for a definite period of time to be resumed at some future date--maybe. The dangers in this position are obvious. Research by its very nature is a continual, on-going process. If research in a particular area stops then the greatest designs of educational researchers will have an enormously difficult task if and when the research efforts resume. Even more important, because of the ongoing nature of educational research in relation to the dynamic, constantly changing nature of the schools and other educational settings involved, a research gap or void would be immediately created. I believe we could never catch up. Ultimately therefore, the moratorium would do a disservice to Black children rather than to serve some major purpose. We do indeed need to continue our quest for knowledge with all children. To exclude some children would be an educational travesty.

There is a more important aspect of the previous question, "Why should the white researcher go into the Black community?" This is the issue of the researcher being white. Consider for a moment the profound needs for educational research in the communities that are non-Black, specifically, the white community. The assertion can easily be made that there is sufficient demand for the white researcher's inquiry in just the white community. Although this is true and some people would end the discussion at this point, frankly it is begging the issue. Why? Because cross-cultural understanding should be a major product or by-product at least, of research involving one or more racial or ethnic groups. This applies to both the researchers involved, the educators reading the research, and hopefully the children directly. If we bring a halt to cross-cultural research efforts then a viable alternative in expanding our knowledge will be terminated. This will only tend to promote or widen previous schisms and perhaps it would even create new ones between the racial groups. The emphasis therefore should be on good educational research which can indeed promote not only greater understanding in relation to education, but also greater understanding of one another. And obviously, the two are inseparably linked together.

The thrust of our future research efforts must certainly be debated. However, several issues seem to be clear. Flaws in previous research do not warrant a cessation or a moratorium on research by the white researcher in the Black community. Through teaming, our efforts can be productive; culturally, socially, and educationally. The caution flag must be rung up, however, so that continued comparisons are not made

between white children and Black children. We must continually seek answers to many issues concerning the minds of all children. And this can be done without necessarily dichotomizing, as we have in the past, the racial or ethnic background of the various children involved.

It is incumbent upon all of us as educators to resolve this dilemma in the best interests of everyone involved. Hopefully, research can continue in the Black community with new directions and constructive results.