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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the factors that impede or assist in the socialization process of African-American children in day care centers and in elementary schools. It is maintained that most child care and school environments support the hegemonic dominance of European-American culture and values, while discouraging the culture and values of African-American children. The majority of the paper addresses the biculturation process and key cultural components that should be part of any program striving to serve African-American children. The "Seven Black Family Dynamics," developed by Wade Nobles, are utilized to provide a structure for analyzing cultural components that may be taken for granted when children are socialized in a traditional family context, but which must be identified, represented, and respected by those providing child care and education to African-American children. These dynamics include an Elastic Family, Multiple Parenting, Strong Kinship Bonds, Role Flexibility, Work Orientation, Child Centeredness, and a Strong Religious Orientation. These seven dynamics need to be encouraged and made a part of every African-American child's socialization process. (MDM)

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AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN**

Renatta M. Cooper

Pacific Oaks Faculty

Presented at National Black Child Development Institute Conference,
St. Louis, Missouri, 1991

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THE IMPACT OF CHILD CARE ON THE SOCIALIZATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN

Renatta M. Cooper
For Alex

To socialize - 1) to adjust to or make fit for cooperative group living. 2) to adapt or make conform to the common needs of a social group. 3) to subject to governmental control; nationalize.

The socialization of its youngest members is probably the most sustaining function of any culture. It is through this process that the child forms his identity, his attachment to a group - a people, a sense of historical continuity. It is through this process that a child begins to assert his place within the cultural, social and national framework in which he exists.

In a study by Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu on academic performance by African American high school students, a disturbing trend was noticed: "Many black students perform poorly in high school because of a shared sense that academic success is a sellout to the white world." (Mydans, 1990) This conclusion has been met with a certain amount of debate within academic circles - and yet I urge you to consider the context in which such an attitude might exist, and such a choice might be made.

African American children are educated in a context which can be alien, ignorant, or adversarial to the cultural context in which they exist. This is as true for middle class children in progressive schools which pride themselves on their ethnic mix (highlighted, of course, on the appropriate holidays) as it is for children in inner city schools, where teachers receive incentive

pay not for their skills, but for their willingness to work in "those schools." This lack of context was powerfully depicted in the classroom scene from John Singleton's film, **Boyz N The Hood**, in which a young European-American teacher talks to a class of visibly uninterested black and brown children about the "Thanksgiving Myth". The children's faces and body language and their art, which adorns the room, speak to the irrelevance of the exercise - but what are her options? Does she know the truth of the myth she is teaching them? Does she know their history? Would she be allowed to teach it if she knew?

African American children spend their days in environments where there are few role models - people with real power who seem "like them". This is an identity issue that simmers through childhood, but asserts itself in a powerful way in adolescence, when the search for identity and group fidelity becomes the most important psychological task.

In this presentation I felt it necessary to begin with adolescence, where the disturbing results of this socialization process are all too evident, in order for us to focus on the danger and challenge that exist within our current child care system. According to **Black Americans : A Statistical Sourcebook**, in 1985, 55.8% of all black children between the ages of 3 and 5 were enrolled in some form of preprimary school. Of those children whose mothers had 4 or more years of college and were employed full

time, 63.2% were enrolled in some type of preprimary school. These are staggering figures, and they do not count or reflect the number of children in unlicensed, informal or "nonschool" arrangements. The numbers and the connections to maternal employment make it clear that we are looking at children who are enrolled in school for child care.

It is estimated that by 1995 there will be 14.6 million children younger than six whose mothers will be in the work force, if current population trends continue. Of these, 21.2% are black children. We are looking at close to 2 million children involved in some kind of school-based child care, public or private.

With the tremendous need, and the lack of foresight that our nation has displayed in the move from home-based child rearing to an institutional model, it is no surprise that the emphasis has been on the creation of programs. Availability and affordability, while important, do not address the socialization practices that take place in child care centers. In fact, I find that most Americans are reluctant to look on child care as a form of institutionalized child rearing. "I'm still his mother," is a phrase commonly heard, and yes, of course you are the child's parents - but how much time do you actually spend with your child?

The average child in a child care environment spends 10 hours a day there, with 2 or 3 of those hours set aside for sleeping or

resting. That would mean between 7 to 8 hours of that child's active, alert time is spent in school. This average child's day might look like this:

- 7:00 - Leave home for school, allow 30 minutes for travel and drop off.
- 7:30 - 5:00 - Child is in child care / school
- 5:00 - 5:30 - Child is picked up. Allow 30 minutes for pick up and travel time home.
- 5:30 - 8:30 - Child is home interacting with parents and siblings.
- 8:30 - Some type of bedtime routine, and the child goes to sleep.

In a typical day like this, I count 4 hours of available interactive time at home - and we all know the reality of what is going on during this time. Meals are being prepared, trips are being made to the store, phone calls are being made and other family members are touching base with each other. I am not at all certain that this is prime "active interactive" time for most children. In fact, this is a pretty difficult transitional time for most families.

Weekends are more family centered - but just as busy. The work of family maintenance, once performed by in-home mothers, is now crammed into two days filled with additional spiritual and social functions. Socialization is of course occurring during these times; children are learning who they are, and what their

role is within their family. They learn how to behave, what behavior is rewarded or punished, what their family believes in, what they honor, and what sustains them. But what about those 50 hours spent in child care / school? What is being learned there? How does this learning complement or confuse what is being taught at home?

In 1983 at NBCDI, I heard Wade Nobles describe culture this way: "Culture is what gives a people a general strategy for living and patterns for interplay with reality. Disrupt the culture, you disrupt their (the people's) reality." This type of disruption has been perpetuated on African American culture. Too many educators and policy makers view our culture as a deviation from the dominant cultural modality. As a result, what is perpetuated in this country is not a model that is culturally democratic, one that would "incorporate the child's language, culture, values, modes of communication, motivation, relating to others and preferred learning style into the materials, policies and practices of the schools." (Ramirez and Castanada, 1977)

The result is a model that supports the hegemonic dominance of European American culture and values, a world view which typically views differences as deficits. It is a model that downplays the impact of oppression on cultural groups that are oppressed, and marginalizes the experiences of individuals struggling with oppression. The focus remains on the individual, while ignoring

the context in which the individual must operate. It is a model where representatives of the dominant culture do not challenge their entitlement or privilege, and where the biculturation process of the African American (or other group) is unacknowledged and unassisted. It is a model where success or failure is placed on the individual or his family, and serious challenge is not given to the model utilized by the educational system, despite the knowledge that a disproportionate number of male children of color are failing under that system. These numbers are so significant that they point to structural and cultural barriers and away from questions of individual ability.

The result is a model where our children, particularly our male children, are at risk of such proportions that it has been labeled a "conspiracy" by Jawanza Kunjufu and others. Conspiracy is a strong word, but when I saw an article in the L.A. Times this spring heralding Progress in State Dropout Rate that included these numbers: "In the Los Angeles district, which is more than 86% minorities, the drop-out rates for the class of '90 were 52% for blacks, 43.6% for Latinos...", I became convinced that conspiracy is just the right word. Who is it that "we" are trying to educate? Who is it that really counts?

School-tolerated / encouraged behaviors are those most frequently exhibited by girls. This assessment has been made in countless psychological and ethnographic studies of educational

environments. Schools are female-dominated environments from child care centers through high school. Can earlier entry into this system facilitate the child's adaptation to the system or hasten his early departure? The outcome will not be positive without a systematic plan - a plan that examines the biculturation process of the African American child, and enhances the process.

The remainder of this paper will address both the biculturation process and key cultural components that should be part of any program striving to serve African American children. A review of our historical strengths and modern challenges will enable us to move from naive to critical transitivity, that is, to direct the change rather than simply go through the changes as a people. This is a task that calls to all of us, because these children who fail are our children. As an oppressed people, living within a system of institutional white supremacy and Euro-centric hegemony, we cannot afford to bask in the glory of individual or family achievements - not while, as James Comer states, "A disproportionate number of black families experience above average economic and social stress." This is a time when we must go home - and look back to those strengths which have historically sustained us as a people, and for the sake of our children see to it that they are integrated into any institution or system that presumes to serve our children.

**Black Family Dynamics and Their Application
in the Socialization and Education of
African American Children**

| Dynamic * | Manifestation ** | Culturally Relevant Response ** | Insensitive Response ** | Application ** |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| Elastic Family Multiple Parenting Strong Kinship Bonds | Behavior monitored by other children. Siblings, "play cousins" etc. | Recognize the behavior and the positive function it serves. | Behavior may be viewed as intrusive or aggressive. | Direct behavior in positive ways. " Did she ask for help?" " Would you like to visit our room for snack ? " |
| Role Flexibility | Sex role development is different for AA children. Behavior based, not based on occupation. | Recognize the cultural historical basis, and current need for the behavior. | Behavior may be viewed as aggressive or having an attitude. | Work with the model. Encourage strong behaviors without validating inappropriate ones. |
| Work Orientation | Societal racism necessitates superior academic preparation for positive educational achievement . | Dilemma requires a balanced solution, considering developmental abilities and not reliant on lower order thinking skills. | Early academics are inappropriate. | Programs must challenge and engage children on cognitive and creative levels. Programs must be balanced. Play must be a valued part of the curriculum. |

* **Black Family Dynamics** by Wade Nobles Phd. Institute for Advanced Study, Black Family Life and Culture (1983)

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The **Black Family Dynamics** developed by Wade Nobles (1983) provides a structure for analyzing cultural components that may be taken for granted when children are socialized in a traditional family context. When socialization occurs beyond the immediate control of the group, these dynamics must be identified, represented and respected by those providing care, education and socialization to African American children. What follow are definitions of the seven dynamics and my interpretations (see chart) of how they can be presented in a early childhood educational curriculum in ways that are culturally relevant.

Elastic Family - The family unit will expand and diminish according to need. This flexibility has enabled blacks to re-establish family ties through many migrations. **Multiple Parenting** - No matter where you were, as a child you had the love and protection of those around you. It also reinforced that you were responsible at all times for your conduct. **Strong Kinship Bonds** - Our way is to include others into our family structure. The western way is to exclude. I have grouped these dynamics because they would all contribute to the manifestation of a child's behavior being monitored by a member of his or her family group, who may or may not technically be related to the child. This could mean anyone from an older sibling to a "play cousin".

Culturally Relevant practice would work with both the relationship and the behavior, understanding the role that it plays

within a cultural context, and keeping it directed in a positive manner.

"Malik is so lucky to have you looking after him. Next time will you please ask him if he needs help?" or "Would you help Malik tell his Mom that he had a great day today?"

Culturally Insensitive practice tries to first legitimize the relationship: "Are you really related?" The behavior is viewed stereotypical, as bossy if the child is a girl and aggressive if the child is a boy. Attempts are made to extinguish a sense of responsibility that may be reinforced at home.

Role Flexibility - A premeditated move was made to keep the black male out of the work force. It became necessary for both parents to work, to bring in what was necessary for survival. Both parents were responsible for protecting the children. The necessities of survival for an oppressed people do not allow for fixed sex roles. Some aspects of this dynamic are actually reinforced by developmentally appropriate practice; a program where non-sexist play is encouraged may reinforce what children are experiencing at home.

However, sex role development is different for African American families. From infancy male children are referred to as man, little man, and young man. Our male children are encouraged to walk like, talk like, and emulate the overt masculine behavior of the men in their worlds. This is in direct response to the emasculation of African American men, and very different from the

patriarchy that exists in European American culture. Culturally this behavior is valued and should be supported by the child's school.

In the same vein, being encouraged to act out every emotion is not appropriate for African American children. Years ago I became the director of a school-aged child care program. The program had two large plastic trash cans that the boys (and it was always the boys) were encouraged to kick and knock around when they got angry. This was the first policy that I changed; in fact, I changed it the first day, the first few times I saw the behavior in action. Instead we talked about their anger, while setting limits on their behavior. "I know that you are angry, but you can't a, b, or c because of it. Because if you do you will get into trouble, which will make you more angry." Simple logic.

The director who had set this policy was a European American man who wanted children to learn to express their emotions. He failed to recognize that this application was not cross-cultural. Living under oppressive conditions mandates learning to handle oppression in ways that don't lessen one's self esteem. I am not speaking of passive acceptance, but of helping children develop critical thinking skills that will enable them to analyze unfair situations and direct their energy in areas where they have some control and feel safe. African American children, and adults for that matter, live "in the belly of the beast that is institutional

racism," to quote Professor Ra of Cal State Long Beach. Recognizing this condition helps one develop control.

Part of this control is control over one's emotions. Our children must learn where to express feelings and who it is safe to let know your feelings. Schools that place a great deal of emphasis on sharing feelings must respect that all children are not comfortable doing this. Their reluctance to engage should be respected, not viewed as a challenge. It is possible to validate an emotion without seeing it on display: "I know you must be very angry, and it's okay if you don't want to talk about it. Let me know if you change your mind."

Work Orientation - There is a strong work ethic among black Americans. The ethic is strongest when you are working for yourself and members of your own group, weakest when you are working for an oppressor, or in an oppressive situation. The reality is that academic achievement is a proven path to success for our people. Historically, African American parents have reminded us that we need to work hard and be twice as good to be successful. This reality is still germane. Programs that don't give children early academic preparation don't give them the opportunity for early achievement. This academic preparation must be done in a way that is both developmentally appropriate and contributes to developing the thinking potential of the child.

Focused group activities are considered developmentally

inappropriate when they are adult directed and children are not free to select another activity. Yet some of this type of activity can be appropriate for 4 and 5 year olds (I do not advise the introduction of any form of structured academic work before the age of 4) if the children are alert, mentally engaged and allowed to interact verbally with the teacher. It is also important that there is a balance of activities, in which the child is allowed to work in small self-selected activities most of the time.

"Workbooks, ditto sheets, flash cards, and other materials dominate the curriculum. (Bredekamp 1987, p. 54)

"Reading / writing instruction stresses isolated skill development such as singing the alphabet song, coloring within predefined lines or being instructed in correct formation of letters on a printed line." (Bredekamp, p. 55)

These activities, the core of many early academic preparation curricula, are considered developmentally inappropriate by NAEYC. They do, however, help to teach and reinforce skills that children need to know. No preschool, pre-K or child care curriculum should be solely based on these components. I cringe when I hear the directors of pre-schools or child care centers "brag" that their children don't play. Play is the child's work. For learning to be meaningful there must be a foundation of concrete experiences on which to build abstract concepts. Rote memorization is a lower order thinking skill. It performs well, but lower order thinking cannot compete against higher order thought. Richard Paul of the Center for Critical Thinking observes that "This trend toward fundamentalism then trains our children to do lower order thinking.

It may result in good grades, but it limits the thinking potential of the learner." (1990, p. 45)

An imbalance of self/adult initiated activities will lead to resistance. Expose children to everything, but don't force. Force also contributes to resistance, which is contrary to your goal.

As Eunice Hale has noted, "African American children are more kinesthetic than European American children. African American homes, on the average, contain more stimulus, sound, and higher activity levels." (1986, p.78) The sitting still that is required in most educational environments - eventually - could be introduced to younger children in a playful way, to help them develop the skill without the stress.

"Let's see if you can sit and listen longer than you did the last time."

"I want you all to remember to save your questions until the end of the story. Make sure you save them!"

"Did you forget that we're saving our questions right now?"

Effective pedagogy can challenge children to develop skills that they will need later on. Tell children why it is important that they learn these skills. In my son's kindergarten, which was developmental, occasionally they would do structured activities and call it "playing first grade". It is also important that individual abilities be kept in mind, and each child's level of achievement be praised.

Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire / describes education this way: "Education is an act of love and thus an act of courage... By giving the student formulas to receive and store we have not offered him the means for authentic thought." (1990, p.38)

Engage and entice the children; challenge them to attempt that which is difficult. Break complex process down into simple components so that children can be successful. Be aware of the developmental range that exists in any given class. Ensure that free play and exploration are critical parts of your curriculum. Children should have ample opportunities for art, and art should never be adult-directed. Creativity is destroyed in children who are instructed what to make and how it should look when you've finished. Parents must be educated to the importance of nurturing creativity in their children, and understand that this may come at the expense of adult oriented art projects and crafts. Teachers should address this educational task instead of giving in to parental pressures on these issues.

There should be a balance between nurturing and teaching relationships with children. Nurturing is part of the socialization and care-giving process. It is different from traditional teacher child relationships. Relational learners need to feel that the teacher likes them and believes that they are capable of performing well in school. A child may think that a nonrelational teacher doesn't like him, and this may contribute to

acting-out behavior:

There are two more dynamics in Nobles' scheme, which I have not included in the chart.* One is **Child Centeredness** - children are the center of our culture. Everyone wants more accomplishments for their children. This assures the survival of the race. As parents, educators, however you define yourself, it is **our** collective responsibility to ensure the survival of our children. The other is **Strong religious orientation** - As a people we have strong spiritual system whether is connected with organized religion or not. Organized religion plays a major role in the African American community, which became clear to me one Sunday morning when I was driving down Normandie Boulevard, in the heart of South Los Angeles. In a span of 3 blocks I counted twelve churches, an average of three per block. I noticed because of the crowds in the parking lots - crowds of African-American families going to church on Sunday morning. This is not far from where Dan Quayle stood and questioned the integrity of the African American family, because we all know who he as attacking when he attacked **Murphy Brown**.

*The chart includes only those dynamics which are translated into children's classroom behavior, with appropriate and inappropriate adult responses, Child Centeredness and spiritual orientation are adult issues.

These were not huge ornate cathedrals or tabernacles, but small bastions of faith - pillars of support in the African American Community. This is not a demographic situation unique to Los Angeles; it exists in any city where we can be found in numbers. By harnessing this faith, we will continue to strengthen the situation of our children.

In closing, let me say that the what works best for our children may not be found in the progressive educational models that work for European American children. Nor is it likely to be found in any traditional academic situation unless we insist that it be there. It won't be found anywhere where there are not African Americans in positions of leadership and authority to educate and guide our children. We must consider models that work effectively for our children and support and defend them.

As I said in the beginning, child care is socialization, nothing more and nothing less. It is how culture is transmitted and regenerated. No culture that hopes to survive can leave this function to those not in or of the group. We must work to ensure that the values that made it possible for each one of us to be here today are maintained and passed on for future generations.

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