

The Detrimental Impact of Teacher Bias: Lessons Learned from the Standpoint of African American Mothers

By Camille Wilson Cooper

It was like being a Black boy was something that was not good, and you have to feel good within yourself to succeed . . . And you'd be surprised how you trust your kid with a teacher, and the teacher's with him more than you are. They're with him the majority of the day, and for someone to just really lower your child's self-esteem was horrible.

—A former public school mother with a son now enrolled in private school

In this era, where policymakers demand “accountability,” education reforms increasingly require teachers to demonstrate subject matter competency, implement curriculum standards, and prepare students to excel on standardized tests (CCTC, 2001; Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000). Most practitioners and scholars agree that a teacher’s ability to help students succeed is linked to his or her own knowledge and use of pedagogical practices that promote student achievement. Yet, teacher effectiveness is further connected to educators’ deep-seated beliefs about their students’ intelligence, character, and potential (Bartolome, 1994; Cochran-Smith, 1997; Fueyo & Bechtol, 1999; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Thus, helping students meet standards and pass tests are just two

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of many things teachers must accomplish in preparing their students to adequately function in a competitive, multicultural society. Teachers' willingness to reject deficit thinking and stereotypes, while embracing a belief that students from all backgrounds can learn and flourish is also essential (Bartolome, 1994; Solorzano, 1997; Valencia, 1997).

The growth of culturally diverse student populations in public schools over the past decade has coincided with decreased student achievement rates and a disturbing decline in the amount of qualified and certified teachers who wish to teach in urban schools (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Fueyo & Bechtol, 1999). Consequently, students who already lack important socioeconomic resources are more likely to receive inadequate instruction. These children are also susceptible to being harmed by teachers who hold strong biases against them, given their racial, class, gender, and family backgrounds (Cooper, 2001).

In this article, I discuss African American mothers' beliefs about the negative impact that teacher bias can have on students' self-esteem and academic achievement. I draw from in-depth interview data to highlight mothers' opinions of, and experiences with, teachers they characterize as "unqualified" and "uncaring." The data stem from a qualitative study of African American mothers' educational views, experiences, and choices. The data shed light on how these mothers perceive teachers as powerful figures who can undermine their efforts to provide their children with equal, educational opportunity and a positive sense of racial identity.

The mothers' sentiments accord with growing bodies of research and critical theory that stress the influential nature of teacher ideology (Bartolome & Trueba, 2000; Cochran-Smith, 1997; Darder, 1991; Fueyo & Bechtol, 1999; Solorzano, 1997; Valencia, 1997.) In addition, the narratives of African American mothers challenge prior research that questions the caring nature of low-income and working class parents of color and doubts the extent to which they value education (Moynihan, 1965; Ogbu, 1990; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997).

Data resoundingly show that the mothers whose standpoint is discussed in this article deeply care about their children's schooling. In fact, their shared conviction that educational attainment is vital to their children's success contributes to their efforts to find competent and caring teachers — even if it requires them to exit the traditional public school system, despite their limited socioeconomic means.

Consequently, I draw from feminist theory to underscore the importance of teacher education programs training social justice educators to be knowledgeable about the positionality of the students and families they serve. I stress the need for teachers to recognize schools as sites of political resistance, which they must work to improve. This requires that teacher education programs offer ongoing opportunities for their students to examine their beliefs, acknowledge and overcome their biases, and understand the relationship between teacher ideology and practice. It also warrants that educators and school reformers capitalize upon parents' strengths and heed their input to better educate children.

The Power of Teacher Ideology

Much of the teaching that occurs in America's public schools reflects the values, culture, and norms of educators who believe that they are preparing students to function in a meritocratic society — a society that will fairly reward hard work and the demonstration of valuable educational knowledge with socioeconomic mobility (Darder, 1991; Lareau, 1989; Oakes & Lipton, 1999; Valencia, 1997). Teachers who view society as meritocratic are apt to believe that schools are as well. They are not inclined to identify schools as vehicles of social reproduction that limit the ability of students who come from families with few socioeconomic resources to gain the knowledge, skills, and cultural capital needed to advance at the rate of their privileged peers (Bartolome, 1994; Lareau, 1989; Solorzano, 1997). Furthermore, these teachers' meritocratic beliefs can easily prompt them to attribute the disproportionate low-achievement rates of students of color to cultural deficiencies (Fueyo & Bechtol, 1999; Solorzano, 1997; Valencia, 1997).

Valencia (1997) and Solorzano (1997) explain that teachers' deficit thinking causes them to make biased judgements of students' intelligence, ability, and behavior that are rooted in racial, cultural, and class-based stereotypes. Darder (1991) further asserts that teachers' peer socialization and educational and race-based experiences influence their ideologies. Furthermore, a variety of scholars point to the denigrating impact that teacher bias can have on students, given that a teacher's ideology is manifested through his or her instructional strategies and treatment of students (Cochran-Smith, 1997; Darder, 1991; Delpit, 1995; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). This directly impacts students' self-esteem and their motivation and inclination to excel (Cochran-Smith, 1997; Oakes & Lipton, 1999).

The growing diversity found within public schools necessitates that teachers of diverse learners accept responsibility for the academic success of all students (Fueyo & Bechtol, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Doing this requires that educators be culturally sensitive and confident in their own ability to adequately teach diverse learners. Thus, teachers must not only enhance their pedagogical skills, but also build nurturing relationships with their students and better understand their racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds (Bartolome & Trueba, 2000; Cochran-Smith, 1997; Fueyo & Bechtol, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Teacher education programs must play a key role in enabling educators to meet this challenge, since students of color, and those with limited English skills, are likely to have White, middle class teachers who have had very different life experiences (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000). These educators may fail to recognize the learning potential and cultural resources of diverse learners (Cochran-Smith, 1997; Darder, 1991; Fueyo & Bechtol, 1999; Moll, 1998). Fueyo & Bechtol (1999) and Darder (1991) further acknowledge that teachers of color, like their White peers, can also lapse into deficit thinking and display bias towards students.

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Hence, they must take the same steps to examine their ideology and maintain democratic and equitable classrooms.

The Call for Teacher “Clarity” and Resistance

Students are in great need of teachers who, in addition to displaying subject matter competence and sound instructional practice, hold three fundamental beliefs about their roles as educators. These include the belief that: teaching is a political rather than neutral act, teachers must work to achieve “political and ideological” clarity (Bartolome & Trueba, 2000, p. 279), and, teachers must resist forces that promote educational and social inequality within schools.

Teachers’ judgement and treatment of students has tremendous influence on their educational and emotional development, and also impacts how students are labeled, and thus able to access educational resources (Cochran-Smith, 1997; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Since teachers’ roles in the classroom bestow them a great deal of power, a variety of scholars consider the act of teaching a political endeavor in which educators heed or silence students’ voices and affirm or denigrate their life experiences (Bartolome & Trueba, 2000; Cochran-Smith, 1997; Darder, 1991; Delpit, 1995; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). In fact, Delpit (1995, p. 24) contends that a “culture or power” functions within classrooms, whereby teachers expect students to follow “codes” or implicit rules that embody the values, culture, and norms of middle class Whites. She explains that teachers, in an attempt to “determine another’s intelligence or ‘normalcy,’” often conclude that students are deviant when they violate these rules, which is a very powerful act.

Educators who do not recognize the power they possess are likely to abuse it or fail to maximize it for their students’ benefit. Bartolome & Trueba (2000) suggest that before teachers can understand the power of their actions, they must first realize that their teaching practices are inextricably linked to their ideology. They define ideology as a “framework of thought that is used by members of society to justify or rationalize an existing social (dis)order” (p. 279). They call on teachers to develop “political and ideological clarity,” which requires them to “achieve a deepening awareness of the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape their lives and their capacity to transform them” (p. 278).

Consequently, Bartolome and Trueba (2000, p. 280) suggest that teachers be critically self-reflective and “‘name’ their ideology for what it is.” This means overcoming their biases. Likewise, Fueyo and Bechtol (1999) discern that the first step in ensuring “instructional effectiveness in a multicultural society,” is “rejecting deficit paradigms.” Darder (1991) further recommends that teachers engage in critical dialogue with people who are culturally different to learn about other cultures and communities. She, and others, underscore the need for teachers to see themselves as learners (Darder, 1991; Cochran-Smith, 1997).

It is imperative that teachers’ efforts to acknowledge their power and gain

political and ideological clarity coincide with them working to improve their educational practices and fight inequity. Indeed, Cochran-Smith (1997, pp. 28-29) states that, "Teaching diverse learners is a matter of the knowledge, interpretive frameworks, and political commitments . . ." Thus, teachers must commit to being resisters of the status quo. This partly encompasses valuing students' assets, motivating them to learn, teaching them to be critical thinkers, maintaining high expectations of all students, and using culturally relevant pedagogy (Bartolome, 1994; Cochran-Smith, 1997; Fueyo & Bechtol, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Social justice educators are teachers who strive to implement the practices described above. They espouse ideologies that counter those of teachers who believe in educational meritocracy and hold deficit views about students' ability to learn. Social justice educators, instead, recognize that society is inequitable. Hence, they expect students of color, along with those who are poor, disabled, female, or have limited English skills, to encounter racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination as part of their efforts to become productive and prosperous citizens (Bartolome, 1994; Darder, 1991; Oakes & Lipton, 1999).

Social justice educators not only acknowledge that inequity is prevalent in both society and schools, they also commit to seeking and enacting change that challenges discrimination and benefits their students (Oakes & Lipton, 1999). They further work to offer their students the skills and critical insight needed to be competent learners who are able to recognize injustice and succeed nevertheless (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Oakes & Lipton, 1999).

Research does not suggest that social justice educators abound in any particular type of school that large student populations can access, regardless of the school's geographic location, demographic make-up, or public or private status. Students attending traditional, public schools in urban and/or poor communities, who could gain the most from the empowering goals of social justice educators, are not likely to do so given that schools in their communities have acute shortages of teachers with even the most basic qualifications and credentials (Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000).

Darling-Hammond and Post (2000, p. 128) explain that inner city schools have the highest rates of underqualified teachers. They state:

Recent studies have found that the difference in teacher quality may represent the single most important school resource differential between minority and white children and that it explains at least as much of the variance in student achievement as socioeconomic status.

The scholars further assert that less competent teachers are more likely to blame students for their low achievement rates rather than hold themselves accountable for offering effective instruction. Hence, I argue that these teachers are not apt to feel a significant sense of efficacy or power, nor push themselves to achieve political and ideological clarity, and work to make schools fair and effective.

In all, research show that teacher education institutions face a dual challenge:

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that of increasing the pool of well-qualified and certified teachers, and preparing those teachers to pursue social justice goals. The voices of African American mothers, who offer first hand accounts of the harm teachers can do when they lack such aims, show that these are formidable but necessary tasks.

Methodology:

Understanding Mothers' School Choice Standpoint

Feminist standpoint theory urges researchers who study women to place women's lives at the center of analysis in order to gain a better understanding of them and how sociopolitical structures impact their lives. Thus, researchers explore women's standpoint, which is the collective insight gained from their shared ideology and experiences. Researchers then move outward from their participants' standpoint to critique the sociopolitical structures in which they interact (Collins, 1990, 1998; Harding, 1991; Smith, 1987).

Below, I discuss data from my study of the "school choice standpoint" of 14 low-income and working class, African American mothers (Cooper, 2001). All of the mothers had children who attended traditional, public elementary schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). I examined how the mothers constructed their school choices, engaged in the school choice process, and believed that educators, policies and other sociopolitical contexts helped or hindered them in educational marketplace. I also explored how the women connected their views to their racial, class, and gender backgrounds. This accords with the notion that race, class, and gender are interlocking constructs that inform Black women's meaning making, which is a fundamental principle of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990).

Sampling Process

I used purposive sampling methods to enlist the 14 mothers. I made a small, prioritized list of schools in Los Angeles where I thought I could find parents who met my sampling criteria given the schools' location, demographic make-up, and public or private status. I accessed my participants from four schools altogether, including a traditional public school, charter school, Afrocentric private academy, and Catholic school.

Under ideal circumstances, I would have included mothers of private school students who received public vouchers since so much of the school choice debate revolves around public voucher initiatives. There are, however, no public voucher programs in California. Yet, one of the mothers in this study, whose child attends the Afrocentric academy, has financial assistance from a private voucher association.

My sampling criteria stem from salient issues discussed in school choice literature and my conceptual framework. I limited my sample to African American mothers from working class and low-income backgrounds since many school choice policies target parents of color with limited financial means. My sample

further includes “othermothers,” a term Collins (1990, p. 119) uses to refer to Black women who provide maternal guidance and support to children that are not their own. In this study, othermothers comprise grandmothers who are legal guardians of their grandchildren.

Examining the educational views, choices, and experiences of mothers was warranted since mothers are often their children’s primary school choicemaker and their perspectives are underrepresented in educational research (David, West, & Ribbens, 1994; Ogawa & Dutton, 1994). Moreover, I targeted mothers of middle school students since entry into middle school is an important transitional period that concerns most parents. It is also a time where parents send their children to their neighborhood public school or actively seek an alternative school when their children complete their primary schooling.

Once I gained permission to visit the four school sites, I distributed fliers to parents before and after school, called parents, mailed letters homes, and attended parent meetings to enlist research participants. I explained the time and practical demands that participating in the study involved and confirmed whether prospective participants met my sampling criteria.

I finalized my sample and then conducted two rounds of in-depth interviews with each mother. In accordance with feminist methodological standards, most interviews were open-ended and conversational (Bloom, 1998). I, however, used protocols that listed interview topics and examples of questions pertaining to those topics as guides. I ventured from the protocols when necessary. After each interview I wrote reflective memos in which I described my personal thoughts and reactions to the mothers and the information they shared. I also reviewed their interview tapes and/or transcripts to prepare revised, individualized protocols for the second round of interviews.¹ The interviews reaped approximately 60 hours of data.

Mother’s Positionality and Other Background Factors

I analyzed the mothers’ standpoint based on the perspectives they shared. Yet, I also focused on the women’s unique insights, which emerged given their individual positionality. Positionality refers to how one is socially located (or positioned) in relation to others, given background factors such as race, class, and gender. It relates to the extent to which a person is privileged, resourceful, powerful, and thus able to navigate and succeed within the dominant, social structure (Banks, 1996; Cooper, 2001; Maher & Tetreault, 1993; Martin & VanGunten, 2002). The group of women I studied had a keen awareness of their positionality and strong opinions about how it impacted their experiences within local schools and the educational marketplace.

I found that they were all frustrated and disillusioned with the current status of the urban, public education system. This inspired 10 of them to withdraw their children from traditional public, elementary schools and enroll them in charter, Catholic, or Afrocentric private schools at the middle school level.

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The majority of the women engaged in a hands-on school choicemaking process. Nine of the 14 mothers said they visited their children's middle school before choosing to enroll their kids there, and several visited multiple schools before making a final choice. The remaining five, most of who were private school mothers, relied on word-of-mouth information and referrals. The traditional public school and charter school mothers stressed that they encountered formidable obstacles in their choicemaking process, which included a complex web of district choice policies, lack of transportation and information about their choice options, and interactions with district officials who acted as school admission gatekeepers. The private school mothers' key challenge was finding the money to cover their child's tuition each month.

All of the women discussed the pervasive inequities they found within their local, urban school district, which they felt diminished the quality of their children's education. The mothers pointed to factors like overcrowding, dilapidated facilities, and the lack of materials and books. Data from the women, however, revealed that their children's lack of access to competent and caring public school teachers was the issue that frustrated, angered, and concerned them the most. Hence, it was a key impetus behind many choosing to exit traditional public schools.

The group of mothers had distinct personalities and personal circumstances that impacted their experiences in public and private schools and their opinions of school choice reform. Their educational values and goals, however, were remarkably similar, as was their belief that their positionality as African American women with limited financial means influenced how public school educators responded to them and their children.

The mothers range in age from early 30s to 80. They differ in education background, occupation, and the number of children they were raising, or have raised. Four of the women were their grandchildren's guardians. Three mothers had children with special physical, mental, and emotional needs, and 12 were single mothers.

The Value of Education

All of the women were adamant in their belief about the importance of education. Indeed, they viewed the difference between being well educated or not, as the difference between their children having bright or dismal futures. The women stressed that securing quality schooling for their children was part of their attempt to ensure that their kids would gain the knowledge and credentials needed to succeed in society. Though they discussed educational inequity and the obstacles they have faced within the education system, the mothers agreed that educational attainment would offer their children greater life options, the ability to compete well against more privileged peers, financial independence, and tools to defend themselves against racism. Thus, they suggested that the quest for educational attainment involves very high stakes. A mother who transferred her daughter from public to Catholic school stated:

I think that the (public) educational system overall needs to understand that the kids need to be educated, that's the bottom line. They need to get educated by whatever means necessary . . . And without that education they are not going to be successful — that just breeds illiterates and homeless, and dysfunctionals.

In light of the priority the that the mothers placed on educational attainment, the inequity they detected in their children's public schools disturbed and frightened them. They expressed disbelief in regard to the ability of school officials to tolerate the vast differences in financial resources found among urban schools and those that are suburban or predominantly White. On an individual level, most mothers concurred that their positionality, given their race, class, and/or single parent status, prompted many public school educators to devalue the importance of serving them and their children well. They, in fact, referred to educators having the same type of deficit thinking that some scholars associate with teachers who exude bias towards poor and culturally different students (Darder, 1991; Delpit, 1995; Solorzano, 1997; Valencia, 1997).

The mothers emphasized that they strive to combat educators' notions that they, in light of their positionality, do not care about their children's schooling. They referred to educators failing to understand that their hectic work schedules, struggles to earn a living, and the responsibility of being their children's sole provider hinders their ability to be involved in their kids' education in the same way that more resourceful and/or married parents may be. Several mothers further asserted that educators' misperceptions fuel their bias. A charter school mother stated:

If you struggle, you're a low-income family, you have to work, and you don't have the job with the flexible hours and stuff, it's so hard to be involved to make a difference, or to make it seem like you care. Because I think that's the thing, because you're not there people think you don't care. It's hard! I think you have to, have to, have to make the time to be visible! Because I really do think it makes a difference. Teachers tell me, 'Oh you're such a good mother.' I don't know what I'm doing that makes people think that I'm really such a good mother, but it's because they see me. If I had another job where I wouldn't get paid (for family leave) I don't know — you wouldn't see me — I have to feed my child. So I think it's so important, if you can at all, to let the people see you. Let them know you care about your child's education because I think it makes a difference in how they treat your kid, I really do.

I found that the mothers assumed a defensive stance in the educational marketplace due to their perceptions that they and their families face so many odds. As educational advocates, the mothers asserted that they not only try to show teachers that they care about their children, but they also hold the teachers accountable for their work and interactions. The women repeatedly referred to their efforts to be their children's "voice," to have a "visible presence" in schools, and "keep close tabs" on educators.

Likewise, most of the women indicated that schools are sites of political and

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cultural resistance where they must fight to protect their children from inequity and discrimination. Ten of the 14 women suggested that their choice to struggle for equal educational opportunity stemmed from a notion that educational attainment is a “weapon” African American children need in order to thrive in an unjust world. This quest, which includes mothers’ school choicemaking, comprises what they agreed was part of their maternal responsibilities or, what I suggest is “motherwork” (Cooper, 2001, p.49; Collins, 1994, p.56).²

Mothers’ Critique of Unqualified and Uncaring Teachers

One of the most prominent findings from my study of African American mothers’ school choice standpoint is the extent to which the mothers asserted scathing remarks about public school teachers. All of the mothers criticized public school teachers in general. Nine of the 14 mothers recalled their personal experiences with teachers they said harmed their child in at least one major way, ranging from inducing emotional trauma to exerting physical abuse. The mothers perceive teachers as assuming a powerful role in their children’s lives. Their data highlight the impact of teacher bias and the need for social justice educators in public schools.

Data from the women’s interviews portray many inner-city, public school teachers as being unqualified to teach well, uncommitted to the teaching profession, uncaring, and biased towards the students they are paid to educate and serve. At the same time, most of the mothers referred to dealing with caring and good teachers who have positively impacted their children at some point, or, they acknowledged that there are good teachers in the public school system. Moreover, despite the mothers’ unflattering descriptions of public school teachers, most also agreed that offering them increased pay and respect could attract better educators to the traditional public school system. Nevertheless, I found the women’s negative impressions of public school teachers to be most salient.

Question of Commitment

Almost all the 14 mothers recounted their personal experiences with urban school teachers who lacked proper certification and failed to challenge their kids. The mothers repeatedly referred to educators as being uncommitted to teaching in the inner city and just teaching to collect a paycheck while waiting for a more attractive job opportunity to come along. A grandmother at a traditional public school said of the teachers:

They’re not in education for the right reasons. A lot of them are in education because it’s an easy job to get, or it’s a temporary thing to do while they’re pursuing their education. Many people come into education with the idea of staying for a little while until they get to where they want to get to. And I think that that’s unfortunate for the students.

The mothers’ comments reflect the fact that officials in their school district

disproportionately assign less experienced educators, including those with emergency credentials, to traditional public schools located in the inner city. In fact, another mother from the traditional middle school stated, “We get second rate teachers, we don’t get the best.” As a result, the mothers said this hinders their children’s ability to become academically competitive. They further criticized teachers for not doing enough to “reach” students, or attempting to “stifle them.”

Mothers’ perceptions that many urban public school teachers are uncommitted to the teaching profession, and/or uncommitted to teaching inner-city students contributed to them asserting that these same teachers do not “care” about their children. In addition, 12 of the 14 women maintained that public school teachers often stigmatize and discriminate against inner-city school children based on their biased beliefs and assumptions. They said the teachers’ negative views often relate to the students’ racial and class backgrounds, or the fact that many come from families headed by single mothers or alternative caregivers.

A mother from the Afrocentric Academy reflected on her experience with traditional public school teachers and explained:

It was like I had always heard people say that they discriminated against Black boys or whatever, and I was like, ‘*Nah*,’ until I had a son that started going through the process of working with the teachers. And it was like, ‘You’re putting negative stuff into my son’s head before he even realizes what’s going on.’ I was really concerned about that, especially when they realized he was coming from a single parent household.

Furthermore, a Catholic school mother, discussed her thoughts about how public school teachers respond to the inner-city students in her South Central LA community. She stated, “I don’t want to say they give up, but they just don’t give it their all.” Moreover, the three mothers who have children with disabilities indicated that they have a heightened concern about teachers who strike them as uncaring and intolerant since their children require special attention and accommodation.

Almost all of the mothers stressed the power teachers have to promote or undermine their children’s self-esteem. The mothers also perceive teachers as having the power to complement or thwart their efforts to nurture their children’s positive racial identities. Indeed, the mothers’ negative experiences with uncaring and biased teachers cut at the core of their fundamental parenting values and goals. They also represent a deep violation of the mothers’ “trust,” since they expect teachers to advance rather than impede their children’s educational and emotional development.

Ethic of Care

Several mothers suggested that urban public school teachers can be quick to assume their students are deviant. An Afrocentric academy mother asserted that public school teachers often avoid taking the time to uncover the potential of

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students who they think misbehave or are not high achievers. She suggested that such educators, “show more interest in them (students), not just dismissing problem kids and putting them on Ridilin and things like that.”

Many mothers explicitly linked their charges of public school teachers not caring about urban students to racial bias. For instance, a mother contended:

A lot of teachers are from very different areas and bring their own issues into a classroom setting. Well if you know you're not particularly crazy about African American children, than why would you accept a job in a predominantly African American area? Just so you can get your feet wet to climb up and go wherever you want to go? No, it doesn't work like that!

Data, overall, show that mothers perceive that public school teachers stereotype, dismiss, or penalize their children, and other African American students, because they associate deficiencies with being Black and lacking economic resources. This significantly contributes to the women's overall critique of the public school system and their desire to pursue alternative schooling options.

Despite the mothers' severe criticisms of public school teachers, many of them expressed sympathy for the hard work that teaching in the inner-city entails. Several also recommended that district officials provide increased salaries and support to teachers to make their job easier. For instance, a Catholic school mother explained:

I think most people who are teachers are really trying to be good teachers. They don't have a lot to work with, . . . I believe that it takes a special kind of person to take on that job, to even want to do that . . . I think it's hard for them, so I think that the administrators would have to provide more incentives to keep them interested and keep them motivated. And allow them what they need in order to give it back to the kids.

The mothers perceive teachers as being responsible for implementing quality curriculum and effective, instructional methods. In total, their comments reveal that they feel good teachers are responsive to children and parents, committed to educating their students well, and qualified to do so. The women also value teachers who are willing to show some sensitivity to the challenges or special needs that impact their students' lives. They, as one mother stated, expect educators to be “very positive and very compassionate.” Several further agreed that they are impressed by teachers who are organized, enthusiastic about their jobs, and interested in helping to “uplift” students.

Most of the women's sentiments are summarized by a conclusion asserted by a traditional public school grandmother who stated that if, as a teacher, “you don't have the love and concern for children, then you don't do a good job. And that's with any school, private (or) LAUSD.”

Learning from the Mothers' Standpoint

The mothers' stories contain data that speak to the power of teachers' ideology. This affirms the notion that teaching is a political, rather than a neutral act, even when teachers are unaware of their own influence. The mothers' standpoint convey their disdain for public school teachers' deficit thinking. Their data show that they see teacher bias manifested in teacher practice, whether it is in the form of unfair judgement and discipline, watered down curriculum, or blatant neglect.

Despite educators' and researchers' inclination to question whether underprivileged, parents of color care about education, the mothers' data reveal that they regard educational attainment as essential to their children's success. The women maintain a strong ethic of care and their narratives raise doubts about how much urban public school teachers strive to educate inner city students well. The women's standpoint does not negate the efforts of many qualified and devoted teachers who work tirelessly to be effective educators. Their views, however, underscore the danger of teacher education institutions failing to prepare and place enough competent and caring teachers in urban classrooms.

There is a dire need for cadres of social justice educators who acknowledge the power they have as teachers and honor parents' trust. These educators should work to gain political and ideological clarity. This would include understanding the positionality of their students and parents. As one mother suggested, teachers should "learn where the kids are coming from, what their struggles are before they come to school, and even after school." Likewise, teachers should focus on students' assets and work with parents to help them be effective partners in their children's education, in light of the personal hardships they face.

Given the tie between teacher ideology and practice, educators who build relationships with families and overcome their biases will likely progress in implementing a "humanizing pedagogy" (Bartolome, 1994, p.181). Doing this would require that teachers resist the oppressive forces that perpetuate educational inequity and provide sound instructional leadership to all students.

The low income and working class African American mothers discussed in this article do not perceive schools as meritocratic institutions. Data, instead, show that they view schools as sites of resistance where they try to prevent resource and pedagogical inequity from destroying their children's ability to attain the education they need to succeed in a competitive world. Social justice educators who are dedicated to opposing the structural inequality found in schools will work toward this same goal.

Implications for Teacher Education

The present need for qualified, social justice educators oddly coincides with an ongoing debate over the necessity and effectiveness of university-based teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ballou & Podgursky, 2000). Indeed,

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some policymakers are calling for less rigorous teacher certification requirements at a time when research and conventional wisdom indicate that we expect public school teachers to fulfill more complicated roles in their students' lives than ever before (Hardy, 2001). Data from low-income and working class African American mothers suggest that teacher education programs must be instrumental in training the types of teachers that can educate and empower culturally diverse students.

Teacher educators and teachers themselves must acknowledge the power of ideology. Teacher educators should place more attention on gauging teachers' fundamental beliefs about students' learning potential in addition to assessing their instructional practice. Furthermore, teacher education programs should encourage their students to engage in what Cochran-Smith (1997, p. 36) calls "inquiry as stance," which includes being critically reflective. It is important that teachers engage in critique so they can improve their practice and recognize the significance of becoming change agents (Bartolome & Trueba, 2000; Cochran-Smith, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Teacher education programs should integrate activities and courses that promote teachers becoming more culturally sensitive and self-aware. They should also hold student teachers accountable for learning about the sociopolitical issues that affect the communities they serve. Program-sponsored, mentoring programs and peer networks could provide new teachers valuable guidance and support to assist them in these endeavors. Moreover, urban public schools would benefit from district policies that assign the most accomplished teachers and administrators to the schools that need them most, even for temporary periods of time so they can mentor others.

Policymakers, teacher educators, and teachers will become complicit in reproducing inequality if they fail to demonstrate the courage needed to implement innovative and meaningful reforms. Making the types of improvements noted above is essential to offering children equal educational opportunity and restoring parents' confidence in urban, public schools.

Footnotes

¹ I also spent some time at each of the four schools reviewing school documents and speaking with teachers and staff members. I attended and observed parent events, such as back-to-school nights, when possible. I spent additional time getting a feel for the communities and neighborhoods surrounding each of the schools. I believe all of these tactics offered me contextual insight into the participants' standpoint.

² Motherwork is a form of cultural resistance historically used by women of color. It includes practices to empower and protect children of color in a racist society, including nurturing a sense of positive racial identity and protecting their physical and emotional well-being. For a deeper discussion of the concept, see Collins, 1994.

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