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... can we bring about an improvement in educational outcomes for Black children without recognizing their culture?

# African Heritage Theory and Afro-American Cognitive Styles

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## I ask you my children

What did you learn today  
did anyone tell you how to meet tomorrow  
did anyone tell you why there are people  
who don't know you ...

did anyone seem to know who you were  
did anyone know that you have the blood of Africa  
in your veins  
or did they pretend to be blind to your color and thereby  
deny its value.

What did you learn ...

did anyone explain the nature of freedom  
did anyone explain the nature of racism ...

did anyone explain the nature of love  
did anyone know anything about those things  
did anyone know anything  
What did you learn today?

— Ronald Coleman

The traditional American educational system has not been effective in educating Black children. Consequently, there is an achievement gap between Black and White children that places Black children at risk in the schools of this nation. A recent report by the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE, 1984) tells us that nearly 28 percent of Afro-American high school students drop out before graduation. This figure approaches 50 percent in some large cities. For those who are in school, average achievement on standardized tests falls two or more grade levels below the average of Euro-American students. Even though Blacks are only slightly more than 10 percent of the population, they make up 40 percent of the educable mentally retarded population (p.18).

NABSE (1984) further points out that the difficulties

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Black children are experiencing in elementary and secondary schools are reflected in an erosion of their achievement in higher education.

African-Americans represent about 13 percent of the college age population (18-24 years). But African-American students represented only 9 percent of the associate degrees, 6 percent of the bachelor's, 6 percent of the master's, 3 percent of the Doctorates, and 4 percent of the professional degrees in 1980. African-American participation in graduate and professional education remains exceptionally low and, in recent years, the situation has actually deteriorated (p. 20).

This report continues. One-third of Black students are enrolled in community colleges and are in programs that do not necessarily give credits toward a baccalaureate degree. We also find that though about 75 percent of White high school seniors go on to college, only about 20 percent of Black seniors do so. Furthermore, only about 12 percent of the Black students who enter higher education complete college and only 4 percent enter and complete a graduate school.

Desegregation has been a focal point for educational reform that is designed to benefit Black children. However, in most urban areas, there is a declining pool of White children to integrate with inner-city Black children. Therefore, the central issue now is: How can we create schools that educate Black children effectively? Early childhood is the time to begin examining learning and care-giving environments.

A companion concern is can we bring about an improvement in educational outcomes for Black children without recognizing their culture? In this author's opinion, the education of White children is relatively more successful than that of Black children because the schools were established for White children. As Hakim Rashid (1984) has stated: "Children from non-European lower socioeconomic status cultural groups are at a disadvantage in the schools because the American educational system has evolved out of a European philosophical, theoretical, and pedagogical context" (p.56).

W. E. B. DuBois (1903) described the Black person in America as having two warring souls. On one hand, Black people are the product of their African-American heritage and culture. On the other hand, they are shaped by the demands of Euro-American culture. Unfortunately, the Euro-American influence has always been emphasized to the exclusion of the African influence. Said another way, despite the pressures of 400 years in America to do so, African-Americans have not melted into the pot.

Rashid (1984) has pointed out that: "The cultural and biological history of African-Americans has resulted in an *essentially African* group of people who must function in *essentially European* schools. Failure to conceptualize Black children within their cultural context has created the expectation that they are really White children in blackface" (p. 59).

Social scientists engage in a type of chauvinistic ethnocentrism that perpetuates an image of normality when describing White children and an image of pathology when describing Black children. If "Johnny" can't read, educators suggest that there is an inappropriate match between his level of development and the curriculum or instructional strategies. But if "Willie" can't read, the appropriateness of instruction is generally not questioned. Rather, the explanations offered are that he is genetically inferior, or he is culturally deprived.

In order to bring about educational change, we must begin to conceptualize Black children within the context of their culture in early child-care settings. We must devise educational strategies that are appropriate for them. We must

create an interrelated learning environment where Afro-American culture in all of its diversity is integrated throughout the curriculum.

Accepting Black children within the context of their culture means acknowledging that they *have* a culture. This culture has roots in West Africa and has implications for the ways in which Black children learn and think.

### Consider The African Background

I have made the point elsewhere (Hale-Benson, 1986) that some scholars who have attempted to study the Black experience have identified inner-city ghettos as the laboratory for studying Black life. There are various other ways of conceptualizing Black culture. Amuzie Chimezie (1983) offers a useful review of theorists in this area. He believes the theorists can be broadly divided into two categories: "Affirmative theorists support the view that there is a distinctive Black culture even though they vary in the degree to which it can be traced to the African heritage. Negative theorists deny the existence of a distinctive Black culture. They attribute any differences between Blacks and Whites to differences in class position, degree of poverty, and attendant social pathologies" (p. 217).

This author ascribes to the African heritage theory. It views Afro-American culture as distinct from White Euro-American culture and views the vast majority of the distinguishing characteristics as explainable in terms of elements of African culture that Africans retained while slaves in America. This theory acknowledges that many of the cultural artifacts have been modified beyond easy recognition; however, a careful scientific investigation involving close comparison with African culture reveal as their roots in Afro-American culture (Chimezie, 1983).

The African heritage theory is based upon three main facts:

—First, many of the distinctive cultural elements involved are generally not characteristic of white American Euro-centric culture (e.g., the extended family and Brer Rabbit stories).

—Second, they are found among virtually all Afro-centric communities in the New World, especially in the Caribbean.

—Third, those elements still characterize African culture today, especially West Africa, from where most of the Africans were captured for enslavement. The widespread presence of these distinctive culture elements in the Afro-centric world (in Africa and diaspora) is one of the most persuasive arguments used by the proponents of the African-heritage theory of Black culture (e.g., Chimezie, 1983; Herskovits, 1958). Africanisms abound in Black culture in the United States. For example, Black dialect, including South Carolina Gullah, has been identified as originating with aspects of African languages retained by enslaved Africans. Other examples are Black folklore, aspects of Black childrearing, Black music, and religious expressions.

The African heritage perspective highlights the advisability of creating linkages with investigations by African scholars on the learning styles of children of Africa and of the African diaspora.

In Africa, I had an opportunity to talk with Dr. Romanus Ohuche of the University of Sierra Leone and other African psychologists who are applying the work of Jean Piaget and studying concept development among African children. These psychologists believe that Piagetian theory and the growing body of knowledge related to it, now provide a useful framework within which to understand empirical research and to apply research findings to curriculum design theory. One of the reasons they look favorably upon Piaget's

work is that the major aspects of his theory can be applied to all human societies and groups, and differences in performance can be accounted for without imputing inferiority or deficiency.

At a 1974 conference in Sierra Leone, West Africa, held by UNICEF to study the development of mathematical and scientific skills by African children, a group of African scholars outlined areas of Piaget's work that need further investigation to describe concept development among African children:

- the opportunities given for play and manipulative activities among children and the relationship of such activities to concept development;

- appropriate interview procedures used to ascertain the characteristics of African children's thinking;

- the extent of bilingualism and multilingualism on the development of concepts. (This was particularly interesting to me because most of the children I encountered in Africa spoke from three to seven languages.);

- in the context of environmental circumstances, to what extent various wasting diseases and deficiency diseases affect intellectual growth;

- against the different social and cultural backgrounds, the extent to which African cosmology influences the development of concepts. (African scholars have hypothesized that the rituals and magico-religious beliefs may affect the development of concepts in African children.);

- the games, riddles, and proverbs found among African groups and their effect on concept development;

- the concept of "intelligence" or "cleverness" as it is understood among African groups;

- parental attitudes toward schooling and the influence these exert upon concept development. (Available evidence suggests that parental attitudes seem to be more important than family incomes in determining the performance of children.);

- the development of relevant social concepts, such as kinship, chieftaincy, presidency, and the like;

- the precocity of African babies and the extent to which it is maintained over a period of time.

It is very appropriate to begin with a consideration of the African heritage and the historical origins of Blacks as an ethnic group in America in discussing the learning styles of Black children. Black Americans have a unique history in America, and it is not unrelated to the difficulties Black children are experiencing educationally. First of all, every other ethnic group that immigrated to America came seeking a better life. Africans were brought here forcibly and subjected to a cruel and brutal form of slavery that was legally instituted with the plan that it would continue forever. Even when slavery ended, oppression in various forms was continual for African-Americans.

African-Americans also suffered as an ethnic group because of their visibility and inability to "melt." Other ethnic groups could blend into the American mainstream after one generation. As pointed out by Havighurst (1976), certain ethnic groups—those of northern European heritage, European-American, Jewish, Asian—are more easily able to assimilate into the mainstream. Other groups, such as those of southern European descent, Spanish speaking, and African-Americans, are more at risk in moving into mainstream institutions such as the schools and the workplace.

Lieberman (1981) has pointed out that even though other non-White ethnic groups have suffered oppression in America, the measures and consequences were not as severe as those for Blacks. For example, when Americans became threatened by the number of Asian immigrants, immi-

gration laws were changed to exclude them and control their numbers. Likewise, Native Americans were relocated and restricted to reservations. Whereas the numbers of these non-Whites were restricted and controlled, Black immigration was forced, and a system of slavery was instituted with the assumption that it would exist indefinitely.

An explanation for the difficulties Black children experience in school may lie in the fact that they participate in a culture that is different from the culture of the school. Elsewhere (Hale-Benson, 1986), I delineate this culture and identify points of mismatch between Afro-American culture and Euro-American culture that may have educational consequences for Black children.

### **Bicultural Socialization**

A bicultural model was set forth by Charles Valentine (1971) in an attempt to develop the cultural difference perspective. He objected to the inference that minority group members were socialized in a totally distinct cultural context. He felt this would preclude functioning within the majority institutions in the society. To more correctly conceptualize this process, Valentine postulated a dual socialization model for minority groups' enculturation within their own cultural group and socialization within the larger society.

Diane De Anda (1984) notes, "although the bicultural model provides an overall conceptual framework, it offers little information regarding the specific mechanisms through which dual socialization occurs." She sought to explain the process of bicultural socialization and to account for variations among and within different ethnic groups in their degree of biculturalism and successful interactions with mainstream society (pp. 101-102).

De Anda lists six factors that can determine whether a member of an ethnic minority is likely to become bicultural:

1. The degree of overlap or commonality between the two cultures with regard to norms, values, beliefs, perceptions, and the like.
2. The availability of cultural translators, mediators, and models.
3. The amount and type (positive or negative) of corrective feedback provided by each culture regarding attempts to produce normative behaviors.
4. The conceptual style and problem-solving approach of the minority individual and their mesh with the prevalent or valued styles of the majority culture.
5. The individual's degree of bilingualism.
6. The degree of dissimilarity in physical appearance from the majority culture, such as skin color, facial features and so forth (p. 102).

De Anda suggests that the variations and interaction among these six factors can account for the extent to which an individual is bicultural.

### **Early Childhood Education As Cultural Transition**

Early childhood education can play an important role in closing the achievement gap between African-American and White children. One explanation for the difficulty Black children experience in school is the fact that they are required to master at least two cultures in order to achieve upward mobility in school and the workplace.

It is possible that African-American males may have to master three divergent cultures. I point out elsewhere (Hale-Benson, 1986) that Afro-American males have a culture that is distinct from White male culture and Black female culture. This culture is not recognized and may even be assaulted at school because it is not understood. Most elementary classes are taught by women, therefore, there is

a feminine orientation in the classroom.

Cornbleth and Korth (1980) studied teacher perceptions and teacher-student interaction in integrated classrooms. They rated White females as having the most desirable personal characteristics and the highest potential for achievement. There was a trend toward rating White females highest, and rating White males, Black females and Black males in descending order. The White females were highest on efficient, organized, reserved, industrious, and pleasant; they were lowest on outspoken and outgoing. Generally, Black males were mirror reflections of the White females—rating lowest on the former characteristics and highest on the latter. White males and Black females were between the two. These data suggest there is a cultural configuration in classrooms. The data also support the notion that in order to achieve, Black males must acquire behavioral characteristics that are incongruent with the culture they bring to school.

It is important to acknowledge this dual socialization required of Black children because early childhood education can play an important role in fostering biculturalism in African-American children, thereby reducing the conflict within the child that depletes energy and clouds perceptions.

However, the "intervention" strategies of the 1960s are passe. Recent research by Black scholars (Hale-Benson, 1986; Rashid, 1981) has rejected the notion that African-American children are culturally or cognitively deprived. They are seen as members of a culture endowed with specific modes of cognition.

Early childhood education needs to strive for cultural continuity—not intervention.

Rashid (1984) suggests that: "The preschool experience must therefore provide a dynamic blend of African-American culture and that culture which is reflected in the Euro-American educational setting . . . The African-American educational setting . . . The African-American child who only sees the Euro-American cultural tradition manifested in the preschool environment can only conclude that the absence of visual representation of his culture connotes his essential worthlessness" (p. 60).

Important questions to consider in seeking cultural continuity are:

1. What is a unified approach to creating an interrelated learning environment for Black children that achieves this cultural continuity?
2. How can an educational program be designed that moves Black children away from a poverty/remedial track and toward an academically oriented preschool experience?
3. How can Black children be connected to the future and acquire experiences with computers that are embedded in their learning styles?
4. How can the Black community achieve a holistic education for Black children in which they are educated about Afro-American culture and heritage in all of its diversity throughout the curriculum at the same time that they learn about other cultures?
5. How can standardized testing be de-mystified for Black parents so that they can facilitate their children's performance on such measures?
6. How can the lower academic performance of Black male children be improved? How can the overriding feminine orientation of early childhood classrooms be reduced and more tolerance of male culture and, specifically, Black male culture be introduced?
7. How can more information be provided to Black parents about how to provide a "road map to achievement" for

their children? The high motivation that Black parents provide for their children to achieve has been well documented by scholars. What seems to be missing is being able to identify the mechanisms for achievement and resolving stumbling blocks along the way.

8. How can parents and teachers assist Black children in coping with the world in which they live as well as changing the world around us?

9. How can the existing patterns in teaching children to handle aggression be improved so that aggression works for them instead of against them? How can parents and teachers teach social skills so that children learn non-violent techniques of interpersonal conflict resolution? How can social skills be taught in such a way that children are able to negotiate mainstream institutions as well as Afro-American culture?

There is a need to articulate a pedagogy that begins in early childhood that includes an interrelated learning environment drawn from African-American culture, teaching strategies embedded in African-American learning styles, and materials relevant to the African-American experience.

The schools, for cultural and educational reasons, need to accommodate instruction to the learning styles of Black children. Early child care settings need to build bridges between the culture Black children bring to school and the outcomes they must achieve in order to survive and become upwardly mobile in American society.

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