



June 1991

Parental Education Choice: Some African American Dilemmas

Diana Slaughter-Defoe

University of Pennsylvania, dianasd@gse.upenn.edu

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Slaughter-Defoe, D. (1991). Parental Education Choice: Some African American Dilemmas. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/65

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Publisher URL: <http://www.jstor.org/journals/00222984.html>

NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Diana Slaughter-Defoe was affiliated with Northwestern University. Currently March 2007, she is a faculty member of the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

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Abstract

The research literature on families and educational achievement as it addresses African American populations is uniquely characterized by attention to educational failure rather than educational success (Slaughter, Nakagawa, et al., 1990). This orientation originated over 40 years ago with the "culture-as-social-class" conceptual model, which attempts to explain the behavior of lower income African American children and families in encounters with traditional schools (e.g., Davis, 1948). Even the most progressive of contemporary models addressing families and schooling in relation to this population such as those of Ogbu (1974, 1988), Brice-Heath (1988), and Clark (1983) have been compelled to account for the educational failures of urban African American children.

Comments

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The Journal of Negro Education, Vol. 60, No. 3, Socialization Forces Affecting the Education of African American Youth in the 1990s. (Summer, 1991), pp. 354-360.

Stable URL:

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Parental Educational Choice: Some African American Dilemmas

Diana T. Slaughter-Defoe, *School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University*

INTRODUCTION

The research literature on families and educational achievement as it addresses African American populations is uniquely characterized by attention to educational failure rather than educational success (Slaughter, Nakagawa, et al., 1990). This orientation originated over 40 years ago with the "culture-as-social-class" conceptual model, which attempts to explain the behavior of lower income African American children and families in encounters with traditional schools (e.g., Davis, 1948). Even the most progressive of contemporary models addressing families and schooling in relation to this population such as those of Ogbu (1974, 1988), Brice-Heath (1988), and Clark (1983) have been compelled to account for the educational failures of urban African American children.

Until recently, however, with the emergence of concerns over the increasing numbers of drug-addicted babies in African American communities, there has been no reason to suspect that significant numbers of African American children are born with inherent intellectual deficits. In fact, existing evidence supports the superiority in sensorimotor intelligence of African American children compared to their non-Black peers (Freedman & DeBoer, 1979). There is also ample scientific evidence that African American children are educable, regardless of the educational philosophy or racial composition of the schools they attend; yet, indicators across the course of children's educational lives reveal that parental choice of schools and parental involvement in the educational process are crucial components of effective schooling for African American children.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND SCHOOL SUCCESS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

We know that African American children at the preschool level, particularly lower income African American children, benefit from quality child care which includes programs for language stimulation and efforts to expand upon and enrich children's natural efforts to explore and make sense of their home and family environments. It has also been shown that parents can contribute positively to children's early intellectual and cognitive development. Moreover, parents and parent-surrogates (i.e.,

teachers who are informed about the processes of early childhood development and who are nurturant and caring toward young children) can be effectively trained and encouraged by culturally sensitive and informed advocates of children to promote the well-being of youngsters. The utility of many such programs can be indexed by (1) evaluating whether the children who participate in them remain on course or even surpass age norms on available measures of intellectual performance, and (2) observing participants' ability to control and regulate their intended behaviors in both children's groups and on demand from adult directives (e.g., Heber et al., 1972; Slaughter, 1983; Campbell, 1991).

We also know that children's continued growth and development are dependent upon continuity of care, particularly once they enter traditional schools (Slaughter, 1977; Slaughter, Washington, et al., 1988). An important dimension of that continuity is sustained parental involvement. Indeed, the best early childhood programs have a strong parental involvement component (Slaughter & Kuehne, 1988). The consensus, which is largely rooted in findings from intervention programs designed to support optimal development even under conditions of extreme familial impoverishment, is that from birth to age five years the family plays a particularly crucial role in African American children's cognitive development.

At the primary and elementary school levels, evidence supporting the beneficial role of parental involvement is less compelling, but it is slowly emerging. The school-based intervention program elaborated by Comer and his associates (1980) appears to be enjoying professional support although evaluations are currently in process. The Comer approach emphasizes parental empowerment and involvement at the decision-making level with the goal of enabling parents and students in lower income African American communities to make the best use of the educational opportunities available in their traditional, neighborhood public schools. It also stresses that parents and educators must share a belief in the positive educational mission of schools and cooperate in the implementation of their educational objectives.

Another strategy for educational reform at the elementary school level currently being implemented and evaluated emphasizes structural change and racial integration. Rosenbaum et al. (1987) are currently evaluating the impact of the Gautreaux Housing Program upon the educational aspirations and attainments of lower income African American mothers and children. The families in this voucher program volunteered to be relocated to predominantly White, middle-class suburbs surrounding Chicago (IL) to improve their housing situations. Preliminary reports from interviews with participating mothers indicate that better and safer housing apparently anchors these families. Over time, despite incidents of racial hostility and the initial stresses related to meeting higher school standards, the educational achievements of the children involved in the Gautreaux program have improved significantly.

The ongoing research of Comer, Rosenbaum, and their respective colleagues suggests that when social and educational policies designed to support the responsibilities of parents of school-aged African American children are enacted, the children benefit educationally. Their research

also suggests that these benefits accrue whether these children are enrolled in traditional, predominantly African American, neighborhood schools or in racially desegregated schools.

Similar evidence is also available for more privileged African American children from middle- and upper-income families. Slaughter and Schneider (1986) deliberately chose to conduct an ethnographic study in four private schools in Chicago with excellent academic reputations, sufficient numbers of Black children in grades five through eight, and a willingness to cooperate by permitting 40 days of classroom observation at each school over the 1983–84 academic school year. They found that the African American children in these schools typically performed at or above grade level in reading comprehension and mathematics computation on standardized achievement tests. The children also perceived themselves to be academically able, comparing themselves favorably with their White school peers and judging themselves to be, on average, more socially competent. The researchers' classroom observations supported the children's perspective. In the classroom these African American children devoted the majority of their time to academic work and took considerable pride in their accomplishments. Interviews with their parents clearly indicated that these families understood the educational mission and philosophy of the school their children attended and were prepared to intervene and support that mission at home and in the school whenever necessary. Further, interviews with administrators and teachers in each of the schools indicated that they expected parents to participate in ways consistent with each school's overall educational philosophy. Although parents in the Slaughter and Schneider study were found to be involved with their children's education, the nature and character of the involvement differed according to the educational values of the overall school community.

Similarly, African American children reportedly can and do have successful school experiences in predominantly Black private (Johnson, 1987; Lomotey & Brookins, 1988) and public schools (Sizemore et al., 1982). Clearly, in the private schools parents have selected a special educational environment for the children (Slaughter & Johnson, 1988), but parental educational choice has also been implicated in public school enrollment patterns (e.g., magnet schools, etc.) (for an overview of issues and references in this area see Schneider, 1988).

Importantly, there is also a consensus emerging in the research community that the family's influence upon children's achievements is largely independent of family structure. What appears to be considerably more important to child and adolescent school achievement in African American communities is the quality of interaction among and between family members and the children themselves (e.g., Clark, 1983; Scheinfeld, 1983; Slaughter, Nakagawa, et al., 1990). In survey studies of student achievement, maternal years of education and perceived maternal encouragement for school achievement may index these more subtle interactional processes (e.g., Wilson & Allen, 1987). Opinion leaders for both young males and females, in this regard, appear to be mothers, frequently in contexts in which their own educational backgrounds have been limited (Slaughter, Nakagawa, et al., 1990). In such situations,

however, at both the elementary and secondary school levels, parents may simply "prime" children for using teachers and other helpful adults to enable them to learn what they need to know to succeed in school.

Finally, retrospective accounts of successful African American adults born and reared in diverse social strata in African American communities provide evidence of the importance of parental support and encouragement for African American children to succeed educationally. For example, although the social backgrounds of Sara Lawrence Lightfoot and James Comer are quite different, both have clearly indicated in recent biographical accounts of their mothers the important role of the aspirations and examples set for them by these women with regard to their own educational attainments and subsequent career achievements (Comer, 1988; Lightfoot, 1988).

It is generally agreed that parental involvement is central to successful child achievement. Additional evidence confirms that regardless of the educational philosophy and school racial composition, so long as there is family commitment to the educational mission of the school in which their children are enrolled, African American children can be successful school achievers.

EDUCATIONAL DILEMMAS CONFRONTING AFRICAN AMERICAN PARENTS

Having established that African American children are educable in widely different settings and that an important factor in this educability is parental involvement in the educational process, let us now turn our attention to the ever more challenging dilemmas African American parents and communities must confront in the 21st century. In the future African American parents and communities must mobilize to achieve greater consensus on educational objectives and assure expansion of educational excellence to considerably more than the select few who benefit from the high-quality "demonstration" programs discussed earlier.

Upon review of a quarter century of developmental theory and research in relation to family and school achievement, at least three unresolved dilemmas can be seen as constituting barriers to African American mobilization around the issue of expanding quality education. First, African American parents and communities have yet to achieve significant consensus on the ultimate objectives of educational achievement. Opinions about these objectives are as diverse as the various configurations of African American families throughout the nation. Without greater consensus, no concerted, concentrated efforts can be launched toward educational mobilization.

In such a context, parental educational choice becomes a complex issue. Taken to its extremes, choice actually limits educational options for the majority of African Americans because it aggravates the long-standing absence of consensus within African American communities about educational goals for African American children. Paradoxically, choice in moderate dosages provides a clear path toward greater educational equity for greater numbers of inner-city African American children

than the more immediately prevailing situation wherein the overwhelming majority of them are involuntarily compelled to attend educationally substandard neighborhood public schools. Thus, determining how to maximize both parental choice and consensus in the mobilization efforts for educational excellence presents dilemmas for African American parents today.

Second, as scientific data increasingly highlight the importance of parental involvement at all stages of African American children's educational life course, changes within familial life styles (e.g., diminishing influence of extended family caregivers), structural changes within American society (e.g., exacerbated rates of unemployment and underemployment), and therefore, family stability, present additional dilemmas. These social changes further undermine much-needed parental support for children's achievement motivation and learning (Yeakey, 1988). Having long believed that traditional schools are primarily, and even solely, responsible for children's success in schools, African Americans must now confront what a significant segment of the scientific and professional child development community have known for some time: (1) supportive families and a secure, stable family life are the necessary, if not sufficient, conditions for school achievement; and (2) in the absence of alternative, effective community-based strategies for supporting and enhancing achievement development in individual children, precarious economic status within families virtually guarantees increments in school failure. Despite assuaging tales of dramatic exceptions to the contrary, the majority of children, including African American children, appear to need continuing parental involvement and support for successful school achievement. Thus, as we move into the 21st century yet another dilemma confronting African Americans is that the family, the primary institution for provision of this support, appears in far too many communities to be literally under societal siege.

Third, the burden of responsibility for solutions to African American community and family problems, insofar as these solutions affect children's academic and social development, is being increasingly placed upon laypersons and professionals within the African American community, without their being given corresponding access to the economic resources and political power necessary to implement solutions. Traditional judicial, legal, and governmental sources of support for African American communities appear to be evaporating. It is difficult to imagine how these individuals and groups will be able to marshal enough external societal support to make a significant difference in the lives and futures of African American children. Perhaps, then, the ultimate act of social responsibility in this unprecedented juncture in history is for African Americans—as parent surrogates for all African American children—to acknowledge our own limitations, including that of our particular expertise as parents, professionals, and researchers; and encourage greater collaboration between research and policy formation and implementation in the educational field.

CONCLUSION

This article has reported evidence indicating that African American children are educable and that African American parents play extremely

significant roles in this process. Dilemmas that constrain parental educational choice and involvement with children's learning were shown to create barriers to mobilization for expansion of high quality educational programs to greater segments of this population. What are the immediate implications for the future educability of African American children? In view of the dilemmas African American parents and communities now confront, I recommend rejection of three *myths* that have posed barriers to African American children's education and offer the following counter-arguments:

- (1) Economic and social supports external to the African American community and family are *not* necessary to enhance the educational possibilities for the majority of African American children.
- (2) Family and community support and involvement are *not* essential inclusions to the criteria for effective schooling of African American children.
- (3) Greater consensus on African American educational objectives is *not* necessary for the mobilization of community efforts to expand quality education to greater numbers of African American children.

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