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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the impact of family life on education and the response of low income families to schools and intervention programs. The influence of social and economic factors on childrearing practices and family relationships particularly among low income blacks, is discussed. Special attention is given to the role of parents as the primary educators of their children, and the potential impact of intervention programs on this role. It is pointed out that both active (Head Start, Follow Through) and passive (Competency Testing) intervention approaches assume that there is something wrong with the family and that this assumption compounds educational and family problems. In addition, evidence is presented to show that neither active nor passive intervention programs alter the caste-like barriers to social mobility for poor families. It is concluded that parenting programs and home based interventions often undermine the strengths and competencies of low income parents and that steps should be taken to provide remediation within the classrooms rather than in the homes. A model program for achieving such a goal is presented. (Author/EB)

EPAMINONDAS AND HIS AUNTIE:*

PARENTING AND FAMILY IMPACT

Carol B. Stack

Is EPAMINONDAS AND HIS AUNTIE a humorous tale told by kinsmen to entertain their children, or is it an example from the early 1900's of the belief that black parents are incapable of teaching basic skills to their own children and that black children cannot learn? The nature of the questions surrounding a tale that many of us grew up with brings us very quickly to a dialogue concerning the relationship between family structure and school achievement.

There is a renewed interest in the complicated relationship between families and schools, and in particular in parents as educators. I have been asked to view family relationships in order to assess the impact of family life on schools (and school performance), and the response of low-income families to schools and interventionist programs. Needless to say, this is a difficult if not impossible challenge.

Perhaps the place to begin this essay is to ask why, at this point in history, there is a spirited interest in the family relationships of low-income people. There is no question that it goes hand in hand with (1) a strong commitment to educational achievement, (2) the attempt to explain why black children do poorly in school, (3) the failure of Compensatory Education, Intervention and Follow Through Programs, (4) a

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*I wish to thank Lanier Holt for her research assistance, her expertise, energy, and her commitment to the needs of children.

search for a "new explanation" for this lack of success, and (5) a sincere and profound hope for a new solution.

I do not believe that the focus of attention on the family stems from a conscious re-birth of the notion that poor families are culturally deprived individuals with flawed family environments. Quite to the contrary, it is apparent that there is a renewed hope in the strengths of low-income families in light of the impressive accumulation of research on the strengths of black families,[1] and in light of the powerful refutation of the "failure of socialization" thesis in John Ogbu's impressive new Carnegie Council study, Minority Education and Caste.[2]

Ogbu's analysis of black education in the context of the American system of racial stratification and Robert Hill's book, The Illusion of Black Progress,[3] provide an alternative explanation for the fact that the economic gap between blacks and whites is widening. By the first half of 1978 "The black jobless rate was a record 2.3 times higher than the white jobless rate." This is particularly striking in light of Hill's observation that white high school dropouts have lower unemployment rates (22.3%) than black youth with college education (27.2%).[4]

The interest in the "natural" strengths of families, family support systems, and cultural diversity has its origins in recent social science developments and in the desire of educators to understand how such families work. In a day and age where it is difficult to determine where to turn for answers, the family may indeed be the right place to look.

Data on how low-income parents construct a child-rearing environment is required if the hope is to determine what, indeed, families do well for themselves. Such data is also necessary in order to determine what

kinds of programs can compensate for the gaps in parenting capabilities. The purpose of the following discussion, however, is to develop an alternative perspective on how to look at families. Although my analysis relies heavily on my research among low-income rural and urban black families, most of the analysis applies to low-income white ethnics as well.[5] My hope is to contribute yet another tier to the growing literature on the inextricable relationship between families and schools.

Families and Parenting

There are numerous studies of family relationships, residence patterns, sex roles, child rearing and language acquisition among low-income black families. These studies are plentiful in the anthropological, sociological and psychological literatures. This work has been given a rich historical context by Herbert Gutman in his recent book, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom.[6] Gutman's work shows continuity from slavery to present times in terms of the depth of conjugal relationships, the strength of kin ties, the stability of mutual aid networks, and, most important, a strong communitarian value of sharing and reciprocity. While some critics of this literature accept the strengths of the slave family and hen quickly ask "what went wrong" in the city, by far the majority of experts have come to accept the universality of cooperative self-help patterns among contemporary low-income black families in urban communities.

These cultural patterns are rich and diverse and they have been vividly portrayed in several books and studies which are widely known. My purpose in this section is not to highlight or summarize these patterns for that would be an easy way out. Instead, I hope to begin

an analysis of what low-income black families themselves see as their capabilities, and what they see as their inadequacies.

Many of the self-perceived inadequacies are fundamental to poverty itself. Poor people find it nearly impossible to raise their families above the poverty line, to get steady employment, or to feel a sense of pride in their basic ability to provide for their children. Most poor adults do not have mainstream skills they can teach to their children. They do not have status in the eyes of the larger society, decent housing, cars that run, new shoes, new clothes, coats, etc. Unemployed men are not allowed to live with their families. Wives and children are required by welfare regulations in all but twenty-two states to set up a separate household and this mother/child unit would loose their only means of financial support if the father moved in. Practically all poor families have difficulty getting their children through the school system and on to college, and most of them have difficulty encouraging their children to become high school graduates. Parents, then, cannot offer to their children, status, education, financial security, residential continuity, or a domicile to be proud of. Even more important, these families cannot offer the hope of social mobility or a hope for a structural change in our economy. Daily, they face the harsh realities of poverty. They see their own grown children, and those of their kin and friends, unable to find steady employment. As a result of unrelenting recession they are often unable to find jobs at all. "Between 1969 and 1976, the proportion of black men heading families who were unemployed or not in the labor force jumped from 18 to 30 percent.... High levels of black

unemployment are mainly due to the unavailability of jobs to blacks rather than to their unsuitability for these jobs. And the lack of jobs to blacks is a result of racial discrimination, depressed economy and ineffective targeting."

These are the ways in which many low-income families feel inadequate. And for these very same reasons society tells them they are inadequate. They need to rely, sometimes too heavily, on the generosity of the extended family to survive. Dependencies incur obligations which must be repaid if luck improves. And while people highly value what they can do for one another, all of us wish for more flexitility and choice in the way in which we conduct our lives.

That many poor individuals and families feel inadequate with respect to their place in the economy and their capacity to change their situation is no surprise. In fact, it is a rather realistic appraisal acquired from experiencing poverty. This feeling of inadequacy or incompetence has been observed and studied. Less often noticed are the strengths, responsibilities, and capabilities that families know they have and utilize daily. How do families feel about themselves as nurturers of their young children, teachers of the children of the extended family, and socializers of the new generation within the community?

To answer this question we would ideally like to know more about family strategies that are devoted to the raising of children, how this time and energy is organized, and what particular meaning these functions have within families and for community life.

It is my observation that within most low-income communities parents and surrogate parents take great pride in raising children. Raising

children involves using cherished skills that are passed from generation to generation. Parenting is a high status and rewarding activity. People, young and old, appear to derive self confidence, and feelings of adequacy from taking good care of their children. Parents may feel inadequate in relation to their economic roles but they feel competent as parents. They know how to love, nurture and discipline their children, and how to teach them the skills they will realistically need in their life time.

As I have written in All Our Kin, children are very important to the poor. Most of the productive work of the kin group is organized around raising children (social reproduction). Child rearing is productive labor and such efforts are highly rewarded. Aunts and uncles, grandparents and cousins, siblings and friends all participate as caretakers who are responsible for the children in their extended kin network. Shared parental responsibilities are not only an obligation of kinship, they constitute a highly cherished right.

In fact, it is my observation from my study in The Flats (a midwestern ghetto), that the black community has long recognized the problems and difficulties that all mothers in poverty share. Shared parental responsibility among kin has been the response. The families I knew in The Flats told me of many circumstances that required coresident kinsmen to take care of one another's children, and of situations that required children to stay in a household that did not include their biological parents.

People in The Flats often regard child-keeping as part of the flux and elasticity of residence. The expansion and contraction of households,

and the successive recombinations of kinsmen residing together require adults to care for the children residing in their household. As households shift, rights and responsibilities with regard to children are shared. Those women and men who temporarily assume the kinship obligation to care for a child, fostering the child indefinitely, acquire the major cluster of rights and duties ideally associated with "parenthood".

Within a network of cooperating kinsmen, there may be three or more adults with whom, in turn, a child resides. In this cycle of residence changes, the size of the dwelling, employment, and many other factors determine where children sleep. Although patterns of eating, visiting, and child care may bring mothers and their children together for most of the day, the adults immediately responsible for a child change with the child's residence. The residence patterns of children in The Flats have structural implications for both the ways in which rights in children distribute socially and also the criteria by which persons are entitled to parental roles.

From the point of view of the children, there may be a number of women who act as "mothers" toward them; some just slightly older than the children themselves. A woman who intermittently raises a sister's or a niece's or a cousin's child regards their offspring as much her grandchildren as children born to her own son and daughter.

The number of people who can assume appropriate behaviors ideally associated with parental and grandparental roles is increased to include close kinsmen and friends. Consequently, the kin terms "mother," "father," "grandmother," and the like are not necessarily appropriate

labels for describing the social roles. Children may retain ties with their parents and siblings and at the same time establish comparable relationships with other kinsmen. There is even a larger number of friends and relatives who may request a hug and kiss, "a little sugar," from children they watch grow up. But they do not consistently assume parental roles toward those children. Parental role behavior is a composite of many behavior patterns and these rights and duties can be shared or transferred to other individuals.

For many of the families I knew in The Flats, there were circumstances that required mothers and fathers to sleep in households apart from their children. A close look at the housing of children in homes that do not include their biological parents shows how misleading it is to regard child-keeping apart from residence patterns, alliances, and the interpersonal relationships of adults, and from the daily exchanges between kinsmen in the domestic network of the child.

Those raising a particular child share the responsibilities of provider, discipliner, trainer, curer, and groomer with one another. Economic providers are expected to share in providing subsistence and scarce goods, daily meals, food stamps, a bed, a blanket, clothes and shoes. Discipliners (primarily women) are allowed to participate in the control of children. At their own discretion they may beat, blame, or scare children for unacceptable social behavior. Trainers not only discipline but teach moral values and respect for adults. A girl is taught to sit like a lady--even a two-year old would be slapped for sitting with her legs apart, or a three-year old boy might be chastised for hugging or touching a two-year old girl.

Trainers instruct by harsh, clear example, showing children the consequences of their act. One afternoon in The Flats, Ruby's four-year old daughter and my son Kevin were bored from being kept indoors on a cold winter day. The four-year old grabbed a book of matches from the kitchen and was lighting them one by one. Both children were blowing them out with great joy. Ruby and I were talking in the dining room. When she saw what was happening, she rushed over, and held a burning match to her daughter's arm, slightly blistering the skin.

Curers provide folk remedies for physical ailments. They have the right to attempt to heal rashes with a little lye or detergent in the bath water, remove warts, pull teeth, and cure stomach ailments of children with "persnickety"--a pungent brew made from tobacco and added to the baby's milk. They might also take a child to the doctor. A groomer has the obligation to care for the children, wash clothing, and check the children's bodies for rashes and diseases. In addition to eligible adults, older females are also expected to groom younger children.

Adult females who share parental rights in children are recruited from participants in the personal domestic networks of the child's mother. This includes blood kin to the mother, the child, and close friends. Social roles such as that of provider were often shared; thus, responsibilities were seen to have composite elements and the various parts could be assumed by more than one individual. However, the rights that eligible kinsmen or close friends share in one another's children are not equal. Other factors such as economics and interpersonal relationships within domestic networks come into play. In

white middle-class families, on the other hand, very few persons would be authorized or would feel free to participate in health care or disciplinary behavior with regard to children without specific permission except in the case of an emergency.

Kin and friends in domestic networks establish mutual ties of obligation as they bestow child care rights and responsibilities upon one another. As these responsibilities are met with satisfaction, the depth of the involvement between kinsmen and between friends increases. Simultaneously, females acquire reciprocal obligations toward one another's children and rights in them. As responsibilities toward specific children are amplified, females are ultimately allowed to occupy parental roles toward children which are recognized by both adults and children. When women consciously perform duties as provider, discipliner, trainer, curer, and groomer, then they have accepted the reality that they may be required to nurture these children. These are the women who are next in line to nurture and assume custody of the children to whom their obligations apply.

People assume these responsibilities because they are rewarded and because they derive a sense of success and competence from them. The skills necessary to rear children are taught by older kin to younger adults and children within family and community settings. Older women and men who have "raised up" several children find themselves in a position of high status within the community. Their advice is respected and sought.

Child socialization could indeed be described as the "kingpin" of family relationships in low-income black communities. Consequently,

any educational program should be weighed in terms of its potential effect on how people feel about themselves as parents. Any program that inadvertently blames a child's failure on his or her family environment undermines the confidence and self-assurance of parents. A program that tells parents "how to do it," undermines an area of expertise within families. Programs that tell families how to play with their children, how to talk to them, and how and when to give affection, undermine the sense of competence that families feel concerning their ability to raise children. Moreover, if an Intervention or Parent Education program fails to change a child's school performance, we must assure ourselves and the parents that it is not the parents' fault. If parents are the target of Intervention Programs, these programs cannot infer that the parents have already failed as teachers and socializers of their children.

The cultural and class confidence that low-income parents have in themselves as parents must be respected in the design of any educational reform program. Likewise, the potential impact of an Intervention Program on parental competence should be a strong consideration in the evaluation of the successes and failures of such programs. Most important, any program that intrudes on the autonomy of family life must be evaluated in terms of whether the program undermines or is supportive of parents as the primary educators of their children.

Intervention and Competency

It is important to distinguish two kinds of interventions: active and passive. Active interventions take the form of Head Start, Follow

Through, Home Based Interventions and Parenting programs that relate to the planned use of parents as educators. Some of the active interventions relate only to children, some relate only to parents, and others relate to both parents and children. All of these share an assumption about the family life of poor children and the parent-child interaction. They all assume that in order to maximize the chance that poor children will do well in school, interventions should:

(1) Promote attachments between children and parents[8]

(2) Attempt to change the relationship between mothers and children[9]

(3) Help parents to foster the intellectual development of their children[10]

Each of these approaches assume that there is something wrong from within the family and that the responsibility for solving the problem must also come from within.[11] These active interventions represent the largest and costliest forms of compensatory education ever tried in our nation's history. Follow Through alone cost $500 million dollars over a 10 year period, and the evaluation of Follow Through programs cost between $30 and $50 million dollars. In the final evaluation, although there have been unmeasured side effects, the conclusions of most experts has been that strategies such as Follow Through do not enduringly raise test scores of poor children.

I would like to suggest that Competency Testing is an example of what might be considered a "passive" intervention strategy. Competency based Testing Programs have been characterized in the press as the fastest growing movement in American education. Thirty-two states now

have some form of competency tests although the tests vary in design and intent. The state of North Carolina spent $134,000 to design a statewide Minimum Competency Test and $4.5 million this year to prepare 89,500 eleventh graders for the test.

Generally, states that spend the least per student on education (K-12) have been the quickest to join the competency testing movement (North Carolina is 47th in the nation in terms of the amount spent by the state per child on public education). While some educators interpret the statewide competency test as a sign that North Carolina has "gotten serious about improving the quality of its public schools,"[12] there is some serious question as to how useful such tests will be to teachers. Generally teachers do not need such tests for diagnostic purposes; they already know which of their students need help. Moreover, any remediation program that "teaches to the test" is not in any way a comprehensive remediation program.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference in North Carolina has protested that the testing program is "racially biased" because of its harmful effects on black, poor white, and Indian students.[13] Critics charge that the test will push thousands out of school without diplomas. These students still will not have hope of finding decent jobs. Spring pre-test results indicated that 78 percent of the blacks and 29 percent of the whites may fail the math section initially, and that 41 percent of the blacks and 9 percent of the whites could fail the reading portion. While the Governor of North Carolina and the designers of the test claim that there is not any cultural bias in the test itself, the pre-test results clearly indicate that competency

testing is a further step towards solidifying the poor as a caste minority, especially if the remedial programs to prepare the students are not sufficient. A second class high school "certificate of attendance" instead of a diploma will only serve to more deeply entrench a caste-like minority status for poor young people.

This criticism is particularly striking in light of Ogbu's hypothesis that caste-like minority status powerfully influences the perception, motivation, cognition, and achievement of children with this status. As both Ogbu and Hill point out, black education does not serve the same path to jobs as do the opportunities available to whites on the basis of education. Schools have not learned to educate the poor. Consequently poor children should not be penalized by testing programs that label them and their siblings as "failures", serving only to further segment those who fail from status and opportunity.

Clearly educational reform cannot achieve comprehensive social reform. The schools have not learned to educate the poor, in part, because the poor do not see the light at the end of the tunnel. In light of this, it is appalling that educators allow "passive" intervention strategies such as the competency test to be seen by the public as a panacea, that somehow absolves educational institutions of responsibility for the disparities between the educational opportunities and achievement of poor and middle-class youth in this country.[14]

Conclusions

Neither active or passive intervention programs alter the caste-like barriers to social mobility. Parenting programs and home based

interventions all too often undermine the strengths and competencies of low-income parents. Minimum competency tes tell students with learning difficulties that as a result of their "disability", they will become second class citizens. Many teenagers will fail the competency tests. No one has analyzed the potential impact of this on them, their siblings, and on their parents. I would assume that failing the test would be interpreted as a failure on both the part of the parents and the children. If programs designed to improve family environments and parenting have failed, and if attempts to establish minimum competency levels do not educate, what alternatives do we have?

I believe that every school age child who is having difficulty in learning basic skills deserves equality in the opportunity to learn. School programs and policies can play a major role in meeting this challenge since clearly many inequities persist within educational institutions as well as in the larger society. For example, public funding for the schools of wealthy children often exceeds funding for poor districts. In another example, some states are establishing a trend of spending more of their limited resources on the more priviledged "gifted and talented" students than they do on remedial work. Opportunities for learning the "survival skills" of the dominant culture must be taught at school if one of the goals of public education is to make this culture's resources accessible to all students regardless of background.

We must consider the lessons of the massive and expensive evaluations of remedial efforts tried so far, and develop new guidelines for policies. We must create model programs that support children's families, and that reflect the varieties of needs of students, families, communities, and

cultures. In concluding, I will describe a model plan in which the schools bring the families and communities of students into the classroom, instead of trying to take the classroom home.

I believe that we should focus our attention on how to better educate all children who are achieving below grade level, and especially the 20 percent of our nation's children who have specific learning disabilities. According to learning disability specialists, at least one-fifth of the children in the country with average or above average intellectual potential have mild to severe learning disabilities. These children are handicapped in that to make normal progress they require intensive, individualized programs in reading, writing, spelling,and arithmetic. These students require a low teacher-pupil ratio, small group instruction, multi-sensory techniques, memonoic devices, and intensive drill. Additionally, while such a program can begin successfully with school age children, they must continue throughout elementary school.

Our teachers in the public schools cannot do the job alone. Rather than tossing the "children of compensatory programs" into the public schools and then spending millions to evaluate their progress, I have the following general suggestions for research and development. We should develop pilot programs that train para-professionals and teachers in systematic approaches to remediation in reading and arithmetic. There are now very few qualified centers that offer such training. (The Director of a Learning Disability Center in Durham, North Carolina, Catherine Adele Harkey, has successfully trained and apprenticed high school graduates, unemployed individuals, and peers as learning specialists.

An experiment with trained volunteers in Asheville, N.C. produced an elementary school with nearly 100 percent readers at grade level in target classrooms.)

Our nation should train a legion of para-professionals to work in the public schools along with classroom teachers to provide small group learning opportunities. Such an approach to public education would require smaller classrooms and more teachers, but in the long run, this would be cost-effective to our nation. Second, we should fund selected public schools in low-income and middle-class neighborhoods to hire these Teacher-Assistants (TA's) and evaluate the impact of TA effectiveness over a three-year period.

I believe that this suggestion answer the question, "WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO TEACH US HOW TO READ?" It is an intervention that is located in the school environment and could provide satisfying jobs and training to many unemployed parents. If para-professionals are trained from the neighborhood, such a program could be designed to increase the level of parent and community involvement in the public schools. In the long run, such a program might bring us closer to the original concept of a "public" school--a school accessible to all members of the community and devoted to their collective welfare.

NOTES

1. Three recent studies of the strengths of black families include Andrew Billingsley, Black Families in White America, Engelwood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968; Joyce Ladner's Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971; and Carol B. Stack's All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community, New York: Harper and Row, 1974.
2. John Ogbu, Minority Education and Caste, New York: Academic Press, 1978.
3. Robert B. Hill, The Illusion of Black Progress, Washington: National Urban League Research Department, 1978.
4. ibid., p. iv, v.
5. Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, The Hidden Injuries of Class, New York: Vintage, 1972, and Carol B. Stack, All Our Kin.
6. Herbert Gutman, The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925, New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.
7. Hill, The Illusion of Black Progress, p. iv, v.
8. In her fine study, Child Care in the Family, (New York: Academic Press, 1977) Alison Clarke-Stewart pinpoints several assumptions of intervention programs. I highly recommend her critique.
9. M. B. Karnes' programs have this specific goal. For an overview of the objectives of research on parents as educators, see Earl S. Schaeffer, "Parents as Educators: Evidence from Cross-Sectional, Longitudinal and Intervention Research," in Young Children, April, 1972.

10. S. W. Gray and R. Klaus report this goal in their program.

11. Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Is Early Intervention Effective?" in Handbook of Evaluation Research, M. Guttentag and E. Struenung, editors, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1975, pp. 519-604.

12. Editorial in the Raleigh News and Observer, November 1, 1978.

13. Durham Sun, October 30, 1978.

14. Editorial from the Durham Sun, attached, and Schlossman, "The Parent Education Game," Teachers College Record, Fall, 1978, p. 806-7.

**Cover excerpt from Sarah Cone Bryant, Epaminondas and His Auntie, Boston: Houghton-Miflin, 1938.

From the Durham Sun
Oct. 28, Nov. 3

Hope For The Future

In the face of high school graduates who can neither read nor write, lower SAT scores, violence in our schools, an alarmed public has leveled a relentless barrage of blame toward the entire educational system of late.

An article in the current North Carolina Education magazine, written by Jane Barnwell Holmes, a Burlington teacher, not only answers the charges but brings such a hopeful note for the future of our schools, that her words are worth repeating.

Unwilling to accept all the blame on behalf of her fellow educators, Holmes points out "the public schools are a microcosm of society, and the attitudes which prevail without also prevail within."

Some of the blame can be laid at the rebelliousness of the late 1960s and early '70s. "Blacks rebelled against white supremacy, women rebelled against male supremacy, young people rebelled against adult supremacy, and some from every group rebelled against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War."

Many young people "chose drugs and sex and freedom over the restraints of the home . . . Discipline broke down first in the home, then on the streets and finally in the classrooms . . . Without discipline, teachers can't teach and students can't learn."

Educational innovations of the past dozen years, under fire recently, were innovations which the decade demanded, she said.

Holmes sees a "brightened picture" in the past couple of years, "a new breed of students." Gone are the ragged jeans, the defiant attitude, the stoned expressions. Achievement is "in" once again. These students are, as a rule, both "sensible and sincere . . . cooperative and concerned." In short, students who are willing to learn.

And they are learning "because parents and teachers are once again assuming places of authority in children's lives, and the children are accepting it . . . The rebuilding has begun."

There are many teachers, no doubt, who may not recognize their students from the above description. Hopefully, many more do.

We seem to have turned a corner, to be finding a saner approach to education.

The educational future looks brighter.

Competent Judgment

City and county school students showed their competency in judging what is best for them by refusing to follow some ridiculous advice handed out by opponents of competency testing.

Attendance for 11th graders the two days the tests were administered was better than average. There were no reports of any pupils refusing to take the tests.

The Durham-based Coalition for Quality Education and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference used ridiculous racist propaganda in an attempt to drum up opposition to the testing program.

Our young people, and their parents, showed a great deal more intelligence than some of the self-proclaimed community leaders.