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ABSTRACT
                This study presents a framework for instructional
programs based on four assumptions about the sociocultural background
of black children: (1) black children share a common cultural
heritage, a history of oppression and racial injustice in America;
(2) black children grow and develop in a family environment that is
historically different in customs and organization from that of the
dominant culture; (3) black communities are instrumental in
supporting attitudes, beliefs, and values of black people, thus
enhancing self-concepts of black children; and (4) black children
have unique abilities and strengths that help them to deal
effectively with their environment. A questionnaire about these
assumptions and about planning programs based on them was sent to 55
black scholars of whom 35 (63 per cent of the sample) responded.
There was generally high agreement among the scholars, specifically
concerning the importance of cultural heritage, family, and
community, and the development of unique black strengths. Items
generating low agreement concerned the importance of monthly
workshops, familial styles and structures, employment of teachers
from the community, and acceptance of black children's language in
school. Staff members of eight black participant programs were also
interviewed; their responses revealed that most programs made no
effort to consider black sociocultural background as a necessary part
of educational needs. Findings suggest that educators must become
sensitive to cultural differences among children and develop programs
responsive to the needs of all. (BJD)

The Black Child:

Some Sociocultural Considerations

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Introduction

The schooling of Black children in America is one of the most controversial issues in education today. The issue is a continuing one in American history but received new and significant attention almost a quarter of a century ago when the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case of Brown v. Board of Education 1954 that the doctrine of 'separate but equal' was illegal in educational practices. This decision, which attempted to outlaw segregation by race in public education, legalized the idea of equal educational opportunity and prompted numerous research studies on Black children. The research that evolved tended to support two general theories, the cultural deficit theory (Bernstein, 1960; Deutsch, 1964; Bereiter and Englemann, 1966; Weikart, 1967; Klaus and Gray, 1968; Nimnicht, Meier, and McAfee, 1969) and the cultural difference theory (Baratz and Baratz, 1970; Ginsburg, 1970; Melmed, 1970; Rystrom,1970; Labov, 1972; Simons and Johnson, 1974). The proponents of both of these theories believed that Black children should be acculturated into the dominant society even though their underlying philosophies and their methods of achieving acculturation were different. It is our belief that because these two theories were based on this assumption, they cannot provide an accurate framework for describing the behavior of Black children. Moreover, these models are not adequate because: 1) they were developed as a result of the socio-political climate of the 1960's which made it necessary for the development of educational programs for minority children; 2) most of the programs were developed by white social scientists who generally had preconceived notions about the abilities and experiences of minority people; and 3) the research which supported these theories was comparative in nature. Billingsley (1972)

explained the flaw in comparative social science research when he stated
that:

> Much of the social science analysis of Black people is comparative
> in nature. It compares the intimate situations of Black people
> with those of the white community. The conceptual fallacy of
> this technique of analysis has seldom been analyzed. Such
> comparative analysis presupposes that at one time in history
> Black people and white people lived on a basis of equality and
> were subjected to equal supports and resources from this society.
> Consequently, any divergence in behavior, attitudes, or conditions
> from this basis of equality and similarity must be explained.
> Yet we know by the reality of our lives that no such basis
> of equality ever existed in this country, but we have developed
> no tools of analysis that starts with the basis of inequality.
> which has always existed.

Because of this basic flaw in social science research, the purpose of this

paper is to present an alternative for planning programs for Black children.

We contend that an understanding of Black children's sociocultural back-

ground is essential in the development of programs for them.

The Framework

Four assumptions have been developed which describe the socio-

cultural experiences of Black children.

Assumption I, Black children share a common cultural heritage, a

history of oppression and racial injustice in America is based on the

belief that the cultural background of Black children is different in

significant ways from the cultural background of most white children.

The history of Black Americans is ingrained in an oppressive and discrimina-

tory system which has delegated Blacks to the position of a castelike

minority. In spite of their position in this society, Black people have

developed survival mechanisms for coping with enslavement, oppression, and

degradation which form the basis for the Black cultural system (Blassingame,

1972; Genovese, 1974; Blauner, 1970; Huggins, 1977; Levine, 1971). The

elements that have influenced the development of the Black cultural system

include: 1) unity, solidarity, and collective resistance; 2) strong sense of family; 3) a unique form of religion; 4) a creative and expressive language system; and 5) music.

Unity, solidarity, and collective resistance is the first element of Black culture. During slavery, the slaves showed impressive unity, solidarity, and collective resistance to their masters (Blassingame, 1972; Bennett, 1975; Genovese, 1974; Gutnam, 1976; Aptheker, 1971). Historians (Blassingame, 1972; Bennett, 1975; Genovese, 1974) noted that the slave quarters provided the primary environment for slaves and it was in this environment where the slaves developed their norms of conduct, created their rules, defined their behavior, and learned cooperation and solidarity. It was also in this environment where the second element of Black culture was developed and fostered.

The development of strong family and kinship relations was vital to the existence and survival of the Black slaves. The family even though it was an unusually fragile institution was the center of the slave community (Bennett, 1966; Blassingame, 1972; Genovese, 1974). The family provided the slave with love, understanding, and served as the primary socializing agent for children. In spite of the suffering of Black adult slaves, they showed love and affection to their children and made every effort to shield them from hardship and abuse. Slave parents worked to protect their children from the shock of bondage, taught them values different from those of the masters, and gave them a referent for self-esteem other than their masters (Bennett, 1966; Blassingame, 1972). The slaves were able to preserve and maintain the existence of the Black family in spite of unrelenting circumstances.

Religion, another element of Black culture, was instrumental in
sustaining family life because it provided the slaves with beliefs and
values which supported their way of life and gave them a positive out-
look for the future. Since religion was a very important part of the
slaves life, the church served as the major social center in the slave
community. Staples (1976) noted that the church provided a meeting
place for friends; furnished avenues for exercising leadership; and
provided opportunities for releasing pent-up emotions. Also, the
slaves strong religious faith helped them to conquer their fear of the
slave master because it incorporated African traditions such as witch-
craft, magic, and vodoo; consequently, producing a new form of Chris-
tianity (Blassingame, 1972; Genovese, 1974). Moreover, Black religion
helped to create a collective identity and pride and influenced other
areas of Black culture including language and music.

The language of the slave community served as a liberating
mechanism because of its African-American origins; hence, the unique
features of the Black vernacular gave the slave community a means of
communicating which was difficult for the white community to under-
stand because of its ambiguity. In effect, the slaves were able to
communicate with each other in the presence of whites with some measure
of safety (Lester, 1968; Levine, 1977; Blassingame, 1972; Genovese, 1974).
The language of the slaves was also instrumental in advancing the
tradition of Black folk tales and folk songs. The folk tales and songs
described the slaves work, loves, and expressed the realities of oppres-
sion (Blassingame, 1972).

These elements which we have briefly described have provided the foundation for a Black cultural system. It is this heritage which has sustained and influenced the survival of Blacks in America for more than three centuries; therefore, we contend that it is absurd to consider the development of Black children without considering this heritage.

Our second assumption, Black children grow and develop in a family environment which is historically different in customs and organization from that of the dominant culture, has its roots in the cultural traditions of West Africa. The structure of the Black family is based on an extended family or cooperative community (Noble, 1974; King, 1976). The Black extended family has established itself as an agent for the survival and advancement of Black people by providing them with mutual networks within the Black community to deal effectively with the diffi-culties of family life by pooling their social and economic resources (Hill, 1978p Martin & Martin, 1978). Thus, the extended Black family family is an agent for the survival and advancement of Black people and provides the foundation for the structure of the American Black family even though it is not the only family structure in the Black community. Changes in the structure of the Black family have occurred as a result of the socialization of Blacks in America.

The extended Black family supports and maintains strong kinship bonds between family members and encourages attitudes which view chil-dren as a valuable resource to the Black family and community. Acceptance and love are basic to the relationship between Black parents and Black children (Washington, 1976). Washington (1976) maintains that Black

people give love unconditionally to their children; hence, love is a part of the acceptance and inclusiveness which characterizes the Black family and community. Even though Black children are loved, they must deal with a difficult environment and it is the function of the family to socialize Black children into the multiple roles that they must perform in society. The family must prepare them to take on not only the appropriate age and sex roles, but also they must teach their children their appropriate racial roles, socializing them to the realities of white racism (Staples, 1976; White, 1972; King, 1976; Martin & Martin, 1978).

> The socialization processes that Black parents put their children through have the functional value of increasing the chances that Black children will survive. It is because of this training that many Black youth are able to cope wtih the seemingly overwhelming difficulties of their lives. . .(King, 1976).

Consequently, the child rearing practices of Black parents are based on the belief that Black children must be taught to survive in a hostile and oppressive society. These attitudes are a result of cultural and historical traditions which define the social and economic status of Blacks in America. However, the extent to which the Black family actually resembles the theoretical model we have described varies from community to community and depends on the socioeconomic status of the family and the degree of assimilation or upward mobility the family has achieved.

Our third assumption, Black communities are instrumental in supporting the attitudes, beliefs, and values of Black people; thus enhancing the self-concepts of Black children, is based on the idea that since the large majority of Black children still live in Black communities they develop their values, attitudes, and beliefs based on their experiences in those communities. We contend that the Black

community is a valuable resource to many Black children because it exposes

them to a bicultural environment. In general, the Black community in

response to economic instability and residential segregation has become a:

> A highly diversified, interrelated aggregate of people who
> unite into relatively cohesive structures in response to white
> oppression, racism, and patterned repression. The diversity
> within the Black community manifests itself in economic life,
> occupational pursuits, earned income, business ventures and
> successes ard failures. . . (Blackwell, 1975).

This highly diversified community serves as a socializing agent for Black

children. The Black community defines what is good and desirable and what

is bad and undesirable from the standpoint of its own interest. Black

children are taught what it means to belong to minority group in a white

dominated society. Specifically, they learn acceptance of their cultural

heritage and a sense of racial pride which is not a 1960's phenomenon

but a part of the Black experience that can be traced to the beginnings

of Black people in America. In addition, the Black community supports

a positive sense of self. These attitudes and beliefs are often trans-

mitted through interactions with Black people in the community and through

social institutions. The Black community serves as a reference for Black

children, often processing and filtering information from the larger

society (Matthews, 1972; Ladner, 1971; Staples, 1976; Barnes, 1972;

Giovanni, 197 ; and King & Karlson, 1978).

The Black community as a resource and a positive self-reference

for Black children is a controversial issue. Ladner (1971) offers an

explanation:

> Many books have bee: written about the Black community but very
> few have dealt with the intricate lives of the people who live
> there. By and large, they have attempted to analyze and describe
> the pathology which allegedly characterizes the lives of its
> inhabitants while at the same time making its residents respon-
> sible for its creation. . .

Few authorities on the Black community have written about the
vast amount of strength and adaptability of the people. Their
power to cope and adapt to a set of unhealthy conditions--not
as stereotyped sick people but as normal ones--is a factor which
few people seem to accept or realize. The ways that Blacks
have adapted to poverty and racism, and yet emerged relatively
unscarred, are a peculiar quality which Americans should commend.

Black children's lives are influenced by their experiences and for the

large majority of Black children these experiences are largely a result

of living and interacting with other people in a Black community which

is circumscribed by Black norms, values, and attitudes. The training

that Black children receive in the Black community often provides most

of them with adaptive and survival abilities which contribute to their

endurance and tenacity in an often hostile, oppressive, and demeaning

society. As a result of their tenacity, adaptability, and perservering

nature, Black children have developed several unique strengths and

abilities.

The fourth assumption, Black children have many unique abil-

ities and strengths which help them to deal effectively with their

environment describes their: 1) unique communication system; 2) resource-

fulness and social perceptiveness; 3) creativity and spontaneity; and

4) real world orientation. The language system which is used by many

Black children has been described by terms such as Negro Nonstandard

English, Black Dialect, Black Idiom, and Ebonics. For the most part,

these terms do not adequately explain the comprehensive nature of the

Black language system because they only describe individual segments of

language such as structure or function.

The language of Black America is more than a linguistic system;

it is an expressive cultural system (Smitherman, 1977; Abrahams, 1973;

Levine, 1977). Smitherman (1977) states that:

> Black dialect is an Africanized form of English reflecting Black
> America's linquistic-cultural African heritage and the con-
> ditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America. Black
> language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning,
> nuance, tone, and gesture.

Black dialect is spoken by many Black children who live in the inner

city and rural south. According to most research (Labov, 1970), there

is no one form of Black English and it is difficult to determine the

number of Black English speakers since it varies according to age,

socio-economic status, and geographic region. Even though many Black

children speak a nonstandard dialect we can assume that Black children

like all children except the severely handicapped have the same basic

vocabulary, possess the same capacity for learning, and use the same

logic as other English speakers. Their language system provides them

with the ability to communicate their needs, desires, beliefs, and aids

them in structuring their world. In addition to the structural func-

tions of language the verbal behavior of Black children is influenced by

situations and the people who are involved in the interactions. Black

children often appear to be more verbal when interacting with peers

(Labov, 1970; Abrahams, 1973; Cazden, 1970; Mitchell-Kernan, 1972).

Nonverbal communication patterns are also an important part of the Black

child's communication system. Nonverbal patterns such as eye-avoidance

techniques, rolling eyes, and certain walking styles can often explain

how Black children are responding to a situation (Johnson, 1971).

In addition to an expressive language system, Black children

must learn at a very early age how to manipulate their environment and how

to play different roles and at the same time maintain their self-respect

and identity. In order to achieve this, many Black children develop

skills which demonstrate their resourcefulness, social perceptiveness,

creativity, spontaneity, and real world orientation. Social scientists

have noted that by the age of six or seven most Black children have

already had at least four different experiences with society. The first

being a nonracist social interaction with family members; the second

being the first racist assaults on them; the third is the militant

rejection of the first racist they meet; and the fourth is the realization

that their individual responses have little meaning in a society which is

racist. As a result of these early experiences, most Black children, by

the age of 10, have to use their resourcefulness and social per. ive-

ness to analyze and interpret their role in society. Many Black children

begin to understand and have knowledge of how certain social institutions

work for and against them. They are often able to analyze situations and

the attitudes of people around them. This astuteness depends on how many

experiences the Black child has had in the larger society; consequently,

as a Black child has more and more experiences they learn to adapt and

accommodate depending on what is apropriate. Black children often have

creative and spontaneous methods of adapting to these situations which is

encouraged by home environments which foster the development of a quick

wit and responsiveness.

These four assumptions have examined the elements which we

believe influence the lives of a majority of Black children in America.

We realize that there is no monolithic Black child and that the effect

that these elements have on individual Black children varies from person

to person; family to family; and community to community; however, it is

our contention that this framework gives a more realistic starting point

for examining the behavior of Black children and planning programs for

them. To give validity to our framework we surveyed Black scholars who

were working in the area of child development.

Validation of the Framework

A second part of the study involved surveying Black scholars

who were knowledgeable in the field of Black child development. The

validation sample consisted of fifty-five Black scholars who were chosen

because they had national visibility. A questionnaire based on the frame-

work was sent to each scholar to determine the extent that they agreed

or disagreed with our framework. Thirty-five scholars or sixty-three

percent of the sample responded to our questionnaire. Certain questions

guided our interpretation of the responses: 1) On which items did the

scholars agree with us?; 2) On which items did the scholars disagree with

us?; and, 3) On which items did the scholars agree with each other?

There was general agreement among the scholars about the impor-

tance of the elements that were identified in the questionnaire. Spec-

ifically, there was high agreement among the scholars concerning the

importance of cultural heritage in the development of educational programs

for Black children. They agreed that it was essential: 1) to use curri-

culum which reflected the cultural background of Black children; 2) to use

materials which reflected Black values, norms, and perspectives; 3) to use

nonracist books and materials; and 4) to stress humanism or the worth and

importance of people (See Table I). Likewise, many of the scholars agreed

that the family and the community were an important part of the child's

life and that educators needed to be sensitive to this issue when developing

programs (See Tables II and III). Equally important was the notion that

programs should be developed that consider the unique strengths of Black

children and which encouraged creativity and spontaneity and encouraged the

TABLE I

ASSUMPTION: BLACK CHILDREN SHARE A COMMON CULTURAL
HERITAGE, A HISTORY OF SLAVERY, OPRESSION,
AND RACIAL INJUSTICE IN AMERICA

			Frequency		
	Items	Essential	Very Important	Important	Percent
Q1:	Cultural Background	29	4	1	97.1
Q2:	Unity, Solidarity	17	6	7	88.2
Q3:	Materials, Black	24	5	5	97.1
Q4:	Positive Contributions	27	4	2	94.3
Q5:	Nonracists Materials	28	3	1	97.0
Q6:	Oppression	23	7	2	91.4
Q7:	Recruit Blacks	21	8	4	94.3
Q8:	Humanism	22	7	3	97.0
Q9:	Workshops	8	5	13	81.3
Q10:	Understand History	17	6	5	84.8

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TABLE II

ASSUMPTION II: BLACK CHILDREN GROW AND DEVELOP IN A
COMPLEX FAMILY ENVIRONMENT WHICH IS
DIFFERENT IN CUSTOMS, ORGANIZATION,
AND PERSPECTIVE FROM THAT OF THE
DOMINANT CULTURE

	Items		Frequency		Percent
		Essential	Very Important	Important	
Q11:	Family Values	21	8	4	97.1
Q12:	Family Structures	20	4	8	97.0
Q13.	Families, Equal	16	6	2	70.0
Q14:	Socializing Agent	15	7	7	87.9
Q15:	Black Family Values	18	5	6	96.7
Q16:	Parent Participation	13	11	7	88.6
Q17:	Support Systems	15	4	8	84.4
Q18:	Recruit Teachers	21	7	5	97.1
Q19:	Parent- Teacher	15	12	5	94.1
Q20:	Family Relationships	18	7	7	94.1

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TABLE III

ASSUMPTION III: BLACK CHILDREN GROW UP IN COMMUNITIES
WHICH SUPPORT THEIR "BLACKNESS" AND
HELPS THEM TO DEVELOP A VIEW OF THEM-
SELVES WHICH REFLECTS THE POSITIVE
ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS OF THE BLACK
FAMILY WHICH IS OFTEN CONTRADICTORY
TO THE VIEWS OF THE LARGER SOCIETY

Items		Frequency		
	Essential	Very Important	Important	Percent
Q21: Neighborhood Teachers	5	7	11	65.7
Q22: Community-Curriculum	10	10	6	76.5
Q23: Decision-Making	16	5	6	79.4
Q24: Socialization	24	7	2	97.1
Q25: Group Orientation	13	8	8	82.9
Q26: Transmit Values	22	7	4	97.1
Q27: Black Church	16	7	2	73.5
Q28: Access to School	17	8	3	80.0
Q29: Political Power	17	3	7	84.4
Q30: Open Communication	21	4	7	97.0

development of basic academic skills (See Table IV).

There were several items which did not receive high agreement among the scholars. The first item which dealt with the importance of monthly workshops received relatively low agreement. Many scholars felt that conducting workshops was not the most effective method of bringing about change and imparting information to teachers. The second item which was questioned by the respondents was the idea that all family styles and structures were equally valuable since we generally accept the notion that two parent families are the most acceptable. The third item which caused some disagreement among the scholars was the employment of teachers from the community or neighborhood; and using the community as a primary source for developing curriculum since many believe that to encourage a Black cultural system is to destroy one's chances of upward mobility. The last item which caused some disagreement among the scholars was the accepted use of Black children's language i school even if it was a nonstandard dialect. Many of the scholars questioned the idea of allowing Black children to use their natural language in school because they generally believed that to allow Black children to use their language suggested that we did not consider the importance or prestige attached to speaking Standard English. The nonagreement responses to the items mentioned were primarily based on the belief in the importance of assimilating Black children in to the dominant culture. The scholars saw the items mentioned as an obstruction to social upward mobility.

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient Matrix was calculated on each response to measure the relationship of agreement between the respondents on an item to item basis. Since agreement was generally high on items,

TABLE IV

ASSUMPTION IV: BLACK CHILDREN HAVE MANY UNIQUE STRENGTHS
                 AND ABILITIES WHICH HELP THEM DEAL EFFEC-
                 TIVELY WITH THEIR ENVIRONMENT

| Items | Frequency | | | |
	Essential	Very Important	Important	Percent
Q31: Support Language	12	2	11	71.4
Q32: Use Home Language	6	4	10	58.8
Q33: Features BE	17	4	10	76.5
Q34: Basic Skills	25	5	2	94.5
Q35: Immediate Environment	13	5	7	73.5
Q36: Creativity, Spontaneity	21	7	3	91.2
Q37: Self-Sufficient, Independent	28	3	1	94.1
Q38: Coping Skills	22	7	3	97.0
Q39: Constructive Purposes	27	5	1	97.1
Q40: Language Workshops	18	4	6	84.8

intercorrelations were strong; however, there were notable exceptions.
The items included issues related directly to educational policy such as
the employment of staff from the community, use of a nonstandard dialect
in school, the development of curriculum which reflects the immediate
environment of the child, and the acceptance of all family styles and
structures as equal. It is our belief that these exceptions are closely
related to the views of the dominate culture and the notion of who con-
trols the educational system.

Application of the Framework

To examine the relationship between our framework and existing
educational programs, we visited eight programs that Black children parti-
cipated in. The programs were either developed as independent Black pro-
grams or early intervention programs. They were located in Massachusetts,
New York, New Jersey, and North Carolina. Questions were developed from
the framework which were asked of the program's administrator. Also,
published materials were used as a source of information.

After interviewing program staff and considering all available
data on the educational programs, we found that most of the programs
did not make an effort to consider the sociocultural background of Black
children as a necessary part of their educational and developmental needs.
The programs were primarily concerned with the assimilation of Black
children into the dominant culture. Specifically, there was little evidence
that Black children participated in the programs except through their physi-
cal appearance. Books and other instructional materials used in the programs
were not diverse and did not reflect the culture of Black children. There
was little consideration given to their culture and lifestyle in the develop-
ment of educational programs. There was some indication that many program

developers believed that acknowledgement of one's culture had to be exclusive of academic achievement. There was one notable exception, a Follow Through program located in Johnson County, North Carolina. There was an obvious effort which was demonstrated through the employment of staff, use of nonracist materials, and the involvement of parents and community in the educational process. Walking into this school one recognized immediately that it was a place for children and that Black children belonged there, too.

Conclusion

We believe that our framework which is based on four assumptions about the sociocultural background of Black children offers a more realistic approach to planning programs for Black children. Since there was general agreement among the scholars we surveyed, we maintain that the framework can provide educators with a starting point to begin to look at the strengths of Black children and to translate those strengths into educational programming. We are acutely aware that there is a lack of programs that consider the sociocultural background of children in their educational planning; consequently, many children attend schools which are not sensitive to their cultural needs and are therefore unable to offer a sound educational program. For example, children who are constantly exposed to and taught by professionals who do not accept their language or their skin color can be expected to do poorly in school. Children who are taught through omission that they do not exist can also be expected to perform poorly in school. Educators must become sensitive to cultural differences among children and use the strengths to develop programs which are responsive to the needs of all children.

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