

# Educating African American Children: Credibility at a Crossroads

by Brenda CampbellJones and Franklin CampbellJones, Ed.D.

If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one.<sup>1</sup>

The overwhelming majority of teachers in America are White (Kailin 1999). However, school student populations are more diverse today than ever before. In schools today, questions of equity are challenging educators to reevaluate an issue that has been simmering for decades: if we believe that all students can learn, then why are there disproportionate numbers of African American children having difficulty in school (Johnson 1996)? Teachers must be willing to learn continuously in order to respond to the needs of African American students. They must be cognizant of historical forces and respond effectively to issues of culture and diversity in order to facilitate student learning and enrich their ability to learn and teach. This approach promotes inclusiveness and institutionalizes processes for learning about differences that might exist between teachers and their students (Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, and Terrell 1999). This allows teachers an opportunity to establish operating norms that respond to the cultural capital of African American children, subsequently strengthening the bond between student and teacher.

## A Crisis of Credibility

When promises made are not fulfilled, a rationality deficit develops, and the system in which such promises were made suffers a crisis of credibility. *Crisis* refers to a contradiction between what was promised and what was delivered. Harbermas (1975) calls this credibility crisis a “legitimation deficit,” which is basically an ero-

sion of belief in the system. This erosion of legitimation creates among citizens to whom promises were made a feeling that things have not worked out as expected and that there are forces that place the system beyond their control (Habermas 1975).

For many African Americans, a rationality deficit fueled by broken promises, a feeling that matters are beyond their control, has existed for generations. One need only reference United States history to gain a sense of the depth of this deficit, which for African Americans calls the credibility of the system into question (Low and Clift 1981). The promises of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments—to abolish 250 years of slavery and affirm the constitutional rights of citizens regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude—are called into question. The promises of equal education for all of this nation’s citizens, in light of the 1954 Supreme Court case of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, abolishing separate but equal schools, are in dispute. The promises of the 1964 Civil Rights Act with its massive regulatory and administrative powers are at doubt (Loewen 1995). For the majority of African Americans there exists an inchoate feeling that certain forces put the operation of the system beyond their control (Jones 1993).

These doubts exist about schools as well as about society at large. Although many educators chant the phrase “all children can learn,” the question of whether African American children should or can be educated as well as their Euro-American counterparts is still discussed by some

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educator-scholars (Herrnstein and Murray 1994). Low expectations for African American children are pervasive in the school community (Berliner and Biddle 1995). “Low expectations” refers to the beliefs—those of teachers, administrators, parents, students, and policymakers—that African American students cannot achieve at levels equal to or better than their Euro-American peers. Espousing a belief in educating all children but practicing the art of educating only a few is contradictory. It has the potential to deepen the legitimation crisis of public schools: their ability to provide quality education to African American children (Argyris 1993).

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*Espousing a belief in educating all children but practicing the art of educating only a few is contradictory.*

Although many educators believe they can provide quality schooling for Black children, covert acts of discrimination against African American children continue, often unbeknownst to those performing the actions (Berliner and Biddle 1995). Paley (2000) examined her attitudes and the behaviors she exhibited toward Black students in her classroom. She concluded that she responded to her students indifferently because they were Black and she was White. Only after deep self-reflection about her actions and the intentions associated with them was she able to change her attitudes and behaviors toward teaching African American children. After Black parents stated that their children were being singled out for disciplinary actions, Paley states:

The next day . . . I begin to watch myself: Do I respond to each child in a similar way? What sort of behaviors draws my negative attention? The self-scrutiny proceeds with no formal plan but is rather a collection of random thoughts and fragments of conversations on scraps of paper.<sup>2</sup>

Claude Steele (1992), in his research on stereotype vulnerability, maintains that African American students face a constant, devaluing assault while they attend school. In school, more than any other place in society, African American children are socialized to believe that their cultur-

al currency is low relative to their Euro-American counterparts. It is in school that they begin to accept this devaluation as the way things are and eventually begin to “disidentify” with school. Disidentification comes in the form of nonparticipation in school activities, academics, and eventually dropping out of school. In self-defense, they shield themselves from an institution they perceive as intentionally inflicting injury upon their psyches, and they are subsequently thrust into the cycle of underachievement.

What must be done to eliminate the deficit of rationality in our public schools and remove the crisis of legitimation in educating African American children? Habermas argues that the legitimation crisis can be solved “by transposing the integration of inner nature in toto to another mode of socialization, that is, by uncoupling it from norms that need justification.”<sup>3</sup> In light of this claim, it would appear that schools would have to disengage from current unsuccessful means of educating African American children. These ways of operating are steeped in traditions—beliefs and rituals—that rest on a historical foundation of educational segregation and inequality. In short, teacher, counselor, administrator, and policymaker attitudes must change. This will not be an easy chore, for it requires constant metacognitive processing, akin to rewriting the script while participating in a play. To gain a greater perspective on the task at hand, attention will now be given to the efficacy of history and tradition and how they play a part in the orientation toward educating African American children.

### **Efficacy of History and Tradition**

Gadamer (1991) posits that history does not belong to us; we belong to it. In this perspective, tradition—the act of handing down—acquires power and shapes attitudes and behaviors from one generation to the next. Grounded in history, tradition sanctions the actions of the next generation based on the actions and attitudes of the previous. All education depends on this process. The role of each teacher, counselor, or administrator carries an inertia that overshadows individualism. A person who takes on the role of teacher is faced with assuming, aside from one’s own individuality, all the societal characteristics, legal charges, and cultural attributes of the position.

Rosenholtz (1991), in her study of the teacher’s workplace and the social organization of schools, would tend to corroborate Gadamer’s

claim. Her findings reveal that teachers conform to the policies, structures, and traditions of the everyday world of work that exist around them. They quickly learn how to classify items properly, perform tasks, and express sentiments in line with the tradition of the organization.

As mentioned previously, the historical legacy of education in America is rooted in acts of separatism and inequality, and these attributes currently operate in the lexicon of the education profession. A quick examination of terminology displayed in Table 1 bears witness to this fact. In the left-hand column are culturally destructive terms used in schools today to describe students or families who are subjugated to oppression, while terms in the right-hand column describe students or families who benefit from entitlement (Lindsey et al. 1999).



Table 1

**WORDS USED TO DESCRIBE OPPRESSED AND ENTITLED GROUPS**

<b>OPPRESSED</b>	<b>ENTITLED</b>
Inferior	Superior
Culturally Deprived	Privileged
Culturally Disadvantaged	Advantaged
Deficient	Normal
Different	Similar
Diverse	Uniform
Third World	First World
Minority	Majority
Underclass	Upper Class
Poor	Middle Class
Unskilled Workers	Leaders

ic performance. However, using this terminology normatively in mediating the responsibility of educators to educate all children to high academic standards guarantees success for some and failure for others. Because subjugation and oppression are integral aspects of the African American legacy, the continued use of these terms to guide the work of educators will ensure the propagation of this tradition (Ladson-Billings 1994; Freire 1990; Lindsey et al. 1999).

This is how history and tradition influence the work of educators. If left unchecked, such policies will continue to devalue African American children despite educators' best intentions. This article will next examine ways in which teachers can uncouple from norms that perpetuate the legitimization crisis. How teachers use personal reflection to improve their teaching craft as well as their ability to see color will be highlighted.

**Self-reflection to Improve Teaching**

An important step in the uncoupling process is engaging in self-reflection. Reflection is a recursive process that engages individuals to fold

In any public school in America today, one can find teachers, counselors, psychologists, administrators, and policymakers using these terms as they attempt to ensure student academ-

back on themselves to uncover blind spots that naturally occur in their field of vision. Some researchers suggest that this process of circularity enables us to discuss our blind spots and how it is that we have come to see (Maturana and Varela 1992). Lambert (1995) refers to reflection as an inner dialogue with oneself whereby a person calls forth his or her own experiences, beliefs, and perceptions about an idea.

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As a part of her own transformation, Paley (2000) maintained a journal and reflected upon her behavior, feelings, and attitudes as she taught African American children. She refers to this as a way of getting to the “hidden” curriculum, those things that are taught to children through our interactions with them (Margolis and Romero 1998). It is within the hidden curriculum that values, beliefs, and assumptions about student achievement dwell. It is here that a veiled curriculum may exist containing characteristics that contribute to the constant devaluation of African American students suggested earlier by Steele (1992). Teachers face the intense challenge of searching for these characteristics and raising them to the surface for critical examination. To examine one’s assumptions and beliefs about educating children—in particular, given the history of our country, African American children—is crucial to becoming a successful teacher of Black children.

Some individuals engage in the process of self-reflection naturally. They frequently engage in a recursive analysis of their emotions, thoughts, and actions. For most, however, this process must be a conscious activity. The following is a protocol adapted from the work of Simon Hole and Grace McEntee (1999) that gives structure to the reflective process.

*Step 1.* Collect stories. Some educators find that keeping a set of index cards or a steno book close at hand provides a way to jot down stories as they occur. Others prefer to wait until the end of the day and write in a journal.

*Step 2.* What happened? Choose a story that strikes you as particularly interesting. Write it succinctly. Avoid judgmental terms and state only the facts as much as possible.

*Step 3.* Why did it happen? Fill in enough of the context to give the story meaning. Answer the question in a way that makes sense to you. Look for the underlying causes for what happened, such as deeply seated values, beliefs, structures, processes, etc.

*Step 4.* What might it mean? Developing understanding is integral for future actions. Recognizing that there is more than one answer is an important step. Explore possible meanings rather than determine the meaning.

*Step 5.* What are the implications for practice? Consider how your practice might change given any new understandings that have emerged from the earlier steps.

Over time, teachers will find the process of self-reflection revealing about reasons for their actions and improving their practice. The following is an unfinished list of strategies that can emerge as teachers engage in self-reflection to improve upon their practice and create a more credible system for African American students.<sup>4</sup>

- Videotape instruction for critical analysis of teacher interaction with African American students to analyze critical elements of instructions: e.g., wait time, expectation, opportunities for higher levels of engagement with the curriculum, etc.
- Visit the homes of African American students in an effort to establish relationships and become familiar with the knowledge, lives, and views of African American students so that the information can be used to develop curriculum and instruction.
- Use parents as resources to learn more about their children and use their expertise to provide a culturally relevant curriculum.
- Perform an audit of the classroom curriculum materials to ensure that students are honored with literature that both reflects

positively upon African Americans and provides a sense of who they are.

- Facilitate learning by increasing variety, space, stimulus variability, and opportunity for social interaction and movement. African American students tend to focus on the social dimension of the teaching-learning process. Therefore, classroom activities should emphasize cooperation rather than competition.
- Build upon the students' use of the Black dialect in the classroom as a means of teaching language flexibility so that students can learn how to make good decisions about the kind of language to use in particular contexts.

### See Color in African American Children

Despite America's historical disdain for blackness (Elliot 1995), a great sense of strength and dignity has emerged from the identity of color among African Americans. Through the descriptor of color, African Americans blossomed culturally, socially, and spiritually (Aptheker 1951). In many instances, African Americans define themselves through color. To fail to see their color is to fail to see them (Tatum 1997). However, one of the greatest blind spots that exist in American education is the myth of not seeing color.

Often teachers and other educators express their ability to ignore color in children (Lindsey et al. 1999; Delpit 1995). These professions of color-blindness, though possibly well intended, are problematic and present a huge blind spot in orientation when educating African American children (McIntosh 1989). West (1994) eloquently argues that race matters in America. To ignore the presence of race in the fabric of American culture places African American children at risk for what West terms nihilism. He describes nihilism as the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopeless, and lovelessness.

Why would ignoring color in African American children channel them toward a state of dejection? Simply put, a critical definer of the African American experience has been color. For 350 years *Colored*, *Negro*, and *Black* have all been used, legally and colloquially, to describe African Americans, and each is a reference to color. As a result of forced socialization through the lens of color, a tradition of self-definition by this lens has been handed down to the current generation of African American children. Only within the past forty years have terms such as Afro-American and African American been

accepted as legitimate descriptors in mainstream America. "Why do Black youths, in particular, think about themselves in terms of race?" asks Tatum (1997). Her response was simple: "Because that is how the rest of the world thinks of them."<sup>5</sup>

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This point recognizes America's historical legacy and permits educators to embrace current reality as they educate African American children. Such an embrace affords teachers the freedom to see children as they see themselves and build upon their cultural attributes.

Research on successful teachers of African American children offers abundant insights into the attitude educators must take in pursuing the goal of successfully educating Black children. Successful teachers do not insist on the assimilation of African American children. They do not presume these children to be like White children who simply need a little extra help. They also understand the full impact of racism on the plight of children. Moreover, successful teachers of African American children view collective growth and achievement above and beyond individual success, regularly challenge curricular and social viewpoints that were erroneous and problematic, and view their teaching as relational and thus only as effective as their relationships with their students. As a result, these teachers engage in "culturally relevant teaching"—a pedagogy that seeks to empower their students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings 1994).

Teachers must become culturally responsive to African American children by relating academic content to their cultural backgrounds. Grounded in intrinsic motivational theory, a culturally responsive approach engages students in the academic content through the lens of the students' culture. A framework for culturally responsive teaching consists of four motivational components (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg 1995):

1. *Establishing inclusion*: creating a learning atmosphere in which students and teachers

feel respected by and connected to one another.

2. *Developing attitude*: creating a favorable disposition toward the learning experience through personal relevance and choice.
3. *Enhancing meaning*: creating challenging, thoughtful learning experiences that include student perspective and values.
4. *Engendering competence*: creating an understanding that students are effective in learning something they value.

This framework establishes core conditions for culturally responsive teaching; it is crucial to developing intrinsic student motivation. A holistic endeavor, this approach affords teachers the opportunity to plan lessons, refine pedagogy, and develop assessments that capture the innate eagerness of children to learn.

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### Conclusion

Returning to our original premise, the majority of teachers in America are White and the student population is more diverse than ever before. “Can African American children be educated in a system that delegitimizes their cultural capital?” is a question that looms large in America. If educators fail to consider ways that African American children are devalued in the current school culture, if teachers do not consider the efficacy of history and tradition in the daily rituals of teaching, and if educators fail to use critical self-reflection to surface deep-seated assumptions about race and culture, then the answer is a resounding “No, schools can not adequately educate African American students.” The educational system is at a unique nexus that goes far beyond its original design by embracing the culture of all the children it serves and thereby advancing the cultural capital of society. If schools fail to meet this challenge, African American children will continue to achieve below their Euro-American counterparts. In that case, the legitimation gap will continue its existence behind the shroud of the espoused

value “all children *can* learn,” when indeed “all children *do* learn.”

### Notes

1. C. H. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1933), 84.
2. Vivian Paley, *White Teacher* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), xiv.
3. Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 93.
4. Elizabeth Bondy and Ross, Dorene Doerre “Confronting Myths about Teaching Black Children: A Challenge for Teacher Educators.” *Teacher Education and Special Education* v. 21.
5. Beverly Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations about Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 53.

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