

# African American Children

by Ruby Burgess

---

Education in the United States has been characterized by the values of conformity, extreme competition, and high academic achievement — at the cost of social, emotional, and character development. (*Get good grades no matter the cost or method* is the general rule of thumb.) These values, particularly conformity and extreme competition, hinder some children from learning rather than helping them to learn. It has become clearer over the past 25 to 30 years that school systems in the United States are inadequately equipped with the personnel, knowledge, materials, resources, and *know how* to educate children from culturally diverse backgrounds. Yet we know that when children and their teachers share the same cultural background or when the teacher who is in an alien cultural environment is not afraid to express her own culture, the teaching act becomes easier and this environment becomes much more supportive for children.

“Differences in the ways groups think and act are more than a matter of using different words or performing different actions for the same purpose. The behavior of people varies, and the beliefs, values, and assumptions that underlie behavior differ as well. Culture influences both behavior and the psychological processes on which it rests. Culture forms the prism through which members of a group see the world and create shared meanings.” (Bowman, 1989) Therefore, a group’s culture is reflected by the group’s view of and behavior in educational settings. This brief article is an attempt to increase the sensitivity to and the awareness of parents, directors, and teachers to the cultural perspective of African American children in an early childhood environment and to share some insights about African American culture.

## How Children Learn

First, consider how African American children exhibit their culture in educational settings. Classic and current research suggests that African American children:

- are people oriented;
- view things in their entirety;
- prefer inferential reasoning;
- prefer novelty, personal freedom, and distinctiveness;
- are not word dependent but are proficient in both verbal and non-verbal communication;
- prefer oral/aural modalities for learning and communicating;
- use internal cues for problem solving; and
- rely on situational context for interpreting meaning.

## Social Orientation

One of the things that we know from the research is that our children, African American children, are highly people oriented. There is a people-to-people orientation in the African American culture that seems to override all the other cultural characteristics. There have been a number of researchers who have clarified this. De Meco in 1983 had African American and European American children look at pictures and

# Beginnings

## Beginnings

pull out pictures they thought meant school. The African American children always chose pictures that had people in them — either teachers or other children. European American children pulled out pictures that focused on the setting — desks, materials, audio visual materials; there were no people in the pictures. There is an object orientation in European Americans as opposed to a people orientation in African Americans.

For African American children the psychological and social environment is as important in the teaching and learning process as is the physical and cognitive environment.

Another study looked at what helped the children develop adaptive behaviors. In the 183 children that Yetal studied, she found that African American children preferred and used social and people skills in order to do what they were supposed to do and to help them develop adaptive behaviors.

Yet another study looked at how Black children determine what is okay and what is not okay and what they prefer in the way of stimuli. This comes from what they call face and emotions research. Black children were by and large able to determine what people were thinking by looking at their faces first, looking at their emotions. They were also better able to remember. When you asked them about events, they recounted the events based on people's faces and the emotions that were a part of the environment.

Positive development is the process of transforming a child's potential or promising abilities into actual skills or talents. It is a process initiated and sustained by the interaction of the child with his total environment and her "significant others" who are present in that environment. All of these components must work together to maximize the child's development.

It is not feasible to separate and isolate the physical and cognitive environment as early childhood education programs continue to do in order to assess program effectiveness. This is not the most effective way to assess program effectiveness for African American children. Rather, the social, emotional, and psychological nuances of the environment must also be assessed in order to determine their effectiveness for African American children. Rose Marie Duhime tells the story of a kindergarten teacher who said to a child who was African American, "I love you." The

child looked at her and said, "I wish you would tell your face."

## Program Content

Program content is also an important factor in designing educational settings which will maximize the potential of all children:

"Excellence in education must prepare a student for self knowledge and to become a contributing problem solving member of his or her own community and in the wider world as well. No child can be ignorant of, or lack respect for, his or her own unique cultural group and meet others in the world on an equal footing. We believe that this type of excellence in education is the right of the masses and not merely for a small elite." (The National Alliance of Black School Educators, 1984)

Therefore, two keys to creating educational settings which foster African American children's total development are total environmental evaluation for acceptance of cultural diversity and relevant curriculum content.

The classroom that accommodates and is responsive to the African American child is one that stresses the importance of children working with and getting along with other children, children being responsible for themselves as well as other children, and children respecting themselves as well as other children. Many times early childhood classrooms will have rules about respecting the property of others while never suggesting that children should respect the people in the environment. Conversely, African American culture stresses respect of people over respect of property. The African American value of respecting people over things presupposes that, when one respects another person, he/she will naturally respect the person's property.

## Teacher Mindset

Teachers who are responsive to African American children in their classroom are creative, flexible, and innovative. They use every method and technique that they have within their grasp to teach the children. In addition, they create new techniques and methods based upon the children's day-to-day contributions to strengthen the teaching/learning process. These teachers trust their own instincts and internal cues to read and interpret social, psychologi-

cal, and emotional nuances of the environment in order to determine if they might in some way be an alienating force in the teaching/learning process. They are not bound to a curriculum that is set up by someone else outside of themselves and their children's selves, outside of the environment. They are responsive to the African American child's culture. They are flexible enough to expect and work with the unexpected. Teachers who need to be able to predict everything that is going to happen will be in constant conflict with most children and with African American children in particular. All teachers need systematic retraining to include self-exploration of their own values and self-images.

## Affirmation of Culture

African American children need to know who they are, what their culture is; their culture needs to be legitimized.

The curriculum and subject matter in the classroom that is responsive to cultural diversity will be reflective of the cultural background of African American children. It will explore and teach African American history and culture that began in ancient Africa (Kmt) and not "slavery." Materials, children's books, and other resources will reflect African American values and perspectives. The methods and techniques for delivering the content will accommodate various learning styles and ways of interpreting meaning. Activities that require uniqueness, creativity, and innovation will be legitimized by inclusion in the curriculum. Cooperative learning as opposed to competitive learning will also be a legitimate aspect of the curriculum.

And all of us know that for the African American child culture is a real issue. Many African American adults as well as children don't like to express their own culture. They don't like to admit that they are African in origin. They have real problems with it largely due to the total environment of the country, the system, and institutional racism. But we have to legitimize these children and we have to help them understand that they, too, are due respect.

Essential to the curriculum, environment, and teaching/learning process is the emphasis on humanism and the worth and importance of **ALL** people. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in educational programs in the United States. These programs — early childhood through post-graduate

— have historically viewed African Americans as commodities, and not human beings (Hale, 1986). African people were brought to the United States as slaves (commodities) for the purpose of increasing the country's economic worth. This image continues to be a significant underlying theme of educational thought, programs, curriculum, and teaching processes.

Excellent early childhood programs will have as their major goal the eradication of the "commodity" image; they will work to wipe this image from the lives of Black children. They will build on diversity and will develop a curriculum that is culturally relevant for all of the children and that focuses on self-awareness and self-esteem. It is in the attitude — an attitude that produces growth and development in all children. Good programs will exercise and develop respect by activities which build upon diversity and maximize the potential of each child to the benefit of the child's own community and people and beyond.

## References

Akbar, Na'im. Address Before the National Black Child Development Institute Annual Conference. San Francisco: NBCDI Proceedings, 1975.

Bowman, Barbara T. "Educating Language — Minority Children," in **ERIC Digest**. Urbana, IL: ERIC Publications, 1989.

Hale-Benson, J. E. **Black Children: Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles** (Revised Edition). Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988.

Hilliard, Asa. "Equal Education Opportunity and Quality Education," **Anthropology and Education Quarterly**, 92, (1978).

McAdoo, H. P. (editor). **Black Children: Social, Educational, and Parental Environments**. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, Inc., 1985.

National Alliance of Black School Educators. **Saving the African American Child**, A Report of the National Alliance of Black Academic and Cultural Excellence. Washington, DC: NABSE, 1984.

Shade, Barbara. "Afro-American Cognitive Style: A Variable in School Success," **Review of Educational Research**, 52, 219-224, 1982.

# Beginnings

Beginnings

Shade, Barbara. "Afro-American Patterns of Cognition," in **Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) Document, #ED223741**. Urbana, IL: ERIC Publications, 1982.

---

*Ruby Burgess is the dean of instruction at Philander Smith College in Little Rock, Arkansas. She is a consultant for the Congress of National Black Churches Carnegie-Project Spirit Curriculum Development Committee and the Smith Day Care Center, Inc. in Macon, Georgia. She serves on the Arkansas Minority Teacher Recruitment Advisory Council and the NAEYC Teacher Education Advisory Panel (NCATE Folio Review Team).*