

# **Educational Differences: The Educational Backdrop of the Black Students of the 1954 Era and the Realities of Contemporary African American Students**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**This study sought to identify educational issues faced by contemporary African American Students that are different or similar (Collins, 2003) to those faced by Black Americans of the 1954 Brown (*Brown v. Board of Education, 1954*) era. This study seeks to reveal through autobiographical life story (Linde, 1993), autoethnography (Denzin, 1997), and autobiography (Smith, 1998) the stories of Black parents of contemporary African American students in an urban suburban context. This study was guided by five questions: (1) Given the social, political and educational climate experienced by Black Americans during the 1954 era, what are the beliefs, assumptions and intentions underlying the educational experiences of the contemporary African American student? (2) How have the goals of Brown been achieved by contemporary African American students? (3) How is the contemporary or post-modern African American student viewed by society? (4) Are Brown's goals still relevant to contemporary African American students? (5) If the goals are still relevant, what still needs to be done to achieve Brown's goals?**

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## **Introduction**

This study began with the understanding that the contemporary African American student's place (Gruenewald, 2003) in his or her educational milieu is shaped by his or her constructed realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the abilities to navigate the social and political landscape. It is from this place that educational knowing, engaging, and succeeding occurs (Gruenewald, 2002). This political landscape of social realities is deeply rooted in historical practices that are based on laws permitting social behaviors and legal mandates seeking to correct social ills. As classrooms in the United States

reflect the larger social norms of its society, previously held customs of separate education has changed to a common education system that places or stratifies students on uneven tracks (Activists, 1995; Bigelow, 1995; Meier, 1995; Miner, 1995). A critical dichotomy in the issue of place is the parent and child's perception of this "place" compared to the place assigned by the educational establishment.

### **Literature Review**

This study was a critical examination (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Giroux, 1992; Gruenewald, 2003; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the factors that have contributed to the educational experiences of contemporary African American students. This was accomplished through the use of autobiographical life story (Linde, 1993). Specifically, information was revealed through oral history (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Tuchman, 1998) and writings (Smith, 1998). This examination allowed me to view for meaning the contextual cultures, knowledge and actions of the self and the targeted students and their parents (Tuchman, 1998). Critical examination allowed me to consider the historical, social and economic situation (Fontana & Frey, 1998) that framed the social and political context of urban and suburban schools attended by the targeted African students. The qualitative analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1998; Miller & Crabtree, 1998) was guided by issues as generational constructs of life and educational experiences; social and political contexts that influence the interpretation of life and educational experiences; the social, political and educational climate of the two generations' experiences; and the beliefs, assumptions and intentions that are the backdrop for the educational experiences of the student of the Black American period and the contemporary African period; the differences and/or similarities that exist in the constructed perceptions of the Black American parents of their African American children; the constructed views and perceptions of each generation about their predecessors and successors; the changes needed to improve the experiences of the contemporary African American student; and, the contributions made by students of the 1954 era to the education of the contemporary African American students.

#### **The Brown Era: The Black American Period (1950-1980)**

The Black American Period from 1950-1980 (Collins, 2003) may also be characterized as The Brown Era. For the Black American student, the highlights of this period were marked by the end of legal segregation and the advent of social change. Specifically, the *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* (1954) attempted to allow Black students to sit next to White students in public classrooms across the United States. The *Brown* decision reflected the belief by the US Supreme Court that the learning of Black

students was inferior when students were educated in an all Black system. The decision further reflected the belief by the Supreme Court that Black students benefited from a superior schooling when sitting next to or being the classroom with White students (Brown et al., 1988; Turnbull, 1990).

National views of Black Americans had been constructed by others prior to this period. These held views were perpetuated during the Black American Period. The culture of the Black American at large and the student in general were not valued (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963, p. 53). The view that Black American children existed in a “culture of poverty” (Lewis, 1966, pp. 68-69) characterized the treatment many received in the schools and justified maintaining the status quo for Black American school children.

The African American family dynamics was viewed as problematic by officials (Moynihan, 1965). Specifically, African American mothers were viewed as deficient in their mothering practices and that this resulted in their children’s intellectual deficits (Klaus & Gray, 1968). Racist ideology (Jensen, 1969) provided a powerful belief system for educators of this period.

With a view of intellectual deficiency of African American children special education was considered a convenient structure to correct deficient mothering practices and problematic family dynamics. As a result of this view, large percentages of African American students were placed in special education (Dunn, 1968). Initially, the structure of special education was successful in convincing the parents of African American children “...to accept the judgment that their child is “not normal” (Tomlinson, 1995). Consistent with the national view of African American students was the constructed mental retardation category these students were placed in. Consequently, a large number of African American students were resegregated from established or White Americans (Sarason & Doris, 1979). Perceived normal students could be separated from abnormal students (Tomlinson, 1995) who were also viewed as having “low status” in the educational environment (Dunn, 1968).

Throughout this period researchers and educators began to challenge the outcomes and pejorative school experiences of African American students. The *Larry P. v. Riles* (1972, 1974, 1979, 1984, 1986) case highlighted the culmination of negative educational experiences of African Americans. Table 1 represents a partial list of these experiences.

The experiences in Table 1 were largely predicated on bias assessment (Almanza & Mosely, 1980; Duffey et al., 1981). Ironically, these assessments revealed a chasm that existed in the not only the instruction African American children received, but in the attitudes and perceptions held specifically by teachers and school personnel and society at large. The inability of society and school and their instructional agents to overcome biased attitudes and perceptions was powerful in denying students access to the academic curriculum during this period. Bias, however was the facilitating agent that implemented the hidden curriculum that resulted in the high numbers of African American students relegated to special education during this period. Contributing to unchecked bias during this period was the loss of many Black teachers from the segregated era. Many of these teachers were simply laid off from their respective teaching jobs. This pool of teachers represented a loss of understanding and skill in teaching Black students. It also represented what one described as a loss of “love” (Collins, 2003, p. 103) by teachers

who knew them. Researchers have documented this bias as differential teacher treatment (Becker, 1952; Chaikin et al., 1974; Dotts, 1978; Harvey, 1980; Oaks, 1982; Rist, 1970; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

But the question during this period was, “What were these tests measuring?” or “What content were these students deficient in?” The answer to this question was simply “acculturation” or even the stress of acculturation (Collier, 1998). Acculturation stress occurs when students are overwhelmed by a new cultural environment. The stress of fitting in or even not fitting in may cause psychosomatic complaints such as headaches, stomachaches, free floating anxiety or other ailments. Acculturation stress may interfere with not only with a student’s learning, but also their demonstration of knowledge (Collier, 1998).

Measuring acculturation included measuring class or socioeconomic status. Put another way, separating classes of students allowed for social stratification (Bowels & Gintis, 1976). It was no accident that classes such as algebra served as a gate keeping mechanism that for many students was insurmountable. Not insurmountable because of inability, but because when a student is tracked to classes such as “basket weaving” (Collins, 2003) but tested on algebra, failure is assured (Sizemore, 1978; Walberg & Rasher, 1979). This furthermore perpetuates the hierarchical socioeconomic class structure of society at large (Taylor, 1976).

Table 1

Critical Comparative Dichotomy (Adapted from Collins, 2003)

<b>Black American Period (1950s – 1980s) The 1954 Era</b>	<b>African American (1980s – Present)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disadvantaged model</li> <li>• Deficit model</li> <li>• Low status</li> <li>• Retardation paradigm</li> <li>• Biased assessment</li> <li>• <i>Larry P. v. Riles</i> (1979)</li> <li>• Jensen’s IQ theory</li> <li>• Acculturation</li> <li>• Class inequities</li> <li>• Tracking</li> <li>• Discriminatory discipline policies</li> <li>• Special education referrals</li> <li>• Tracking</li> <li>• Basic skills</li> <li>• Disparate resources between black and white students</li> <li>• <i>Brown v. Board of Education</i> (1954)</li> <li>• Belief that low income and minority students’ IQ lower than high-income and majority students</li> <li>• Correlation between race and achievement dependent on SES</li> <li>• Desegregation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deficit model beliefs</li> <li>• Bell Curve theory</li> <li>• Overrepresentation in special education</li> <li>• Disproportionality in gifted programs</li> <li>• Bias evaluation between handicapped and nonhandicapped</li> <li>• Education of poor students</li> <li>• Hidden curriculum</li> <li>• Integrated schools</li> <li>• Tracking,</li> <li>• De facto and de jure segregation</li> <li>• Inferior curricula</li> <li>• Discriminatory disciplinary policies</li> <li>• Zero Tolerance Policies</li> <li>• Results of inequitable education</li> <li>• Cognitive styles – diverse view of the world – processing of information</li> <li>• Disidentification or disassociation with school success</li> <li>• Achievement gap</li> <li>• High stakes testing</li> <li>• Hurricane Katrina</li> </ul>

**The African American Period (1980 to Present)**

Students of this period reaped the benefits of the toil of their ancestors. Time distanced students in this period from slavery and to some extent, its stigma. The hard fought benefits of the civil rights movement of the Black American Period seem to promise to remove many barriers faced by predecessors. Progress had been made. Prior to the Black American Period (Collins, 2003), the Negro was denied educational access. The subsequent Colored American was given educational access though disparate.

Black Americans even “demanded that all institutions, including the schools, more accurately reflect their ethnic cultures” (Banks, 2001, p. 27). Multiculturalism emerged from the civil rights movement during the 1960s. In striving to eliminate discrimination in the larger society, multiculturalism sought specifically to eradicate gross attitudes and perceptions about marginalized children in the classrooms of the United States. This proved to be problematic for proponents of multiculturalism. A major reason for this difficulty was the awkwardness during this period of the legal requirement to accept someone in a social setting that historically the law sanctioned to reject. The classroom, as a microcosm of society, was no different. Unfortunately, many of the issues faced by children during the Black American period persisted in the African American Period.

The perception by teachers that African American students are deficient persists during this contemporary period. Differential teaching methods continue to persist. Placement practices during the Black American Period have resulted systematic overrepresentation (MacMillian & Reschly, 1998) of African American students in special education. Disproportionate (Anderson & Anderson, 1983; Argulewicz, 1983; Educational Testing Service, 1980; J. Ford et al., 1982; Pink, 1982; Polloway & Smith, 1983; Ysseldyke et al., 1982) representation of African American students is a strong hegemonic message to society that special education is the place for these students.

Systematic underrepresentation of African American students in gifted education (Ford, 1998; Grossman, 1998; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Jenkins, 1936) is as strong a hegemonic message as the overrepresentation issue in special education. Bias in referral, screening and assessment play major roles in exclusionary practices (Ford, 1998).

## **Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology**

### **Information Collection Method**

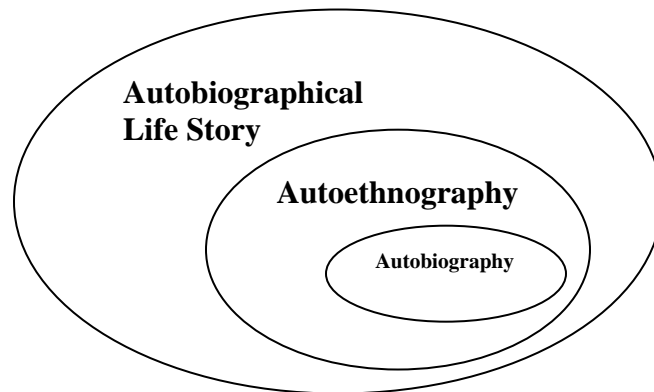
This study was a critical examination (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Giroux, 1992; Gruenewald, 2003; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the factors that have contributed to the educational experiences of contemporary African American students. Specifically, information was revealed through oral history (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Tuchman, 1998) and writings (Smith, 1998). Multiple individual and personal perspectives were utilized. This was accomplished through the use autobiographical life story (Linde, 1993), autoethnography (Denzin, 1997), and autobiography (Smith, 1998). In this life story autobiography, the primary subject and author’s writings reflect his relationship and interactions with multiple people (wife, son, daughter, community personnel and school officials). The study takes an autoethnography perspective in which the primary subject provides “a reflective self-examination by” (Creswell, 2005, p. 438) the author of events and their meaning “within his...cultural context” (p. 438). Finally, the subject provides an individual or personal account of his experiences. As shown in Figure 1, the broadest perspective is the autobiographical life story

introspection. Within this perspective is the autoethnographical introspection. The most personal and individual perspective is the autobiographical introspection.

Writings or artifacts (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) included letters and notes taken during observations and meetings. Writing also included written reflections of observations and meetings. Other artifacts included graded papers, report cards, teacher comments and communication from school officials.

### **Figure1**

#### **Relational Model of Multiple Individual and Personal Perspectives**



#### **Participants**

The participants that informed this study were comprised of two generations reflecting the experiences of the Black students of the 1954 era and contemporary African American students. Specifically, the participants were a wife and husband and their daughter and son. The participants' date of birth and years of schooling defined their respective generations. Generational experiences provided an understanding of the issues faced by individual participants as well as revealing cohort information related to gender constructed across generations.

Four participants informed this study. Two participants were the biological parents of the other two participants. Both of the parents were born in 1958 in what Collins (2003) describes as the Black American period, as well as during the 1954 era. One parent participant was male and the other parent participant was female.

Two student participations were the biological children of the parents that informed this study. One student participant was born in 1990 and one student participant was born in 1992. Student participants were female and male, respectively. Both participants were born during what Collins (2003) describes as the African American period.

Both parent participants grew up in a large metropolitan area in the state of Texas and attended urban schools. One parent (father) participant attended segregated schools through 6<sup>th</sup> grade and integrated schools from 7<sup>th</sup> through high school graduation. The

other parent (mother) participant attended segregated schools through 4<sup>th</sup> grade and integrated schools from 5<sup>th</sup> grade through high school graduation. As the mothers of both participant parents were teachers who were transferred to White schools at integration, but of the parent participants accompanied his or her mother to the integrated school. Subsequently, both parent participants were bussed to an integrated high school. Each parent grew up in different Black neighborhoods. Both parent participants were college graduates.

As both parents worked full-time, both of the student or child participants attended day care facilities from ages three months to ages nine and seven, (female and male, respectively). At ages five and three, the respective student and child participant, moved from an apartment to an urban suburban home. The female student participant attended day care facilities owned and operated by African American females through age five. At age five, the female student attended an after school program, while her brother attended an all day care program. When the male student participant began public school at the age of five, he joined his sister in attending an after school program. She attended integrated after-school day-care facilities through age nine. She then attended an after-school program provided at a predominantly African American church she attended until age eleven. Her brother attended this program until he was nine years of age.

### **Data Organization and Manipulation**

The data was organized using a file folder system (Merriam, 1988). Initially, data was organized by type: letter, notes, observations, meetings, reflections, graded papers, report cards, teacher comments, and communications from school officials. Next, I color highlighted units of data. I then sorted units of data. Using the constant comparison method, I analyzed each unit for similarities and differences. Next, I compared the data across the two generational cohorts (Linde, 1993). I then compared the data by gender, constantly looking for similarities and differences. I continued to compare data, seeking new units and larger categories. As categories emerged from the units of data, information that did not fit the original category was taken out and placed into another category. Through repeated comparison and sorting, file folders were developed using the category themes that emerged.

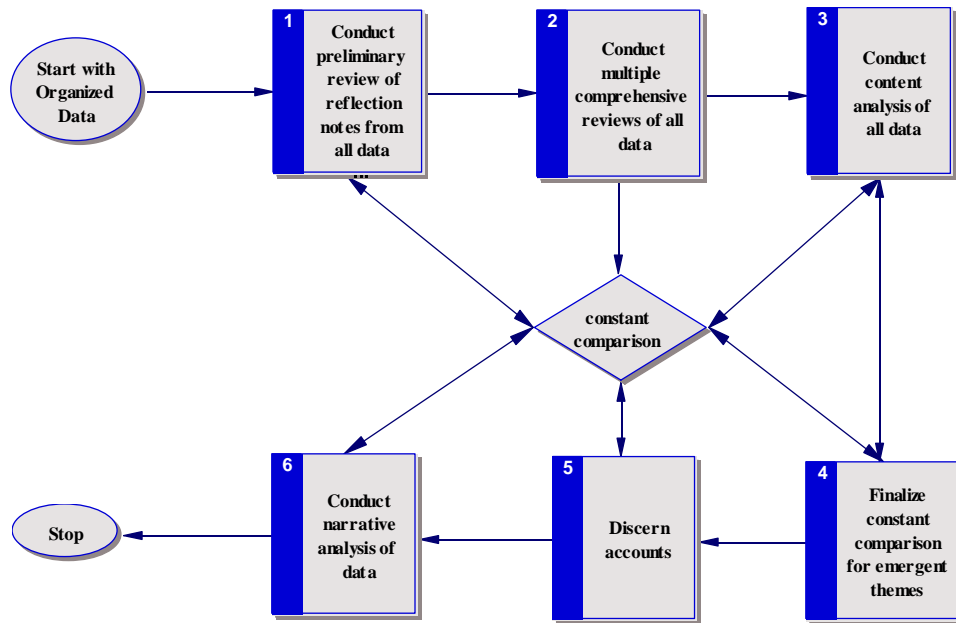
### **Constant Comparative Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing. Specifically, the process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) among generations, themes, genders, concepts, and observations were utilized to develop an understanding of the participants' experiences and realities



(Lincoln & Guba, 1985) under investigation. The data was processed through inductive analysis that involved unitizing and categorizing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Units of data were isolated. From the units, categories were formed on the basis of similarity of meaning. The constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) resulted in persistent reconceptualization and adjustment until all data units were placed into an appropriate category. Figure 2 provides a schematic of the data analysis process utilized in this study.

**Figure 2**  
**Constant Comparison Analysis Process (Adapted from Collins, 2003)**



Specifically, data information, in its smallest form, units, was identified (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Units represented information that could stand separate and distinct from other similar or different data. Similar units, however, could form a category. Categories formed with specific supporting concepts resulted in themes. Units were added and shifted and shuffled and reshuffled constantly to attain a high level of scrutiny. Consequently, as more data were collected and analyzed, the categories were refined and themes were reconceptualized. Repeated review of the data allowed the emergence of interim themes, categories, supposition and propositions (Merriam, 1988). In turn, these became the connections between and across generational members and genders. By turning the data over and over and manipulating it, constant themes emerged. The primary focus of this analysis was to make meaning of the data and thus to structure it into meaningful categories (Merriam, 1988).

## **Narrative Analysis**

All data was analyzed for content. This was accomplished by analyzing the units and categories for broader conversational constructs (Lieblich et al., 1998). Content that occupied significant participant time was marked using a colored highlighter (Brown et al., 1988). This content was significant because it not only identified elaborated narrative constructs, but provided supporting detail. These themes were marked in the transcript using a colored highlighter. From the marked data, related narratives emerged.

## **Characteristics of the Research**

### **Credibility**

I engaged in activities to ensure credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in findings and interpretations. Participant constructs across generations and gender were compared and contrasted for common and related themes. Additionally, ongoing “member checks” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314) allowed me to compare shared constructed perceptions. Member checks focused on the consistency in the interpretations of constructed narratives. Confirmation from multiple sources was sought to bear out the emerging findings (Merriam, 1988). I also engaged in ongoing “peer debriefing” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308) to maintain integrity in the inquiry and interpretation process. Discussions were held with disinterested parties regarding meaning and interpretation of specific units and categories. A memo pad was maintained to record discussions held between the investigator and other parties.

### **Transferability**

Transferability was problematic in this study. On one hand, certain surfaced experiences are consistent with historical reports. However, on the other hand, contextual settings threaten “unique historical experiences...because the results may be a function of the context under investigation....Construct effects are threats because the construct studies may be particular to the studies group” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 298). An example of this is the dissimilarity in terms of access for legally segregated schools of the Black American Period (Collins, 2003) compared to legally desegregated schools of the African American period (Collins, 2003). While segregation and desegregation comprised the Black American Period, social attitudes and perceptions prevent contextual generalizations to be made about experiences during the African American Period. Nonetheless, this study proposes that transferability might be possible because of its rich

and thick description, in future studies; but that any projected application context cannot be definitive.

### **Dependability**

Triangulation is a method of improving the probability that findings and interpretations will be found credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation is defined as “the use of multiple and different sources, methods, investigators and theories” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 305). It is “an alternative to validation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1985, p. 4). More specifically, “The combination of multiple methods, empirical material, perspectives and observers in a single study is best understood...as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, and depth to any investigation” (p. 4). This study sought to emphasize “coherence” (Linde, 1993, p. 12). This is gained through multiple relationships that support “personality, cognitive structure, social situation, and psychopathology” (Linde, 1993, p. 12). Generational and gender cohorts corroborate “culturally defined landmark events” (p. 23). Clearly, in some instances, corroboration was possible across generations and genders.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is defined as the audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study maintained two forms of documentation; historical folders and a reflexive journal.

The first form of documentation was historical folders. In these folders, information was maintained throughout the school years of the student participants. Materials that formed an “audit trail” (p. 391) were maintained. This included raw data, data reduction and analysis products and theoretical notes.

A “reflexive journal” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 319) served as the instrument through which information flowed and provided “information about methodological decision made and the reasons for making them” (p. 327).

### **Results**

Participants in this study provided significant information about their educational experiences with a focus on the contemporary African American period. Specific themes emerged. These themes provided an insight and allowed the deconstruction of contemporary educational practices. This deconstruction also offers a first hand

description and the impact of the social and political experiences of contemporary African American students. This data is laid next to the historical data of the Black American period. This study sought to unravel, through personal story, the educational perceptions of the individual students and their parents within the designated social periods across two generations.

The information that formed these narrative themes was collected in an informal manner (Giroux, 1992; Lincoln & Guba; 1985) and was supported by the educational experiences identified by Collins (2003) during the Black American and the African American periods. The data collection was accomplished by formal and informal interview. As a result of “theoretical saturation,” (Adler & Adler, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) frequency of experiences within family cohorts and across targeted periods could be established. Units of information allowed the researcher to explore discovery within the contexts under study.

Multiple narrative forms emerged from the data provided by the participants. The first set of findings presented from the analysis emerged through the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that examined unitized information provided by individual participants and family cohorts within and across periods. Second, a set of findings is presented in the narrative story form through which information is deconstructed. A major theme that emerged was educational conditions. Three subthemes emerged: (a) experiences growing up; (b) experiences as a student/observer; and (c) experiences as a parent/outsider.

### **Narrative Constructs**

Parents want the best for their children. We were no different. Expecting our first child set in motion a lifestyle change we anticipated for seven years. A miscarriage a few years earlier made this pregnancy even more valuable. Because we would be new parents, we read from cover to cover the books our doctor’s office gave us on expecting a newborn. My wife painstakingly monitored her diet by regularly eating just the right amounts of squash, broccoli, cauliflower, green beans and other vegetables she rarely ate prior to this pregnancy. She ate more fish, less meat and as prescribed by her physician, kept crackers beside our bed for an upset stomach.

We based our home purchase on location. Essentially, we moved to a home that was approximately 15 minutes from both of our jobs. Our planned community home was in an urban suburban school district that achieved top local and state achievement ranking. We knew when we moved into this community that approximately 10% or less of the district’s population was African American. Optimistically, we believed our roots in family, church and our ties to our communities of origin could fill any gaps in our school district. We also felt that our family’s background as educators would help make our children successful. Family friends also gave us a confidence of capital to be successful in our district.

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## First Impressions

With our optimism, we took our 5-year-old daughter to enroll her in half-day kindergarten at our community school. A major image we encountered was an all White office, faculty and staff. This was contrasted by the all Black custodial and mostly Black cafeteria staff. Thinking on our feet, we began introducing our daughter to the custodial and cafeteria staff. I knew that these people would be important to our daughter and if she needed protection, they would protect her. I observed my mother interact with all people when I was in elementary school. She car-pooled with a custodian, who she socialized with after work and depended on and was depended on to do things friends do such as take care of each other's children, share recipes, lunches and even borrow and lend lunch money. This friend and others who held different positions (cafeteria staff, school secretary, grounds persons, counselor, principal, teachers) was my mother's support group. As her support group, she did not worry about the treatment her children received when they attended school. I knew, as did my siblings, that these people were my parents in my parents' absence.

Unlike the disinterested responses we received from the principal, assistant principal and office staff, the custodians and cafeteria workers warmly greeted us. Interesting, as we conversed with the custodial and cafeteria staff, the principal or other White personnel redirected any custodian or cafeteria worker to another task; thereby preempting or brief conversations.

We met our daughter's kindergarten teacher. She was the school's assistant principal for our daughter's grade. As she explained her classroom rules to us, I could not help but wonder how she would manage her two jobs. When asked, she explained that because of the growth of the school, particularly kindergarten students, it was necessary to add another class. However, the school was unsuccessful in hiring a teacher on short notice. While our optimism began to fade, we decided to remain positive.

In the fall, our daughter entered kindergarten. She made many friends. She loved her teacher. She was always in high spirits and seemed to enjoy school. However, reports received from school indicated she had trouble "following" directions. After talking with her teacher on several occasions, I scheduled an appointment with the teacher. After signing-in at the front office, I went to the classroom where the teacher was waiting for me.

I met with the teacher in the afternoon, right after morning class, as this is when she functioned as assistant principal. Upon entering the classroom after the morning class, the neatness of the classroom made me wonder if children were ever here. Everything seemed to be in its place. Commercial material filled the bulletin boards. Blocks and toys were all neatly in their place. Student desks were neat and in straight rows and columns. Nothing in this classroom was out of place and the teacher was dressed immaculately.

Immediately, she told me that our daughter was too sociable and that this prevented her from remaining on task. As she talked, she explained to me that other children had this same problem. When talking about other children, she described them as "those day-care-kids" who require more structure than kids who are not in day care.

By now, my wife had joined the meeting. The teacher went on to tell us all the things our daughter could not do, but nothing she could do. One problem this teacher identified was behavior. We asked her to explain what she meant. An example she gave was when our daughter went to the restroom. She explained that our daughter made loud noises when she went to the restroom. I asked her to be more specific. She continued to be vague. Initially, I thought she meant she made noises when she had a bowel movement. Instead, and after being pressed, the teacher stated she sang loudly when in the restroom. When asked if she told our daughter not to sing in the restroom, she stated she had not. The teacher provided no explanation for not telling her student not to sing loudly in the bathroom. The teacher stated that students should know the appropriateness of certain behaviors. As in many future conversations with school personnel, we asked this teacher to explain how our daughter would know the appropriateness and the expectations of behaviors unless she was informed.

By Thanksgiving, we knew we had to move our daughter out of this teacher/principal's classroom. At a meeting with multiple district personnel, I struck up a conversation with a Black principal in my district, but at another school. I had accompanied a coworker to this principal's school on designated multicultural days; I got the impressions that she expected her teachers to be culturally responsive to the needs of children. After telling this principal who my daughter's teacher was and about her attitude and perception of our daughter, she told us to transfer her to her school.

After the Christmas break, we transferred our daughter to another school in our district. Unfortunately, our hopes were crushed and the imagined promises of a more culturally responsive environment, even with a Black principal, never materialized. We went from a teacher/principal who stereotyped children to teacher who was ineffective and maybe even incompetent. Because of the concern the new teacher's poor teaching skills, on weekends we enrolled our daughter in a commercial skill-building program.

Our daughter loved her new teacher. However, when we met with our daughter's new teacher, she told us things like, "... [your daughter] invades the other children's space...she doesn't know how to remain in her own space." When I observed our daughter, it was true, she did invade the space of others – but so did most of the other children. One or two children, who sat very still, remained in their tiny imaginary box the teacher explained as their space. Another observation I made was that our daughter was ignored in this classroom. When the teacher asked a question, she consistently called on the same students who sat near her. When asked about this practice, the teacher responded that our daughter usually did not have the correct answer. In spite of her teacher's behavior, our daughter still adored her teacher.

As on this occasion and after subsequent observations, we met with the principal. She grew increasingly annoyed with us stating to us that we should have known what we were moving into. On one of the last occasions, she told us that she had worked hard to build the "self-concept and esteem" of our daughter's teacher and that we were tearing it down. Near the end of the semester, our daughter reported to my wife that the principal called her into her office and screamed and yelled at her that she had better behave in class. The next day my wife confronted the principal, who denied the incident. Our transfer for the next year was denied.

Warnings came from veteran administrators as well as family members. They warned that we should not confront the teacher or the school because we “are not with [our daughter] when she is at school” and this could cause her harm. Of course, we did not want any harm to come to our daughter. However, we began to weigh the harm that we were observing and the projected harm predicted by others. During this time, we observed a confidence in our daughter about herself that did not generalize into her confidence about her schoolwork. Specifically, when asked to demonstrate to us an academic skill, she resisted. The confidence she began school with had dwindled. After multiple meetings and observations of our daughter in her classroom and the relationships with various teachers, I decided that not intervening would be more harmful than intervening in our daughter’s schooling.

Over the years, intervening in the form of advocating and in some instances activist activities, has been more beneficial than not intervening. On all occasions, I felt it important to know the schools’ policies and procedures regarding entering a school building and going to a classroom. I have also made it a point to insist that my children respect their teachers and administrators, in spite of their behavior. We have taught our children not to talk back or to talk in an inappropriate way to any teacher. However, I also encourage them to bring to us any problem, with the understanding that we will deal with it. They rarely bring problems to us.

On multiple occasions, I have observed both of our children in their classrooms. When our daughter was in an early grade, one of her teachers suggested in a parent teacher conference that I not inform my daughter beforehand that I would be observing her. The teacher suggested that our daughter’s behavior would change. During the conference, I informed the teacher and the administrators at the table that when I schedule to observe my daughter, not only is the teacher notified, but also my daughter. I informed them that just as the teacher is aware of the reason for my observation, I also feel it necessary to inform my daughter. This serves multiple purposes. First, the visit alerts my daughter that there is a problem and it allows her to discuss this problem in detail with her parents. I have been amazed that in most instances, that the teacher had not discussed with our daughter that there was a problem, but sent notification to us about a problem. Second, notification allowed our daughter the opportunity to change her behavior to that desired by her teacher and for me to observe this behavior. Finally, the notification allowed me to compare our daughter’s behavior to that of her classmates. This has been the most informative aspect of all observations that my wife and I have made over the years. Without fail, when we have observed our daughter, as well as our son, we have observed numerous other students in the same classroom behaving in the same manner. When asked why these students’ behavior were not problematic, most teachers chose not to respond and the issue was always dropped. One thing I always try to do after an observation is to sit down with the teacher and an administrator and discuss what I observed. Nevertheless, we observed differential discipline practices by our daughter’s teachers and by administrators as well.

We have also addressed the differential instructional behaviors of our daughter’s teachers. In the third grade, our daughter’s language arts teacher told us that a first writing draft was evidence that our daughter required special education services. She suggested that the school be given permission to test our daughter. What this woman did

not know was that my wife had a bachelor's degree in journalism and minored in English. She did not know that she had a master's degree in technical writing. She did not know that she currently teaching writing to college students. She did not know that I had a bachelor's degree in English and had taught high school English for five years. After we reviewed the draft, we asked this teacher to explain the problem with this first draft. She explained that the one paragraph paper had sentence structure problems, but did not elaborate. I explained to the teacher that for a first draft it was not uncommon and that these problems are usually worked out during the second draft revision. My wife further identified the development of the topic sentence and detail sentences.

A loud voice yelled to us, "You need to do what you are told and let us...." This voice came from our daughter's math teacher. Just as loud, I asked the teacher to explain what she meant by this statement. The principal silenced the teacher and we continued the meeting. The principal dismissed the language arts and the math teachers. We informed the principal and the remaining teachers that we did not appreciate our daughter not being taught and her teachers trying to convince us that she was the problem. We explained to the principal that we were going to thank neither her staff nor her for not teaching our daughter. Realizing that she had a situation on her hands, the principal quickly apologized for everything that had happened and of course assured us that she and her staff would do the best for our daughter.

### **Story Significance**

On the surface, the reader may be inclined to view the story as commonplace. The reader may believe that most or all children have experiences similar to that described. Even if this were true, the impact of the similar treatment on African American children has a disparate outcome. Clearly, "Policies, procedures, or practices that are neutral as written but have a disparate impact, in that they disproportionately deny opportunities to students from racial and ethnic minority groups, may have the effect of discrimination" (Markowitz, 1997). This is evident in the way feedback from teachers to our daughter in the story. Rather, she was penalized for not knowing the hidden curriculum. This alone creates achievement gaps in African American children.

As an insider, that is, someone who has taught and worked in public school systems and is familiar with school policies and procedures, securing an appropriate education is labor intensive. As parent/educators, we believe that to get teachers to teach our children, we have to fight for or wrangle appropriate instruction out of teachers. We cannot imagine the confusion and disconnect experienced by parents who do not have insider status or knowledge of the workings of schools. The required persistence alone is demanding. As the math teacher suggested in the story, our involvement is different than what she desired. Our children's schools wanted parent involvement. Initially, we thought that meant engaging in a partnership with the schools. However, what we found was that meant coming into a school and being told what to do. It did not mean providing information about our children's learning. It did not mean collaborating with



the school to make our children successful. On too many occasions, parent involvement meant participating in or sitting through “dog and pony” shows. These shows did not allow parents to provide input about the issues facing their students. An example of this occurred when a little White boy (who was also her friend) told our daughter that she could not do something because she was Black. In response, our daughter kicked the little boy and told him that she could do anything she wanted to do. After this altercation between the children, we received a call that evening from the principal. She nervously explained what our daughter had already explained to us. She wanted to assure us that this kind of thing does not happen at her elementary school. When I asked her what she planned to do to deal with the attitudes stated by the little boy, she responded by restating that that kind of thing does not happen at her school. She could not explain how it happened this time, however. I suggested to this principal that she provide diversity training to her staff. I further suggested to the principal that diversity understanding occur with her staff and the students. I explained to her that I was not surprised that the little boy stated this to our daughter. I explained that he was making public the attitude perpetuated by the varied actions of school personnel. He probably did not intend to hurt our daughter and upon reflection was probably sadden at what he had said. Nevertheless, I explained to the principal that what the little boy said to our daughter was an assault. Unfortunately, I believe the principal did not want the situation to escalate. Her goal, as has occurred with other principals, teachers and staff, was to handle us.

I gave similar suggestions to school personnel years later when our daughter and her friends told us that a student had been called a “nigger.” The principal’s response was that the situation had been contained.

### **So What Has Changed?**

Change can only occur in the presence of stagnation. Stagnation may occur to perpetuate the status quo. It may occur because society is unsure of the direction to take. Stagnation may be symptomatic of the storm about to erupt or even the evidence that the storm has passed. To some, stagnation may represent a calm that is comfortable. The call for change often occurs when society demands something different or when those in power desire change.

The social, political and educational climate experience of African Americans during the 1954 was one of change. African Americans without doubt had experienced change from previous periods. They emerged from slavery when education was legally denied. Any slave who received an education did so under great threat. Despite this threat, slaves secretly found ways to educate themselves or to be educated. However, the dominant view of society about freed slaves during this period was extremely negative and rejecting; thereby not deserving of an education. A major focus of this rejection centered on the physical being (e.g., body size and facial characteristics) of the African American.

African Americans continued to experience change as they were granted access to a separate, but equal education. The hallmarks of this period were disparate resources between Black and White students. The held negative attitudes of African Americans evolved into what scholars describe as the constructed deficits model (Banks, 2001).

No doubt the most significant change for the education of African Americans occurred during the 1954 era. This period ushered in an atmosphere of unprecedented social change. In education, this change resulted in the legal dismantling of segregated education for African American children.

As African American children integrated the schools in the United States, they came to school with the stigma of slavery and the negative attitudes held by the agents of the educational institution. They integrated schools with great courage, but were perceived as disadvantaged because of their parentage, language, community and lifestyles.

Attitudes and held perceptions were the catalyst for constructions such as biased assessment and the retardation paradigm. From these constructions emerged practices in special education that held large numbers of African American students captive in not only the educational milieu, but also limited their work potential.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In the American social and educational purview, there is in place social stratification systems that are reproduced for the purpose of perpetuating and legitimating the systems (McCarthy, 1993; Weber, 1946). These social stratification systems encompass smaller more micro systems that, in circular fashion, help to support the larger structure. Social scientists that provide discourse in this type of historical foundations include Georg Simmel, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. Issues of cultural power that emerge as a means to stratify or re-legitimate systems are provided in the discourse of Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1980). Philosophers that describe the stratification experiences of African Americans include Woodson (Woodson, 1919; Woodson, 1933), Dubois {1935 #35} and B.T Washington (Harris, 1993). Contemporary philosophers include bell hooks and Cornell West (to name only a few). Ideologies from all of these contributors imply the direct connection between the social context and educational practices. Hegemonic themes specifically connect the social context to origins in educational practices. These themes have transcended multiple generations and serves to reproduce and re-legitimize social status in the school setting.

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