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Creation of a Cultural Prism: The Key to Excellence for African American Children

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Creation of a Cultural Prism: The Key to Excellence for African American Children

Janice E. Hale

I. INTRODUCTION

The inferior quality of education that African American children receive leads to perpetual economic inequality and lack of political power to change it. There is a dimension of European colonialism in the American educational ethos. The non-recognition of the culture of African American children in main stream psychology and education practice constitutes ethnocentrism. African American culture is overridden, ostensibly to impart efficient "mainstream" education. But the process creates alienation and disconnection from the school and academic pursuits for many African American learners. The goal is to impart the same excellent out comes to all children but to find away to do it within the context of their culture and learning styles. The task for urban educators is to describe the achievement gap; delineate the causes of the achievement gap; and develop strategies to eliminate the achievement gap. Urban educators are called upon to address the dynamic character of urban life offering pedagogy that is sensitive to the special experiences, conditions and opportunities presented by a culturally diverse student body. Urban education calls for a commitment to excellence in education, inclusion and social justice.

The achievement gap literature sets forth four broad theories as to the key contributing factors to the black-white score gap. These factors areas follow:

- Genetic differences between races
 - The Bell Curve(HernsteinandMurray,1994);
- Behavioral differences
 - The Burden of Acting White(Fordham and Ogbu,1986;Ogbu, 2003);
 - The Stereo type Threat(Steele and Aronson,1998);
- Differences within family structure and economics status
 - Socio economic status and test score differences(Duncan and Magnuson,2005;
 - Impact of wealth upon the achievement gap(Orr,2003);
- Differences within the schools
 - School Quality (Phillips, Crouse & Ralph, 1998);

- Racial Bias in Testing Jencks & Phillips, 1998);
- Student-teacher relationships (Ferguson, 2002);

All of the aforementioned factors have been empirically investigated, and both proponents and critics are in full supply for each. According to Jencks & Phillips (1998), eliminating the Black-White achievement gap could be the single most important means of promoting racial equality in the United States. A comprehensive summary of achievement gap research, along with empirically based solutions for narrowing of the gap, was published by Thompson and O'Quinn (2001) on behalf of the North Carol in a Education Research Council. In order to successfully eliminate the Black-White test score gap, ten fundamental changes to educational policy were suggested as follows:

1. Provide qualified and experienced teachers to all students(Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997)
2. Maintain small class sizes in the early years(Finn, Fox, McClellan, Achilles & Boyd-Zaharias, 2006; Sanders & Rivers, 1996)
3. Establish equitable and appropriate grouping practices at the elementary level (Kulik, 1993; Slavin, 1987, Slavin, 1988)
4. Ensure equitable representation across high school curriculum tracks(Finn, 1998; Finn, Fox, McClellan, Achilles & Boyd-Zaharias, 2006)
5. Promote culturally appropriate pedagogical and discipline practice ("Author", 1982, 1986, 1994, 2001; Boykin and Miller, 1997; Delpit, 2006; Kunjufu, 2002; Skiba, Michael, Nardon & Peterson, 2002.
6. Encourage high teacher expectations of student achievement (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004, Ferguson, 2002; Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004)
7. Maintain both school and student accountability measure (Betts and Grogger, 2003; Driscoll, Halcoussis, and Svomy, 2008; Figlio & Lucas, 2004; Ladd & Walsh, 2002; Reback, 2008; Springer, 2008)
8. Adopt supportive programming, including comprehensive reforms, individual tutoring programs (Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson, 2001; Borman, Hewes, Overman & Brown, 2003; Hock, Pulvers, Deshler & Schumaker, 2001; Lauer, et. al., 2006; Wasik & Slavin, 1993)
9. Enforce desegregation of schools and programs (Clotfelter, Vigdor, & Ladd, 2006; Greenwald, Hedges & Laine, 1996; Lee, 2004; Orfield & Yun, 1999)

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10. Provide all children with high quality early childhood education (American Educational Research Association, 2005; Calman & TarrWhelan, 2005; Frede, 1995; Haskins, 2006; King, 2006; Kiep, 1007; Knudsen, Heckman, Cameron & Shonkoff, 2006; Lynch, 2007; Magnuson, Myers, Ruhm & Waldfogel, 2004; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Ramey & Ramey, 2004; Rolnick & Grunewald, 2007; Winter & Kelley, 2008; Wong, Cook, Barnett, & Jung, 2008)

Paige and Witty (2010) offer advice about what authentic African American leaders must do to eliminate the achievement gap. They correctly observe that the achievement gap is a "complex phenomenon that has powerful tentacles, buried deeply not only in school quality but also in African American home and family life and in African American community sociocultural life"(p.154). They state further that without having a thorough knowledge of the problem and any kind of sound theoretical foundation, scarce resources, precious time and irreplaceable emotional energy are waste don't-conceived initiatives.

Understanding the learning types of African Americans produces a path toward demystifying African American sociocultural life and gleaning instructional implications. There is a plethora of creative studies that tie instructional practices to the learning styles of African American children (Durodoye, 1995; Berry, 2003; Moody, 2004; Parsons, 2005; Cantrell, 2006; Emeka, 2006; Bailey, 2007; Carter & Haskins, 2008; Duskins, 2012). This is an area of inquiry that has waxed and waned in popularity over the past 40 years. This article advocates that scholars take the time to strengthen the science that undergirds scholarship on the learning styles of African American children. A detailed discussion of problems in definitions of learning style, problems in the creation of the science to empirically document learning style, problems with instruments used in empirical studies, is provided in Author, (2016).

II. CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE CULTURAL PRISM

My current thinking is that to analyze the academic challenges faced by African American children, we need a broader concept that I am going to call a **Cultural Prism**. The concepts of learning style and cognitive style have become obtuse and muddled for our purposes. The nomenclature and specifics of the behavioral processes that have been identified by existing instruments make it very difficult for teachers and administrators to absorb and translate them into practice. When I originally wrote ("Author" 1982), I was seeking to develop an argument that would be heuristic and open up a fertile path of scholarship. I now feel that this perspective is diminished when it is limited to classroom pedagogy, especially because there are a panorama of components related to schooling that

contribute to a child's educational success and achievement. All are impacted upon by culture. There is a need for a **Cultural Prism** in developing strategies to work effectively with African American parents; design effective classroom management strategies; promote nurturing child behavior management; eliminate student push out from high school; intervene in child failure; understand distinctive patterns of performance in particular subject matter areas, on assessment measures and as mediated by gender.

Du Bois (1903) said that "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world . . ." It is my position that the scholar/educator who is proficient in utilizing the **Cultural Prism** must be gifted with a Du Boisian first-sight, second-sight, third-sight, fourth-sight and fifth-sight which are all necessary to decode the difficulties African American children are experiencing in school. The professional who utilizes this **Cultural Prism** must be proficient in each area and must be able to move seamlessly between each dimension. If a phenomenon is not explained by one dimension, the expert should be able to shift to the subsequent-sight for a salient hypothesis. The reason we are stuck where we are is that we have experts who can operate in only one dimension or the other and maintain that the answer is found in the only dimension they understand and have commerce with. This is the reason why we don't have the luxury of only having scholars collaborating with scholars of one discipline and practitioners working in isolation in school districts rejecting any meaningful collaboration with scholars. To construct this approach, we are going to have to create a dynamic partnership across disciplines and between scholars and practitioners.

This broader concept of **Cultural Prism** requires:

1. *First-sight*: an understanding of African and African American history and culture as a context for behavior.
2. *Second-sight*: an understanding of the socio-economic exigencies of African American life.
3. *Third-sight*: an understanding of African American child development, learning, cultural and behavioral styles.
4. *Fourth-sight*: an analysis of statistics related to achievement patterns of African American children.
5. *Fifth-sight*: an ability to identify discrepancies in educational practice that affect African American children which constitute malpractice. These discrepancies apply to instructional practices in addition to administrative decisions.

a) *Specifically*

First-sight: an understanding of African and African American history and culture as a context for behavior. While this dimension does not include race as a

biological factor, it includes an understanding of racism. Any scholar who seeks to interpret the educational profile of African American children must be grounded in the history and culture of African and African American people. There can be no valid oppression-blind analysis applied to the situation of African American children. All of the ramifications of racism are included in this category.

Second-sight: an understanding of the socioeconomic exigencies of African American life.

This dimension incorporates social class considerations in interpreting the achievement patterns of African American children. This dimension is essential because of the extent to which the largest numbers African American people have emerged from and been relegated to the lower social class in America. This dimension also encompasses the need to create the science to accurately assess social class as it relates to school achievement for African American families. This issue is discussed in more detail in Author (2016).

Alexander, Cook and McDill (1978) contended that tracking serves the interests of higher status parents who exploit such mechanisms to ensure their children's success. Higher status parents know how to manipulate the system to achieve their children's placement in gifted or honors tracks. They know the significance of these placements in obtaining admittance to the most prestigious colleges which result in their children entering networks that improve the chances that they will be recipients of prestigious and high paying jobs.

According to Alexander, Cook, and McDill (1978) following are the detriments of tracking for children of lower socioeconomic status:

- Tracking channels scarce resources to those who have the least need for them.
- Students in non-college tracks are denied access to students, teachers, counselors, and information that would broaden their interests, challenge their abilities, and improve their performance.
- Non-college tracked students are discouraged from competing with those students who are initially more advantaged, and thus are not required or even encouraged to strive for academic excellence.
- Students in non-college tracks are looked down upon as being unintelligent. As a result, they fail to develop attitudes and insights concerning education and institutional functioning that would allow them to compete successfully with their more advantaged classmates for post-schooling resources and rewards.
- Non-college track students are shunted into curricula that will impede their prospects for success in college. If they persevere in their college aspirations, they will be relegated to junior and

community colleges which will further diminish their expectations.

- Being in a college track increases the probability of applying to college and enhances one's prospects for being admitted. Thus, sorting processes within high schools may substantially affect the later attainment of children from lower or higher socioeconomic strata (pp. 47-66).

In addition to inequities within schools, there are the ever present socioeconomic inequities of school funding. Howard Horton (1994) pointed out that:

U.S. education is primarily a state function, therefore each state has the obligation to see that all school districts are equally funded, that is, per pupil expenditure should be equal for all. Per pupil spending in Boston public schools should be comparable to that in the public schools of Brookline, Cambridge, Newton, or any other Massachusetts community. However, it appears that Massachusetts citizens and those of other states prefer to spend \$35,000 to \$50,000 per year to keep an African-American youth incarcerated than \$10,000 a year to educate that youth. (p. 267).

Another example drawn from this dimension is the discussion in ("Author" 2001:131 of the instructional accountability infrastructure that is derived from the volunteer activity of White mothers in affluent school districts. James Comer's (1999) school reform model acknowledged the manner in which excellence is delivered to White children through the volunteer leadership offered by White mothers. However, his solution of trying to import that same strategy to transform inner city schools didn't work. The point in understanding these educational discrepancies is not to employ a one size fits all solution. One size fits nobody. The point is to see an essential element for success that is present in one setting and missing in the other. The next step is to construct a strategy that is culturally appropriate in the African American setting that fulfills that function. These culturally appropriate strategies are what I describe in the Culturally Appropriate Pedagogy school reform model contained within that volume ("Author" 2001: 131).

The foundations that commissioned, funded, and ordained Dr. Comer's work, essentially want to wave a magic wand and "train" lower income African American mothers to function in their children's schools like White upper income mothers do, who are highly educated and supported economically by White husbands. No effort is made to provide the lower income African American mothers with the educational and economic assets that would transform their lives overall, enabling them to function comparably in that context. They just want to change the one thing -- how they relate to the schools. The pressures and exigencies of life at each social class level for Black

mothers are delineated in detail elsewhere (“Author” 2001:135-136; Author, 2016). The gatekeepers in this society want to tinker around the edges instead of creating fundamental change.

The Comer Model is an example of identifying cultural discrepancies in educational settings, but not going far enough in creating a *culturally appropriate solution* to rectify the situation. This is not the fault of the Comer team. Their limitation is that they viewed the landscape overlooking the **Second-sight**. They took it as far as they could, with good intentions.

Third-sight: an understanding of African American child development, learning, behavioral and cultural styles. This sight involves a grounding in empirical research related to African American child development that is not included in mainstream texts. (“Author” 1982) was a stab at trying to pull together elements of African American child development that pertain to learning. A comprehensive volume on all aspects of African American child development is clearly called for. “How to teach Black children” manuals and “How to parent Black Children” books do not fulfill this category. It is difficult to achieve a grounding in African American child development from reading bits and pieces of empirical studies distributed over an infinite number of publications. There should also be course offerings in the academy that offer a comprehensive overview of African American child development and pedagogy.

Fourth-sight: an analysis of statistics related to achievement patterns of African American children. Every educational entity has data. These data are trotted out by everyone. However, there seems to be a limitation in the ability of school districts and advocacy organizations to apply a **Cultural Prism** to the interpretation of these data. When there is no culturally appropriate interpretation of the achievement data and patterns, there is no subsequent creation of remedies and interventions – only hand wringing.

A simple example of the ways in which school districts and other collectors of data can never create solutions is in the fact that they often report data by ethnic group and by gender but not by **ethnic group by gender**. That is, they can divide data between males and females in one data set. They can also give you a breakdown of achievement by grade level and by ethnic group. However, if you ask for data on Black males and Black females, the data is not available.

There is a chapter in my forthcoming book in which I delineate the work I did with a Texas school district in explaining why African American children’s performance fell below that of Hispanic, white and Native American children during an intervention.

The school district did not have a data set that compared the performance of African American boys compared to African American girls. I pointed out to them that the differences in patterns by gender were

extremely important in figuring out what was driving the variance between ethnic groups. My team thought deeply and came up with an entity outside of the school district that had the race by gender break down. Through swift work, they were able to have that data set dropped off at our work site for my review. I was able to show them that a whole new world opened up when we could break down the ethnic patterns by gender. Just the fact that this school district did not even keep the data of ethnic group by gender blocks a significant path to interpretation and intervention.

The educational difficulties of African American children are well documented. There are advocacy groups who owe their entire existence to sounding the alarm over the statistics they collect and lament. However, because they do not have the **Third-sight**, the beat goes on. The statistics get worse and they collect more contributions for their organizations. However, nothing improves for African American children.

The work of Dr. Ivory Toldson (2008, 2011) is an example of this dimension. Dr. Toldson, a professor at Howard University is a Senior Research Analyst for and his work is funded by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. His scholarship is highlighted as an example of this dimension because he accessed existing data bases and subjected them to statistical analyses that revealed new findings and insights. His studies explored factors that statistically improve the educational outcomes for African-American males by analyzing academic success indicators from four national surveys: *Health Behavior in School-age Children* (HBSC: N=1225), *National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement* (NCVS-SCS: N=849), *National Survey of American’s Families* (NSAF: N=2497) and *National Survey on Drug Use and Health* (NSDUH: N-1208).

The Executive Summary reports that the research adheres to the standards for *Scientific-based Research*, which are mandatory for application to federal educational policy and academic instruction. This research:

1. applies systematic and objective procedures;
2. uses empirical and experimental methods;
3. involves robust data analyses that have the statistical power to test hypotheses and justify conclusions;
4. uses valid data and corroborates findings across multiple measurements, and
5. has been subject to peer review by independent experts. The findings will assist policymakers, educators, school advocates and families to plot the path to academic success for school-age African-American males.

Please review the summary of the presentation of Dr. Erika D. Taylor, Senior Research Analyst, Center for Great Public Schools, National Education Associat-

ion, Washington, D.C. at the ISAAC Think Tank where she addressed this issue: <http://africana-children-isaac.org/research/journal/archives/133/v1i2directors.php>

When I served as a consultant with the aforementioned Texas school district to explain the lower performance of African American children, we reviewed the issue of poor performance on an assessment of eighth grade mathematics. I raised the question of which math courses each group had taken prior to taking the test. There was no repository for such data. At my suggestion, my team collected that information by creating a tally from school records. We found from our data collection that many of the White children who scored well on the test were taking Algebra II (had taken Algebra I and Geometry) and most were in classes on one of the three levels of courses above basic eighth grade math (Algebra I, Geometry or Algebra II). None of the African American children were enrolled in any course higher than basic eighth grade mathematics. These “data” reframed the question of why the African American children were performing poorly (on the math proficiency test) to the question of where one needs to be in the sequence of mathematics classes to perform well on the test. It then becomes important to examine strategies for getting African American children on track to begin Algebra in at least the 8th grade.

I always say that who takes Algebra and when they take it is the most political issue in education. I was once in Kansas City for a consulting assignment and spoke with an educator who pointed out to me that most of the fundamental mathematics concepts are imparted to children by the 3rd grade. In 4th and 5th grade, the children just learn how to multiply and divide with 3, 4, 5, digits. In 5th, 6th, and 7th grade math covers marginally significant concepts related to basic math. He said that this was originally placed in the curriculum because at the turn of the 20th Century, most pupils were marking time until they could drop out of school in the 7th grade and join the workforce. Algebra was reserved for the 8th grade because it was a college preparatory course. So, there has historically been a divide between those who dropped out in the 7th grade and those who took Algebra in preparation for college.

When my son was in an elite private elementary school (:Author” 2001) he was given the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in the 4th and 5th grades. On his 5th grade test, he scored 1 grade above grade level in mathematics. On that basis, he was accelerated in math in such a way that he began Algebra I in the 8th grade. However, his White male friends in the class scored higher, *I was told*, and were accelerated in such a way that they began Algebra I in the 7th grade. This is how the acceleration works that results in White children moving through the mathematics sequence and having more courses under their belts when they take the 8th grade mathematics test. This has nothing to do with

African Heritage Theory of culture or even African American child development. This insight comes from being able to put on 3-Dimensional glasses and see through discrepancies in the collection of and interpretation of educational data that affects African American children. This is the **Fourth-sense**, a dimension that must be a part of the **Cultural Prism**.

Fifth-sight: an ability to identify discrepancies in educational practice that affects African American children. These discrepancies apply to instructional practices in addition to administrative decisions.

This dimension stems from identifying educational malpractice that is perpetrated against African American children. It is essential that educators are made aware of micro and macro expressions of such malpractice. In (“Author” 2001) I gave examples of **micro** malpractice in the episodes I reported in the treatment of my son in an elite private school. In my forthcoming book, I will present in detail a report I prepared as a consultant for a Texas school district that gives examples of the **macro** expressions of such malpractice in the treatment of African American children. In some cases, the malpractice is not intended -- it is defacto, but malpractice, nonetheless.

Jere Brophy (1983) described a protocol of interactive behaviors of teachers who, for whatever reasons have low expectations of their students. The research shows that teachers tend to:

- demand less from low-expectation students (“lows”) than from high expectation students (“highs”).
- wait less time for lows to answer questions.
- give lows the answer or call on someone else rather than try to improve the lows’ response through repeating the question, providing clues, or asking a new question.
- provide lows with inappropriate reinforcement by rewarding inappropriate behaviors or incorrect answers.
- criticize lows more often than highs for failure.
- praise lows less frequently than highs for success.
- fail to give feedback to lows’ public responses.
- pay less attention to lows and interact with them less frequently.
- call on lows less often than highs to respond to questions.
- seat lows farther away from the teacher than highs.
- use more rapid pacing and less extended explanations or repetition of definitions and examples with highs than with lows.
- accept more low-quality or more incorrect responses from low-expectation students.
- attempt to improve more on poor responses from highs than from lows.
- interact with lows more privately than publicly.

- in administering or grading tests or assignments, give highs but not lows the benefit of the doubt in borderline cases.
- give briefer and less intuitive feedback to the questions of lows than to those of highs.
- use less intrusive instruction with highs than with lows, so that they have more opportunity to practice independently.
- when time is limited, use less effective and more time-consuming instructional methods with lows than with highs.

Overall, Brophy (1983) indicates the following in relation to differential treatment of ability groups and/or tracks:

- that teachers are more demanding of and give longer reading assignments to their high groups. Teachers interrupt low group students more quickly when they make a mistake in reading. Teachers are more likely to give the low group students the word or prompt them with graphic or phonetic cues rather than semantic or syntactic cues that are designed to help them intuit the word from its context;
- that with low groups, teachers were observed to have been less clear about their objective, *to make fewer attempts to relate the content of their courses to students' interests and backgrounds*, to be less reasonable in their work standards, to be less consistent in their discipline, and to be less receptive to student input;
- that high track classes have teachers who plan and implement more independent projects and tend to introduce more higher-level and integrative concepts. *Low track teachers stress more structured assignments dealing with basic facts and skills*;
- that high track classes are seen more as an academic challenge, so teachers plan them more thoroughly. Low track teachers, in contrast, are less well prepared and are much *more likely to spend time correcting papers or allowing students to do activities of their own choosing rather than teaching academic content* (pp. 631-61).

An article by Eva Chun (1988) identifies dimensions of educational practices that discriminate against African American children. Chun points out two themes that become intertwined in the areas of ability grouping and tracking that negatively affect children in the lower socio-economic strata. She identified two themes:

1. socioeconomic status bias in educational policies and
2. preference given to intellectually-advantaged students rather than to non-college track students.

The focus of her analysis centered upon ability grouping and tracking in classrooms. She defined ability grouping as the sorting of students into instructional

groups based upon alleged differences in ability. She also pointed out discrepancies in teacher expectations about the present and future academic potential of students. She documented the self-fulfilling prophecy which is the tendency for students to become what teachers expect them to be. Chun also reviewed the research that documents the effects of race and socioeconomic status on teacher expectations that contribute to the self-fulfilling prophecy effect.

III. CONCLUSIONS

It is my contention that we, who want to affect change for children have *to think outside of the funding*. Some of the organizations that receive corporate funding with boards dominated by persons from corporations have had their missions reduced to healthy snacks and jumping jacks. A central problem is that in the words of James C. Young, Professor at Clark Atlanta University, "Everybody can do education." Every single person alive feels that they have the solution to educational problems. Bill Gates, who dropped out of Harvard and created Microsoft feels that by virtue of his wealth, that he knows more about education than professional educators.

The recommendations for future research are implicit in the article. Numerous references are made to the learning styles of African American children in scholarly article (Durodoye, 1995; Williams, 1998; Berry, 2003; Moody, 2004; Parsons, 2005; Cantrell, 2006; Emeka, 2006; Bailey, 2007; Carter & Hawkills, 2008; Duskills, 2012). This article advocates that scholars take the time to strengthen the science that under girds scholarship on learning styles of African American children. Specifically,

1. Need for a precise definition of what constitutes the learning styles of African American children. There is a need to reconcile the different terminologies that are describing the same thing;
2. Creation of instruments to measure such a construct instead of using instruments that are available but were not created for that purpose;
3. Need to resolve the imprecision in the measure of social class as related to achievement patterns of African American children;
4. Need to bring an interdisciplinary prism to designing interventions that emanate from achievement gap data.

My belief is that everything we do should be directed toward fighting for educational excellence for African American children. Closing the achievement gap is only the first step. As V.P. Franklin (Hale, 2001, Foreword) has stated, our goal must be to prepare African American children for their leadership role among African peoples throughout the world in the twenty-first century. Educational mastery and excellence are the first steps toward that end.

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