2014

# It Takes a Village! Culturally Relevant and Sustainable Education for African American Preschoolers

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# CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

**ICUE**

## Montego Bay, Jamaica
### November 6-8, 2014

**UNC CHARLOTTE**
The Urban Education Collaborative

## International Conference on Urban Education
*"Building and Sustaining Global Partnerships for Learning & Development"*

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## Introduction

National educational reform efforts are now focusing on improving the quality of and accessibility to quality early childhood programming for children to decrease economic and achievement gaps. However providing opportunities for quality early childhood programs for low-income children is not a new phenomenon. Head Start, comprehensive school readiness programs was launched almost 50 years ago to provide quality preschool programming and services for children and families living in poverty[3]. Nationally, 48% of children under the age of five live in poverty with 66% of Black children living in low-income families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2014). The state in which this study took place, 77% of young Black children live in low income families, and have the least access among cultural groups to high quality educational experiences and opportunities for success (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2014).

Current early childhood intervention literature tells us the associated risk factors with living in high poverty urban communities such as disparities in access to quality health care, high levels of toxic stress, exposure to societal violence and low parental education has been linked to challenges in pre-school readiness. However, high quality childcare can improve children's cognitive, social and emotional development (Walker, Wachs, Grantham-McGregor, Black, Nelson, Huffmin, & Richter, 2011). Yet, what still puzzles many educational reformers is that an achievement gap still exists between minority children and their White peers even when low income and the associated risk factors are a shared reality cross culturally (Lee, 2002). Therefore, an important question, is asking why or how White children from low-income families have greater and longer lasting achievement outcomes than their minority peers who were also recipients of 'high quality' early childhood experiences? In addressing this question, the answer lies in how high quality has been defined in traditional early childhood research and literature.

## Measures of Quality Care

How is quality defined in early childhood programs? General consensus is that quality programs provides infants, toddlers and preschoolers with stimulating and responsive environments that enhance their cognitive, social, and language development and are empirically linked to improve young children's social and cognitive outcomes (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2005). There are several instruments that have been used by childcare facilities, licensure and accreditation agencies to measure the amount of stimulation in the care environment and sensitivity of the care provider. For example, the most widely used and popular measures of quality in the center classroom are the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) (ECERS; Harms & Clifford, 1980) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (LaParo, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). However, there is a contested debate in the field on whether quality measurement tools such as ECERS and CLASS a) reflect White, middle class values, b) is appropriate for children from other cultures and c) supports the socio-cultural development of young children.

## Framework: Culturally Relevant Education

This study draws upon a theoretical framework that quality in early childhood education is defined within the context of children's ethnic and linguistic diversity. For example, scholars contend that practices rooted in communal rather than individualist goals and music contribute to the success and advancement of African

American children (Hilliard, 2000; King, 2004). Furthermore, social cultural theory views learning as culturally mediated. Therefore, looking through the lens of the child requires teachers to implement curriculum and instructional practices that are culturally sensitive and relative to the child's experience (Ladson-Billings, 2014).

To effectively implement a culturally relevant and sustainable pedagogy, teachers and early care programs must first believe that all students can succeed, maintain an affirming student-teacher relationship and see excellence as a complex standard that accounts for student diversity and individual difference (Paris, 2012). Culturally relevant pedagogy (CPR) connects classroom learning to children's home experiences and native languages (Ladson-Billings 2014). This cultural understanding of students (family traditions, customs, etc.) alone, however, is not sufficient. Culturally relevant teachers help students make connections between students' community, national, and global identities and the socio-political constructs that influence these identities (Paris, 2012). It also encourages children to work collaboratively and expects them to teach and take responsibility for each other (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014). This research therefore explored how teachers and parents in a predominantly African American early childhood program implemented CRP and supported young children's social and cultural development.

## Research Methodology

An ethnographic case study approach was used to explore the research questions:
- What are teachers and parents beliefs about and experiences with culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) within an ethnically diverse early childhood program?
- How are children's socio-cultural development and awareness encouraged in a quality early childhood program?

The study took place in a quality, ethnically diverse childcare center in the Midwest for one year (child age range 18 months.- 5 yrs.). Participants were 19 children, 10 parents, 4 teachers (lead and assistant teachers) and one program director with a total sample of 34 participants. The children and families served at Imani's Child Development Center (pseudonym), a faith based program, were predominately African American and all children spoke English. Two children were from Sudan, Africa and were bilingual, one child was White. Imani's Child Development Center (CDC) was located within a historically urban, African American community in which a majority of families are at or below the poverty threshold. Imani's CDC was physically located within Mt. Calvary Baptist Church (pseudonym), one of the largest Black churches in the state. 20% of the children and families who attended Imani were also members of Mt. Calvary.

Data sources included 6 descriptive memos of CLASS observations (LaParo, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004); 3 individual teacher interview transcripts, one parent group interview transcript, 7 observational field notes (6 classroom and one community). NvVio was used to code and categorize emergent themes derived from the data sources. A two-tiered coding system was used to analyze the interview transcripts, observational field notes and descriptive memos of survey data. Data were divided into meaningful units consisting of phrases in interview transcripts or written records anywhere from one sentence to a page and a half. These data units were indicative of the participants' experiences and beliefs in supporting children's socio-cultural development. Member checking occurred during each phase of data collection.

## Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the beliefs and experiences of teachers and parents within a high quality predominately African American early childhood program. By focusing on culturally relevant practices we were able to examine how participants helped to support young children's social and cultural development. Findings suggest that teachers and parents have a shared goal of academic success and social/emotional skill development by way of having high expectations for and building responsive and

affirming relationships with children. Participants identified the collective responsibility of the 'village' and 'other mothering' in helping to expose young children to positive images of Black people to counter future subtractive experiences and also negative stereotypes prevalent within the Black community. During the parent group interview, one father expresses why Imani CDC was the best early learning environment for his young Black children:

> I have 3, the other 2 are here…..They're older. They just took off. They all went here and did the preschool. It's more like a positive image of themselves… I'd like to just get them off and start off on the right track of seeing positive images other than me and my wife, my family, whatever... African Americans in [city, state] doing positive things because you just turn on the TV and you'll see all this mess that they get bombarded with every day about how it's bad and you have to be this way or you have to act this way to be Black and cool. We brought them to [Imani's CDC] to start them off with these positive images and this is what reality is, you know. I think that was one of the biggest things the teachers—we know the teachers and talk to them anytime; you know they're developing their social skills.

Furthermore, evidence of CRP in teacher's connectedness with students and practices such as multi-literacies responsive to the unique cultural learning styles of AA children was evident across data sources. Culturally relevant principles were a shared philosophy of education and practices at Imani CDC. These practices replicated that of a traditional 'African village' in which the elders taught, responded to and supported the younger members of the village. Accordingly, when asked about the exceptional educational outcomes her program had for the young children she serves, the center director expresses a focus on collective responsibility by stating:

> It starts with and it has to be that parent involvement is the key to your success. A higher level of expectation. I had this conversation last week with a parent and another director. The question was "How are you so sure about your day-to-day operations with your staff?" I said "Because my expectation is that they mirror my image." I'm very empathetic. I'm very engaged with my families. I'm very involved with the kids. I'm just involved in the community. I take a vested interest in their success and my staff has taken up that on as our moral compass for how we operate.

While parents and teachers stressed the importance of the village and collective responsibility in educating the young Black child, findings suggest challenges still existed between parent and teacher perceptions of effective communication between home and school. Such finding tells us the need for culturally responsiveness to also extend to families. In other words, efforts are needed by adults within the village to build positive and affirming relationships with one another.

## Scholarly Significance of Work

Research suggests children from high poverty communities who receive high quality early childhood education and intervention increases preschool readiness (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2005). This study explores further how the presences of culturally relevant practices is integral in sustaining the successful educational outcomes and access to quality early childhood education provided to young children and their families. Approximately 12.5 million children ages 0-5 are enrolled in child care settings (Laughlin, 2010). More than 1.3 million childcare providers care for these children in a variety of early care and education settings including center and home-based care. Therefore, this research attempted to add the experiences and voices of preschool teachers, children and families to the scholarship on culturally relevant education.

Implications of this work also suggest a need to further explore how Black teachers, directors and parents of young children are working collaboratively to develop academically and culturally resilient children who are equipped with the tools and skills to continue along a trajectory of success, especially if faced with less culturally responsive teachers and quality educational environments as they enter primary school.

Future research could extend the study to explore further the role Black owned childcare centers have in educational advocacy for children and families once they enter school.  Research could also explore how quality early care programs implement CRP while also maintaining licensure status, which often requires programs implementing culturally subtractive classroom measures and child assessments.

Nevertheless, this research challenges us to band together as a village of researchers and educational professionals to be inclusive of our youngest students and their families as we explore issues of educational equity and opportunity within high poverty urban communities.

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