

## Conclusions: The Future of Family Involvement in Schools in African-American Communities

Anne Juhasz, Ph.D.  
Professor Emeritus  
Loyola University

The time is right for us to present new voices and new views of family involvement in schools. Four decades have passed since Martin Luther King's landmark speech. We can use it as a beacon for our vision of the future of African-American children and families. This is our opportunity to build on his "field of dreams", and we must seize the moment. As educational architects, it is our task to draft a plan reflecting our vision and to spell out the basic principles and the sound theoretical framework supporting our design. An open model leaves room for future expansion, change, revision, and progress. Research and lessons from the past can guide us as we begin our dream work and assemble our team. This dream work — the game plan, and the game itself — is exciting and challenging. This project is more worthwhile than any we have attempted previously. The stakes are high. The future of our children and our nation hang in the balance. This is serious business; but, we are ready, and there is hope. The lights have been turned on, and the future looks bright. We now have resources that were not available when King delivered his speech. Today, African Americans are more visible and more successful in education, business, and professional arenas.

Publicity and promotion of "It Takes a Village to Raise a Child" and the "Let No Child Be Left Behind" projects raised awareness, interest, and support from communities and governments. Theory and research in the social sciences and education provide developmental and philosophical foundations and recommendations for methodology and program design. Benefits, barriers, and problems related to family involvement in schools have been identified, and relevant government publications are readily available.

It is our responsibility and our mission to make the dream become a reality. Moreover, it is time to expand the "field of dreams" and to replace the dark glasses clouding our view with multi-focal lenses (which clarify our vision of a positive future for all children and all families). King's dream can become a reality. To believe is to achieve, and this is do-able. It will make a difference because what impacts on the least of us affects all of us.

### A Plan for the Future

The future of family involvement in the schools rests with today's teachers and parents who will take what they have learned from the past, establish the philosophical foundations to guide their interactions, incorporate child and family development theory and research into their plans, and use educational, psychological, and sociological constructs and methodologies in their applications (see Sternberg, 1998). What are the primary components of this plan?

- The major dynamic in the action plan for teachers and parents is *change*. Those with whom they interact, the settings in which they function, and the world they live in all are constantly changing.
- Teachers and parents will develop a guiding philosophy and use it to plan and implement change.
- Teachers and parents will clarify their picture of those involved in the partnership and define the partnership for today's world.

- Teachers and parents will direct their work—to teach, to research, to serve — toward the goals of family/school involvement.
- Teachers and parents will live in the present and dream of the future.

### **Our Philosophy**

The guiding philosophy of Livingstone College's family involvement initiative rests on the principles of equality, respect, and inclusion. "Equal" is not "same". Respect knows no boundaries — color, gender, race, and religion do not determine who should be valued. Inclusion in the sense of belonging, acceptance, and cooperating in collaborative teams is the key to involvement. From this foundation come rules directing and governing our actions: (1) dos and don'ts, (2) similarities — not differences, (3) positives not negatives, (4) strengths not weaknesses, (5) successes not failures, (6) equal but not the same, (7) flexibility and change not status.

### **Families and Children**

An inclusive concept of family is necessary, whether "parent", "guardian", or "caregiver". No universal definition exists. Its composition is constantly changing, and we must be on common ground if we are to communicate effectively and interact productively. McCreary's (2002) research on family composition and healthy family functioning of low-income, African-American, single parent families of young children found these attributes that define family membership: they share emotional attachment, they have enduring relationships, and they help each other in tangible ways. Also, these characteristics, and not wealth, determined family stability and defined quality of life style of a "functional" family. Participants in school involvement should fit this description, and these guiding principles will apply to all who fulfill the role(s) of "significant other" to youth. We assume that all significant others want a good life for their children; all children are attached to their significant others; all families have a right to a place in society; all youth and their families have value and potential; the significant other is a child's primary teacher; and, the child is an important family member. These characteristics form a foundation of strength for African-American and other minority youth and their extended personal and social, including educational, networks.

What do we know about children, and how can we use this knowledge? Our children are our greatest resource — the link between home and school, caregiver, and teacher. They are a powerful force and are our hope for the future. Each has the potential for success. Each has a valuable contribution to make. As adults, they will shape the world of tomorrow. Our children learn from us, because of us, in spite of us. Adults and peers model, motivate, instruct, direct, guide, challenge, and inspire, both positively and negatively, and children strive for competency, self-validation, meaning, and equilibrium. They interpret their world and those in it, and they shape their learning. Children have different starting points, march to different drummers, and learn in different ways and at different rates. Their development follows a sequential pattern with individual variables in timing, level of competency, and focus on different task areas. Individual differences require flexibility and creativity. Meeting the developmental needs for belonging and esteem are priorities. The basic rules of our guiding philosophy should dominate.

### **The Teacher's Role**

The teacher plays a critical role in the future of children, their families, and the success of involvement in the school. Each teacher is the leader in her classroom. She sets the psychological tone and creates a healthy family environment for students and parents — one which will encourage progress toward the goals that they all have for the child's

success. It is the teacher's task to identify strengths in each student, in each family, in the school, and in the community. The teacher must build on these characteristics and create opportunities to develop new ones. Teachers need to understand the need to belong and to be valued. This is the most important task, and developing feelings of worth extends to students, parents, teachers, families, groups, and organizations.

We categorize in value-laden terms—the “best” college, the “good” or “bad” parent, the “worst” family or teacher. However, a child's self-esteem is multifaceted, based on inherited or developmental characteristics, attitudes and values, accomplishments and skills. Self-evaluations can be positive or negative, and situations or significant others' feedback influences youths' feelings of esteem. In the school setting, developmental tasks, peer performance, teacher expectations and reactions set the stage for a wide variety of self-evaluations. Another consideration on which effort and achievement depend is one's feeling of efficacy — the certainty that you can perform the task and are capable, the determination that pushes you to try and to strive for success.

### **Meeting Today's Challenges**

Teachers have other important and challenging roles to play in the future of education. And now the time is right for them to ask important questions and to make recommendations and suggestions. The national focus on education and the highly publicized initiatives, “Leave No Child Behind” and “Every Child Shall Read by Grade Three”, open windows of opportunity for teachers since the goal of these programs is “to close the racial gap in performance” (Kane, 2003, p. 573). Teachers are most highly qualified to lead the way and are morally and ethically obligated to serve youth and their families. However, both of the recent initiatives raise questions that merit serious consideration. For example, “Leave No Child Behind” raises the questions: Behind whom? Behind what? Should we not be more inclusive? Should we leave no teacher, parent, class, school, family behind? Behind in what respect? Should we measure success by a narrow academic standard? Equal does not mean same, and we need to assess developmental levels and individual starting points.

The “Every Child Shall Read By Grade Three” edict makes no sense at all. Arbitrary barriers are raised at each grade, and if we recognize a wide range of individual differences, environmental, and social factors influencing reading progress, we will see that this is a prescription for failure. Even the concept of what reading is and should be will escape many who will accept repeating or recognizing words as reading. More worthy goals can be set — ones that would have long-lasting positive effects on the individual's quality of life and on the future progress of a nation. Rather than training to hurdle grade barriers, teachers should aim to nurture a love of learning, to unlock the mystery of ideas and words, to open windows on the world of nature, science, history, adventure, and imagination. Words alone are nothing. A child may have concepts and understand his world far beyond the grade three level. When (s)he is ready (s)he will connect words to ideas and sprint past his or her peers. Every teacher should be a teacher of reading, and caretakers who read for enjoyment and who read to their children lay the ground work. Families can be involved with schools by reading to children, raising a related question, “Is adult literacy a school responsibility?”.

Family involvement in school is the first step in utilizing a village to raise a child. This communal approach has been traditional in pre-technological societies, including pioneer and rural communities. Interdependency and cooperation were essential for survival in an “exchange-for-services” economy. All were stakeholders with a vested interest in raising children who would contribute to the common good of their society. Teachers, clergy, and doctors were the leaders and the transmitters and guardians of the codes of behavior. With only a few diverse influences, life was hard but much simpler. Organizational stakeholders, businessmen's clubs, and church ladies' groups provided input and support. In the 21st

Century, identity is multifaceted, and stakeholder recruitment and involvement is a matter of individual choice and commitment to a common goal. The following principles of involvement should serve as guides for stakeholders:

- All participants must share core attitudes and values and have similar goals.
- Participants must feel a sense of dedication and commitment to children and to family involvement.
- Inclusion and relationships are keys to success.
- Stakeholders must communicate effectively, cooperate, and collaborate as team members or partners.
- Youth need opportunities for development of leadership skills (e.g., learning to listen, respecting others' opinions, recognizing strengths, appreciating contributions, developing competencies, and being involved in planning, decision-making, and delegating).

### What Can You Do?

A stakeholder in the future of African-American children, indeed, all children, should focus on the family, its strengths, and its needs. Stakeholders can:

- (1) Ask why? Who? How? What? Why should (s)he be involved? Who would like to be involved? Who are the leaders? How can (s)he contribute? How will (s)he and others benefit? What would (s)he feel comfortable doing?
- (2) Ask children how they would like their parents to be involved.
- (3) Create a healthy family environment in the classroom incorporating core values.
- (4) Build on childrens' and families' strengths and skills to create opportunities.

If stakeholders accept these challenges, they have the potential for creative leadership.

### The Role of Teacher Preparation Institutions

The future of African-American involvement in the schools is irrevocably tied to future teachers and their ability to achieve the goals outlined in the plan. Teacher preparation institutions face a daunting challenge. Technology has changed the classroom environment, and the methods and materials which teachers use. The skills required for success focus on manipulation of instruments and available software, and students must be competent technicians, often at the mercy of the machine. A 2003 report from the Carnegie Foundation (Kelly, 2003) focused on the problem of "innovation today if we are to educate for tomorrow's needs" asking, "What is the next move?" and "Whose move is it?". While community groups and the business world can provide input, the main responsibility will fall to teacher preparation institutions, a role traditionally played by historically black colleges and universities such as Livingstone. These institutions will have to focus on developing skills in using instruments and techniques to incorporate content in ways that will result in desired student outcomes. As these graduates enter schools, apply their new learning, and increasingly make contact electronically, it will become more important for parents, teachers, and students to have face-to-face contact.

These changes in modes of communication will raise further barriers to involvement. Technologically deprived populations will be stranded or left behind (Walton, 1999). This will affect not only school stakeholders but also their older and retired support systems. The hi-tech have-nots, those without the machinery or skills, will not be the only losers. Creativity will be vastly limited to the few who design the programs from which the others must choose. Classes in fine arts and physical education will probably diminish even more. The world of learning will change and, with it, our children, our teachers, and their involvement with parents. Surfing the net, engaging in video games and chat rooms are no substitute for the quality and texture of creative thought patterns, the love of literature, the magic of the spoken word, and the imagination fostered when good books become teaching partners and good friends.

At the same time, some of our leaders view education as a broken system in need of mending. Such damage control has placed emphasis on teacher accountability resulting in a burdensome, time-consuming method, robbing teachers of valuable instructional and interactive time with students and their families, forcing them to teach to measurable standards. Determined and evaluated by experts, there is little room for flexibility or creativity. As a basis for teacher certification, bulky student portfolios of concrete exhibits or evidence take the place of a teacher's own systematic observation and notation of each child's progress and mastery of the basic skills in their developmental sequence.

When teaching was considered an art, a teacher was able to use his or her own knowledge of students, having the flexibility to tailor approaches and assignments to fit the child's level, interests, and ways of learning. It took experienced mentors and models to raise a teacher. A recent American Psychological Society article (Kersting, 2003) points out that the field of education is the only profession that bases standards and policy on intuition and anecdote, and change is on the way. The 2002 U.S. Secretary of Education Report on Teacher Quality and Quantity recommends higher standards for teachers, a model streamlining the teacher certification system and allowing alternate routes to the qualification certificate. These changes will influence the type and quality of family involvement in the schools in ways that are difficult to predict.

### A Vision for the Future

In my vision of the future, Martin Luther King's "field of dreams" for African Americans is expanded to include all humanity. This global perspective acknowledges the common characteristics and basic needs of developing humans and societies. These are bonds which unite us all. Applying the same principles of inclusion and involvement to all families and schools would cut across and eliminate artificial boundaries based on race and color, and other traits and constructs. The basic, common threads that bind humanity can be thought of as the vertical strands on a loom and the unique strengths characterizing different groups as the horizontal strands interwoven to form a rich and vibrant tapestry — the fabric of our society.

One person's dream is not enough to make it a reality. Stakeholders must believe and make it happen. African Americans could begin by basing their feelings of belonging and of value on many different attributes, seeking to extend their field of experience, and expand their view of a world that could be realized. It is my hope that this special issue of *The Negro Educational Review* will reach a diverse population of stakeholders capable of seeing beyond labels, beyond accents, gender, and skin color, perceiving all people as neighbors working together for a better reality for youth.

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