

The Education of Children Whose Nightmares Occur Both Night and Day

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I want to share with you a brief conversation that I had with a nine-year-old African American male several years ago. I was sitting on the steps of my church, which is located in a poor Atlanta neighborhood, waiting for a locksmith to open my car when an inquisitive little boy spotted me and jumped on his bike to get a closer look. After being persuaded that he did not have to break into my car to retrieve my keys, I asked my newly made friend, Darius, to sit down to talk. I asked him the usual boring questions that adults ask children: "What is your name? How old are you? Where do you go to school? What is your teacher's name?"

And finally, I asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" After responding quickly to the other questions, he stalled on the last, and said, "I don't wanna be nothing." "Oh come on," I said. "There are so many wonderful and exciting things to dream about -- being a teacher, an astronaut, a businessman, a mechanic, a policeman. Just close your eyes and let me know what you see yourself doing when you get to be all grown up." Darius hesitantly followed my directions. He closed his eyes, folded his arms over his chest, and lifted his head toward the sky as if he needed divine inspiration for such a difficult task. After fifteen seconds of what appeared to be a very painful exercise, I interrupted Darius's concentration. "What do you see?" I asked impatiently. "Tell me about your dreams." The young boy mumbled, "Lady, I don't see nothing and I don't have no dreams." Stunned by his remark, I sat speechless as Darius jumped on his bike and rode away.

Darius -- this bright, energetic, and handsome young man -- is not likely to end up at Emory University. In fact, statistical data predict that Darius has a better chance of ending up in a state prison where African American men now represent 41 percent of the prison

population. By the way, if Darius ends up in prison, taxpayers will spend more than \$25,000 a year for his upkeep. For that amount of money, we could pay his tuition at Emory.

Sometimes we forget that a large number of children, like Darius, "don't see nothing and don't have no dreams" when we ask them to envision the future. These are the children whose nightmares occur both night and day. ¹ At night, the villains are creatures in horror movies and in books like *Goosebumps* -- creatures that recede in daylight. But Darius, unlike other children, has "daymares." Ghosts and demons haunt and chase him as part of his daily life, and daylight offers no reprieve from fear. Ironically, these daytime horrors are scarier than nightmares. The duress doesn't end when Darius opens his eyes. Daymares feature no scary faces, just scary effects -- poverty, violence, hunger, poor health, drug addiction, bad schools, insensitive policies, and privileged people who sigh in collective hopelessness and outrage wondering where Darius's absent father is and blaming Darius's young mother for having a baby she apparently can neither raise nor afford.

I have spent my entire career at Emory researching and writing about the school experiences of African American children like Darius, and their schools and teachers. It should come as no surprise to you that most of the research in this area, including my own, is directed at identifying correlative and causative factors, models, and interventions aimed at reversing the dismal achievement statistics of many African American low-income students. On most indicators and measures of academic achievement, African American and Latino students' performance lags behind their white and Asian peers. ² Although African American students have shown some increased performance on standardized test scores, the gains have been relatively small and inconsistent over time. The achievement gap between black and white students narrowed in the 1970s and 1980s when black students' gain scores exceeded those of whites. However, since 1988 the gap has widened again because black students' scores in reading and math have been declining. ³

In addition to the low academic achievement that takes place in schools, they are places where black and poor children are disproportionately placed in low-ability tracks and special-education

classes, suspended, and expelled. How can we explain why schools have become places of daymares for children like Darius? Why can't poor children of color succeed in schools? Different explanations for the academic failure of African American students have gained the attention of researchers and policymakers. 4 I briefly will discuss four explanations -- socioeconomic, sociopathological, genetic, and cultural. I will acknowledge the merits of three of the four positions and point out their specific weaknesses and their common limitations, such as their tendency to be deterministic and require revolutionary political, social, and economic changes. Finally, I will conclude with some of my current research and work from the center I founded and direct -- The Center on Urban Learning/Teaching and Urban Research in Education and Schools (CULTURES) -- arguing that teachers and schools are part of the solution, not the problem, with urban education.

First, the socioeconomic explanations relate Darius's school failure to income, class, and wealth variables and cite disparities traceable to America's legacy of slavery and Jim Crow as well as the lack of economic opportunities for so-called oppressed minorities. These researchers like to quote statistics revealing that the strongest predictor of academic achievement is socioeconomic status (SES). Yet the problems with SES theories are their failure to explain why African Americans from more affluent families still score significantly lower than their affluent white counterparts on standardized measures. Nor do these studies explain why blacks in desegregated suburban schools score only slightly better than blacks in segregated urban schools. Nor do they explain the finding which tells us that the average black child now attends school in a district that spends as much per pupil as the school attended by the average white child. 5 The per-pupil expenditure in the Atlanta public schools, for example, ranks among the highest in the state.

Second, the sociopathological interpretations point an accusing finger at Darius, his single mother, and the community where they reside -- blaming them for the dire circumstances in which they find themselves. The language these researchers use reflects their views of these children. They refer to Darius as "at risk," "disadvantaged," "deprived," or fasten upon him more polysyllabic educational labels such as "developmentally immature," "product of a dysfunctional

home environment," and suffering from an "attention deficit" or "behavior disorder." At the macro level, researchers write about the "culture of poverty," "the underclass," and the "economically and politically marginalized." Many of the researchers in this area appear to have given up on children like Darius and believe that long-term significant improvement in urban schools is virtually impossible without concurrent revolutionary improvements in the political and economic context in which schools exist. 6

Popular reports of crack babies, welfare dependency, gangs and crime, and single mothers failing miserably at parenting complement and distort these research perspectives and provide support for policymakers and politicians who point to the achievement of past and present immigrants and wonder why African Americans won't stop their whining and work harder to achieve the American dream.

Some researchers, such as the anthropologist John Ogbu, take a kinder and gentler yet still sociopathological approach, referring to African Americans as "caste-like minorities" who hold dysfunctional values. 7 There are many educational researchers who support this position. They believe that African Americans have internalized the dominant group mythology -- notably that blacks view intellectual accomplishment as a characteristic of whites -- and therefore African American students have given up on academic achievement.

The sociopathological view -- as you can tell by the label I have placed on it -- has limitations. The focus on people of color as incessant victims and perpetual slaves fails to acknowledge the resilience of African Americans and the legacy of their pre-slave, African heritage. The sociopathological view lacks contextual and historical perspectives and is devoid of time and place relationships. In addition, this position does not acknowledge individuals' own personal experiences and their resolve to counter society's perceptions of intellectual competence, or what Foley calls "the role of autonomous, rational actors." 8 The critical theorists would add to this critique that African American students' negative behavior and poor academic achievement are a form of political resistance and are rational in the context of their limited occupational and economic opportunities. 9 These theorists purport that African American students are aware that schools are a mechanism of economic and

cultural reproduction, and therefore they believe that they are doomed to fail.

Third, the genetic interpretations suggest that poor people and people of color have low achievement in schools because they lack intelligence. ¹⁰ These theorists refer to the inheritability of intelligence and discount critics who suggest that IQ scores do not necessarily result in any predetermined behaviors. The Bell Curve by Herrnstein and Murray argues that African Americans are intellectually inferior to whites and suggests that academic tracking and even some forms of segregation might be justifiable. ¹¹ It is amazing that this concept of black inferiority keeps surfacing every twenty years in spite of the psychological literature which indicates that environmental factors, school attendance, and nutrition contribute to intelligence and that scientists do not know why there is and always has been a differential between the IQ scores of blacks and whites. ¹²

Fourth, the cultural-congruence interpretations represent my theoretical framework. Consequently, I will spend more time discussing this view. The notion of congruence, which is based on seminal anthropological and historical research, documents retention of African culture in America. ¹³ Although there are regional and social-class variations of these retentive African cultural behaviors, researchers have verified that their presence "persists across social-class segments within an ethnic group." ¹⁴

Unlike the sociopathological perspectives, the cultural beliefs, values, and perceptions of African American students are not necessarily considered inherent problematics in the cultural-congruence literature. By 'culture' I mean a group's history, language, values, norms, rituals, and symbols -- those shared behaviors and knowledge that represent "the sum total of ways of living" and are important for any group's survival in a particular environment. ¹⁵ Mainstream white students, like their African American peers, bring cultural beliefs, values, and perceptions to school. The difference between the school experiences and success of the two groups is that the culture of middle-class white students is more likely to be compatible with the culture of the school than the culture of African American students.

Given that the cultures of African Americans and other students of color are often misunderstood, ignored, or discounted, these students are likely to experience cultural discontinuity in schools. In my work, I refer to the concept as a "lack of cultural synchronization." 16 Teachers also bring to schools their own set of cultural and personal characteristics that influence their work (beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, ethnicity, gender, and social class). When teachers and students bring different and often conflicting cultural experiences to the classroom, there is the possibility of cultural discontinuity. When there is a cultural conflict between the student and the school, the inevitable occurs: miscommunication and confrontation between the student, the teacher, and the members of the student's home, along with hostility, alienation, diminished self-esteem, and eventual failure by the student. When teachers and students are out of sync, they clash and confront each other, both consciously and unconsciously, in matters concerning cultural variables such as:

- * verbal language, which includes issues of dialect, accents, argot, and bilingualism;
- * nonverbal language, which includes interpersonal and social space, body language, touching, vocal characterizers, qualifiers, voice segregates, and vocal qualities like pitch, tone, rate, and rhythm; and
- * coverbal behaviors such as gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact (or lack of it).

Now, this cultural explanation of mine has some conceptual limitations. Although it is clear that culture -- particularly ethnicity -- is a powerful force that influences students' predisposition toward learning, it must be emphasized that cultural behaviors are learned behaviors that can be unlearned and modified. Culture is not static, deterministic, or predictive; people of color are not mere products of their culture. Thus, culture affects individuals in different ways. Hanson states that culture is not a strict set of prescribed behaviors, but is rather a "framework through which actions are filtered or checked as individuals go about their daily life." 17 She adds that culture is constantly evolving and that although some students may share the same cultural background and predispositions, not all members of the same cultural group behave in identical ways or identify with their culture to the same degree.

This critique of the cultural-congruence paradigm emerged from my own educational biography. My unique school experiences pushed me to think about cultural congruence in broader and more complex ways. Rather than simply looking at rather obvious mismatches like differences in ethnicity, social class, verbal and nonverbal modes of communication, I have concluded that the most important match has to be that of holding home and school together through vision, shared values, and a sense of mission and purpose.

My schooling is an affirmation of these very points. 18 I am a non-Catholic who attended an all-black elementary and secondary segregated Catholic school in Alabama that was administered by white priests and nuns from the Midwest. This curious mix of conflicting cultures is pertinent and instructive because it illustrates the resilience and adaptability of African American children (in fact, most children) in handling contradictory and contentious worlds.

As a child, I practiced two religions: the faith of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (commonly known as the AME Church) and the faith of white Eurocentric Roman Catholicism. Although I was not Catholic, I attended Mass and catechism classes five days a week in school and weekly AME Sunday school classes, church services, and youth-group meetings outside school. I understood the Catholic sacrament of private reconciliation and the AME practice of public testimonials. I admired the white Catholic priest and the black AME preacher. Latin masses and Stations of the Cross were no problem; neither were gospel singing and revivals. I unabashedly interacted with white nuns in black habits as well as black ushers in white uniforms. I am amazed how well I mastered this fine art of cultural switching as a child, and I am reminded that children and adults can retain and celebrate the culture of their ancestors yet also be at ease in multicultural settings. An individual's ethnic identity and cultural solidarity do not erode because we are all capable of "multiple ways of perceiving, believing, doing, and evaluating" the world. 19 These are not conundrums to fret over.

My writings about African Americans in Catholic schools caution researchers to examine critically the meaning of cultural mismatch. I believe that my school experiences did not result in school failure

because there was more "match" than "mismatch" of cultures than was obvious to me as a child. The essential conflict of my school experiences centers on differences in norms more than values and beliefs. What the Catholic nuns and priests shared with my parents and the African American community were strong and dogmatic beliefs in the power of education over oppression and discrimination and the importance of values such as discipline, achievement, and hard work. They shared a common mission and vision, clearly articulated and passionately executed. My parents were more insistent upon my school success than those zealous nuns and priests; my father, a career military man, was more punitive regarding failure. Although I was told that the Catholics were misguided in their religious perspectives, I was to tolerate them and be respectful because they held the key to my educational future. This belief in education served as the common foundation that minimized the potential for hostility and alienation between the Protestant African American community and the Catholic school. The Catholics -- with their different religion, dress, ethnicity, and geographic origins -- did not maintain an oppositional relationship with the African American children and their families.

At this point, I want to emphasize that three of the four theories (socioeconomic, sociopathological, and cultural) do contribute something to our understanding of why so many urban students of color fail to achieve in school. They each have specific limitations and share common inadequacies such as their deterministic overtones and revolutionary requirements. Nonetheless, they also minimize efficacy and agency, both personal and collective, and disregard the role played by significant others, individuals, and institutions -- e.g., teachers and schools -- that can offset the impact of negative influences that prohibit and constrain school achievement. In particular, they underestimate, ignore, or devalue the influence of teachers who look at the Dariuses of this world and see hope and possibility and not despair.

Contrary to popular portrayals of incompetent and uninterested urban teachers, I have concluded in my work that there are some teachers who make a difference in reversing the cycle of despair and school failure among African American and other nonmainstream students. The teachers I have worked with in CULTURES represent

the best of urban teachers. Focusing on models of best practice is an important step in finding solutions to the seemingly intractable problems in urban education. As Saphier explained: "Of all the things that are important to having good schools, nothing is as important as teachers and what they know, believe, and can do." 20

I now will discuss my work of the past five years in CULTURES, a professional-development center for experienced teachers. The center has enrolled more than 150 teachers in five culturally diverse school districts in the Atlanta metro area. The voices of the teachers, not just researchers, are important to include here because these teachers have taught me so much and because they, unlike researchers, have an intimate knowledge of the young Dariuses and their daymares.

The typical participant in CULTURES is an African American female teacher from an elementary or middle school in the Atlanta Public Schools who boasts more than sixteen years of teaching experience. In addition to providing them forty hours of classroom instruction, I have read hundreds of their journals, lesson plans, transcripts of their entry- and exit interviews, and visited the schools and classrooms where they work.

These experienced teachers were competent in their subject matter and proved themselves experienced and masterful pedagogues. They were excited about learning new teaching methods and keeping abreast of knowledge in their teaching field. However, these necessary but insufficient attributes were not the characteristics that distinguished them from their equally competent peers. They believed that students needed a demanding curriculum, but they seldom were advocates of a particular teaching strategy or program. The pedagogy was less important than their beliefs about the very nature of teaching itself. Teachers, in my research, not only viewed teaching as telling, guiding, and facilitating mastery of content standards, but they also believed teaching is defined as: caring, "other mothering," believing, demanding the best, a calling, and disciplining.

Teaching Is Caring

Teaching is about caring relationships. The teachers I work with understand the power of care. As Jane Roland Martin said, they turn

schoolhouses into school homes where the three Cs (care, concern, and connection) are as important as the three Rs. 21 Researchers -- like the ones in an impressive eighteen-month ethnographic study of four multiethnic schools -- concluded that the most consistent and powerful finding related to school achievement for diverse students was this issue of care. 22 Students said they liked school and did their best when they thought that teachers cared about them or did special things for them. Students said teachers cared when they laughed with them, trusted and respected them, and recognized them as individuals. Kids were not saying that they liked teachers who let them have their way: just the opposite. Students defined caring teachers as those who set limits, provided structure, had high expectations, and pushed them to achieve.

Teaching Is Other Mothering

These teachers, regardless of their own ethnic identity, felt a sense of personal attachment and kinship to the low-income African American, Latino, and Asian children they taught. Patricia Hills Collins called these adults the "other mothers" -- teachers who emotionally adopt hundreds of students each school year. 23 One CULTURES teacher went through a rather interesting naming ritual with her students on the first day of school.

Mrs. Jones said: "The kids call me mama. You know, I take ownership of these kids. I tell them on the first day to attach my last name to their name." Mrs. Jones described how at the beginning of the school year she gives every child a new hyphenated name. For example, if a child's name is James Smith, Mrs. Jones tells him his new name is James Smith-Jones. When asked why she insists on this renaming ritual, she stated that she wanted the children to know that "you now belong to me and how you act and what you do reflects me."

Teaching Is Believing

Teachers' beliefs about their teaching and their ability to influence the achievement of their students are critically important. 24 Teachers who have confidence about their practice are persistent and resilient in the face of obstacles and seemingly overwhelming odds against them. These teachers don't give up on their students. They have

confidence in their ability to teach and believe that their students can learn. One teacher said: "You know I can tackle and teach the worst child and make a difference. I can see some good in anybody and that includes the worst child in this building. . . . Our job as the adult and as the educator is to try to help that child find the good within himself and to identify the good in us. I can't think of any child that I would just like to shove off on somebody else and that's the truth!" The research suggests that highly efficacious teachers use more challenging and creative instructional techniques, are more persistent with failing students, remain in the profession longer, and receive higher evaluations than their less efficacious colleagues. In addition, teacher efficacy has been linked to student achievement as well as students' attitudes about school.

Teaching Is Demanding the Best

The power of high teacher expectations in raising the achievement of students of color is receiving renewed attention in educational research and has matured since the 1968 Rosenthal and Jacobson study, *Pygmalion in the Classroom*.²⁵ We now know that there are many situational and contextual variables that mediate and influence how teacher expectations are communicated as well as received. These factors include the grade level and age of the student, the subject matter, and the characteristics and beliefs of the teacher as well as of the student. In spite of these limitations, teachers are significant others in the lives of their students, particularly their low-income and minority students, and their expectations about their students seem to be related to achievement.²⁶ One teacher summarized this research by asserting, "If you expect nothing, you get nothing!" Another teacher said, "I expect an awful lot, but I refuse to settle for less." One of the most memorable statements about teachers' high expectations was made by a high school student who wrote: "Another reason I like Mrs. M. is because of the way she teaches. If she tells you to solve a problem and you don't attempt to do it, she'll make you stand at the board the whole class period. But don't think for a minute that you're finished when the bell rings because she'll have you back in there at 3:15. And you'll stay there however long it takes. And if you miss your bus, she'll take you home. That's how much she cares about her students and that's why I care about her."

Teaching Is a Calling

In 1903 DuBois wrote: "In the Black world, the preacher and teacher embodied once the ideals of this people -- the strife for another and a more just world, the vague dream of righteousness, the mystery of knowing." 27 As DuBois's statement indicates, teachers in the African American community were held in high esteem and saw teaching as a moral act reminiscent of the "lifting as we climb" philosophy of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century black women educators such as Lucy Laney, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, Fanny Jackson Coppin, and Ana J. Cooper. 28 Many of the teachers in my work -- notably the African American teachers -- have a strong and apparent sense of spirituality and use phrases and words such as "special Godly anointing" and "sacred calling" to describe their work. The interviews of these teachers are replete with references to words such as "blessings" and "mission."

In the tradition of the religious conception of a calling, these mostly women teachers saw their work as having spiritual purposes. This spirituality -- evident in their teaching behaviors, values, and beliefs -- often bore themes of transcendence and transformation. These teachers served as spiritual mentors and advisers for the Darriuses who have never had dreams of their own. Sometimes their teaching became preaching when these teachers thought it necessary to bolster these children with sermonettes about hard work, achievement, hope, appropriate behavior, and respect. One teacher told me she does not just teach her subject matter. She said, "I teach life." When I asked another teacher to name her greatest asset, she quickly responded, "My faith." One of my favorite quotes related to this view of teaching is, "Whoever our students may be, whatever subject we teach, ultimately we teach who we are." 29

Teaching as Disciplining

It is not surprising that these mission-driven, spiritually grounded teachers also tend to be strong yet compassionate disciplinarians who are admired, not resented, by their pupils. One student wrote the following about one of the teachers: "This woman is my favorite teacher because she's always on my back making me do better. I don't

mind though because some days I need that extra push. She asks my other teachers what I'm doing and what I'm not doing. And if she should find out that I'm not up to par, she'll fuss at me as if I was her own child. And then she'll tell my momma! I love this woman because she cares so much." Vasquez called these no-nonsense teachers "warm demanders" -- committed, respectful, dedicated, and competent educators who are not afraid of or resentful toward their pupils. 30

Finally, I believe that each one of us in this room faces at least two immediate challenges. First, as we continue to work on research models that explain or predict the conditions of children whose nightmares come both night and day, we have to convince policymakers and others with power and authority to act on behalf of what Lisa Delpit calls "other people's children." 31 The academy must change its view that advocacy has no role in sound scholarship and get rid of artificial and divisive distinctions between theory and practice, objectivity and passion, the thinkers and the doers, and the mind and the heart.

The second challenge to Emory University as an institution and to each of us individually is that we will not and cannot achieve our vision by ignoring children who have none. It is not enough to think of Darius as a research subject, a service project, a sick or jailed client, a paper topic, or just another kid in your class who is doomed to fail. Somehow we must start to think of him and our future as inextricably linked. Like the teachers I described in this lecture, we must become dreamkeepers for children who talk about dying, not living, and who actually plan their funerals and not their future.

I will close the same way I began this address -- by remembering my friend Darius. As a nation, we cannot survive with children whose only dream today is to survive until tomorrow. Children who have no stake in society do not mind destroying it. Yet, to regard Darius as a menace to society engenders fears and leads to more gated communities, jails, and flight to the suburbs. What is needed instead is a sense of moral outrage and a civic consciousness on behalf of all children whose dreams are not just deferred, as Langston Hughes wrote, but whose life chances are so limited that they have lost the capacity to dream at all. 32

I am convinced that eager, well-educated, committed people such as the undergraduate and graduate students at Emory and the teachers in the CULTURES project can and do make a difference everyday. We already have the knowledge, skills, and technology to transform children's daymares into dreams. What we lack is the collective will to do so. Ron Edmonds, the trailblazer of the school-reform movement, noted nearly thirty years ago that we already know all that we need to know to provide a quality education for all children. He said, "Whether we do or do not depends upon how we feel about the fact that we have not done it." 33

Notes

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