# Toward a Collaborative Approach to Parent Involvement in Early Education: A Study of Teenage Mothers in an African-American Community

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*This study addresses the challenge of creating a collaborative approach to parent involvement. As part of a family literacy program, participants in the study were 19 African-American adolescent parents from low-income backgrounds whose children attended an early intervention program. Parents' beliefs about learning and literacy were sought through a series of peer group discussions. The data revealed a continuum of perspectives ranging from behavioral to constructivist beliefs, suggesting important intragroup variability within this particular sociocultural group. The discussions also revealed shared goals that may be used to forge collaborative relationships between parents and professionals in the interest of improving African-American children's early education. Illustrations from a family literacy program are used to show how parent beliefs may be incorporated into programmatic changes, building constructive relationships that work toward supporting children's success in schools.*

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A lthough parent involvement programs in early intervention are abundant and thriving, critics have questioned their benefits for improving the lives and the educational success of young children (Diaz, Neal, & Vachio, 1991; Kochanska, Kuczynski, & Radke-Yarrow, 1989; Stevens, 1984; White, Taylor, & Moss, 1992). Many now challenge programs that are designed to exert a central influence on parents' caregiving roles, assuming that the skills they bring need to be replaced by the more "desirable" values represented by the school (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Delpit, 1988; Harry, 1992b; Silvern, 1988). They suggest that another approach is necessary to engage parents in the educational process, one that assumes a *posture of reciprocity* (Harry & Kalyanpur, 1991). It is believed that programs must forge collaborative relationships that involve a mutual understanding between teachers, parents, and others in the community. From a hermeneutic perspective (Moss, 1994), this view argues for *unconstrained communication* in which all parties concerned (including teachers, parents, and administrators) learn to approach one another as equals.

Establishing these egalitarian relationships that respect parents' responsible roles requires greater sensitivity toward culturally and economically diverse families than has previously been reported, however. Much of the research (Moreno, 1991) has reflected an assumption that mainstream American values and behaviors represent the standard against which "good" parenting should be measured. The "ideal" middle-class mother, for example, has often been described as one who engages in inquiry-like verbalizations, rarely making negative, corrective, or punitive statements, compared to the poor lower status mother who is seen as controlling, directive, and intrusive (Hess & McDevitt, 1984; Hess & Shipman, 1965; Laosa, 1980). Hess and Shipman, in a study examining 160 African-American mother-child dyads, for example, reported large differences among status groups in the ability of the mothers to teach their children. In contrast to providing verbal information necessary to reflect and solve problems like middle-class mothers, the lower status groups tended to restrict the number and kind of alternatives for action and thought open to the child, relying instead on passive compliance of rules. Implicit in these studies is the notion that lower status parents are failing their children linguistically and cognitively by not providing an enriching environment for learning.

An alternative view is that lower income mothers have high aspirations for their children but do not have the mechanisms for attaining these goals (Chavkin & Williams, 1994; Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Hale, 1982; Harry, 1992a). Comparing family-school relations between upper middle-class and working-class families, for example, an ethnographic study by Lareau (1989) concluded that social class—specifically, education, occupational status, and income—provides parents with unequal resources and dispositions toward school. These are differences that critically affect parent involvement in the educational experience of their children. She found that working-class parents believed that their role was to prepare children for school by teaching them manners and rudimentary skills, to be supportive, but not to intervene

in their children's program. Casanova (1987), as well, reported that while retaining parental control over the children's home activities, the Puerto Rican parents in her descriptive study tended to relinquish control over the education and discipline of their children to the school.

Yet as Goldenberg (1987) found in his study of low-income Hispanic families, when perceived as being influential in helping their children learn how to read, parents have been able to directly impact their children's early achievement. Outreach specialists sensitive to the cultural community, however, may need to negotiate the means for involving parents in the schools (Casanova, 1987). Delgado-Gaitan (1991), for example, demonstrated that by creating an advocacy group responsible for reaching out to assist parents in the ways to communicate with school personnel, parents became aware of their children's conditions in school and their rights to collectively shape some school practices. Thus, despite widely held views regarding the incompatibilities between schools and minority children's homes, studies like these suggest that, when such cooperative linkages are formed, parents can make important contributions to their children's growth and achievement.

Empowering families to share responsibility in children's early education may be particularly important in language and literacy development. Despite steady improvements, children from minority homes continue to lag far behind their nonminority peers in written language, and the gap progressively widens thereafter (Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1993; Mullis & Jenkins, 1990). Research on the effects of prevention and early intervention has supported a variety of strategies, including instructional practices (Pinnell, 1989; Schweinhart, & Weikart, 1988) and parent support activities (Smith, 1980; Zigler, & Valentine, 1979). For example, using the native Hawaiian collaborative *talk story* narrative form, Au and Jordon (1981) significantly improved Hawaiian children's success at learning to read, demonstrating that the quality of instruction can have an important influence on children's chances for academic success. Likewise, programs designed to support mothers' receptivity to children's early literacy demonstrations have also been shown to be highly influential in promoting children's literacy opportunities and receptive language abilities (Edwards, 1991; Neuman & Gallagher, 1994). Taken together, these studies suggest that children's probability of becoming literate may be greatly enhanced when teachers become more responsive to the children's own culture and when parents become more actively engaged in children's ongoing educational activities.

Still, as Harry (1992a) cautions, it could be difficult to establish reciprocal relations with parents who may see themselves as inadequate to the task of collaboration or who may perceive this task as conflicting with their existing cultural traditions. A critical part of the empowerment process, therefore, may be to learn from the parents themselves: their beliefs, values, and practices within their homes and communities. As Goldenberg and Gallimore (1991) have documented in their compelling study of Spanish early reading improvement, the more educators know about the dynamics of these beliefs,

the more likely they are to develop programs responsive to the families and children they are designed to serve.

An examination of beliefs could contribute to a better understanding of parental teaching and managerial strategies that influence their child-rearing practices as well. Described by Sigel and his colleagues (Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1984), beliefs, as "mental constructions of experience" (p. 346), are drawn from cultural sources of knowledge transmission and serve as guides, motivators, and organizers for behavior with children (McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1982; Sigel, 1985). On a sociocultural level, they help individuals to identify with one another, and to form groups and social systems (Buchmann & Schwille, 1983). Beliefs and given modes of behavior generally evolve over time and reflect patterns of coping with and adapting to the surrounding environment (Ford, 1993; Pajares, 1992). Thus, understanding parents' beliefs about their children's learning may ultimately add to growing knowledge of the history of the parent-child relationship from a cultural perspective (Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1984). It may also refocus attention on the *content* of parents' *educational messages* to children, rather than on the *form* or linguistic style (i.e., inquiry vs. directive) of these messages.

Examining beliefs may further help in the search for forces that guide parents' actions.[1] As Nespor has argued (1987), beliefs tend to be more inflexible than knowledge systems, typically operating independently of the cognition associated with knowledge. Yet they are often more influential than knowledge in determining how individuals organize and define tasks. Beliefs are organized into schemata, which encompass an array of related attributes. For example, in a study of parents' preferences for teaching their children, Sigel and his colleagues found that parents who preferred to use distancing strategies (behaviors that focus on getting the child to make inferences, to reconstruct, or to plan) also held cognitive goals for their children, were child-centered, and encouraged independent thinking in their management and teaching strategies (Sigel, 1985).

Studies examining parental beliefs suggest that they are highly related to traditional constructs of authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive parental control behaviors (Baumrind, 1987; Kochanska, Kuczynski, & Radke-Yarrow, 1989; Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985; Schaefer, 1991). Described in Baumrind's extensive research (Baumrind, 1968, 1971, 1987), the authoritarian parent believes in keeping children in a subordinate role by restricting their autonomy, favoring passive compliance instead of verbal interchange and negotiation. In contrast, the authoritative parent adheres to a rational, issue-oriented approach, guiding children firmly, yet responsive to their ideas. Distinct from both of the previous patterns, the permissive parent makes few demands of the child, preferring to be a resource to the child, rather than an active agent responsible for shaping or altering the child's ongoing or future behavior. Several studies have reported strong associations between these beliefs and parental teaching strategies in both structured and unstructured tasks with children (Bee, Egeren, Streissguth, Nyman, & Leckie, 1969; Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985).

An understanding of the beliefs of culturally diverse families, then, could lead to more effective parent education programs that build on parent strengths and needs. This may be especially important for developing specialized services for high-risk groups, such as teenage mothers and their children, which is the focus of this research. It is currently estimated that one of 10 teenage girls in the U. S. will become pregnant. Teenage pregnancy is a social problem of growing proportions (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1986). Studies suggest that teen mothers tend to be less well-educated, less likely to be working, and more impoverished (Berlin & Sum, 1988; Landy & Walsh, 1988). Further, there is evidence that early pregnancy may have severe consequences on their children's future school performance and their economic independence as adults (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987; Sander, 1991; Williams, 1991). Recent studies (Berlin & Sum, 1988; Reis & Herz, 1987), for example, indicate that children born of teen mothers are likely to suffer learning difficulties, suggesting a potential intergenerational transmission of low basic skills, low educational attainment, and poverty.

Existing intervention programs for teen mothers, typically targeting either prevention or deficiencies in mothering, however, have shown little success (Fulton, Murphy, & Anderson, 1991; Landy & Walsh, 1988; Musick, 1993). Musick has argued that many of these human service programs reflect an unconscious devaluing of the people they service by their lack of understanding of their cultures and opportunities. Rather, it has been suggested that a more fruitful approach to intervention may lie in hearing the voices of the women themselves on their beliefs and values. A better understanding may ultimately help to support parent education programs that influence the nature and quality of family relations as well as children's growth and achievement.

In examining maternal beliefs and behaviors from culturally diverse groups, however, a frequently encountered error has been that of treating certain ethnic or cultural groups as if they were homogeneous, an assumption that is not empirically supportable (Laosa, 1981). Weisner and his colleagues (Weisner, Gallimore, & Jordan, 1988) have argued persuasively that such isomorphic representations tend to produce stereotyped or romanticized views of minority subcultures. For example, studies have reported important within-group differences in the ways in which parents from the same sociocultural groups view and behave toward their children (Laosa, 1980; Norman-Jackson, 1982; Schachter, 1979). If such variability is ignored, faulty interpretations of findings, and rigid and insensitive approaches to resolving home and school discontinuities could result (Laosa, 1981).

Consequently, this descriptive study was designed to elicit adolescent parents' beliefs about learning, and early literacy in particular. As part of a family literacy program, our goal was to establish a relationship with adolescent parents that respected their responsible roles as educators of their children yet, at the same time, guided them in ways to enhance their children's literacy opportunities. From an emergent literacy perspective, literacy learning is thought to include a broad array of activity on the part of the child

(talking, labeling through pointing, drawing) that may be enhanced through adult interaction (Neuman & Roskos, 1993; Teale & Sulzby, 1989). By identifying shared goals, we then provide illustrations of ways in which these parental beliefs may be incorporated within a framework of developmentally appropriate practice, helping to assist parents in fulfilling their aspirations for themselves and their children.

# Method

## Participants and Setting

Nineteen African-American adolescent mothers, all of whom had toddlers in an early intervention program, participated in the study. Mothers' ages ranged from 17 to 22, the average age being 19. Nine of the mothers had one child, seven had 2 children, three had 3 children, with ages ranging from 2 months to 6 years. All were on public assistance, living in the most impoverished areas in the Delaware county region.

Adolescent mothers were enrolled in a school district-sponsored Adult Basic Education (A.B.E.) or Graduate Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) program serving over 200 women in the urban metropolitan area. Having dropped out of school as a consequence of childbearing, poor academic achievement, substance abuse, and/or economic circumstances, the program was designed to allow mothers to attend a yearlong literacy program, with accompanying day care provided for their young children. Nine of the participants were enrolled in the A.B.E. program, specifically designed for students reading at the fifth- to eighth-grade level, and 10 were involved in the G.E.D., reading at the ninth-grade level and above. Although family support systems varied, the majority of the women lived with their mothers and other members of their kinship network, including grandparents, nieces, and nephews. Only two women lived on their own.

Infants and toddlers of adolescent mothers were provided free day care in a center located two blocks away from their school site. The center consisted of a large room, staffed by five paraprofessional African-American women. Half of the room was devoted to cribs, playpens, and strollers, while the other half included wide-open spaces for children to play. There were no designated sociodramatic play areas in the center, and only a few books and toys. Nor were there any structured activities, aside from meals and naptimes, provided for children. Other than a large ABC banner on a wall, and 10 children's books kept on top of a refrigerator, no literacy-related objects or regular storybook opportunities were available to children.

While the center provided for 10 infants and 10 toddlers, the number of children that actually attended the program changed often, due to high absenteeism on the part of the parent in the literacy program, or the child in the day-care program. Citing its poor quality, many parents refused to send their children to the center, preferring family day-care arrangements instead. Thus, while originally designed as a demonstration program to help

improve mothers' parenting skills, the center remained essentially a separate entity from the adolescent mothers' program.

## Interviews and Discussions

Much research has examined parental beliefs through educational belief scales (Rescorla, 1987; Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985), vignettes (McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1982), and inventories (Strom, 1984). In addition to sharing strengths and weaknesses inherent in all self-report instruments, these tools have tended to reflect mainstream culture and have not been particularly sensitive to varying modes of family interactions that might occur in different sociocultural groups. Further, items from questionnaires often fall prey to an "it depends" type response in which the wish to relate specific beliefs to the myriad of contexts that may have been responsible for their creation is not allowed in this format (Pajares, 1992). For these reasons, among others, some researchers have suggested that open-ended formats may lead to far richer and more accurate understandings of beliefs.

To encourage such open-ended responses, peer discussion groups were formed to engage participants in focused discussion. We employed a set of nondirective interview procedures based on focus group methodology (Krueger, 1988), which were designed to allow participants to respond without setting boundaries or providing clues for potential response categories. Nondirective procedures generally begin with limited assumptions and place considerable emphasis on getting in tune with the reality of the participants. With the help of a highly trained leader, our goal was to create a permissive environment that nurtured different perceptions and points of view. We wanted to give participants ample opportunity to comment, to explain, and to share experiences and attitudes, providing clues and insights that might be reflective of their beliefs on learning and literacy. Thus, the purpose of these focused discussions was to capture the dynamic interactions among participants, which might yield qualitative information on how they perceived their educative roles and practices.

Prior to engaging in peer discussion groups, a set of interview materials was assembled to provoke targeted discussions of parents' perceptions on learning and literacy development. On the basis of numerous visits to the school, informal lunches with participants, and conversations with teachers and administrators, we generated an open-ended discussion guide. Designed to provide an opportunity for the participants to answer questions from a variety of dimensions, questions were developed to be broad in the beginning, then more focused as the conversations continued. These questions, however, were only a guide; serendipitous comments and questions from the leader or participants were encouraged within the context of the overall purpose of the study.

Two additional sets of materials were collected in preparation for the discussions. The first involved pictures of children from different countries around the world, as they played, worked, and learned in a variety of settings with teachers, parents, and friends. The second set of materials was generated

by visiting a multicultural preschool in the area; here, we taped 8 short video scenes (2–5 minutes) demonstrating children playing and learning with their peers and adults. These materials were designed to be used, if appropriate, during the group meetings to generate lively discussions within a multicultural context (see appendix for discussion guide and video segments).

## Procedures

Groups of mothers were randomly assigned to one of four interview discussion groups (4–5 per group) held in a quiet setting within the school. Discussion time varied on the basis of their interests and comments from 1.5–2.5 hours each. All sessions, totaling approximately 10 hours (including debriefing described below) were recorded with permission and later transcribed.

We attempted to establish a thoughtful but informal atmosphere beginning with refreshments, casual conversation, and basic ground rules. Then the leader gave a general overview of the topic and ended with "I'm interested in your views about your children's learning, and what kind of schooling you'd like them to have." This introduction was designed to break the ice and indicate that all points of view were to be encouraged. The moderator then proceeded along the lines of the questioning route soliciting ideas, conversation, and probing for information when necessary. For example, if participants seemed to be simply echoing one anothers' comments, after several echoes the moderator would say, "Does anyone see it differently?" "Any other ideas?" Sometimes, she would ask for clarification, like "What do you mean when you say you are like your mother? Or, sometimes she would prompt participants for evidence to support a position: "When you said you teach your child—tell us how do you do that?" In this respect, the leader attempted to avoid a convergence of perspectives by encouraging participants to express their personal experiences and differing points of view. When topics appeared to be covered and no fresh perspectives seemed to emerge, the leader thanked the mothers for their participation.

One member of the research team spot-checked the equipment to determine if the videotape was of sufficient clarity and volume to be usable for more detailed analysis. Several other members observed and took notes of the discussion groups from an observation room. After each session, the research team and the moderator reconvened to compare notes, share observations, and consider the questioning route to explore whether questions should be eliminated, revised, or added to ensure divergent perspectives and interactions of greater depth. A final debriefing meeting, summarizing the key points of the discussion from each member's perspective was held following the last session.

## Data Analysis

The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the data into codable categories. Coding consisted of holistically

marking a turn at speaking or interaction and reading for gist, rather than clause by clause. According to Alverman and Hayes, this method of coding yields an accurate description of meaning in analyzing discussions (1989). Four members of the multicultural research team viewed and read tapes and transcripts independently, identifying themes or categories across the groups within the context of the discussion. They also highlighted particular words or phrases—their tone and intensity—which reflected these themes. Conversations on extraneous, or highly personal, topics unrelated to the subject were not coded.

Coming together as a group, we first compared categories over a series of weeks and then examined similarities and differences in transcripts within categories. For example, one category that emerged involved the importance of how children learn. Some mothers believed that they learned by being "told" rather than by "experience or interaction," suggesting a view that children learn through transmission. In a similar fashion, we found contrasts in beliefs in other categories, including mothers' beliefs about their roles in educating their children, schooling, and literacy development.

Our next step was to establish linkages between categories that appeared to reflect a common perspective. For example, learning by being told appeared closely tied to the view that a teacher's role was to "train" children through drill and practice, using recitation as a demonstration of learning. These views seemed to vary from a more constructivist perspective, emphasizing play and imagination within the context of meaningful activity. Through comparisons and contrasts in each category, we examined parents' views of themselves as teachers, and the ways in which learning and literacy might be facilitated on a continuum of perspectives. As a group, we then coded parent interactions according to each category in the typology, along with the number of participants responding to the belief, in order to derive the total number of interactions in each category, the percent of interactions representing each perspective, and the number of adolescent mothers who seemed to share the belief (it should be noted that, in some categories, some participants did not choose to discuss a particular concern). These numbers are, of course, only used for descriptive purposes and cannot be projected to the larger population.

Three external respondents, who were knowledgeable members of the participant group but were not involved in the data reduction and analysis, were asked to review the credibility of these categories and representations. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) occurred through a three-phase procedure. In the first phase, we asked one of the outside respondents to view segments of tapes and to categorize incidents according to the tentative categories generated by the group. After classifying segments, we asked the respondent to state her rationale for coding each one into a particular category. In the second phase of member checking, we provided a second outside respondent with examples of verbal statements in each category and asked for a written commentary on whether the statements consistently reflected the perspective or not. Finally, we provided a copy of our analytic

categories and interpretations to a leader in the community for her reaction. These procedures, together, served several functions. First, they provided a check on whether statements represented certain perspectives between and across categories. Second, they helped to refine our category system. For example, certain categories, such as participants' beliefs about their own mothers and self-esteem, had to be eliminated due to limited information provided throughout the discussions. And third, these procedures helped us to examine whether our reconstructions might be adequate representations of these respondents' own reality.

Following this analysis, we then derived a set of theoretical propositions within and across categories and perspectives that seemed to best encompass parents' beliefs about learning and literacy for their children. This analysis provided us with a set of shared beliefs that could be used to facilitate a more collaborative process of involving parents in their children's early education.

Because the goal of the methodology was to capture the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of the participants, focus group researchers (Cafferata, 1984; Krueger, 1988) generally agree that only minor editing of comments is appropriate. Comments from participants in this study were spoken largely in Black English Vernacular. As linguists have powerfully demonstrated (Heath, 1983; Labov, 1972), Black English and its regional and social variants follow rules and are rich in social-communicative properties including unique dialogic and narrative features. Consequently, we present the views of participants in their words, providing insights in the ways in which these parents expressed and shared their beliefs and practices.

## Results

Our analysis indicated that these adolescent mothers did not share a common world view. Rather, their orientations toward learning and literacy seemed to reflect several different child development perspectives, broadly defined along a continuum of transmissive, maturational, and transactional beliefs.

On the transmissive side of the continuum, comments seemed to reflect the belief that knowledge was finite, defined as a set of skills, and transmittable from those who had it to those who did not: "I want my child to learn practical skills, like clean-up and dress-up. There should be set times every day for learning." Children were expected to master what was taught by the adult: "My daughter knows her alphabets and her numbers 1 to 10. I taught her that when she first turned 1." They were also expected to reproduce responses as learned without variation. As one mother said, "I want him to learn something. When he come home from school, and I ask, "What did you learn today?" I want him to be able to say, 'I learned to say this, and I learned how to pronounce that.' " And another mother said, "I feel better knowing that my kids are learning something other than toys." The building of skills from smaller to larger, and more simple (i.e., they should learn how to clean and how to eat) to more complex (i.e., alphabet and numbers), appeared to be characteristically both adult-centered and product-driven.

Table 1
**Continuum of Perspectives on Learning and Literacy**

| Beliefs about | Transmissive | Maturational | Transactional |
|---|---|---|---|
| The parent's role | Emphasis on direct teaching; knowledge defined as a set of skills transmitted by adult | Emphasis is on child's abilities to learn through his/her own experiences; parent's role is to provide nurturance and opportunity | Emphasis is on encouraging children to actively construct knowledge through their own initiative with adult facilitation |
| The child's role | Child learners expected to master what is taught through observation and/or recitation | Learners expected to initiate on the basis of interest and personal/social needs | Child encouraged to ask questions to reason and to learn from child-oriented activity (i.e., play) |
| Learning and literacy | Emphasis on the early acquisition of alphabet, numbers, colors—discrete skills | No particular emphasis; child will learn when "ready" | Emphasis on child developing at his/her own pace; encouragement through engaging in storybook reading, conversations, and responses to questions |
| Schooling | Teachers should manage instruction; learning should be paced; priority of group over individual interests; product-orientation | Teachers should provide a safe environment; should be positive role model for children; schools should be physically well maintained | Teachers should focus on individual needs of children; provide a learning environment for child-initiated activity and skill learning |

Comments from this perspective seemed to share much in common with the prototypic authoritarian parent (Baumrind, 1971, 1987; Schaefer, 1991). Parents' desires to shape, control, and evaluate the behaviors and attitudes of the child were held in accordance with a set of basic standards of conduct.

Toward the middle of the continuum was a more maturational view of learning. Here, learning was not confined to a set of tangible skills but incorporated within a broader definition of education. "Education is about life in general. All the education in the world don't mean you know knowledge about life. Knowledge about life, schools, the ways the street is, everything." Children were thought to have an innate potential for learning that enabled them to develop their individual capacities: "My daughter went and got potty-trained by herself." Thus, learning was seen primarily as the result of physiological development (i.e., "Children learn when they are ready to learn"). Less emphasis was placed on *what* children should be learning than on ensuring that they were provided with a safe and nurturing environment within which to learn. Participating alongside adults in their daily events, children were thought to develop their own interests: "I say that a child makes up their mind about what they want to do and they just do it," and then they "learn from their own mistakes." Like the permissive parent, described by Baumrind (1968), the child was encouraged to regulate his or her own activities as much as possible.

At the other end of the continuum was a more transactional view. Within developmental parameters, children were thought to actively construct knowledge through direct experiences and through manipulation of objects and interpersonal interactions: "He'll take his dolls out, and he will sit down and pretend to read 'My bunny book.' You should see his face when he pretends—he gets so excited." Rather than situating the locus of control in either the adult (i.e., transmissive) or the child (i.e., maturational), the transactional view seemed to empower both the child and the parent in child-centered activities: "The more you do with a child, the more they learn." As one mother said, "When I play peek-a-boo with my little baby, she's understanding—she's showing me with her eyes, and she be learning. So no matter what games you play, they will still learn." Inspired by curiosity, children were thought to act as the creative agent with adults facilitating and guiding the learning process: "She and I watch TV and try to answer the questions. They had a question something like, 'What was the capital of Philippines,' and I guessed Manila. And my daughter said, 'Are you sure Mom?' And I said, 'No I'm not sure, but I'm just guessing.' And I just say, 'Why don't you try to guess? You may not know it, but it's OK to guess.' In this respect, there was emphasis on the child's active engagement in situations that focused on the process of meaning-making more than products or outcomes. As mothers attempted to strike a balance between exerting control and encouraging children's growing independence, their comments shared much in common with descriptions of the authoritative parent (Baumrind, 1971, 1987).

These perspectives, described in greater depth in the categories below, were reflected in each group. Within each session, however, there was a dynamic interplay between the majority of participants expressing transmissive and maturational beliefs and a vocal minority, providing a counterpoint from a more transactional perspective. The following analysis describes parents' beliefs, focusing on their roles as educators of their children; their methods of instructing; and their views of early literacy learning contextualized within their daily practices with family and children.

## The Parents' Role

Our coding indicated that 141 interactions focused on the mothers' beliefs about their role as parents. Reflective of a transmissive perspective, 7 of the 19 mothers suggested that children's acquisition of information was directly attributable to the performance of the adult as teacher. Consistent with this view was the belief shared by mothers like Mary and Tameika that they were responsible for their children's educational success. "We're the teachers to make sure they get an education." Mothers wanted their young children to learn practical life skills (i.e., potty training, hygiene), as well as preparatory skills for school including the identification of body parts, shapes, colors, numbers, and the alphabet. Displays of knowledge from children through recitation were often acknowledged through external reinforcement. In three of the four groups, for example, mothers reported rewarding their children with food or material tokens (i.e., barrettes, sneakers, toys). "I'll buy him a pack of chips or something. And that just encourages a child to do things because they know that, once they do it, they know it pleases their parents. That's why, you know, you got to applaud a child."

Over half (26%) of these interactions from the transmissive perspective focused on school readiness. Parents were eager to prepare their children for school, frequently teaching them skills they presumed would be needed to be successful. "I want to prepare my child for school like teaching her the ABCs or how to spell her name. And I'm telling her to spell *dog* and *cat*." In two instances, for example, mothers attempted to instruct their children while they were still in utero. "This may sound funny, but, when I was pregnant, I used to write the alphabet on my tummy. I used to write *read* and stuff." Much of the mothers' efforts seemed designed to mold and shape their children so that they might "fit" into the educational system.

But of even greater importance than "teaching" their children, 44% of the total interactions in this category focused on the mothers' role in providing basic security for their children. Beyond the basic requirements of food, shelter, and clothing, eight of the mothers identified their role as primary providers of the nurturance necessary to enable their children to develop their potential. "You have to give them love. We all need love. Just to know that someone is there for you, that's why I'm here for. I'm here to take care of him, to make sure he have what he needs and what he wants. 'Cause he my child. I want to bring out the best in him, not what I want him to be, but what he wants to be."

In three of the sessions, mothers alluded to the futility of trying to exercise control over other individuals. Finding themselves in the position of regulating their child's behavior while, at the same time, rebelling against their own parental constraints, these interactions reflected concerns about "pressuring" the child: "Bad things happen when you put too much pressure on your kids. Instead of doing right, they do the other way 'cause they can't take it, 'cause it's too much pressure. Better let them be what they want to be." Sixteen percent of these comments indicated a reluctance to teach particular skills, believing in a child's basic ability to learn what was needed when it was needed. Sandra, for example, was hesitant to hold any expectations for her child, saying, "I just want him to live his life."

Inherent in this apparent freedom of choice was a feeling of powerlessness to control events. Instead of discussing life's options, Somalia talked about "dealing with" life's circumstances, expressing grave fears for the future. "I don't know if there's gonna be a future for my kid. I see him when he starts to go to the potty on his own. I'm serious, that's as far as I bother to look." Within this context, interactions appeared to focus on a desire to exert control over a situation that was believed to be beyond control.

On the other hand, 20% of the total interactions of the parents' role were more congruent with a transactional perspective. Comments from four mothers focused on processes like conversation and play as a vehicle for children's learning. These interactions reflected a strong interest in helping children to become independent through guidance. "I think, if you guide your child to do a lot of things by herself, that child will be fine. I let her do her homework by herself, and then she comes to me when she don't know it, and I check it over. But if you stay over your child, your child won't learn to be independent." Thus, in contrast to the transmissive perspective, these interactions focused on parents' responding contingently to children's cues and questions:

V: My daughter is in that stage of "Why this?" and "Why that?" and I really like when something's wrong and she be like, "Mommy, why, why why? and I tell her.

H: Does it make you impatient when she does that?

V: No. It doesn't hurt none to ask questions. How is she gonna learn something?

Thus, interactions from a transactional perspective seemed to emphasize the processes important for children to learn, rather than particular products or skills. However, it was clear from the discussions that most of the mothers appeared to be "weighted" by the responsibility of having a young child. They viewed their role seriously as taking care of their children and teaching them when they could the skills they believed were necessary to become socially competent, independent, and educated individuals.

## The Child's Role

Tensions noted in the interplay between teaching, nurturing, and guiding the child were similarly reflected in mothers' beliefs about the child's role

in learning. Here, we coded 106 comments that ranged along the continuum from transmissive to transactional beliefs. On the one hand, 42% of the comments were reflective of the transmissive perspective. Children were asked to be "attentive observers" and expected to "sit down and learn." Consistent with this attitude, seven of the mothers strongly emphasized obedience and respect for elders, with little tolerance expressed for curiosity and questioning: "She be asking questions just to be asking questions."

Yet on the other hand, 48% of the interactions voiced the belief that a child's role was to "behave like a child." Particularly committed to providing their children with the gift of time, eight of the young mothers regretted having been denied a childhood. Ramona's recollection that "I was always the adult in my house, and I want my son to have a childhood" was echoed by three other women in her group. The mother's role from this perspective seemed to place little emphasis on "correct" behavior: "They supposed to make noise. They supposed to make a mess. If they don't, I think something is wrong." Therefore, like Kim suggested, let "kids be kids;" mothers were supposed to demonstrate maternal instincts like flexibility and patience. "Honey, you've got to have patience. That comes with the package. That comes when you have them. When you have kids, I mean, that patience comes with it." Children were accorded greater freedom to develop social antennae in order to independently negotiate the environment. Along with this belief was the approval of children's mobility and autonomous decision making. Mothers often pointed to independent learning, like practices such as potty training (i.e., "She started by herself") and bedtime (i.e., "We just up 'til we go to sleep"). Thus, "getting" an education for children was often defined as learning to be "mature, independent mainly, school smart, street smart, everything."

Only 10% of the comments were reflective of the transactional perspective. Interactions from 2 of the mothers focused on the importance of books and toys in stimulating children's imagination and motivation to learn. Kim, for example, suggested that "a child can sit down and draw something that looks real funny to us, but to them it be might a car and a house. But like, who are we to judge if they're using their imagination?"

## Beliefs About Learning and Literacy

We coded 65 interactions that focused on learning and literacy. In each group, mothers uniformly agreed on the importance of the early acquisition of literacy. In fact, the learning of letters was often described as a benchmark of development, akin to walking and talking. Ten of the mothers expressed views congruent with a transmissive perspective. Literacy was described as knowing one's "alphabets" or ABCs: a set of skills unrelated to particular purposes or social context. "She knows her ABCs; she can even say them backwards."

Mothers read stories to children for didactic purposes—to teach children to count, to recite their alphabet, and to teach them right from wrong. "My mom bought my son some of these books, and they have like, one of them

is the title like *Be Careful*. They are like safety books; they show him and tell him to be careful—Don't do that." Similarly, stories were used as teaching tools: "When my son is bad, I tell stories like, "You know what? The Boogie Man is going to come and get you, cause you was bad." And "You know what? The Boogie Man said any child that is bad, he is going to come and git!"

Despite agreement on the importance of literacy and alphabet knowledge, six of the mothers expressing a maturational perspective believed that their child was not ready to be read to: "When they're ready, they will try, so you just wait until they're ready to read." Rather, 30% of the total interactions in this category focused on children's lack of attentional skills to listen and their preference for television programs over books. As Sakema said, "I don't like reading to him; plus my son is very inattentive. He will not sit and listen to you read. The most I have gotten him to do with educational programs is Barney. Thank God for Barney."

In contrast to the majority of participants, three mothers expressed a more transactional view regarding young children's approximations of conventional reading and writing as valid signs of early literacy. In 18% of these interactions, both the acquisition of skills and processes like conversation were viewed as supportive of literacy development. Audrey and Somalia, for example, both encouraged their children to scribble, to handle books, and to read aloud:

> *Audrey:* My mother reads to my baby. And when she reading, my little baby has to have a book too. And my little baby says "La, la, la, la," you know, when she's reading and tries to say what my mom say. Like she tries to talk over the top of it, like she's really reading this book. She'll hold it, she might have it upside down, but she'll hold it, the book, like she's saying something!

One mother indicated that she participated in make-believe telephone conversations with her daughter: "I write the number on a piece of paper. She'll copy it. She'll call people and say, 'Is such and such home.'" Another described using books as narrative props: "I not only read to him, I kind-a-like, somewhat, act it out. I'm like, 'Now what do you think is gonna happen when he do that?' And even though he don't talk much, he understand what I be saying." Thus, while there was overall agreement that children needed to learn basic skills (i.e., particularly alphabet knowledge), in some instances, mothers approached literacy as "not what you do, but how you do it," exploring opportunities for creative social interactions.

### Beliefs About Schooling

In each group, young mothers discussed the importance of schooling, regarding preschool as a critical preparatory setting for success in later schooling. Views of what actually constituted a "good school," however, varied along the continuum. Our coding revealed 123 interactions that related to beliefs

about schooling. Indicative of a transmissive view, 48% of the interactions focused on qualities such as skill instruction, tightly managed time schedules, disciplined behavior, grades, and tests—all seen as positive indicators of a well-run preschool. Consequently, a good teacher was defined by five of the mothers as a good manager, training children to sit attentively for long intervals of time in order to learn.

> I worked in a day-care center, and my kids were 18 months old. When we walked them in they had a premade tape. The VCR was set, the babies was in their high chairs, the other kids around the table. The tape was sort of like Barney. They taught their ABC songs. Then after that they had another tape which was a Sesame Street premade tape when they watched that. Then it was time for play time. Right? But they got them in the custom of when you go to school. You don't go to recess when you go to school. You go to class and these kids were grasping that when they was 18 months old.

In reacting to several play scenes on videotape, two of the four groups engaged in extended discussions about the usefulness of play, fearing that valuable instructional time in school could be wasted on child-directed activities or *free play*:

| | |
|---|---|
| J: | They can have free play, but I don't think it should be all free play. |
| S: | You gotta sit them down and teach them something. |
| A: | Yeah, teach them something. |
| J: | Like my son. I have a schedule of everything he does. |
| Leader: | So, what do you mean by "free play?" |
| J: | Like what they were doing in the video, but I think they should have, they should sit down and learn. |
| A: | Yup. |
| Leader: | You don't think they learn anything from that? |
| J: | They were learning, but I don't think they were learning what they should. I don't think they were learning a lot. |

Reflecting a more maturational perspective, 36% of the interactions focused on providing a "safe environment where there's nobody harming them." In this context, the teacher's role was to provide a positive role model (i.e., excellent moral character) and skillful classroom management. Expressing great concern for their children's emotional and physical well-being, five mothers found it difficult to relinquish their child's care to that of the school. In one of the sessions, for example, Sandra and Deria both reacted fearfully and suspiciously to a male teacher in a video segment, regarding men as unsuitable or inept caregivers: "I feel much safer with women watching my children than men." From this view, then, a good school was a "safe" school, which, when provided with equipment and proper custodial care, enabled children to learn when they were ready to learn (e.g., motivation being the child's responsibility.) "They got to do what they got to do; either they learn or they don't learn."

Of these interactions, 16% reflected a more transactional view, regarding the creation of a warm and caring rapport between teachers and children as an important aspect of the learning environment. "If a child likes a teacher, it's better communication. There's not too much crying and stuff like that. With a lot of children, they were all playing together. There was no fighting. No arguments or anything." Three of the mothers described that in a good school, teachers developed a "respectful" relationship with children; they were not custodians, but individuals who would "take time out to help each and every one of the kids; they come around and sit with you and talk with you," encouraging children to use their imagination.

Words like *creativity* and *imagination* were used in these interactions by mothers to refer to and define the thought processes demonstrated in children's activities. Play was considered valuable because it allowed children not only to practice newly acquired skills but also to extend their learning within a child-directed, independent context. "They want to play, that's all kids want to do when they first wake up in the morning until they go to bed at night. You can teach them through the play." An example of the dynamic interplay between mothers' perspectives could be noted in this discussion between Clarise and Tanja, after having viewed a scene with children playing in a sandbox:

> C: It's not playing in the sand; it's imagination. It could have been anything. They could have been sitting there and making something. I'm just saying, it may be nothing to us, but to them it's a whole new world!
>
> T: I mean it's good and everything. But there's a time where you've got to take the kids and say, "Okay, now we're going to learn the ABCs" or "Today we're going to learn how to make the number 2."
>
> C: But who's to say they didn't do that?
>
> T: But that's not what we was shown on the tape. We were shown one basic thing that they were doing, and that was play.
>
> C: Well, just tell me this, if your child was in a day-care center and your child was told, "Okay today we're going to learn the ABCs. What little child do you know is going to sit there and say, "Okay, we're going to learn our ABCs?" They can be learning their ABCs while they're sitting in the sandbox too.

Thus, in contrast to the other perspectives, play was seen as a basic characteristic of young children's behavior as they interacted with people and objects in their environment. A good school, then, was one that not only provided children with skills and security but opportunities for child-directed activity to facilitate learning.

### Shared Goals: Characterizing Adolescent Mothers' Beliefs

These discussions reflect on several critical issues. First, as was previously cited, much existing research on parent beliefs, values, and practices has focused on intergroup differences, often assuming homogeneity of experi-

ences across families within a particular culture (Bernstein, 1970; Diaz, Neal, & Vachio, 1991; Ninio, 1980). Middle-class parents have been reported to conform to authoritative or progressive beliefs compared to low-income parents who are seen as authoritarian, negative, and restrictive (Bee et al., 1969; Bernstein, 1970; Laosa, 1980). This assumption is clearly challenged by these discussions. Beliefs, among participants of similar ethnic, educational, and economic status, were situated along a broad spectrum, ranging from a more behavioral to a more constructivist perspective. Sharing much in common with traditional constructs of authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative parenting styles (Baumrind, 1968, 1971, 1987), these processes—transmission through transaction—suggest that there may be important variations in beliefs *within* social class. By centering on the content of parents' attitudes and beliefs, and not the linguistic styles, we evidenced important individual differences among and within this particular cultural community of African Americans. Given the sample size and the descriptive nature of the study, these data, of course, cannot be generalized to a broader population. Nevertheless, this study does suggest that, as part of understanding culturally diverse populations, we need to focus on the individual voices among them. As Greene has argued (1992), although cultural background surely plays a part in shaping identity, it does not determine one's identity. Rather, it may well create differences that should be honored and different orientations that must be understood.

At the same time, however, these discussions did indicate points of convergence, or shared goals, in this particular cultural community that seemed to reflect the basic beliefs of all participants in their attitudes toward schooling and literacy. Each of these beliefs are briefly described below.

## Belief 1: "You Gotta Teach Them Something"

Voiced with greatest repetition, mothers wanted their children to thrive both socially and intellectually. This belief was reflected in their desire for schools to teach both practical life skills (i.e., how to deal socially with others; hygiene) and academically oriented skills (i.e., letter names, numbers, listening skills). Thus, the differences among mothers tended to focus more on how to teach, rather than on what to teach. As Delpit has argued (1988), skill acquisition seemed to be regarded as part of the *culture of power*, providing children with the *rules* needed for future success in schooling. And in fact, Tizard and his colleagues' large-scale longitudinal analysis of 33 schools for infants in the inner cities suggested that the strongest predictor of attainment at age 7 was the amount of 3R knowledge that the children had before they ever started school.

## Belief 2: "I Want My Child to Be Safe"

Of critical importance to all mothers was the desire for their child to be in a safe environment. In fact, school was valued by many mothers because it provided a refuge from the unpredictable atmosphere of the "street." Yet, at

the same time, the young women acknowledged that their children's ultimate safety resided in how well they became sensitive to the social cues and learned the behaviors necessary to fend for themselves in a hostile environment. Therefore, they placed strong emphasis on their children's learning a variety of interpersonal skills, from cooperation to autonomy, that might facilitate social negotiation both in and out of school.

### Belief 3: "A Good Teacher Is Keeping That Respect"

While some mothers preferred a more authoritarian teacher role model than others, clearly all regarded "respect" (respect for children, from children and between teacher and family) as a critical component for establishing and maintaining family/school relations. Mothers respected teachers who were nurturant, maintained order, were willing to attend to children's individual needs, and taught them skills. Making visible some measures of children's skill development through reports, folders, and conversations earned great respect *from* parents. Similarly, teachers demonstrated respect *for* parents, when they communicated informally and shared information that might assist other parents in their efforts to help their children.

> I'm a friend of Tameika's (her daughter) teacher. She knows I'm a single parent and I'm young. She's working with me a lot, but I think that's helping me a lot, the way she teaches me how to. See, I don't have any patience, but she teaches me to "just sit down, and you do your homework while Tameika does her homework," and when you're finished you can recite words with her. And we worked it out, the way she told me to do.

### Belief System 4: "What I'm Doing, I'm Doing for Her"

All of these teenage mothers sought to be positive role models for their children. For a fair number, in fact, this was the central goal that motivated their decision to continue their own education. "I had to become something for myself, to be an example for him. It would be okay for him to look up to different people out there, but I want him to look up to his mom." Yet many believed they lacked the skills and resources that other mainstream parents had at their disposal for helping to upgrade their children's performance. In addition to communication, therefore, parents wanted to be sufficiently skilled themselves to successfully negotiate their children's future schooling.

## Conclusions and Discussion: Creating a Collaborative Relationship

As noted from these discussions, parents in this study reflected basic beliefs highly compatible with those of many school professionals (Chavkin, 1994): They clearly valued educational achievement, security and independence in learning, respect from and for teachers, and information that might enable

them to enhance their children's learning. These beliefs, in fact, represent the cornerstones of education in a pluralistic society (Greene, 1992). However, while sharing much in common with mainstream educational ideals, they also indicate very specific beliefs, spoken passionately at times, about how best to educate their children. It is by giving voice to these beliefs that educators may forge an alliance with parents to improve minority children's early education. Such an alliance involves key efforts from both constituents: Professionals should be willing to incorporate a range of pedagogical teaching strategies to be more congruent with family beliefs; similarly, parents should be willing to participate in activities that may enhance their role as educators of their children.

Thus, creating such collaborative relationships may require both adaptations in early education programs as well as in parent involvement activities. In our case, for example, efforts to respond to adolescent mothers' shared beliefs suggested changes in the day care and the parent-education program. These changes were not the result of implementing a particular "model" program, although what actually evolved might guide other efforts. Rather, these changes were designed to incorporate parents' beliefs in order to establish a constructive relationship between families and professionals.

For example, in an attempt to address parents' concerns for their children's skill and social development, day-care staff initiated several structural changes in the day-care program. Prior to change, the child-care room had been arranged with large, open spaces for children to engage in gross-motor activities, with few toys or books, or real-life objects to manipulate. After change, the room was redesigned to include small literacy-related play centers (a kitchen and a grocery store) to resemble real-life literacy contexts with environmental print and authentic objects (Neuman & Roskos, 1992, 1993). Next to these areas, a "cozy corner" library was created with low-standing book cases for toddler use. Although some of the books in the library were narrative, the majority of these books in this library were informational, relating specifically to concepts and skills parents' viewed as important. For example, some favorite books included an alphabet story, *Alligator's All Around* (Sendak, 1991), a counting book, *Ten, Nine, Eight* (Band, 1983), as well as books about safety and neighborhoods, *Building a House* (Barton, 1981), *Dig, Drill, Dump, Fill* (Hoban, 1975), *Watch Where You Go* (Noll, 1993), and *Hey, Al* (Yorinks, 1986). Together, these areas provided children with opportunities to playfully engage in skillful language and literacy activity, while practicing a variety of interpersonal skills that might enhance learning and facilitate social negotiation both in and out of school.

The parent involvement program evolved, as well, to reflect parent beliefs. Before change, mothers had attended weekly parenting education classes at their school, with little opportunity for linking what was learned to interactions with children. In response to their concern for monitoring children's progress as well as interest in becoming positive role models for their children, parents were invited, as part of their literacy program, to spend time in the day-care center. Rather than "service the group" (Smith, 1980,

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p.39), the day-care center staff and researchers taught parents to become actively involved in the educational activities described above, reading books and playing actively with the children. Many of these sessions were video-taped and used to coach parents individually in labeling, scaffolding, and responding contingently to children's initiatives in reading and play.

Before change, mothers were often isolated from others who had children of similar ages. Following change, as a method of sharing information and developing trust and respect, lunchtime conversations were held weekly with mothers, staff members, and researchers. Here, we used the dynamic interplay between transmissive, maturational, and transactional views found in the previous discussions to encourage mothers to stretch their ideas and develop further insights about the ways children learn. Working together as a team, mothers had the opportunity in these conversations to communicate informally with teachers and staff, to practice new skills, and to contribute to their children's instructional program.

Consequently, as Harry has so poignantly written (1992a), these examples illustrate that establishing a *posture of reciprocity* between parents and professionals may require a delicate shift in the balance of power between schools and communities. This power shift must be founded on a basic respect for families, their knowledge and beliefs, and their cultural community as a primary context for children's early development and learning. Within this basic frame, actual parental services and involvement may take many forms, with the overriding intent of empowering individuals to make informed decisions and to assume control over their lives.

Through a better understanding of parental beliefs, parental involvement programs may be designed to enable culturally diverse parents to realize their aspirations for their children. But mutual respect is not enough; groups with diverse agendas need to identify shared goals and devise strategies for successful implementation. Parental beliefs may help shape certain school activities and policies; at the same time, these beliefs may inform school personnel of information and strategies that parents need for negotiating with schools. Such collaborative efforts may help to build constructive relationships where parents and teachers can work together to support children's ultimate success in schooling.

## APPENDIX
### Discussion Guide

I. Introduction

- Explain purpose of research; explore what parents might think the discussion was going to be about; what are their expectations?
- Ask women to describe themselves: age, number of children, where they live, with whom they live?

II. Discussion

- What is a mother? Is a mother different from a father?

- In what ways are they like their own mothers? How would they like to be like them? In what ways do they not want to be like their mothers? Why?
- What makes a mother a good mother? Ask for specific words.
- What makes a mother a bad mother? Why? Ask for specific words.
- Who is the best mother they know? Why? Ask for specific words. Ask the meaning of each of these words.
- What happens if a mother is (word)? What does that do for the child?

III. Show pictures/videos

- What are these mothers doing? What are they doing with their children? For their children? What are their children thinking? Feeling? What are they showing/ teaching/telling their children? Is that good? Not good?
- What about these mothers would they like to be? Would their children like to have them as their mothers? Why? Why not?
- Would they like to have their children doing these activities? Why? Why not?

**Video Scenes Taped for Discussions**

1. Children in preschool having a make believe conversation. A male teacher chatting about toy food. (2 minutes)

2. Boy solemnly setting table for play, and girl playing in dress-up corner. (2.5 minutes)

3. Two boys playing a large crash-the-trucks game (somewhat wild). (2.5 minutes)

4. Sandbox group play between a group of children, all having a good time. (2 minutes)

5. A view of the classroom's physical design. The classroom is quite run-down. (3 minutes)

6. A teacher preparing the group for snack time. The teacher is quite authoritarian in manner. (5 minutes)

7. Reading aloud together as a group with the teacher. Singing two action songs. (2 minutes)

8. Group game, "Duck, Duck, Goose," with teacher's guidance. (3.5 minutes)

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## Notes

[1] In their extensive series of studies, Sigel and his colleagues (McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1982; Sigel, McGillicuddy-De Lisi, Flaugher, & Rock, 1983) reported a complex linkage between beliefs and parents' behaviors or actions. Parental beliefs that contained action (e.g., children learn best through direct instruction) predicted subsequent behavioral expressions (i.e., use of direct instructional teaching strategies with their children). However, parental beliefs that were more global in nature (e.g., children learn through an accumulation of knowledge) did not contain such clear-cut behavioral expressions. Consequently, they argue: beliefs that have many options for expressions are not good predictors

of behavior, since various strategies may become links in the long chain from belief to action.

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