

*Unequal Childhoods:
Class, Race, and Family Life*

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A study of African-American and white children in fourth grade

- Middle-class
- Working-class
- Poor
- 2 hour interviews with parents of 88 children
- 12 families intensive observation 20 days in a row
- Multi-racial team of researchers



Unequal Childhoods: The Power of Social Class

- Class differences in the cultural logic of child rearing
 - Middle-class: ***concerted cultivation***
 - Working-class and poor families: ***accomplishment of natural growth***



Concerted Cultivation

- Parents believe that they have an obligation to foster the growth and development of children's talents and skills.

Accomplishment of Natural Growth

- Parents provide and presume children spontaneously grow and thrive



Impact of Class Differences in Child Rearing

- Time Use
- Language Use
- Intervention in Institutions

- Unequal benefits in terms of being “in sync” with schools



Role of Race

- Lived in racially segregated neighborhoods
- Black Dads faced insults in public spaces
- Black parents worried about school discrimination
- When 10, race *not* apparent in time use, language use, and interventions in schooling
- Commonalities in white and African-American children in poor and working-class families in approach to school



Implications of *Unequal* *Childhoods* for Educators



1. Working-class parents turned over responsibility for education to the schools

- For parents who are high school graduates or high school drop-outs this is a *reasonable and rationale approach*
- Literacy and math skills are limited
- These parents have a notion of professional expertise and see educators as educational experts



2. Pattern of distrust of schools by working-class and poor

- Families [correctly] believe that the school has the power to turn them into the state to “come and take my kids away”
- See this as a palpable threat
- Colors their interactions with educators
- Educators see this as happening only in rare cases
- Families worry about it



3. Need to build on strengths of families: kin

- Very elaborate and close kinship systems in many urban neighborhoods with cousins having frequent contact
- School programs could build on cousin/aunt contact as a social network to be activated that is meaningful to participants
- Much more meaningful than classroom-based networks

Overall need to meet parents where they are



- Language patterns very different by class
- Working-class parents often find directives very helpful (rather than reasoning)
- Parents see corporal punishment as helpful
- Want children to defend themselves on school grounds
- Turn over responsibility for education to educators