

Book Review

Black Children: Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles, by Janice Hale-Benson. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

The public school is a multi-faceted social institution. It is a creation of society based on a shared value—knowledge; the need to know, master and perform. A method by which society reaffirms itself, education has stood as the American ideal of opportunity. But the question of whether the opportunity has been equal remains an issue of controversy among social, political and educational theorists. In a predominantly White society, are the cultural differences of the Black population being addressed? According to professor and author Janice Hale-Benson, the answer is a resounding “no.”

In **Black Children: Their Roots, Culture and Learning Styles**, Hale-Benson asserts that current-day public education has not allowed for distinctive cultural and cognitive patterns of the Black child. As the West African heritage continues to shape the cultural identity of the Black student, he finds participation in the Euro-American culture of the school difficult. Behavioral patterns, socialization styles and learning skills are markedly dissimilar from those of White students and “Americanized” individuals who, despite foreign birthright, have undergone assimilation.

The self-proclaimed thesis of Hale-Benson’s text is “to offer an alternative approach to conceptualizing the behav-

ioral styles of Black children and to lay the foundation for devising educational strategies that complement Black culture.” The ultimate goal is “education for survival” which ideally would result from incorporating the learning styles typically used in the Black family into the learning styles characteristic of the educational environment.

In supporting the validity of her thesis, the author exhaustively examines the historical, sociological and psychological antecedents that have contributed to the social and intellectual totality of today’s Black American. Tracing the roots of the Black American to his African origin, Hale-Benson looks within the cultural makeup of an ethnic group which comprises a growing portion of the population. What she finds is a culture rich in tradition and steeped in ethnic pride. But the traditions and behavioral patterns so engrained in Black heritage are verboten in the public school setting. The child reared in a home environment that welcomes active and vocal participation is penalized for such behavior in the school. Speech patterns that are indigenous to his cultural identity are unacceptable in the classroom and quickly corrected. And the fostering of positive self-concept crucial to the educational experience begins for the Black child with an eradication of those characteristics that intensely identify “self.”

While Hale-Benson’s rhetoric is sometimes biased and accusatory, she nevertheless opens some emotionally charged topics to much needed scrutiny. Her well-researched and documented text is a valuable contribution to the study of the Black educational experience in America.

Reviewed by Susan Day Harmison
Book Review Editor

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