

The Strengths of Families of Color: Implications for Practice

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CalSWEC Fairness and Equity Symposium

April 4, 2005

Summary of Questions & Answers following Dr. Hill's Keynote Address

Describe the debate between legal permanence vs. cultural permanence.

- The language of federal policy looks at permanency in terms of structure, rather than function. When permanency was first being talked about in ASFA, the emphasis was on legal permanency. Now, we need to broaden the definition of permanency and talk about it in terms of function. In one Illinois survey, for example, statistics showed that stability was just as great among kids whether they were in guardianship as opposed to adoption.

What is the research to substantiate cultural and functional patterns of people of color?

- Dr. Hill is associated with the Race Matters Consortium, located at the University of Illinois. The work of the Consortium encourages raising awareness of the problem of disproportionality. Their website is www.racemattersconsortium.org. Here you can find a number of documents that present the research, as well as policy position papers.
- CWLA also published a book in March, 2005 titled "Race Matters in Child Welfare". It includes papers from a Westat conference with scholars from across the country discussing the issue of disproportionality.

Discuss funding for relative caregivers.

- In Illinois, the Yoakum decision stipulated that relatives should not be handled differently than non-relatives. This means that if relatives are properly licensed they should be able to qualify for the same funds as non-relatives. The problem is that a lot of relatives do not pass licensing requirements and some of them don't want to be licensed. The bulk of those kin get the lower TANF payment and not the foster care payment.
- Though still in the early stages, a number of states are beginning to explore mechanisms to provide more support to kin guardians.

Cultural strengths are often converted into deficits. An example is the idea of flexibility and moving around, which is a tremendous strength that research now suggests is actually better for kids. However, when our child welfare policy makers look at it, they do not make that connection. Do you have suggestions for how to frame this discussion in a way that can draw policy makers into it?

- We need to have policies that are more family-oriented, rather than focused on individuals. If we maximized family functioning there would be positive outcomes for the children. However, we first have to educate our own constituencies and admit within our own field that this is a problem. Congress would then be more responsive as more people are galvanized to want to do something about it. For example, juvenile justice and special education are two areas that have admitted that disproportionality is a problem and Congress

has mandated efforts to explore this. Both of those areas are intricately linked with child welfare.

As trainers, how do we get workers to look at the functioning of the larger family system in terms of positive outcomes, rather than process or structure?

- More effective data systems that can monitor some of this type of information will yield better data. We have to be much more bold and aggressive in terms of indicating the importance of it, and including more partners at the local level to be able to have an impact on the field level.

Is there any movement in any state to call children who are being raised by their kin, “functional adoptions”, so they don’t have to do the legal piece? When this data first came out, relative placements were called “functional adoptions” by UC-Berkeley, but there was no way to count those as a permanency measure.

- I’m not aware of any. It is important to be more sensitive to the functions of kin, but policy is not that sensitive. However, it would be much more effective for counting outcomes.

When talking about family preservation and how to provide services for single parent households, does it hinder our efforts to provide adequate family preservation services when researchers gloss over the fact that there is disparity in positive outcomes from these households? For example, when the rate of children growing up in single parent households is between 70% and 80%, yet the graduation rate and college entry rate is 50%, there is still some disparity.

- First of all, we have to have a balance. Research has shown more positive outcomes than we acknowledge, especially among Black single parents because they typically have the support of kin. For example, according to a national study, Black teenagers use drugs less than the White teenagers. Why don’t we talk about these findings? We also wouldn’t want to carry that to the extreme and say, “Therefore, they don’t need any help.”
- We need to remember that family functioning consists of a lot of dimensions, not just economic, and in some of those dimensions, single parent families do less well than two-parent households and need the help of helping professionals. Also, we have to restore somehow the role of the fathers because, going back to the study of non-custodial parents, many of them do want to be involved.