

On Nature and Environmental Education: black parents speak from the inner city

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SUMMARY *Twenty four black parents from Houston, Texas were interviewed on their perspectives about nature and environmental education. Results showed that animals, plants and parks played an important part in the lives of these parents and their families. Parents were also aware of the negative effects of environmental problems, such as air pollution, water pollution and garbage. Parents talked about such problems with their children, acted to help the environment and believed it was important to live in harmony with nature. Parents supported environmental education for their children and believed it was as important as drug education. Anthropocentric and biocentric considerations characterized parents' environmental reasoning and often their conceptions of what it means to live in harmony with nature. Taken as a whole, parents spoke of their commitment to environmental issues and enjoyment of nature while remaining vividly aware of the difficulties which arise from urban poverty.*

Introduction

Black communities in the USA are disproportionately subjected to large amounts of environmental pollution and environmental hazards (Bullard, 1990; Gaylord & Bell, 1995; Wenz, 1995; Westra, 1995) [1]. However, little is known about this group's environmental concerns, understandings and values (Bullard, 1987; Mohai, 1990). In the current study we investigated this issue by interviewing black parents in an economically impoverished urban community. This study forms part of our larger project which involved not only interviewing parents, but also 72 black children (across grades 1, 3 and 5) from that same community. We then sought to integrate the psychological data from both studies to help teachers in that community as they developed a culturally and developmentally appropriate environmental science and values curriculum.

The results from the child data have been reported elsewhere (Kahn & Friedman, 1995). Those results showed, for example, that children believed that

throwing garbage in their local waterway (a bayou) would harm birds, water, insects, local people and the view and that it would matter to them if such harm occurred. In consort with their reasoning, children's moral obligatory judgments were assessed using three criterion judgments: prescriptivity (that the act in question should not be done), rule contingency (even if a rule permits the act) and generalizability (even if people in a far off location perform the act and think it is all right). Results showed that children conceived of throwing garbage in the bayou as a violation of a moral obligation. In addition, two overarching forms of children's environmental reasoning were found: anthropocentric and biocentric. Anthropocentric reasoning focused on protecting nature in order to protect human interests, including considerations based on personal interests, aesthetics and human welfare (e.g. 'air pollution goes by and people get sick, it really bothers me because that could be another person's life'). Biocentric reasoning focused on protecting nature because nature itself has moral standing, including considerations based on intrinsic value, respect and rights ('animals don't need to be killed either, because they need the same respect that we need'). Overall, it appeared that the serious constraints of living in an economically impoverished urban community could not easily squelch these children's diverse and rich appreciation for nature and moral responsiveness to its preservation.

In this article we report on the results from the parent data. We investigated four overarching questions: how do parents value the importance of nature for their family?; what environmental problems are parents concerned about?; what types of environmentally related behaviors do parents participate in with their family?; what are parents' views toward environmental education for their children? The goal was to help characterize and give voice to black parents' perspectives on nature and environmental education.

Methods

Subjects

Twenty four parents were recruited through an elementary school in Houston, Texas. Virtually all of the children attending the school were black (>99%), most received the free lunch program (91%) and the majority were considered low performing (60%). All of the parents who participated in this study had at least one child enrolled in the school. A 'parent' was defined as the child's primary carer, which sometimes was the child's grandmother (8%) or other guardian (8%). The principal of the school helped recruit parents whom he thought might participate. Through informal discussion with the principal, his selection criteria included at least one of the following: parents who had shown (a) an interest in helping the school (e.g. as a playground monitor), (b) an interest in helping out in their child's classroom, (c) an involvement in other school activities, (d) a particular interest in their child's education or (e) an interest in environmental issues. Of the 24 parents interviewed (all of whom were black), 23 were female and one was male. Two reasons help explain this disparity. The interviews occurred during school hours (on the school grounds) and fathers were more likely than mothers to be employed during that time. It was also the case that men, as parents, resided in a small percentage (23%) [2]

of the households who participated. The average household size was between four and five people.

Procedures and measures

One of two interviewers (one black, one white) administered to each parent individually a semi-structured interview that lasted approximately 40 minutes. This interview methodology was pioneered by Jean Piaget (1960, 1965, 1969) and has been elaborated upon by a wide range of current researchers (Damon, 1977; Ogbu, 1977; Turiel, 1983; Killen, 1990; Saxe, 1990; Laupa, 1991; Kahn, 1992; Nucci & Turiel, 1993; Helwig, 1995; Smetana, 1995; Wainryb, 1995). Such interviews involve systematic (structured) questions yet the freedom for each interviewee to express themselves extensively and uniquely. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

The interview comprised the following structured questions.

(1) Toward understanding how they valued the importance of nature, parents were asked whether animals were important to their family, and why. Similar questions followed about parents' views and values toward plants and parks/open spaces. Parents were also asked whether they thought it was important for people to live in harmony with nature, and what is meant by harmony.

(2) Toward understanding what they perceive as environmental problems, parents were asked whether they were aware of any environmental problems. Then, if parents had not mentioned one or more of the following items, they were specifically asked if they were aware of any problems with air pollution, water pollution or garbage. Along similar lines, parents were asked whether any environmental problems affected them directly. Potential problems with air pollution, water pollution and garbage were again investigated if not spontaneously mentioned. Parents were also asked whether they lean more toward conservation or technology as a general strategy for solving environmental problems. ('Some people say there are two ways to solve environmental problems. One way is to decrease our consumer needs and use of technology to control nature. The other way is to push ahead with developing new technology since it is believed that technology will be able to solve the environmental problems. What do you think? Do you favor one way more than another? Why?').

(3) Toward investigating their environmentally oriented family practices, parents were asked about whether they ever talked about environmental problems with their family and, if so, how a typical conversation gets started. Parents were also asked whether they do anything to help the environment and if so what.

(4) Toward understanding their views toward environmental education, parents were first asked to rank the importance of drug education on a scale of 1 (least important) to 10 (most important). Then, using the same scale, parents were asked to rank the importance of environmental education. Parents were asked to explain their rankings. Parents were also asked how they would like to see their child's environmental educational curriculum in the school developed ('What kinds of things do you think are important for children to learn about nature? What would you put in the school curriculum? Why?') and whether

TABLE 1. Parents' conceptions for living in harmony with nature; summary of categories

Acting upon	Conception based on doing something to or for nature, including <i>positive acts</i> ('to live in harmony with nature means to help the environment'; '[harmony means] planting more trees') and <i>negative acts</i> ('not polluting the air'; 'don't be shooting at the birds').
Experiencing	Conception based on experiencing or interacting with nature ('[harmony means] being out in nature'; 'just going to a river or lake or something and just sitting there, absorbing all of the fresh air, the outside').
State of mind	Conception based on experiencing a particular state of mind or feeling ('[harmony means] to enjoy the outside'; 'to live happily together as one big happy family').
Balance with nature	Conception based on being in balance with nature ('[harmony means] you're balanced out with nature, to where you're not working against it, like we can't exist without plants and without us, they can't exist'; 'working together, because everybody [including a person, ant or mouse] has a job to do or a place').
Respect for nature	Conception based on respecting nature, including such concepts based on reciprocity ('[harmony means] I'm going to respect the bee, if he respects me') and perspective taking ('to put themselves in the animals' shoes, could they live in that environment with all the air pollution living outdoors').

they thought it was a good idea to coordinate some school environmental activities with at-home environmental activities.

Coding and reliability

A coding manual was first developed from the responses of 50% of the data and then applied to all (100%) of the data. Three types of responses were coded.

(1) Dichotomous evaluation responses (e.g. yes/no; aware/not aware of environmental problems);

(2) content responses (e.g. animals, plants, garbage, water pollution and air pollution);

(3) conceptions of living in harmony with nature (e.g. respect for nature).

Parts of the coding system drew on Kahn & Friedman (1995). Summary descriptions of the harmony conceptions are presented in Table 1 and for the environmental justification categories in Table 2.

An independent coder trained in the use of the coding manual recoded six interviews (25% of the data). For evaluations intercoder agreement was 97% (and statistically significant by testing Cohen's kappa for statistical significance at the 0.05 level). For content responses, justification and harmony conceptions intercoder agreement was 100%.

Results

The Importance of Nature

Eighty-six percent of the parents said that animals played an important part in the lives of their family. Often, on this topic, parents spoke favorably of pets, such as dogs or cats. It was also not unusual for parents to speak of ways in which their children interacted with a diverse range of smaller animal life close at hand:

TABLE 2. Summary of environmental justifications categories

Personal interest	An appeal to the personal interests and projects of self and others, including those that involve recreation or provide fun, enjoyment, or satisfaction (e.g. 'I like to go [to a park because] you can sit and you can think').
Aesthetics	An appeal to the preservation of the environment for the viewing or experiencing pleasure of humans (e.g. '[garbage is a problem] because it makes the street look very nasty and trashy and smell of it'; 'I think we need to want to foster beauty, not only just where we live specifically but everywhere')
Welfare	An appeal to the physical, material and psychological welfare of human beings (e.g. 'because nature helps you out more than people think it does, like if there's a lot of smoke around, trees breathe in the smoke, so you can have clean air to breathe yourself'; '[parks and open spaces are important because] I think it helps to perpetuate a sense of freedom and openness and non-restriction').
Relational	An appeal to a relationship between humans and nature based on caretaking and feelings of companionship and love (e.g. '[animals are important to me because] you bond with them. Your love for them becomes almost at times [like the] love that you can have for human beings because of the way that they in return show you their affection').
Biocentric	An appeal to a larger ecological community of which humans may be a part, including an appeal to <i>intrinsic value</i> wherein value for nature is not derived solely from human interests (e.g. 'I think that the animals and the plant life was put here just to be loved and appreciated for what and how it is'), <i>justice</i> , wherein nature has rights, deserves respect or at a minimum warrants equal treatment to humans (e.g. 'I feel like you should treat animals like human beings; everybody should be treated equal including pets') and <i>teleos</i> , wherein nature has a proper endpoint or good for which it aims (e.g. 'The plants and animals are here for certain reasons; the caterpillars are here because eventually they're going to be butterflies. The tadpoles are here because eventually they're going to be frogs. You know, everything is here for a purpose').

My grandson picks up all kinds of little animal things and some of them, I don't even know what they are myself, but he brings them in and gets a jar.

My kindergarten daughter, she might see something that looks injured and um she saw a worm. She doesn't pick up these black ones or brown ones because they sting. So, this one was a yellow one and she said he was hungry. So she picked him up and took him over to a leaf and put him on it. You know, they do those type of things.

Eighty-six percent of the parents also said that plants played an important part in the lives of their family and 95% said parks and open spaces did. Often parents spoke with enthusiasm of these aspects of nature (e.g. 'we're crazy about animals, pets', 'we love plants', 'my children love to run in the park').

Parents particularly spoke of two types of problems which made it difficult to interact well with their natural surroundings. One problem involved pollution:

[Where I live] they have a lot of backup sewage and stuff. And my children can't play in the backyard because it's just nasty. And right now before I left they was over there trying to stop it. It'll be right back. Back up probably next week some time.

A second problem involved social violence:

Because kids don't have no break around here because all they could do is stay in the house. They couldn't really go outside and sit on the porch, 'cause somebody may shoot 'em or something. 'Cause it was just bad around here. But now, it's just a little better, 'cause I guess the police had really got on their jobs.

In other words, it is not so much that parents and their children wanted to avoid nature (even in terms of just playing in the backyard or sitting outside), but that the noxious pollution and potential for violence within their community made such experiences difficult.

All of the parents (100%) said it was important for people to live in harmony with nature. Parents' conceptions of what it means to live in harmony with nature were coded with the categories presented in Table 1. Results showed the following percentages of the total number of conceptions offered (multiple conceptions were coded): acting upon nature (39%), experiencing nature (18%), being in the right state of mind with nature (13%), being in balance with nature (13%) and respecting nature (16%).

Across five questions, parents' environmental justifications were coded with the categories presented in Table 2: three questions focused on why parents believed plants, animals and parks were or were not an important part in their lives, the fourth on why parents proposed particular types of environmental curriculum and the fifth on why parents believed it was important to live in harmony with nature. Summing across the questions results showed the following percentages of the total number of justifications offered (multiple justifications were coded): personal interest (24%), aesthetics (16%), welfare (39%), relational (12%) and biocentric (10%).

Environmental problems

All of the parents (100%) were aware of at least some environmental problems, including air pollution (75% of the parents), water pollution (71%) and garbage (67%). Most of the parents (91%) believed that they were directly affected by one or more environmental problems, such as air pollution (54%), garbage (42%) and water pollution (21%). Their knowledge was often direct:

I'd say about the third week, I have gotten up early in the morning and walk outside and the pollution smell is really bad. Sometimes, I'll tell you what, it seems like sometimes you come by and it smells like a cesspool, but it's really not. You can smell that chemical and where it's coming from, but then you have to go back 'cause sometimes it be real strong.... And smells strong, sometimes it smells terrible.

[The air] stinks, 'cause I laid up in the bed the other night. Kept smelling something, knew it wasn't in my house, 'cause I try to keep everything clean. Went to the window and it almost knocked me out. The scent was coming from outdoors into the inside and I didn't know where it was coming from.... Now, who'd want to walk around smelling that all the time?

Toward solving environmental problems, 67% of the parents favored conser-

vation over technological solutions, while 33% favored technological solutions over conservation. Here are two examples of each type of solution.

Nature is natural and with all this high tech we have going on now, it's not really guaranteed. You know what I'm saying? But we can always depend on nature 'cause we come from nature. Nothing takes the place of nature (conservation solution).

I don't feel we should do the technology because in a sense they always have new ways of doing things and then when they get through with that project there's something else they didn't remember to do (conservation solution).

Going back to nature, that's not going to get it, is it? I mean, things have changed and you got to change with it. You know, nature's fine, but I think going on with new technology would be the better way. Like when a big oil spill or something happens, you don't have the technology to clean it up and going back to nature, it's just not going to work (technological solution).

[The problems have been going on] so long and it's still going on. So I think they need to come up with some new development and technology (technological solution).

These responses appear to fit into the larger societal discourse on ways in which technology can both enhance and degrade human welfare and the human connection to the natural world (Hart & Chawla, 1981; Kohak, 1984; Rothenberg, 1993; Strong, 1995).

Environmental practices

The majority of parents (93%) said that they did things to help the environment. Activities included recycling cans and bottles (70%), picking up litter (43%), recycling newspapers (26%), recycling other items (22%) and re-using materials (4%). Some of the parents who recycled cans and bottles did so by giving their recyclables to other people who went from house to house requesting such items. These people, in turn, took the recyclables to a facility (which was located outside their community) and collected the money. Parents often gave their recyclables away in this manner because they did not own a car and thus lacked the means to recycle the materials themselves. This lack of transportation sometimes affected parents' environmental practices in other ways as well. For example, when parents said that they did not often go to parks, the reasons sometimes stemmed from not having a car to get to the nicer and safer parks outside their community. Similarly, in terms of parents teaching their children more about nature: 'A lot of parents don't take their kids a lot of places where they can understand [things about nature] ... because a lot of parents don't have no transportation'.

The majority (88%) of the parents had conversations with their children about environmental issues, such as water pollution (18%), garbage (15%), harm to plants (15%), air pollution (12%), harm to animals (9%), recycling (9%) and chemicals in food (3%). These family conversations were started in a variety of ways, based, for example, on observing and interacting with nature directly

(47%), TV and movies (47%), school discussions (27%) and newspapers or other media (7%). These conversations were often poignant:

Yesterday, as my son and I were walking to the store and we were walking down Alabama [street] and for some reason, I think they're getting ready to widen the street. And it's a section of Alabama that I thought was so beautiful because of the trees and they've cut down all the trees. And you know it hurts me every time I walk that way and I hadn't realized that my son had paid attention to it, too. So, he asked me, he said, 'Mama, why are these, why have they cut down all the trees?' And then he asked me, 'Well, if they cut down all the trees everywhere, would that have an effect on how we breathe?'

The water we drink just comes out of the faucet and sometimes he'll say something like 'this water doesn't look right'. You know, it could have something in it that could be detrimental to us. [My son asks] 'Could it hurt me? How do we know what's in this water?' And to some of his questions I have no answer because I mean, I cannot tell him what's in the water 'cause I don't know. I wonder some things myself.

Such conversations point to an appreciation for nature (of trees), environmental concerns which arise through direct experience of environmental degradation (the cutting of trees and water pollution) and perhaps some sense of powerlessness in not being able to preserve what exists of their community's natural beauty and in not knowing about their environment's safety.

Parents particularly spoke of two problems which appeared to limit their pro-environmental behavior. One was that once a parent might solve a local environmental problem, one or more residents in the community would create it again:

There is a lot of trash, and it just makes the area ugly. And you can clean up and then go to bed and wake up, the people that walking up and down the street, you know, wake up in the morning and it's right back thrown in your yard.

Right open daytime they just come and take [the flowers I plant]. Yeah, cause I try to keep some of 'em outside you know. I try to make it look pretty out there and they just, you know, they'll come and take 'em.

The second was that solutions to some environmental problems depended on the cooperation of larger numbers of people:

I guess it makes it hard because you know, whereas maybe I might be doing it, my—my neighbor next door might not be doing it.

Well, to tell the truth, the little bit that we do do, it might be helping out a little bit, but it's not too much one single family can do ... maybe things wouldn't be exactly the way it is right now, but one family's not going to make that much difference.

Thus, perhaps as for environmentally concerned individuals everywhere, a sense of futility at times emerged in the voices of these parents.

Environmental education

On a scale of 1–10 (with 1 the least important and 10 the most important) parents ranked the importance of drug education for their children. Results showed a mean rank of 8.5 (SD 3.3). On the same scale parents ranked the importance of environmental education for their children. Results showed a mean rank of 8.7 (SD 2.4). Matched-pair *t*-tests showed no statistical difference between parents' rankings for the importance of drug education versus environmental education. In comparison to environmental education, 57% of the parents ranked drug education as equally important, 29% as more important and 14% as less important. Of parents who equated the importance of drug and environmental education, their reasoning often focused on the physical ramifications of both problems:

With the drugs, we're nothing. Without the environment, we're nothing. And drugs is something I see every day. There are dealers across the street from me. So, I see this every day and it's just killing us. I mean, it really is killing us and with the drugs, we're not going to have any youth.... With the drugs, you're not going to have a future and without any environment we're not going to have a future.

Well let's put it like this here. If you don't take care of one [drugs], it's going to kill you. If you don't take care of the other [the environment] it's going to kill you.

Parents were also asked what they thought would be important for their children to learn about nature and to include in their children's school curriculum. Based on the total number of responses (multiple responses were coded) parents suggested a focus on littering/garbage (16%), air pollution (14%), spiritual aspects of nature (12%), plants (12%), animals (12%), water pollution (6%), drugs and human violence (4%), technology (4%), recycling (4%) and nature walks (4%). All of the parents (100%) favored environmental education that coordinated school curriculum with at-home activities.

Discussion

The black communities in Houston have remained—in the words of Robert Bullard (1987)—largely invisible to politicians, researchers and environmentalists alike, locally (in Houston) and nationally. Thus, through interviews with parents, this study helps to make visible one black Houston community's perspective on nature and environmental education.

In summary, parents spoke of their commitment to environmental issues and enjoyment of nature. Animals, plants and parks, for example, played an important part in the lives of these parents and their families. Parents were aware of the negative effects of environmental problems, such as air pollution, water pollution and garbage. Their knowledge was often direct, visceral: the air would often 'smell like a cesspool' and sewage would often back up and be 'just nasty'. Parents talked about such issues with their children. In response to environmental problems parents more often favored conservation solutions over technological solutions. Parents acted to help the environment, often by recycling. Parents were also committed to environmental education for their children. In terms of

their environmental reasoning parents drew most often on anthropocentric considerations, including personal interest, human welfare and aesthetics. Yet biocentric reasoning, where nature itself is given moral standing, was not entirely absent, comprising 10% of all justifications. Moreover, more than one quarter of parents' conceptions of living in harmony with nature involved the biocentric orientations of being in balance with nature or respecting nature.

Research has shown that if education is to succeed better in black communities it will likely depend in part on support from the home (Ogbu 1977, 1993; Solomon, 1992; Winters, 1993; Boston Globe, 1994). Three results suggest that such support for environmental education exists. First, parents ranked highly the importance of environmental education (8.7 on the 10 point scale). Second, there was no statistical difference in parents' ranking of the importance of drug education and environmental education. As one parent said: 'With the drugs, you're not going to have a future and without any environment we're not going to have a future'. Third, all of the parents favored environmental education that coordinated school curriculum with at-home activities.

Environmental educators often believe that children need to experience pristine natural settings to develop environmental sensibilities (Chawla, 1988; Orr, 1992, 1994, Nabhan & Trimble, 1994). Accordingly, educators have questioned whether environmental education can occur effectively in the inner cities, especially when parents lack the economic means for their families to visit natural settings outside their own community. It is a difficult issue and we do not want to downplay the importance in children's development of experiencing pristine areas. Yet our results suggest that urban educators can draw on other worthwhile approaches as well. For example, Bullard (1987) reports, and the parents we interviewed agreed, that three overriding environmental problems in Houston include air pollution, water pollution and garbage. Thus one obvious approach involves helping students to understand and improve such environmental conditions which directly harm their well being. In addition, since parents sometimes spoke of living in balance with nature and respecting nature, it may well be possible to bring such considerations to the traditional curriculum. For example, one third grade teacher at the childrens' school chose literature (such as *The Giving Tree*, Silverstein, 1964) to read to his students to help foster an empathy for the natural world. Equally important, our qualitative results highlight instances where these children, perhaps like all children (Wilson, 1984; Kellert, 1996; Kahn, 1997), were fascinated with the animals and vegetation within their reach: butterflies, ants, trees, worms, spiders, leaves and flowers. Thus our results suggest that nature in its splendor can be found everywhere and that urban educators can look not only far off but close at hand for experiences from which to develop curriculum.

The results also bear on the universality of the human relationship with nature. A colleague and ourselves recently completed a study in the Brazilian Amazon on children's environmental views and values (Howe *et al.*, 1996). To our surprise, based on 26 measures, the Brazilian children's environmental moral judgments and reasoning largely resembled those of the black Houston children interviewed in the Kahn & Friedman (1995) study. The current study continues to delineate some potentially universal features of the human relationship with nature, ranging from various ways of justifying environmental judgments and understanding what it means to live in harmony with nature to the

more direct impact that nature has on our well being. As one parent asked: 'Who'd want to walk around smelling that [polluted air] all the time?' No one.

Before saying more, a methodological qualification is in order. At the outset of this study the principal of the school had objected to our proposal to solicit parents randomly from the school population to participate. He said that such a solicitation would be too burdensome on parents and in any case largely ineffective, given that most parents did not communicate with the school through such written documents. Instead, the principal targeted certain parents to recruit. From our informal discussions with the principal it appeared that he (reasonably) chose to solicit parents that had been somewhat active in the school or in their child's education. But how much did this 'principal-solicited' population of parents differ from a representative population within this community?

One answer is that our results may represent a higher bound in terms of this community's overall environmental orientation. If so, then our results would still show an important characteristic of this community and perhaps of most if not all urban black communities in the USA, namely that within these communities live environmentally oriented parents. Moreover, our results would help to flesh out the depth and complexity of such parents' orientations in terms of their environmental commitments, values and reasoning.

Alternatively, another answer is possible which emerges from recent comparative research between black and white environmentalism. For example, Mohai (1990) re-analyzed a large set of survey data conducted by Louis Harris Inc. (Fischer *et al.*, 1980) and found higher levels of black environmentalism than was often reported in the research of the 1970s (Crenson, 1971; Kreger, 1973; Hohm, 1976; Ostheimer & Ritt, 1976; Hershey & Hill, 1977-1978; Mitchell, 1979). Moreover, in Mohai's analysis there were no statistical differences in environmental concern when blacks and whites were compared as a whole and few differences when blacks and whites were compared by socioeconomic categories (p. 754; see also Mohai & Twight, 1987; Bullard, 1990; Bryant & Mohai, 1992). When Mohai found statistical differences blacks scored higher than whites on environmental concern in four out of the seven cases. Thus, to the extent our results are of a piece with environmentalism and indeed of national samples (Kempton *et al.*, 1995), the explanation may lie not in the potential bias of our sample, but that in the USA there is less difference between black and non-black communities than some individuals might perceive.

A further word about such perceptions. The political activist Eldredge Cleaver (1969) once wrote that 'black people learned to hate the land ... [and] have come to measure their own value according to the number of degrees they are away from the soil' (pp. 57-58). Others have similarly advanced the proposition that certain conditions, such as a history of slavery, have denied blacks the opportunity to develop appreciative attitudes toward nature (for an overview of the literature see Taylor, 1989; Mohai, 1990). Such a perception may have been fueled historically by the large migration of black Americans until the 1970s from the rural south to the cities of the north and west. Yet, in contrast, many black writers—from Booker T. Washington to James Baldwin to Huey Newton to Toni Morrison and bell hooks—have written of the enduring place of land and nature in the psyche of black Americans. For example, bell hooks (hooks, 1996) writes:

Living in modern society, without a sense of history, it has been easy for folks to forget that black people were first and foremost a people of the land, farmers.... Living close to nature, black folks were able to cultivate a spirit of wonder and reverence for life. Growing food to sustain life and flowers to please the soul, they were able to make a connection with the earth that was ongoing and life affirming. They were witnesses to beauty. (p.21)

Thus, according to hooks, 'generations of black folks who migrated north to escape life in the South [have] returned down home in search of a spiritual nourishment, a healing that was fundamentally connected to reaffirming one's connection to nature ...' (p. 22). Accordingly, such desires for a stronger connection to nature may have contributed to the reverse migration which Stack (1996) and others have begun to document. By 1990 the South had regained a half million black Americans, both in the southern cities and countryside.

Something of this history and the black American's connection to the land emerged from our own data. For sometimes parents spoke of having grown up in the country and that they wanted to impart some of that way of life to their children:

I was born in Mississippi and I spent a great part of my life on a farm. And on the farm we had corn and tomatoes and okra and stuff like that and we had a couple horses and before my father passed away, my baby was able to spend about a year or so there. And he just loved that. As a matter of fact, if possible he would go back to that kind of life.

I'm from the country. So, I want them to really learn all the outside things, you know, that I enjoyed as a child coming up. You know, fresh air, and I enjoyed fishin' and stuff like that so I want them to be able to you know, go out there and enjoy nature.

Other times parents' connections to the countryside was through their own parents.

When I was a little kid, my grandmother lived out in the country. She said she liked it out there 'cause it was quiet and peaceful and you can breathe the air out there was clean and fresh.

Such connections to a rural past, although largely unexplored in this study, may further explain these parents' particular receptivity for environmental education for their children.

Finally, it is important to note that our general approach in this study shifts the ground of the research enterprise slightly. Instead of only comparing the black commitment to nature and environmental issues with another racially based population, it is also important to ask how is the black relationship with nature to be understood within the context of their social and physical environment and how can we build on such relationships to foster environmental education and a healthier and more life-affirming connection with the natural world? These questions support the recent call from Gates & West (1996) when they write: 'We [the black communities] need something we don't yet have: a way of speaking about black poverty that doesn't falsify the reality of black advancement; a way of speaking about black advancement that doesn't distort the enduring realities of black poverty' (p. B7). Indeed, through our interviews

black parents gave voice to both realities. They described the harsh living of urban poverty, from drive-by shootings to drug dealers living next door, while articulating, sometimes eloquently, their environmental awareness, values and sensibilities and guarded hopefulness for their children's future.

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NOTES

- [1] Based on our informal conversations with parents, teachers and school administrators it appeared that most of the people in the community where we conducted our research preferred to distinguish themselves as black Americans as opposed to African Americans. Thus throughout this article we follow their preference.
- [2] At times the reported percentages are based on a sample size slightly smaller $n = 24$, due to missing values. For example, in this case there were two missing values, thus our results showed that fathers resided in five of the homes out of 22 responses (23%).

Notes on Contributors

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