DAP in the ’hood: Perceptions of child care practices by African American child care directors caring for children of color

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Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative analysis concerning child care practices by six African American directors of subsidized child care centers located in a low-income, racial ethnic minority area of Los Angeles, California. These programs are traditionally African American programs that experienced an influx of Latino immigrant enrollment. Using the integrative framework for children of color proposed by Garcia Coll et al. [Garcia Coll, C., Crinic, K., Lamberty, G., Wasik, B., Jenkins, R., Garcia Vazquez, H., et al. (1996). An integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children. Child Development, 67, 1891–1914], which places racial ethnicity in the center, we examined how these directors integrated professional standards of practice (developmentally appropriate practice) with community understandings of the role of preschool/child care in this community; the function of social stratification on their articulated practices; and their understanding as to how they include the Latino immigrant families. We discovered patterns that reflect a community-interpreted understanding of developmentally appropriate practice.

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1. Introduction

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is a set of guidelines mandated by professional organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). DAP is accepted widely within the professional child care community as the standard for exemplary care. Publications endorsing DAP articulate universal methods and procedures to enact DAP as a means to professionalize the field (Copple & Bredekamp, 2005). The standards of DAP have come under scrutiny in that they “claim legitimacy of science in proclaiming a universal child rearing practice” (Lubeck, 1996, p. 158) and may not incorporate fully the contexts of care in which practices are enacted. This study is not a critique of DAP as it pertains to all communities. Instead, we are interested in examining the extent to which a universal model can be applied to diverse populations.

DAP standards do encourage an acceptance of diversity and mandate that high quality programs need to provide opportunities for anti-bias approaches to curricula for young children. The NAEYC (1995), position statement, Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through 8, highlights the importance of “recognizing that children are best understood in the context of family, culture, and society” (p. 5) and
that programs for young children should “ensure that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for the participating children and their families” (p. 5).

It is the position statement concerning diversity of DAP on which our study focuses. What meanings and relevancy do directors of traditionally African American child care programs in an historically African American community of Los Angeles give to their practices? Additionally, these agencies are programs that are experiencing increased diversity due to the influx of Latino immigrant families into the area. As such, it creates an opportunity to determine whether this shift in demographics has shifted the directors’ interpretations of appropriate practice.

The population under study is one that only contains individuals who are part of racial ethnic minority groups in America. We used the integrative model of child development for children of color by Garcia Coll et al. (1996) as our theoretical framework. By “children of color” we refer to children who are racial or ethnic minorities. Throughout the paper we use the term “children of color” or “racial ethnicity” rather than race or ethnicity, in accordance with Thorne (2005). The integrative model of child development assumes that “social position” (Garcia Coll et al., 1996, p. 1895) is a dominant feature of the developmental experience of children of color. Social positions are the aspects of an individual or group such as race, sexual orientation, social class, or gender, which “societies use to stratify or place individuals in a social hierarchy” (p. 1895). These social position characteristics are used as a means for social stratification through mechanisms such as racism, prejudice, segregation, and oppression.

Social stratification mechanisms are a pervasive and central barrier that families of color experience at all levels of life. Group-based social inequality is an aspect of American society historically, as demonstrated by slavery, Jim Crow laws, and the struggle for suffrage by African Americans and women. These inequalities function within and between all levels of society, from the political and economic sphere to the interpersonal domain (Fenton, 1999).

Child care centers in urban communities of color are not immune to the social stratification dynamics of U.S. society. Dependent upon the beliefs and experiences of the director of the program and the teachers who work in it, the child’s experiences there may or may not reinforce the social dynamics of U.S. society. The child care center’s orientation toward race may be continuous with the community or discontinuous with the community in which it operates (Johnson, Jaeger, Randolph, Cauce, & Ward, 2003).

A society in which there is group-based social hierarchy, such as the United States, will reflect patterns of social dominance at all levels of interaction. If, according to Bronfenbrenner (1995) all levels of social interaction impact individual development, aspects of social dominance will be an integral part of that development. As such, our theoretical framework regarding the practices in child care that impact children of color places the constant experience of social stratification mechanisms such as racism, oppression, and segregation at the center (Johnson et al., 2003).

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of directors’ interpretations of appropriate practices within a community of color by focusing on three questions:

- How do directors in a community of color integrate professional standards of practice that are respectful, meaningful, and relevant for the African American and Latino children and families who use their services?
- Is social stratification, particularly in terms of racial ethnicity, part of the directors’ articulated practices?
- Given that the centers are traditionally African American programs, with predominantly African American directors and staff that have increasing numbers of Latino immigrant children, how do the directors incorporate this added diversity into their articulated practices?

1.1. Practices

The actual practices of a child care program are separate from indicators of quality, as defined through teacher–child relationships and the emotional quality of the caregiving and classroom environment (Howes & James, 2000). Research involving child care practices indicates that a program’s practices are closely tied to the community and cultural contexts in which the teachers and children participate (Lubeck, 1984; Wishard, Shivers, Howes, & Ritchie, 2003).

The directors in our study come from the community (see Table 1) and may incorporate an understanding regarding practices that reflect a consistency with the historical and cultural context of the area as well as an accommodation to developmentally appropriate practice. We hypothesized that the practices of directors in communities of color mirror some of the findings concerning parental goals within communities of color in which parental “needs and concerns reflect their status as minority members of historically subordinated racial ethnic groups in the United States” (Uttal, 1996, p. 43). African American and Mexican-American parents include “racial safety and cultural maintenance” (Uttal,
Table 1
Characteristics of child care center directors (N = 6)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
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<tr>
<td>No college</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Home is S.L.A.</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years in field</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4–6 years</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1996, p. 43) as a major criterion for selection of a child care program. Research regarding child care practices reveal that programs engage in implicit and explicit forms of racial and cultural socialization (Sanders, 2005). Child care programs may promote or inhibit positive aspects of cultural socialization, such as, racial ethnic identities; something that traditional measures of child care do not measure (Johnson et al., 2003). Programs that fall under the umbrella of a promoting environment for racial ethnic minority children provide consistent cultural practices between home and school (Uttal, 1996).

Some research (Uttal, 1996, 1998) indicates that professional standards, like DAP, can be a compromise for parents of color who “recognize that child care arrangements are an important site that influence their children’s understandings of their cultural heritages” (Uttal, 1996, p. 56). This line of research assumes that programs that follow DAP are programs that often engage in middle class understandings of care (Lubeck, 1998; Uttal, 1996), which may not coincide with the cultural and historical contexts of the children of color and the child care practitioners who reside and work in communities that provide care for these children. Additional research reinforces the assumption that DAP may not reflect the socialization goals and perceived needs that poor and racial ethnic minority parents find important for their children. Parents of racial ethnic minority children tend to prefer programs that are academically oriented, for example (Fuller, Holloway, & Liang, 1996; Fuller, Holloway, Rambaud, & Eggers-Pierola, 1996).

Some research indicates that it may not be racial ethnicity that is the contributing factor to parental socialization goals but shared neighborhood contexts that include poverty, discrimination, and immigration (Bean, Berg, & van Hook, 1996; Selby, Murphy, & Lorenzen, 1990). Parents who are low-income consistently endorse a more didactic mode of instruction in which literacy and basic skills are thought to be the main function of child care programs, and play is not necessarily thought of as part of learning (Holloway, Rambaud, Fuller, & Eggers-Pierola, 1995). This view of child care as an educational setting rather than “an opportunity for their children to have social interactions” (Uttal, 1996, p. 44) runs counter to the developmentally appropriate practice discourse in which the centrality of play in learning is paramount.

The findings of these studies are from parents and the question still remains how the directors of programs in racial ethnic communities that are also poor incorporate community-embedded child rearing practices for the children in their programs. Given that the children who attend child care may spend 4–10 h of the day in these centers, the orientation or operating philosophies of the centers, as articulated by the directors is an important consideration.

We found that these community-embedded directors both accept DAP and change it to meet the perceived needs of the children in this community. DAP becomes infused in these programs with didactic instruction and African American cultural traditions, such as religiosity and community mothering. Directors do see the need to address the social position of racial ethnic minority children, particularly African American children, and they do so by using academics, culturally literate staff, and diverse experiences as buffers. Directors are clear about the needs of African American children but are still in a state of flux regarding the Latino families to varying degrees. The quandary appears to be connected to the language barrier these directors perceive and the center’s orientation toward families as partners or families as support to the center.

2. Method

The principal investigator conducted all of the interviews and was the participant observer at the child care programs. Directors who were part of the larger study participated in semi-structured, individual interviews that lasted
approximately one to 2 h. The first segment of the interview was taped. During the taped portion, directors answered open-ended questions about their perceptions of working in child care in this community, the goals of the program, her opinion regarding the children served, her perception of continuities and discontinuities that the children or families experience between home and school, and her reasons for working in the community (see Appendix A). The questions were adapted from interview transcripts of teachers and directors who participated in the Best Practices Research Project of the National Center for Early Development and Learning (see Howes & Ritchie, 2002 for background information). The questions from the Best Practices study were the result of focus group discussions between the Best Practices researchers and selected participants. The Best Practices study included the same participant demographics and regional area as this study and, as such, the questions have good face validity. The questions were only guidelines and each interview took on a direction of its own based upon the topics that came up during the interview. Afterwards, the directors provided personal demographic information. The interviews occurred throughout the study period and at the convenience of the director.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, the participant observer kept field notes about each center during the data collection period. The participant observer was present at each program a minimum of 2 days per week. Each visit lasted approximately 2 h and by the end of the study period the participant observer had experienced the daily schedule of every program, with the exception of the nap period.

During the participant observation, informal conversations occurred between the observer and the teaching staff as well as informal observations of teacher–child interactions, common activities and routines. Immediately following each visit, the participant observer recorded the events that transpired during her observation period. As the observations were informal, the participant observer did not create formal time series counts or frequency counts of every interaction or activity. The notes were used to verify themes already present in the interview and/or discover potential themes that did not come out during the interview to be verified with the directors at a later date. The study period was approximately 3 months (September–November).

2.1. Analysis

Our method of qualitative analysis relied upon grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and existing theory, which are both “legitimate and valuable” (p. 33) aspects of qualitative inquiries (Maxwell, 1996). Initially, the principal investigator and an assistant separately listened repeatedly to the interviews while taking notes concerning the topics that began to emerge. We discussed our findings and came to a consensus as to what the major topics were. We then listened again while transcribing portions of the interview that related to those topics. We read the transcriptions separately and began to create themes within each topic. Again we met to discuss these themes and come to a consensus regarding them.

An important feature of qualitative analysis is “investigator triangulation” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p. 41) or employing the perspectives of multiple researchers. To do so, the interviews underwent a second coding process that included two additional research assistants and the directors in the study. The research assistants transcribed each interview verbatim and reworked the initial themes based upon the verification of themes by the directors. To check the accuracy of the transcriptions and our evolving themes, the directors reviewed their interview transcription to make corrections or clarifications.

A second important feature of qualitative analysis is the flushing out of assumptions that the researcher may harbor regarding the topic or the study population (Maxwell, 1996). To make these assumptions apparent, we followed Maxwell’s (1996) researcher experience memo exercise to make our assumptions clear. Each author individually wrote about the reasons regarding her interest in the topic; what we hoped to learn from it and what previous personal experiences we have had that make issues of diversity important now. We discussed our assumptions after this writing experience. This process made apparent three important assumptions that all of us shared. First, we believe that the directors are doing what they do because they feel that what they do is the best for all of the children in their care.

Secondly, we fear that our privileged status at a college environment would block us from seeing the pertinent aspects of their articulations that may only be understood by an insider. As a former child care administrator within this community, the principal investigator was both an insider and an outsider (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993). As such, a part of our assumption was that the interviews and our interpretation of the interviews had validity due to her insider–outsider status and our member checks during the study period.
Third, we believe that cultural processes are a major force in the lives of individuals and that social stratification is an aspect of the racial ethnic minority experience that research concerning human development has ignored or used tangentially. As such, we have chosen to make the racial ethnic minority experience our focus, which may exclude other pertinent aspects of the child care experience in this community.

2.2. Community and participant demographics

2.2.1. Description of the community

A central feature of the community under study is that it is predominantly a non-white and poor area. The families who reside in the participating programs’ neighborhoods have an average per capita income of $9914 and an average median household income of $27,988. An average of 32% of the families in these neighborhoods live below the poverty line and, for families with children under 5 years of age, this average percentage increases to 42%. The area historically has been the first United States’ home to many recent immigrants. Census data confirm that the area is still the first home to many immigrants from Latin American countries. Forty-six percent of the 60,000 residents of this region are foreign born. Seventy-nine percent of the residents speak Spanish at home and 50% of those residents speak English less than very well (U.S. Census, 2000).

Overall, the child care programs in this study operate in neighborhoods that are 40% African American and 40% Latino. These statistics mask wide variation in the racial and ethnic composition of the individual neighborhoods. Each of the seven participating centers operates in separate neighborhoods. The African American population surrounding the participating child care centers is as low as 7% out of a neighborhood population of 5280 to as high as 82% out of a neighborhood population of 5963 (U.S. Census, 2000). Latino representation in these same communities is as low as 2% (N = 4214) to as high as 92% (N = 5280).

2.2.2. Description of the centers

There is small diversity in terms of the organizational structure of the child care centers. Four of these centers operate under larger non-profit agencies while the other two centers are individually operated non-profit organizations. The four programs that receive state funding are large and maintain several preschool classrooms as well as several separately functioning programs. Some of these separate programs include teenage parenting and health programs, or job training on the same site or at different locations. These programs have the capacity to serve as many as 50 to over 100 children on one site. They each have at least three classrooms or a configuration that allows for children of multiple ages to fit in a large area simultaneously.

The two relatively independent centers are small to medium (N = 15–20 children) and they have only one classroom. The organizational structure of the two smaller centers is different. One center is a former family child care home that became a Christian-oriented child care center after local endorsements. Although the program has less than 20 children, it accommodates the full age range from infancy to school-age. While this center is a small, family-owned business, the other small center is the one and only child care program under the auspices of a large state-wide foundation.

2.2.3. Description of directors

These directors are educated, economically self-sufficient, and self-empowered women who fit Collins’ descriptions of the self-empowered African American woman (2000). All but one of the directors live in the South Los Angeles area, and they have lived in this area most of their adult lives. Five directors are college-educated, and all of the directors have completed successfully over 24 units of coursework specifically associated with early childhood education. The directors are also highly experienced in that they have worked as directors for at least 10 years and have been in the child care field for a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 35 years. The directors are familiar with developmentally appropriate practice through their coursework and in-service trainings. In-service trainings occur at least twice each school year.

3. Findings

The findings are organized according to the three main questions that the study addressed: the integration of DAP for African American and Latino children, social stratification practices, and the programs’ orientation toward increasing diversity due to Latino families accessing their services. Each of the three sections provides an introductory paragraph that highlights the main themes that we discovered for each category. Briefly, the programs do seem to modify DAP in
unique ways that reflect a cultural understanding of the populace. Social stratification preparation is a central aspect of the pedagogy employed in the programs. Although the influx of Latino migration into traditional African American programs has been occurring for at least a decade now, the directors are struggling with how well they integrate Spanish-speaking families.

3.1. Integration of DAP for African American and Latino children

We discovered three themes that related to the directors’ orientations toward developmentally appropriate practice. Although directors did not consider DAP to be a contradiction to the practices that they feel are relevant for their children, directors have transformed DAP into fun didactic instruction. The other two themes are reminiscent of traditional African American community practices, which are including religiosity as a part of sensitive caregiving and the need for community mothers.

3.1.1. DAP is fun didactic instruction

Given that the majority of the directors have college degrees and several units in early childhood education, they are well-versed in talking about developmentally appropriate practice. In principle, several endorse DAP. One director, for example, described the ideal program as having “a curriculum that is child-friendly and the teachers understand it, and the teachers understand how the children learn” (D39). Similarly, another director articulated the importance of the process of an activity rather than the end-product:

A lot of times teachers really get into their projects and they try to get the children to complete it, or to color within the lines, it’s not about that, it’s about what’s going on in that child’s mind and how you are connecting with that child while you’re doing a project. (D19)

Although there is an acceptance of DAP, there is a range as to how much the directors endorse DAP. Three programs, in particular, fully endorse DAP and articulate a strong understanding of the fundamental aspects of it. “Exploration and working on their interests is what’s important. You allow their creativity to blossom and let them play and work with each other socially” (D1). For the remainder of the directors, coupled with an acceptance of DAP, are articulated practices that are somewhat contradictory to the centrality of play and child-centered curricula of DAP. One director, for example, who spoke about the importance of play then mentioned, “I like them reading and writing” (D27). She ensures that the children at her center are familiar with colors and shapes, and are beginning to read and write. These are all qualities that she feels prepares the children at her center for Kindergarten. Similarly, during participant observations, there were several instances of strong didactic instruction at all of the centers, including those where the directors articulated a full endorsement of DAP. The directors and teachers frequently engaged children in drill work that concentrated on numbers, colors, letters, writing the first and or last names and craft activities that were uniform with very little child choice. The adults managing these activities, however, presented them in a very fun, animated and warm manner. The children were attentive, not fidgety, and very engaged with the directors or teachers who lead the activities. The concept of child-centered curriculum at a majority of the programs was transformed into make academics fun for the kids.

3.1.2. DAP is religiosity

Sensitive and responsive care is an important practice found by researchers in high quality child care programs (Howes & Sanders, 2006). For these programs, sensitive, responsive care is also important but its interpretation is somewhat different than purely being warm and responsive. A distinguishing feature of these programs, which we classify as an aspect of meaningful and relevant DAP within this community, is the infusion of religiosity into their practices. Religion or religiosity is a central feature in the lives of African American families (Haight, 1998; Mattis, 2005; Mattis, Fontenont, & Hatcher-Kay, 2003). Although one center promotes itself as a “Christian child care center” (D19), many of the centers also incorporate religion into their practices. Three of the programs incorporate a moment of silence before meals, in which children are asked to fold their hands and bow their heads. Comments, such as “help me Jesus!” “Let’s thank the Lord you were not hurt further”, “Hallelujah” and “Aren’t you a blessing” directed toward children who came to teachers or the directors for assistance were not uncommon comments. In this sense, children received not only a hug for their bumps and scrapes but also a form of responsiveness that was infused with the spirit of Christianity.
3.1.3. DAP is community mothering

In addition to incorporating religiosity into their practices, the directors put upon themselves the responsibility of being a community mother. This is a term similar to other-mothering as defined in Collins (2000). The community mother is an integral aspect of sensitive caregiving articulated by the African American directors. Their adoption of the community mother role replaces or supplements the traditional other-mother within the African American community who neared extinction due to historical and social forces that affected African American communities nationally (Collins, 2000).

The directors’ role as the community mother continues the tradition by bringing other-mothering/other-mothering for the community into the professional field of child rearing. Being there for the children of the community is a necessity to these directors due to their perception that the traditional extended family unit within the African American community is not a given. One director described her role as the community mother as:

( . . . ) Even those simple things, like what to do when they’re teething, you know, how to recognize a fever, when a fever’s too high. A lot of new parents don’t know these things, yeah, grandmas not around, cause everybody’s working. Grandma not there, we don’t have that extended family like we used to. And I take what I learned from book knowledge and common sense [I am] like the community mother or something like that. (D19)

The community mother knows how to care for children and knows what children need. “They may not know how to care and nurture their child at certain stages but we do” (D26). The community mother also is a source of information for the parents regarding child rearing. “Parents see that I know what to do with kids and that I really connect with their child. Being and knowing how to connect with the child. ( . . . ) Parents ask how I know something and I just know” (D27). The community mother has no qualms or reservations about telling a parent that the parental goals for the child are incorrect or not the best for the child. “They [parents] want them to learn. [They say things] like ‘Mrs. X. when they gonna this when they gonna that?’ and I have to say, ’girl, you pushing your baby!’” (D25)

Accompanying the theme of community mother is a strong sense of seeing their role and that of the center as a protector of the family and the educational future of the child: “Even when they go to another school, they want me to be looking for them, to be the protector” (D27). One director stepped in to intervene with a child she thought would be lost if she did not attend private school. As she explained it:

This one Latino parent, they had this little girl. Smart, smart, smart child. I told that mom, ‘your child needs to go to a private school. If she gets into a public school, you gonna ruin her. Her behavior is gonna plummet. Do something!’ (D25)

The directors view their role as the community mother as a justified one given their training and education in child development, their knowledge of the community, as well as their vast experience in working with children.

3.2. Social stratification awareness

The directors intuitively understand the model proposed by Garcia Coll et al. (1996), which interprets social stratification as a central feature for the development of children of color, especially when the focus is on Black children. Academic preparation, community-literate teachers, and exposing children to diverse experiences are three practices that directors articulated. All three practices reflect their awareness of the need to prepare children of color for future encounters with racism, prejudice, and discrimination.

3.2.1. Academic emphasis is preparation for bias

Academic instruction in these programs is not purely preparation for school. Directors view academic instruction as a buffer against the future injustices that their children will experience due to their status as a racial ethnic minority. As one director told the principal investigator of the study:

These children don’t have the moms and dads that read to them all the time, or the nannies that can do all the grunt work while mommy and daddy go have fun. If we don’t do it, these kids will be at a disadvantage in school. It’s okay for white folks to poo-poo academics in child care. ‘Let them play, they’ll get that in school, don’t pressure them!’ Well, we, in this community, don’t have all that at home. ( . . . ), You know this, you know. Why should we put our little Black children at a disadvantage? (D25)
The emphasis on academic instruction is consistent with previous research, which found that African American mothers’ child rearing goals have the intent of providing their children with a better chance in life (Dill, 1980). From the perspective of the community, strong academic preparation gives the children from these programs a head start that will set them up for a successful future. According to one director, “Most of our kids who leave out of here go to first grade. Interviewer: Oh, they don’t go to Kindergarten? Director: No, they’re too smart. I want them to become a well-adjusted adult and I always advise my parents to have their children tested (...)” (D25). The directors feel that, through academic achievement, children of color “reject their place” (Collins, 2000, p. 185) as second class citizens in the United States. When programs for children of color expose children to an academically enriched environment, one that poor racial ethnic minority children may not receive from the home environment, not only may children of color reject their place but they also “strive for more” (Collins, 2000, p. 185) or perceive greater possibilities in their futures than the poverty and crime of their immediate communities.

3.2.2. Community-literate teachers

The directors’ awareness of the influence that discrimination and racism have on their children’s futures guides their practice in terms of the staff they hire. One director stressed her need to ensure that the teachers she hires, “is [sic] aware of the community and knows what’s going on in the community and understands the community and understands the children culturally” (D39). Understanding the community translates into knowing the needs of a community that is poor and includes the experiences of racial ethnic minority people. “I have a whole team on an interview panel [for a potential child care worker] I have my outreach workers, ones that are working on other problems, not necessarily working in the child development centers, they know what’s going on in the community” (D39).

Racial ethnicity is not the only factor that is important in terms of community understanding. Instead, a community understanding for these directors is to have a sense of place or knowledge of the neighborhood. One director demonstrated this knowledge of the community while discussing the hardships some children face daily. In her words, “(...) some kids see some very traumatic things before they come to school in the morning. You know they all don’t come you know [carefree], some have some real bad stuff happening to them” (D25).

3.2.3. Exposure to diverse experiences

Two directors emphasized that their children be exposed to a diversity of experiences within and outside of the community. The importance of exposure to diverse experiences includes knowing not only the community in which one resides but also aspects of the surrounding community that make it unique or that are part of the identity of a place. For example, in California, the beach is a central aspect of California and one of the directors expressed dismay over her families’ lack of knowledge regarding local attractions:

(...) Expose them to everything in the community (...). Last year we had a parent, we had three parents, and they were all natives–had never been to the beach. Had never been to the beach! And one of our teachers has a cousin and she’s in her forties and she’s never been to the beach, never been to an amusement center, and she’s been to a park maybe twice. Can you name someone in their forties whose never been to the beach, never been to an amusement center like Magic Mountain? She’s only been out to dinner maybe four or five times, and she doesn’t like going out to dinner cause she doesn’t know how to eat. So it’s things like that, we really need to do for the kids, to not let them grow up [like that] in this society in which we live today not knowing. (D25)

Directors hold a strong awareness of who their children are and the stressors that come with living in a poor, urban environment. The development of confidence in all settings is an important feature of coping with the realities of discrimination. As one director stated, “They [children] need the confidence to function in all settings, not just with their friends down the street but all over the world and to do that they need to know the world” (D1).

Academic instruction and exposure to diverse experiences facilitated by teachers who are part of the community or a similar one are practices employed at these programs to prepare their children for the discriminatory experiences they will most likely encounter later in life. Practices from the perspectives of the directors cannot be divorced from the central aspect of what they do: preparing children of color to function productively in a world where their abilities may not be valued due to the color of their skin.
3.3. Orientation toward Latino families

These programs are not exclusively African American anymore due to the demographic shift occurring in the communities surrounding the centers. The programs include several children from Latin American countries. One director’s articulation of her experiences with the demographic shift exemplify the growing pains these programs experience as they adjust their practice to include a more diverse population.

(…) The demographics in this neighborhood are changing, when I originally started my business, it was a majority Black, but just in the last 10 years it is turning over to Hispanic. And if I am going to be here, there are going to be more and more Hispanic children coming in and I’m a have to deal with that. It’s not that I don’t want that. In fact I’ve had a couple of [African American] parents ask me about that. “XX where are they coming from!” Just all of a sudden, a lot of Hispanic families started coming (…). (D19)

A central theme articulated by the directors that addresses Latino family orientation is the language barrier. Directors also held two distinct orientations toward the Latino families, which we refer to as a family-support versus a family-partner orientation. It appears that those directors whose practices are reflective of a family-partner orientation perceived more commonalities than differences between African American and Latino families, while those directors who viewed families as a support to the program tended to articulate differences between African American and Latino families.

3.3.1. Language barrier

None of the African American directors spoke Spanish. As such, they had to rely on Spanish-speaking assistant teachers, if they had one, or sometimes the child who was enrolled in the child care program. The language barrier was a source of frustration for all of the directors and their methods of alleviating the frustration differed. A majority of directors were not open to returning to school and learning Spanish. As a result, these directors often found the Spanish-speaking influence in their programs problematic.

Based on field notes, five of the programs have English-only, African American teachers and Spanish/English-speaking assistant teachers who were hired with the intent to “bring the Spanish-speaking families fully into our program” (D1). Often, however, there are two classrooms within one, with the Spanish-speaking assistant doing activities with the Latino children and the African American, English-speaking teachers conducting activities with the African American children. The situation of a segregated classroom creates very different environments for the two groups of children that are not equivalent. Recent research suggests that young children who have same language/same ethnic peers in their child care classroom adjust more easily to child care yet racial ethnic diversity is a setting that contributes to complex play (Howes, Sanders, & Lee, submitted for publication). One of the director’s experiences with helping non-English-speaking children adjust to an English-only environment highlights how difficult the transition can be for children and how frustrating it can be for the teachers who are caring for them. For these children who were integrated into an English-only classroom, this director remembers that “they cried everyday, most of the day. Because we didn’t understand them, they didn’t understand us. (…) It worked out but it was a hard transition. For the kids and for us.” (D19)

Although directors struggled with the language barrier, they also perceived positives to the inclusion of Latino families in their programs. Several directors took a proactive stance toward the language barrier by hiring Spanish-speaking staff, learning key words in Spanish or by making an extra effort to communicate with them in other ways.

Oh, there’s a language barrier. But I think it all works with the parents because some of the staff translates. (…) I pick up the pieces of the words and they keep on talking until I go, yeah, yeah, yeah, I got you, I know what you’re saying [makes hand gestures to indicate other modes of communication]. But it’s a lot of fun, I enjoy it. (D27)

One director poignantly articulated how the diversity helps to combat racism:

(…) The family, the child, had never been around African American people. The mom and dad argued about the little girl coming here because the dad didn’t want her in an African American school and her mom has told me on more than one occasion, that it has helped her, the dad too, because now he’s not a racist, he actually speaks to me and it took him only 3 years to get to that point, but he actually speaks to me now and he participates in class activities. The older girl, the older daughter she, her best friend is African American so she went on
to elementary school, and the school she’s at is pretty even [in terms of the numbers of African American and Latino children] so she’s not having any problems. And the youngest one is doing wonderful. (D26)

3.3.2. Family-support versus family-partner orientation

The directors either articulated cultural differences in which the family’s main function is to support the child care program ($N = 3$) or stressed a family-partner orientation in which they stressed the need to understand each individual family and develop a partnership instead ($N = 3$). One director articulated a family-partner orientation as, “(there are problems) only when the teachers don’t understand the needs of the family.” This director also stated previously, “we want to know them as a family”. In contrast, another director who held a family-support orientation stressed difference between the two groups. “African American families want kids to listen and mind, and pay attention, kind of strict with kids. Latino parents they’re mostly let the boys do what they want to do but the girls they’re more strict and tight on. (…) I’m used to [African Americans]” (D27).

The directors struggle to include the Latino families and ensure that the experiences of the Latino child are as beneficial and fruitful for them as they know the experiences for the African American children are. However, they are not certain that they are. One director’s comment reveals the sense of insecurity they have regarding the care they give for the Latino children:

(…) With the African American children, I’d say it is pretty much the same [consistency between home and school] because we treat, I know me personally, and I encourage my staff to treat the children like they are at home because for a lot of them we are their second home. Some come at 7:00 in the morning and they don’t leave till 5:30. (…) It’s really a big part of their day and some of the children we’ve had since they were 2.5 and now they’re 5. One of the children we just had graduated started off as a baby till a 5-year-old. The Spanish children, it’s hard to tell whether we are more like home or how because only two of the staff members will communicate with them and with the parents. We treated them equally, we try to treat them like they were at home too and give them as much attention and love as we did the English-speaking children. (D26)

The above quotation exemplifies an overall, yet implicit theme that runs throughout the interviews. The directors are more assured about what they do when they talk specifically about the African American children. They are animated and use many positive examples when discussing African American children. It appears that the emotional connection to the African American families has a stronger valence than the connection to the Latino families, especially for those directors who articulated differences between the two racial ethnic communities. When the directors speak specifically about the Latino children, as in the example above, they communicate that they do the best they can, try to treat everyone alike, etc. The attitude seems to be, we don’t know if what we are doing is the best thing, but we will make sure these Latino children are treated fairly and are ready for school.

4. Discussion

The child care directors of the six centers described herein shed light on the multidimensional meaning behind developmentally appropriate practice. For the children in these centers, developmentally appropriate practice is linked to the culturally responsive ways in which these child care directors interact with the children in their centers. The directors share an intuitive understanding of the needs and conditions affecting the children in their community and adapt DAP to accommodate to those needs. Strong academic programs are not a contradiction to DAP but a needed addition to prepare the children not only for school but also for future biases they may encounter as racial ethnic minorities. Strong academics, culturally literate staff, and exposure to diverse experiences are buffers for the social stratification mechanisms racial ethnic minorities encounter in life.

Practices, such as community mothering and religiosity reflect the African American tradition in these programs. Despite the directors’ desire to provide enriching care within diverse communities, directors indicate some discomfort associated with the population shifts. Their enactment of practices is distinctly African American and as such, these directors, who are fully immersed within the African American community, are struggling to accommodate their programs to meet the needs of both racial ethnic groups. They are successful to varying degrees.

Given that the community in which these programs operate is not only a community made up of racial ethnic minorities, but also a community that is poor, their concerns as to whether they meet the needs of the Latino children may not be as pertinent as meeting the needs of the poor. Despite their connection to the African American commu-
nity, community for these directors transcends racial ethnic boundaries and encompasses the needs and values of the neighborhood.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

As with any study, there are limitations that our study cannot address. As a qualitative study with a small sample size, our study cannot generalize to the wider child care population. The goal of the study is not to provide broad generalizations concerning all directors articulated practices or even racial ethnic minority directors’ articulated practices. Instead we were interested in examining deeply one context with the intent of informing researchers and professionals in early childhood/child care as to how DAP becomes transformed within a community of color to reflect the traditions and goals of the participants.

As mentioned in Section 1, we interpreted the interviews through the lens of the social stratification model. As such, we have chosen to focus on one aspect of a complex social phenomenon. We believe this is an acceptable focus to have given the population under study and the lack of research that has considered racial ethnic minority status as a central feature.

It would be beneficial to examine more precisely the in-service training programs in which directors participated to determine how DAP is presented, what aspects of DAP are discussed, and how often DAP is a part of the in-service discourse. In so doing, one could paint a broader portrait of DAP’s influence in these directors’ lives as well as a more thorough interpretation as to what parts of DAP were particularly relevant to these directors.

This study did not examine the children’s experiences in these programs. A future step is to connect children’s experiences to community-embedded practices, such as religiosity and community mothering. What effect do these practices have on racial ethnic minority children specifically? Do practices, such as hiring culturally literate staff and those practices that reflect the historical ethnic traditions of a community bolster children’s developing understandings of racial ethnic identity and self-efficacy, for example?

Our study did not interview parents regarding their beliefs or collect data on the home environments. Given that parents are the main socializing force in their children’s development, it would be fruitful to determine the level of impact that culturally consistent versus non-culturally consistent practices within child care settings have on early childhood development with parental influence included in the analysis.

4.2. Implications

In this study, we examined how directors infuse their practices with community-embedded meaning. This has implications for teachers and directors who work in similar communities. As the DAP recommendations regarding cultural diversity stress, effective teaching practices include an understanding of family, culture, and society. A potentially effective way to incorporate the diversity mandates of DAP is to include knowledge of the community through perspective-taking experiences and exposure to the history of communities of color within the United States. This goes beyond, families sharing cultural practices or developing an understanding of different cultural traditions. Instead, effective use of cultural context to inform practice should engage teachers and directors to “walk in the shoes of” as well as to integrate the historical contexts of a particular community into their practices.

The findings also shed light on the manner in which well-intentioned policies for public-funded programs may derail effective and culturally embedded practices if there is a lack of awareness of the traditions within a community. For example, religious practices are not allowed in publicly funded child care programs. However, religious practices, as witnessed in these programs, may also provide a culturally embedded form of sensitive caregiving that holds relevance for the child care program participants. As well intentioned as the ban on religious practices is, a uniform ban on any and all religious practices may stifle what appears to be a very effective mode of child soothing that teachers in these programs employ.

As demographic shifts occur within communities such as the one in this study, it would be beneficial for funding sources, training programs, and community-based conferences to expose teaching staff and directors of these programs to the tools to facilitate interaction between ethnic groups who reside within a particular community. Something as simple as providing funds for teachers and directors to take courses in a language that is common in the community where they work would help to create stronger connections between the cultural traditions of the center and home communities. As the findings from this study imply, how effective can attempts to build bridges between
the child care program and the home community be when teachers/directors and parents do not speak the same language?

In closing, multicultural practices for children of color are not only an anti-bias orientation but also a preparation for bias. The needs of racial ethnic minority children may not be directly concordant with the needs of racial ethnic majority children. Curricula and policies directed toward children of color should take into account the social positions that children of color have within U.S. society. For children of color, preparation for bias may be an ignored but pertinent factor regarding child care experiences.

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Appendix A. Director assessment

Part I: Personal background information
Where were you born?
Did you grow up there?
How did you come to be in L.A.?
Do you live in this community? How long?
How did you end up working in child care?

Part II: Questions about child care beliefs and practices
What do you think is the one most important thing that should happen in your center everyday?
When you go home from a day’s work at this center, and you are feeling great about what went on here, what is a good day like here?
When you go home from a day’s work at this center, and you are feeling pretty rotten about what went on here, what is a bad day like here?
What makes the difference between a good and bad day in terms of what you and the teachers do with the children and families?
What are you trying to achieve with the kids in your program?
When you think about a quality child care program, in your own personal opinion, what is it?
If you could hire the ideal teacher to work with your kids, describe the most important qualities that she should have. Why?
How did you come to your beliefs about child care?

Part III. Questions about race and culture; continuities and discontinuities between home and school
- Your center contains both African American and a good number of Latino children. Is there anything that’s particularly hard/great about working with this diverse group of children and families? (ask for specific examples)
- Do you think that what happens at this center, the way the teachers and you relate to your kids, the way the kids are taught and cared for here is similar or different from what happens at home? How similar, how different?
- As a (select appropriate identifier: African American/Latino) woman, do you find there are challenges in educating (choose opposite of interviewee: Latino/African American) families or children? Like what? How do you deal with this challenge?
- Is there anything you can think of that makes it beneficial to work with such a diverse group of children and families? (ask for specific examples)
- How do your personal values, what you hold dear for you and your family, compare with those of the parents and children here?

References


