Looking Back to Look Forward: Leveraging Historical Models for Future-Oriented Caregiving

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What can we – as educators, parents, researchers, community members – learn from independent Black institutions about expansive ways to support the well-being of children and their families? And why and how ought we look back to look forward, regarding caregiving that is culturally relevant and sustaining? Here, we explore independent Black institutions as educational contexts in and through which Identity, Purpose, and Direction were cultivated with intention to support robust learning opportunities. We begin to unpack these rich, historic sites of caregiving with attention to data and messaging around how to nurture children as affirmed and agentive learners, and with respect to the role and value of nested communities that include biological family and invested educators.

Research and scholarship on the science and pedagogies of caregiving at the institutional level in the United States have usually focused on mainstream institutions such as the public school system. Explorations and analyses of alternative historical institutions, such as independent Black institutions (IBIs), on the other hand, point to notably different relational and educational perspectives, framings, and implications. Established in the 1960s and early 1970s, IBIs were created by a wide range of Black community members, including Black parents, artists, educators, and others inspired by calls for self-determination. Historical analysis shows that in IBI schools and preschools, closeknit cohorts of adult men and women collaboratively assumed a wide and fluid range of roles, serving key relational and educational functions that the caregiving literature primarily situates with individual caregivers, especially mothers. Also understudied by scholars in the domain of education, the existing scholarship tends to present IBIs in monolithic ways that center gender politics and/or tensions between and within the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Such narrow lenses fail to capture these historical models of caregiving and sites of learning in ways that point to their potential to inform discourse and approach across these too-often siloed domains.

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IBIs were intentional about nurturing the well-being of future generations of Black people, with named goals to "educate and socialize" Black children to "assume . . . future roles" that were wide ranging, using the complementary pillars of Identity (Past), Purpose (Present), and Direction (Future).[1] In this essay, we ask what IBIs can tell us about expansive ways to support the overall well-being of children and their families. Do IBIs shed light on and help us (re)imagine caregiving models that are culturally relevant and sustaining? The scholarship on caregiving has identified parenting characteristics that tend to be associated with well-being in children.[2] Here, we present IBIs as a historic practitioner model of/for caregiving at the communal, intergenerational level that intersects with focal principles identified in the empirical literature on caregiving. Cultural ways of being and knowing influence how any community converges around and executes caregiving goals; and across disciplines, there is a gap in caregiving/caregiver-focused research. IBIs have much to teach researchers and practitioners about comprehensive approaches to caregiving, inclusion and inclusivity, and recognition. They also offer insights into the social nature of human development, attachment relationships, security that facilitates learning and/through exploration, building trust, intersubjectivity, and elders as models. We begin to unpack IBIs as rich historic sites of caregiving approach and impact, with attention to implications of interest.

Public narratives center the Civil Rights Movement with little to no consideration of subsequent liberation movements. The omission of these movements from the civil rights discourse undermines the work of Black artists, parents, educators, and neighbors who imagined and designed institutions that focused on Black lives and futures.[3] Historian Peniel Joseph, for example, invites us to see the Black Power and Civil Rights Movements as inextricably linked, with the former a crosscutting component of the latter.[4] With explicit goals around reclaiming the caregiving and education of Black children, IBIs took shape as localized embodiments of the Black Arts Movement – the cultural arm of the Black Power Movement – which was most influential from 1965 to 1975.[5]

Putting discourse and ideology into practice in/as brick and mortar, public-facing institutions serving Black communities, most IBIs offered P–12 schooling. Committed to Black family wellness overall, many also met community needs via food cooperatives and/or vegetarian eateries, typesetting services to support Black writers and businesses, publications that leveraged the literary imagination in pursuit of liberation, and/or nation-building classes for adults focused on how to care for one's family and community independent of any state or government support.[6] Most IBIs were guided by the principles of Black cultural nationalism, the belief that people of African descent possess a unique "ethos" due to their enslavement in the Americas and the Caribbean, through which numerous tradi-

tions, practices, and adaptations from African homelands endured – with a whole continent's landscape of ethnic, linguistic, relational, spiritual, political, artistic, and other norms.[7] At the heart of Black cultural nationalism was the belief that Black and Blackness are thus intersections of color, culture, and consciousness.

So which pieces of which culture/s would provide the foundation for Black communities of the United States? Which cultural knowings even remained, after generations of systematic, systemic undertakings to erase language, family, and ethnic bonds, and prevent enduring community through violence and physical and socioemotional torture? The Nguzo Saba, the seven principles of Blackness, created by activist and Africana studies scholar Malauna Karenga in 1966 and celebrated today through Kwanzaa, were the root of IBIs' caregiving goals, approaches, measures of success, and impact.[8] These principles are Umoja (Unity), Kujichagulia (Self-Determination), Ujima (Collective Work and Responsibility), Ujamaa (Cooperative Economics), Nia (Purpose), Kuumba (Creativity), and Imani (Faith). And it was these prioritized practices, this shared Black value system, that Black Power and Black Arts Movement leaders and stakeholders sought to embody and spread.

We (Maisha and Nim) first crossed paths at a Social Science of Caregiving convening at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (CASBS) at Stanford University. Maisha was then a CASBS fellow, ethnographer, and education researcher diving into a historical ethnography project examining IBIs. Nim studies the effects of caregiving on human brain development and she framed the opening session "Biological and Neurological Foundations of Care." Nim shared data regarding the emotional learning afforded to the infant from caregiving experiences, and this affordance was described in the context of the safety and security provided by the available caregiver. During the session, both of us saw the potential value of collaborating to explore convergences of developmental science and IBI values and practices.

While our academic paths don't always overlap, we share a desire to revisit and reclaim historical models of caregiving rarely included in published research. We seek to disrupt all-too-common narratives that overwhelmingly position white families, white parents, white desires, and white norms as the model for parenting nationwide, without critique of how structural, interpersonal, and internalized racism and racist ideas interfere with parenting, teaching, and children's experiences and outcomes. Maisha's point of entry is keenly interested in how people of African descent cultivate and sustain literate identities through community. Nim's field is psychology and human neuroscience. The disciplinary and methodological unruliness of our coming together deepens our emergent reflection and dialogue about the future of caregiving. And this highlights what we and our colleagues inevitably miss when we retreat to our respective silos.

As we began sharing and thinking together, it was useful to reflect on our own upbringings. Maisha's African American parents were engaged in Black liberation struggles and were institution builders committed to educating Black children through foundations of Identity, Purpose, and Direction. Early Kwanzaa practitioners, they modeled the aforementioned seven principles of Blackness not merely as holiday celebration, but as a value system that permeated all aspects of daily life all year. Caregiving, in this context, meant providing enough structure and support for children and adults alike to learn to be wisely agentive as they conducted themselves. Nim's family includes a mix of cultural influences: her mother immigrated to the United States from South Korea; her father was white American. In Nim's context, caregiving took shape in ways heavily influenced by East Asian traditions of Confucianism, as a bidirectional relationship that spans the lifetime and generations, with early parental care investments later reciprocated through filial piety and then personal caregiving returned to parents as they age. Two patterns caught our attention. The cultural backgrounds and assumptions we brought to our work together differed in many critical ways, emphasizing the variability of caregiving culture across individuals and societies – variability that remains relatively neglected in the literature on caregiving. And, for both of us, the deep role of the larger community, beyond individual caregivers, was a formational aspect of our respective upbringings.

With this background in place, we offer points of convergence between guiding principles and practices of IBIs and the science of caregiving that have emerged from the literature, our research, and our discussions together. The caregiver can be thought of as a "mega-stimulus" in a young child's life, serving multiple functions in establishing the foundation of processes upon which the child will rely in future years. IBIs served much the same role in the lives of the families those institutions engaged. Here, we discuss how the three pillars of Black education common across IBIs (Identity, Purpose, and Direction) converge with six caregiving variables identified in the literature: the socially embedded nature of human development, the attachment relationship, security that facilitates learning/exploration, trust building, intersubjectivity, and modeling elders.

Pillar I: Identity

1. *The socially embedded nature of human development*. Multiple traditions within developmental psychology point to the importance of accounting for the socially embedded nature of human development when considering children's well-being.[9] Describing the intimacy and interdependency between children's well-being and their social ecology, psychoanalyst and pediatri-

cian Donald W. Winnicott dramatically noted, "there is no such thing as an infant."[10] This statement was meant to emphasize that humans are an altricial species, a species born without the ability to live independently. Indeed, humans have an innate expectation and need for caregiving. Caregivers increase our odds of physical survival and provide social scaffolding that guides brain and behavioral development toward the mature form.[11]

Comprehensive models of the mental, cognitive, and emotional development of children thus acknowledge and appreciate the extent to which these outcomes emerge through collaboration between children and their caregivers. Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development extends this notion, recognizing the continuity between family and community.[12]

Applying this framework, we see IBIs as having played a critical caregiving role for those who engaged in their creation of a multilayered social structure. By definition, IBIs provided an intentional social ecology for children that was also intergenerational (and historical) and invited all who engaged to consider their role and possible contributions to the world. What the caregiver is to the child, IBIs might have been to the children and family members of those children. IBIs provided scaffolds for children to be good stewards of the gifts they had to offer, and focused on cultivating those unique gifts. For example, the Institute of Positive Education, established in 1969 in Chicago, and the Ahidiana Work/Study Center, established in 1973 in New Orleans, both focused on early childhood: pre-K through approximately age eight.

2. *Attachment relationships*. The child's first community is their family, and the most proximal and salient adults in the family are the child's primary caregivers. The caregiver-child relationship is now known to be a learned relationship, with children tending to develop attachment/s to the adult/s with whom they interact regularly and who is/are most responsive to their needs (physical, emotional, cognitive).[13] While researchers have overwhelmingly focused attention on the mother as the primary attachment figure, research has also shown that primary caregivers may also or instead be other important adults in the child's life (or perhaps even a small collection of adults) who routinely provide caregiving.[14] Such findings speak to the power of the caregiving environment (whether it consists of one adult, two adults, or several adults) as the critical element that becomes represented in children's internal working models.[15]

   The human ability to be presented with and respond to multiple caregivers is a phenomenon called alloparenting, and humans often provide care for children who are not their own offspring, which is understood to

be an adaptive behavior.[16] We use the term caregiver as an intentionally flexible definition indicating the person or persons who take caregiving responsibility for a child and to/with whom that child forms an attachment relationship.

A striking feature of IBIs is that they assumed this broader picture of a caregiving alloparent community, in contrast to the usual focus on parents or, even more narrowly, just biological mothers. All adults within IBIs worked thoughtfully together to provide a foundation for the future success of the children they served. IBI educational institutions situated every adult in contact with the community's children as part of the caregiving system. Adults driving the bus, preparing and serving the food, and being involved with direct instruction all had relationships with the children and influence over those children's ideas, and worked collaboratively to adhere to a shared value system. Within IBIs, children thus experienced a very broadly defined caregiving network that extended, from the earliest years, beyond one biological parent. Notions of "the teacher" and "teaching" were also more expansive, and situated as central to the role of every adult who was part of an IBI. As stated in materials from the EAST, a Brooklyn IBI established in 1969, "What we require is sincere interest in the growth and development of Black youth and a devotion to work and learning."[17]

Pillar II: Purpose

3. *Security that facilitates learning/exploration.* As an altricial species, infants are born with a great need for and expectation of protection provided by a caregiver. Infants cannot independently manage stressors encountered early in life. In fact, the protection provided by caregivers to the infant has been associated with a strengthened ability for the child to independently manage stressors later in life.[18] For the infant, the caregiver provides an external source of buffering against potentially harmful stress reactions that the young brain is not yet equipped to manage alone.[19] This stress buffering is important not only for protecting the developing brain against elevated levels of stress, but also for teaching a young child to safely explore the environment for the purposes of information gathering and learning.[20] That is, the protection afforded by the caregiver is bedrock upon which children feel free to take risks and explore their environments. This exploration leads to learning.

   In the same way, IBIs sought to provide a buffer to their members by ensuring that Black children received affirming messages about what it means to be Black, not merely by way of color and skin tone but with respect to culture and consciousness.[21] As children learned how to love themselves,

their families, and their communities, they became equipped to be in the world and engage with a diverse community of stakeholders while maintaining a sense of self and confidence that armed them for numerous contexts. Security makes a human brave, and strong foundations allow space for risk-taking.

Many IBIs published books, pamphlets, journals, and newspapers of their own to provide Black people with affirming images of Blackness. In Chicago, for example, The Institute of Positive Education created a literary journal, *Black Books Bulletin*, that not only reviewed literature for mature readers but committed space to the ongoing review of children's literature. Black caregivers could learn to discern between literature that would support their children's positive identity development and literature that could be detrimental to their sense of self.[22]

4. *Trust-building.* As a reliable source of social buffering, caregivers – and IBIs – develop/ed implicit and fundamental trust with and within the child.[23] Such trust is crucial; it forms the basis upon which future social influences rest, building the child's implicit sense that "someone has got my back," as well as the sense that the child can trust themselves. Trust in self and in others is elemental to self-agency, the notion that children can influence their environments. Development of trust early in life is also a strong predictor of children's ability to form successful relationships with others in the future.[24]

   Practices within IBIs were designed explicitly to build trust. The focus on self-discipline, for example, is one strategy IBIs leveraged to build trust and confidence with children. Discipline in the context of IBIs was not something enacted onto children, but a practice cultivated within. By providing a value system – the Nguzo Saba – Black institution builders sought to appeal to children's intellect and reasoning rather than simply telling them what to do. In addition, great emphasis was put on the role of the *mwalimu* (the Kiswahili word for *teacher*) and the expectation that the teacher would see working with, for, and on behalf of Black children as an honor, even if there were struggles involved. A critical sense of self-value develops from the social cohesion formed from this type of intimate interpersonal trust: the child can develop a sense of "belonging" within and to a larger group.[25]

5. *Intersubjectivity.* Intimate relationships, including those between a young child and their caregiver, are accompanied by intersubjectivity, the phenomenon by which two individuals intuitively communicate with each other and have a shared understanding of the external world.[26] Psychology researchers have argued that when two people share an understanding of the

world, they satisfy a desire for interpersonal connection.[27] The attachment relationship between caregiver and child has been described as one that becomes characterized by increasingly complex intersubjective processes.[28] Intersubjectivity also facilitates children's learning from others and thus has been understood as a core component of cognitive development.[29]

Intersubjective processes were central to IBI practices. Print materials designed and produced by IBIs often dedicate time to defining the purpose and goals of education. The EAST, for example, asserted in their school handbook that "the education of our people must have a purpose if it is to be meaningful and fulfilling." This "meaningful" education was built on the premise that children were "being educated to build for *all* of our people and to provide for the needs of our people."[30] This shared understanding and commitment was modeled from "teachers" in the space. Children saw their teachers working across domains to create opportunities for the Black community both within and outside school walls. This kind of education, according to Black institution builders, purposefully contrasted with Western ideas of education, which some institution builders believed trained children of African descent "from birth to work against" themselves.[31] At the EAST, children and their teachers had to be guided by the question "What kind of society do we want to build?"[32]

Pillar III: Direction

6. *Modeling elders.* Caregiving environments provide numerous opportunities for children's learning. Social learning is a primary means of acquiring new skills and identifying role models that help shape children's emerging identities.[33] Although children can learn from various social models, they tend to learn especially well from caregivers.[34] This moderation of learning rate by nurturance may be one reason why children more often imitate parents than strangers.[35]

   The role of IBIs in families' lives may have created a caregiving context that both increased access to prosocial adult models and promoted modeling of those behaviors through a highly nurturant context. In the context of IBIs, every elder was a "teacher," whether that adult did or did not have a role in the formal education of the child, and it was expected that male adults be as involved with the education of small children as female adults. We hypothesize that such access to a diverse range of role models benefits children.

As we imagine the future of caregiving, we think it would be important to revisit the rich histories of social movements – especially those driven by nondomi-

nant communities – to learn about tools, strategies, mindsets, and values successfully employed to care for the young. Community models have much to teach us about how to expand our understanding of caregiving. As we seek out new ways to frame the science of caregiving, we can and should learn from how communities have already done this work.

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