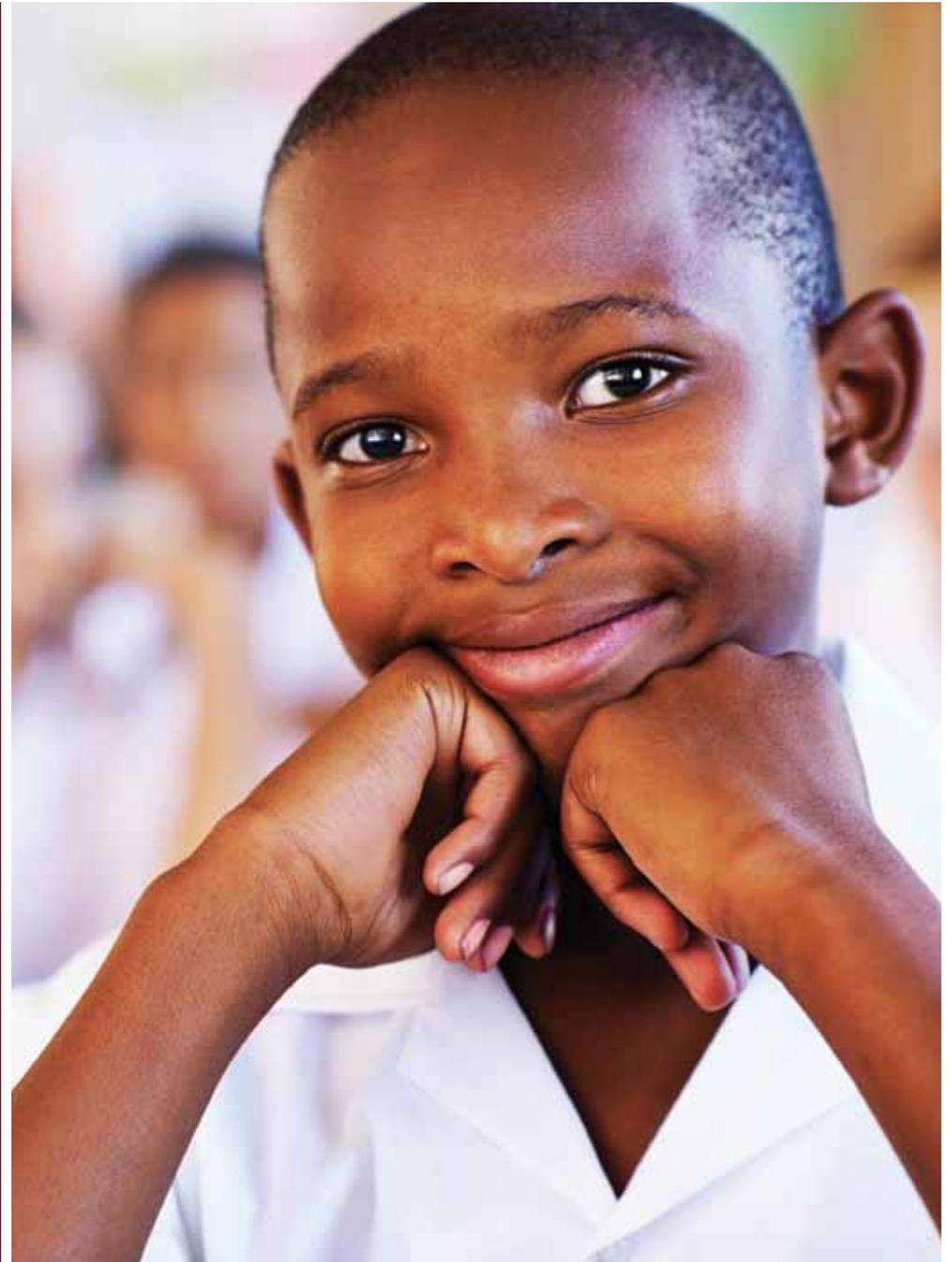# THE BLACK FAMILY:

RE-IMAGINING FAMILY SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

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There is no shortage of reports, briefs, studies or statistics about the state of the young Black child in America. In particular, we hear about the persistent achievement gap supported by data indicating that the gap begins prior to school, especially for young Black boys. There are many reasons for the achievement gap, and many intertwined solutions. One of the most prominent suggestions is to focus not on the achievement gap itself, but on the opportunity gap that that exists for Black children and their families. However, this gap is deeply entrenched in the social, political and historical contexts of the lives of Black families and children since the enslavement period. Research is clear that parenting and family processes provide an avenue for successfully addressing the gap experienced by Black children, yet it is critical that we ask how parents are supported in ways that are culturally relevant and strengths based.

The purpose of this brief is to re-imagine what it means for schools and early childhood education programs to support and engage with families, especially families with young children living in poverty. This re-imagining requires a strengths-based perspective that acknowledges the complex lives and history of Black families as they continue to strive for success, even in the midst of many barriers including social and institutional racism, prejudice and limited opportunities.

RE-IMAGINE WHAT IT MEANS FOR SCHOOLS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT AND ENGAGE WITH FAMILIES, ESPECIALLY FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY.

STRENGTHS OF BLACK FAMILIES

Numerous studies point to the key and critical role of families in the success and achievement of young children before and after birth (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Joe & Davis, 2009). Families, broadly defined, tend to be permanent fixtures in children's lives, particularly when compared to pre-schools and teachers. The contributions of families go well beyond meeting the basic needs of children–food, shelter and health care. Families, particularly parents, and especially mothers, serve the primary role of being children's first attachment figures. A secure attachment between children and their parents during the early years provides a foundation for children to explore and interact with their environment and others under uncertainty (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1988), which is an important transactional process in children's development and success (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). With this foundational research about the significance of parents in the early years, there has been a recent resurgence on supporting positive parenting, particularly parents' responsiveness, sensitivity and provision of cognitive stimulation, as well as enhancing their *intentional and proactive* engagement in their children's learning and development. This focus is exemplified by such disparate efforts as the family engagement framework developed by Head Start and the emphasis on allowing for parental choice for schools. The challenge that remains is whether and how these new frameworks will address the existing achievement gap, and, importantly, the opportunity gap that develops as early as 9 months of age, especially for Black males (Aratani, Wight, & Cooper, 2011).

There are universal aspects of parenting that have been noted as beneficial for all children, regardless of income and ethnicity (Bradley et al., 2001; Mistry et al., 2002). These processes include sensitive and nurturing parenting and provisions for an enriching environment. In essence, when parents are responsive and sensitive to children's needs and provide a variety of enriching opportunities (e.g., reading and talking, engaging in imaginative play, and visiting parks and museums), then children's sense of autonomy and confidence in their skills and abilities are enhanced, strengthening their ability to deal with novel stimuli (e.g., learning to read) and overcome obstacles (e.g., insensitive teachers) (Pungello et al., 2009).

Yet parenting is also culturally based, so more attention is needed to understand and positively respond to and incorporate specific practices and beliefs that are unique to minority families, especially Black families, whose children are disproportionately represented across negative education, health and development measures. Recent studies have begun to question whether the framework of parenting is equivalent and meaningful across ethnic groups (Iruka, LaForett, & Odom, 2012). For instance, are Black parents who are viewed as more "controlling and intrusive" compared to White parents really that way and, further, is their parenting perceived by children in the same way? Do parent-child activities mean the same thing for White and Black children when the questions focus on middle-class Eurocentric beliefs of what is good parenting? Should these perspectives also take into account other activities that minority parents may engage in with their children, such as going to church, engaging in oral storytelling, and attending cultural events? How are measures of "family engagement" around cultural socialization efforts taken into account?

Cultural socialization includes "parental practices that teach children about their racial or ethnic heritage and history; promote cultural customs and traditions; and promote children's cultural, racial, and ethnic pride, either deliberately or implicitly" (Hughes et al., 2006). In the case of Blacks, who have faced and continue to face prejudice and discrimination, this means that parents have to instill pride in their culture and history to combat the negative images and perceptions about their cultural group. Depending on the child's age and competence, parents may socialize children about their culture through discussions about important historical and cultural figures; traditions and celebrations; exposure to culturally relevant books, music, art and stories; eating of ethnic foods; and use of family home language or dialect. So beyond the universal practices that Black parents engage in, there are other culturally meaningful parenting activities they also engage in that remain hidden when researchers tend to discuss key parental practices that are beneficial for children.

16% OF BLACK CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 5 ARE FOREIGN BORN OR HAVE AT LEAST ONE FOREIGN-BORN PARENT AND REPRESENT A RAPIDLY GROWING SEGMENT OF THE U.S. POPULATION

DEMOGRAPHICS OF BLACK FAMILIES

As we delve deeper into culturally relevant practices, we need to look at the variety of cultures that make up "the Black family," which is neither homogeneous nor monolithic. In fact, the demographics regarding "who is Black" has changed in the past couple of decades to include children of immigrant families from countries in sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and South America. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, approximately 16% of Black children under the age of 5 are foreign born or have at least one foreign-born parent and represent a rapidly growing segment of the US population (the African immigrant population alone rose by 63% from 2000 to 2008). Yet despite these demographic changes, children in Black immigrant families remain neglected by research studies and national discourse on immigration. As shown in Table 1, Black families also vary in their educational attainment, structure and poverty status.

Considering the complexity of parenting in general, which is further complicated by poverty, low educational attainment and the trappings of disadvantaged communities that Black families are more likely to experience, the social, historical, economic and cultural contexts of Black families need to be considered when seeking out family support and engagement practices and policies that are most critical and beneficial for the family system. Throughout our recent history, systematic laws and rules have been set up to disenfranchise Black individuals and families, from the Jim Crow laws to educational institutions segregated by policy and by practice. Discriminatory and predatory practices have infiltrated financial institutions as well, such that even when Black families have the resources and assets to generate wealth and positive child outcomes, such as homeownership, income, employment, college education and inheritance, the returns to those families are less compared to White families (Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013). In addition, ongoing financial woes and deep budget cuts are having increasingly deleterious effects on the economic health of families, which impacts the well-being and stability of the family, and subsequently their parenting processes and practices.

Table 1. Black Family Demographics

EDUCATION ATTAINMENT (PERCENT)		FAMILY ARRANGEMENT (PERCENT)		POVERTY STATUS (PERCENT)	
LESS THAN HIGH SCHOOL	15.5	TWO-PARENT ARRANGEMENT	38.1	BELOW 100% POVERTY	26
HIGH SCHOOL/GED	34.8	ONE-PARENT ARRANGEMENT	55.2	AT OR ABOVE 100% POVERTY	74
SOME COLLEGE	29.8	NO PARENT ARRANGEMENT	6.7		
COLLEGE DEGREE AND/OR HIGHER	19.9				

SOURCE. U.S. CENSUS 2010, U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY, ANNUAL SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC SUPPLEMENT, 2010

PARADIGM SHIFT: CULTURALLY RELEVANT FAMILY SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

Rather than viewing Black families as deficient or parents as "uncaring, dysfunctional, unsupportive and… as obstacles in the way of progress and problems to be overcome," (Noguera, 2008) it is critical for programs seeking to be more effective in supporting and engaging Black families to change their frame towards cultural relevance and consider the **4Es–Exploration, Expectation, Education and Empowerment.**

EXPLORATION

Black families have a rich set of resources and skills that demand to be explored and valued in family support and engagement programming. There is a rich history of spirituality, collectivism and "stick-to-it-iveness" in Black families. There are also meaningful cultural adaptations that result from a history of disenfranchisement in the U.S. and deep-seated qualities from our African roots, such as flexible use of language, innovation and exemplary artistic and athletic prowess. These culturally-based practices and resources, also coined as "funds of knowledge," need to be identified and integrated into the experiences of young children, as well as used as resources in bringing and integrating new information into children's learning. The term *Funds of Knowledge* (FoK) is an anthropologic term first coined by Wolf in 1966 to "to define resources and knowledge that households manipulate to make ends meet in the household economy (Hogg, 2011). Researchers from the University of Arizona recognized the importance of this concept in school settings for immigrant children. Moll and Greenberg (1990) defined FoK as "the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive." If these "FoKs" are respected by educators, families can then contribute resources to teachers to help them "draw on student experiences and priorities in schooling, thus validating student knowledge and life values, and enabling them to scaffold student learning from the familiar" (Hogg, 2011).

Practice. One can identify families' FoKs through multiple approaches, including home visits or other opportunities that lead to conversations about and observations of families' routines and rituals. It is critical to approach families without judgment –and without extensive forms for them to complete–so that the focus of the discussion can be about the many ways in which families can support their children's learning, success, unique talents and contributions. To elicit the FoK of families, educators must be careful not to diminish the various activities, skills and routines in which families engage, no matter how different they may be from their own. Educators should instead consider how what they learn may shape their perception of the child and family, as well as how their new knowledge could be integrated into classroom instruction, program activities and events.

EXPECTATIONS

Low expectations have been cited as a major contributing factor to the gap found between Black children and others, because they undermine children's sense of competency and increase their learned helplessness (McKown & Weinstein, 2008). Similarly, educators often hold low expectations for Black families' engagement, especially low-income Black parents, at least as it concerns school-based activities (e.g., class visits, volunteering and parent-teacher conferences). Barriers often cited for the lack of parent engagement are time, availability, one-parent households, stress, transportation and child care. While real enough, these barriers are often used punitively to reinforce the expectations of limited parent involvement, which in turn leads to more limited involvement. It is also a deficit view that simultaneously devalues parent engagement in the home and community while minimizing the powerful statement that "parents are their children's first teacher." To turn this model on its head requires that schools and teachers create a culture in which parents are expected to be *intentionally and proactively* engaged in their child's learning and school experiences. This only happens by building on Black families' FoKs and providing mechanisms for engagement that are more responsive to the contexts and benefits for these families. It requires, for example, that schools assess the value of having parents coming into the school for less-than-meaningful activities, and exploring alternative opportunities that support social networks and leadership roles.

Practice. In more intentionally and proactively engaging families, program should look to FoKs to unearth the skills and assets of parents and families. In addition to initial home visits, schools can support targeted surveys, interviews or focus groups to help them better understand how they can build upon parents' goals to encourage and support their engagement using the parents' preferred methods. Programs should seek not to "excuse" parents and families from being engaged, but rather find ways to help parents and families meet the expectations of involvement. Schools may find that, in order for parents to be fully engaged, they have to feel that they are making a difference in ways that make them valued partners and contributors. This perspective may lead to opportunities to invite parents to develop classroom lessons and activities based on their skills and talents; form parent-buddy or mentor programs; hold events at varying times and in alternative locations; and encourage parents to take on leadership roles in initiatives that schools may not be able to prioritize on their own, such as father-child engagement programs.

EDUCATION

Families are deeply knowledgeable about their children's strengths and weaknesses, and, with the right resources and supports in place, they are in the best position to meet their children's needs. Due, however, to the history of disenfranchisement of Black families in participating in high-quality educational systems, it is important that parents are educated on how to navigate the complex institutions and systems they are likely to encounter for the benefit of their children. Educating parents about how to successfully navigate systems helps to ensure that they appropriately advocate for their children, from choosing a preschool that meets their child's needs to deciding whether to test for gifted and talented programs to seeking support for special needs.

Practice. Early childhood education programs and schools often engage in partnerships with a variety of community and local agencies that, together, can help share information, support advocacy and promote access to resources and networks. Shared data systems and other ongoing communication can help to ensure that families seeking information and support are connected not only to appropriate services and resources, but also to each other, which helps to build critically important social capital and networks. These connective efforts should be enhanced by teachers who can facilitate specific relationships between families based on their FoKs. For example, where one parent is known to have skills navigating special education services on behalf of her child, she might be able to support another parent seeking assistance and advice on navigating a similar system for his child.

EMPOWERMENT

The crux of all family support and engagement programming should be to empower families to be self-sufficient and appropriately equipped to deal with the challenges of parenting and life obstacles. Family support programs identified as being the most effective for families and children focus on providing the families with the tools to achieve their goals as opposed to doing it for the family (Avellar et al., 2012). Home visiting programs, including the Nurse-Family Partnership, have made it a priority to focus on empowering families within their life contexts and cultural environments, ensuring that the skills they develop are transferable, create a sense of self-agency, and promote self-control.

Practice. Empowering families is a process of building self-competence and self-sufficiency that requires programs to explore families' assets and capacities, educate them on issues around advocacy and networking, and hold high expectation about their role as parents in all aspects of their child's development. Empowering families does not mean "doing it" for the family—which may be

easier and more productive in the short run, but increasingly harmful in the long term. If, for example, a parent is seeking more information about attaining a college degree, the program or school should not simply call the nearest university. Instead, they can provide contact information for various colleges, help the individual understand the information, ensure they have support in navigating the system and connect them with other parents who may have themselves recently gone through a similar process. When considering how to structure parent events and activities, programs and schools may also want to think about (1) providing education and resources that match with goals the parents have identified; (2) identifying different ways to share information using a diverse range of communication methods; (3) providing opportunities for parents to be heard and listened to, whether at meetings with important community or school figures or through one-on-one conversations; and (4) celebrating the smaller successes achieved in the face of multiple challenges, such as opportunities to recognize parents attending their first parent meetings or supporting family members making progress learning a new language.

IMPLICATIONS

This re-imagining of family support and engagement to meet the needs and strengths of African American families will require adjustments in practices, policies and research, including the following recommendations:

- **Practices.** Programs and schools will need to focus on expanding the traditional, one-way, directional approach of "family engagement" to a more authentic bi-directional approach that sees families as valuable to the process of educating children, both because of their fundamental importance and because their meaningful engagement matters in achieving current measures of accountability and success. Leaders and educators will also need to ensure that their practices are culturally relevant, reflective of families' race and ethnicity as well as their economic and social conditions. This could lead not only to a focus on parent engagement in school-based programming, but also a focus on supporting engagement and empowerment in the home and community. Cultural competence is not, of course, mastered through one-day trainings, nor is it an added programmatic component. It needs, rather, to be integrated into all aspects of professional development, curriculum, assessment and evaluation. It is a developmental process ranging from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency that requires proactiveness, intentionality and authenticity.

- **Policy.** Policies about family engagement are written and implemented as a one-size-fits-all approach that offers limited attention to the culture and contexts of families. Furthermore, professionals who are expected to

support families are themselves provided with limited resources, support and guidance. This sends a message that "family support" is simple, uncomplicated and non-essential compared to other program elements. In line with this re-imagining, policies and accompanying funding and implementation resources need to be better aligned to support the truism that "parents are children's first teachers." Supporting this principle is a key aspect of high-quality early care and education programs, extending through the early grades.

- **Research.** Studies and interventions are often conducted based on middle-class Eurocentric values and beliefs. The examination and evaluation of parenting practices and family processes tend to be based on these traditional views, with little focus on cultural differences, as well as the varying contexts of minority families and children. Researchers need to examine the historical contexts of certain assumptions about parenting practices and supports that are needed, especially in light of changing demographics. In addition, resources must support research unpacking what it means to be Black in America, which would likely require new theoretical and methodological approaches and the engagement of diverse researchers, practitioners and community agents. There is a need for new research, including new questions and measurements, which examine what is needed to effectively and successfully support and engage Black families. These new vantage points should consider their unique social, cultural and historical contexts and perspectives that shape their lives and hence their children's lives and development.

CONCLUSION

The Black family is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. As a means to addressing the achievement and opportunity gaps that persist in the U.S. with Black children, it is important that in addition to addressing the academic and social-emotional needs of children, the role of the family must be authentically acknowledged and valued. This would require examining the social, political and historical contexts of families' lives. Black families have many resources that are valuable to children's learning and development. However, more attention and intention is needed to incorporate these resources into children's early care and education experiences. The *4Es* is a beginning framework that can be used to harness the strengths of Black families with the goal of improving their lives. Addressing the opportunity gap for young Black children cannot happen without their families and communities as a critical element of the solution.