

## Foreword

# THE LANGUAGE OF EXCELLENCE:

## CHANGING THE DISCOURSE ABOUT OUR CHILDREN

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**F**or more than 30 years I have researched and written about successful teachers of African American children. I took this approach because most of what I learned in graduate school and read in the existing literature focused on Black children and failure. So pervasive was the notion of the failing Black child that when I attempted an electronic search back in 1989 with the descriptors, “Black,” “African American” and “Education” I quickly got responses that said, “see, culturally deprived; see culturally disadvantaged.” There was no language of educational excellence associated with Black children. Despite the attempts to combat this language of cultural deficiency the literature still leans on this concept to talk about Black children. One of the more popular ideas used in urban schools these days comes from the so-called “culture of poverty.” I deem this “so-called” because my graduate training is as an educational anthropologist. I know exactly what culture is (and is not) and one thing that culture is not, is ‘poverty.’

Poverty is a *social condition* that reflects the values and policies of a society. Culture is what people develop and shape based on their language, traditions, customs, religion, art, music, knowledge, and other group practices. When a society believes it is all right for some segments to live without decent housing, adequate health care, and equitable education while others have all of these things and much more, this is a statement about social values, not about the culture in which the poor find themselves. But I do not want to give much attention to this rhetoric about a culture of poverty in a volume that is dedicated to the strength and resilience of a people who have withstood some of the most devastating cruelty and deprivations of any people on earth and still persevere.

# 58%

**OF BLACK CHILDREN UNDER AGE 6 ARE LIVING IN POVERTY.<sup>1</sup>**

Black families are nothing short of miracle workers. Without the advantage of many social resources (e.g. wealth, health, housing, education, etc.), Black families have relied on cultural practices to ensure that their children are equipped to take advantage of available opportunities and to survive an often hostile society. This has been their tradition since before Emancipation. However, when Emancipation did happen, two of the first institutions formerly enslaved individuals formed were churches and schools. Indeed, through my extensive international travel I could not help but notice that those institutions were present in Black communities worldwide. I saw them in small villages in Ghana and South Africa as well as rural communities in Jamaica, the Bahamas, and Brazil. Our formerly enslaved ancestors took their meager resources and built churches and schools. Their dedication is evident in the more than 100 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) across the country. The history of many of the HBCUs reveals that through their churches these people—although often illiterate—decided to invest in their children’s future. Black people did this then and they do it now.

As a part of my work I have the opportunity to provide professional development for educators—teachers, administrators, instructional support staff, etc. Recently, I have begun some of those professional development sessions with a trailer from the 2010 documentary film, “Babies” directed by Thomas Balmés. The film features 4 babies during their first year of life from four different parts of the world: Japan, the US, Namibia, and Mongolia. In the trailer we see the remarkable similarities among these infants. All four are exploring their world, interacting with the others in their environment, learning to crawl, walk, play, and practice what they see others (particularly) do. I point out to my participants that the two things that all children do as a part of their development is attempt to figure out **(1) how to navigate their environment** and **(2) how to interact with the other people they encounter in that environment**. Every child who shows up in our classrooms comes with these same intentions. It is the differential treatment they receive that leads to differential outcomes.

The authors of this volume address the critical issues of good health, strong families, and positive early learning as the important building blocks for ensuring excellent outcomes for our children.





AMONG LOW-INCOME FAMILIES IN WISCONSIN,

**7.5%** OF BLACK CHILDREN AND

**45.5%** OF WHITE CHILDREN

LIVE IN A HOME OWNED BY THEIR FAMILY. AMONG FAMILIES WHO ARE ABOVE LOW-INCOME, 49.4% OF BLACK CHILDREN AND 86.8% OF WHITE CHILDREN LIVE IN THEIR OWN HOME.<sup>2</sup>

#### GOOD HEALTH

Although good health is essential to success in life, several factors have prevented Black families from attaining and maintaining good health. Those who subscribe to the “culture of poverty” blame Black people for their own health issues. They seem to ignore the social policy decisions that have worked against Black children and families and contributed to their lack of good health. For instance, the obesity epidemic in many Black communities is related to the lack of grocery stores that stock fresh fruit and vegetables and the preponderance of fast food restaurants. It is also a result of the lack of recreational resources such as parks and community centers, which can be safely accessed and utilized.

Many Black children may not get a good start in life because their mothers don’t have access to high-quality prenatal and post-natal health care. In the United States, for example, Black mothers are less likely to breastfeed their babies – in part because they are more likely to be in hospitals where they are provided with infant formula from the very beginning.<sup>3</sup> Instead of communicating about the health benefits of breast-feeding, and supporting their efforts, Black mothers are all-too-often encouraged to take advantage of the “convenience” of formula and, further, are more likely to be employed in jobs and industries that are not conducive to longer-term breastfeeding. These are policy decisions and choices, not cultural ones.

## STRONG FAMILIES

For all of the rhetoric about “family values,” the U.S. is notorious for policy decisions that work against families. Our international peers provide families with substantial parental leave. For example, in Sweden, parents are granted 13 months of parental leave with 77.6% of their monthly salary.<sup>4</sup> Either parent can take the leave or both parents can share it (e.g. one takes 6 months and the other takes 7 months). In the U.S., maternity leave tends to come without pay – or requires parents to use any sick or vacation time they have available to them.

Much of the discourse about Black families is about the large percentage of single mothers and babies born to unmarried parents. A look back at the 1965 Moynihan Report indicated that 25% of Black families were headed by single parents, mostly women. The data from the report are correct but the interpretation of the data – that Black families are pathological – is wrong. Originally, in 1935, AFDC was instituted to encourage mothers to stay home with their small children.<sup>5</sup> The major recipients were White women. Black women were deemed ineligible because they were participating in the labor force. Social policy then dictated that in order to receive government assistance, parents must be single – and Black women realized they could receive more benefits if there were no men in the household – so they made the financial decision that was best for their children. What is lost in this discourse is that prior to the mid-1960s, most Black children actually lived in two parent households. Instead of asking what is wrong with Black families, the Moynihan Report could have asked, “What is wrong with our society that is causing Black families to disintegrate?” I pose the question in this way because if we look at the statistics on single families we see that, today, 35% of all American families are single parent households.<sup>6</sup> What might we have learned from the earlier Moynihan Report if policy makers had taken the data as a way to examine our society rather than indict our families? The contributors to this volume focusing on strong families realize that children exist in family units—two parents, single, familial caregivers (e.g. grandparents and other family members)—and that to ensure the success of children, the society must support families, regardless of their structure.

**34%** OF BLACK CHILDREN UNDER AGE 6 ARE LIVING IN FAMILIES MAKING LESS THAN \$11,525 PER YEAR;

**NATIONALLY, THIS NUMBER IS 25% OF BLACK CHILDREN, AND 7% OF WHITE CHILDREN.<sup>7</sup>**

## POSITIVE EARLY LEARNING

The last section of this volume looks at education, and although I focus more on K-12 education, it is clear to me from all of the research that early learning is pivotal for later success. Unfortunately, the evidence also indicates that Black children are not faring well in this area. In March of 2014 the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) division of the U.S. Department of Education reported that although Black children are but 18% of the pre-school population, they are 48% of those suspended and/or expelled from pre-school. At the tender ages of three and four, we are seeing Black children excluded from school before they can even get started.

Given the options, Black families often opt for center-based or home-based child care where the providers are family, friends and neighbors who may be loving and nurturing – and understanding of the community culture – but who also lack the educational background to help lay the foundation for making their time with young children consonant with what schools will demand in kindergarten. Our current standardized test-driven school environment means that children are now expected to show up to school already in possession of the kinds of knowledge and skills that kindergarten used to teach.

In addition, some of our low income and poor parents are themselves victims of substandard education and are limited in their ability to help their children achieve what schools determine to be “readiness.” This does not mean that Black children arrive at school with no knowledge and unable to benefit from the schooling experience. Teachers could, for example, choose to recognize activities such as clapping, jump-rope games, and call and response songs, which are a regular part of urban life, as opportunities to leverage the teaching of reading and literacy skills.

Indeed, the job of those who would work with Black children is to learn more about their individual, cultural, community and home experiences. Good health, strong families, and positive early learning are important building blocks in ensuring the success of all children; when any one of these building blocks is absent, a child faces an uphill struggle. It then behooves the adults who surround that child to stand in the gap when and where that child needs them. A good place to begin is by changing the discourse that considers being Black a risk factor.