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African American Families Under Fire

Ethnographic Views of Family Strengths

BETH HARRY, JANETTE K. KLINGNER, AND JULIET HART

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the discrepancy between school personnel's negative stereotyping of African American families and the family information gleaned by ethnographic research. Using findings from a 3-year ethnographic study of the special education placement process in a culturally diverse urban school district, we describe the general atmosphere of negativity that prevailed among school personnel with regard to African American families living in poverty. The article focuses on the families of three case study students who were referred to special education. Home visits and ethnographic interviews with caregivers revealed family strengths that were neither known nor tapped by school personnel. We interpret the findings in terms of the power of cultural capital and the discrepancy between the schools' perceptions of such capital and the capital actually possessed by families.

AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES CONTINUE TO BE under fire. Comedian Bill Cosby's recent diatribe against the family structures, lifestyles, language, and child-rearing practices of African American families living in poverty has brought an old theme to the forefront of the American public conscience. Despite criticism from some African American leaders, the public dialogue following Cosby's remarks indicated that many African Americans share his impatience with the continuing pattern of social exclusion experienced by African Americans, at least in inner-city environments. By this view, African Americans' exclusion is self-engendered and self-perpetuated. By this view, African Americans have

chosen to reject the values and benefits of the mainstream and continue in a life on the margins of the society by their own choice. By this view, African Americans have no one to blame but themselves.

We believe that Cosby's remarks are out of context. It is easier to make judgments about behaviors than to seek an understanding of the circumstances, motives, and sentiments they reflect. Although we understand and share Cosby's frustration, our work inside schools that serve African American children and families brings us a rather different perspective. We do not seek to engage Cosby's argument at the broad level of society as a whole. As researchers in special education, we have focused on issues related to African American and other culturally or linguistically diverse students whose difficulties in school have led to their being perceived as "disabled." Compared to Bill Cosby's wide-angle lens, we take a much narrower focus on the discrepancies between the widespread negative impressions of African American families and the close-up views we were able to gain in case studies of children referred to special education programs.

In this article, we use the findings of 3 years of ethnographic research to challenge the belief that African American parents living in poverty are the cause of their children's learning difficulties. Our stories of families are not intended to prove that *all* families function well, nor are they intended to deny that family influence is important in children's education. Our purpose is to show the difference in perspective that can be attained by personal knowledge—and to show that understanding makes all the difference. We submit that notwithstanding detrimental urban environments, poverty,

and limited education, a step into the world of families can provide a much different picture from the stereotypical views so commonly expressed.

BLAMING THE VICTIM

The literature on minority families has undergone several revisions over the past half-century. Although it is beyond our scope to offer a detailed summary of this topic (see Harry, 1992), we note that public constructions of African Americans' family structures and practices have historically been colored by an overwhelming assumption of deficit, making it difficult to disentangle the real effects of poverty and historical discrimination from the continuation of negative stereotypes (Frazier, 1948; U.S. Department of Labor, 1965). Ryan's (1976) now famous phrase "blaming the victim" is central to this argument. Meanwhile, several African American scholars (e.g., Billingsley, 1968; Hill, 1971) have countered this negative tradition with explanations of the strengths of African American families, which have been marked by adaptability in response to centuries of oppression. More recently, an ecological emphasis has placed the responsibility for family deficits on the public policies and social circumstances that perpetuate extraordinary life challenges for these groups (McLoyd, Jayarante, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994; Spencer, 1995).

Negative views of families living in poverty have been reinforced by research contending that the effects of the home environment outweigh those of schooling (e.g., Coleman et al., 1966). One line of research that has been very influential in public conceptions of family dysfunction is the work on family *risk* by scholars such as Nichols and Chen (1981) and Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin, and Baldwin (1993). These studies listed specific factors associated with risk, in particular poverty, unsafe neighborhoods, large family size, residential instability, and parental characteristics such as poor mental health and criminal or drug involvement. Sameroff et al. found, however, that no single characteristic was necessarily detrimental, but rather a combination of several factors. In similar work, Blair and Scott (2000) sought a relationship between such factors and special education placement. They found that special education placement at the age of 12 to 14 years was highly correlated with mother's education, single-motherhood status, prenatal care, and low birthweight.

This line of work is important in informing public policy regarding issues such as health care and early intervention. It says nothing, however, about schooling for the poor. We take issue with the fact that these studies do not ask whether or to what extent schooling might also contribute to IQ scores or special education placement at age 14. It is well established that IQ tests are highly correlated with school learning and mainly test what children have learned (Donovan & Cross, 2002). It is also well established that children in poor neighborhoods generally receive poor schooling (Darling-

Hammond & Post, 2000). Therefore, any investigation of the contributors to low achievement or special education placement must take into account the role of poor schooling. Like Keogh (2000), we think it is important to ask whether children's failures should be seen as school-based "instructional failures" (p. 7) rather than parental failures. There is no question that the early years are formative. Nevertheless, we believe that schools can make a difference. The problems engendered by negative early family influences can be seriously reinforced by poor schooling.

The National Academy of Sciences' report (Donovan & Cross, 2002) on the placement of minorities in special education—despite its emphatic statement that the responsibility for low minority achievement must be shared by community, home, and school—initiated a renewed focus on the social and environmental effects of poor homes and communities. Because of the extensive influence of this report, we will address it separately here.

THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES' REPORT

The National Academy of Sciences' (NAS) report on minority overrepresentation in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002) devoted a detailed chapter to statistics on the numerous detrimental social and biological influences that affect children living in poverty. In particular, the chapter highlighted findings on the disproportionate presence of negative influences such as lead-based toxins, alcohol, iron deficiency, and maternal depression among African American families who live in poverty. The report pointed to proven and potential effects of these influences on children's cognitive and social development. One example given was the strong correlation between high lead levels and hyperactivity in young children, the assumption being that hyperactivity contributes to poor academic achievement, which, in turn, may be linked to special education placement. Another risk factor documented by the report as affecting African Americans in particular is low birthweight, which has been significantly linked to poor school outcomes. According to several studies summarized in the NAS report, African Americans suffer more than any other ethnic group in the United States from low birthweight, even controlling for socioeconomic status. The report also noted that African-born Black women did not demonstrate this discrepancy, suggesting that the low birthweight phenomenon is more likely linked to social conditions in the United States than to race.

The NAS report's foregrounding of the social-biological argument produced a strong objection from many minority scholars who contested the emphasis on poverty, arguing that this emphasis tends to "blame the victim" rather than face the responsibility of educators in the pattern of disproportionately high special education placement of minorities. It may also be that some scholars interpreted the arguments as sug-

gestive of racist beliefs in genetic inferiority, although the report focused on environmental factors that affect prenatal, perinatal, or early childhood development. However, Losen (2002) argued that the emphasis on environmental toxins assumed a connection between the outcomes of these toxins and special education placement, when in fact there is no literature directly linking these factors.

Our concern is that the NAS' discussion of the role of negative biological and environmental factors lacks a focus on the policy context in which these factors thrive. The fact that newborn children of African American women tend to be more underweight than those of other ethnicities is well established and has been of concern to public health officials for decades (Ventura et al., 2000). The fact that certain neighborhoods have been allowed to continue to have high levels of lead in their buildings whereas others have been purged of this toxin is also well known. The fact that minorities in inner cities receive vastly inferior health services has most recently been affirmed by another report of the National Academy of Sciences (2002). It is important that concerns about these policy issues not be avoided by educators in the debate over minority children's school outcomes. Indeed, we believe that it is time for disciplines such as education to become more connected to disciplines such as sociology and developmental psychology, whose scholars have long been concerned with the negative effects of discriminatory public policies.

In addition to early biological influences, parental activities with children are undoubtedly connected to children's success in school. Parents in middle and upper income brackets, regardless of ethnicity, are usually heavily engaged in preparing their toddlers and preschoolers for basic literacy and numeracy activities. Ethnicity is also correlated with this type of school readiness. For example, using familiarity with print as an indicator of school readiness, the National Center for Education Statistics (2000) showed that children of White and Asian mothers with a high school diploma demonstrate the greatest familiarity with print—twice as much as Blacks and approximately one and a half times as much as Hispanics. Maternal high school education approximately doubles the readiness levels of children of all ethnic groups, but the size of the gap and the pattern of hierarchy remains the same.

We reiterate that these data are interpreted as a "blame the victim" argument only when group differences are highlighted without mention of the policy context in which they occur and without acknowledging family stressors and strengths. Unfortunately, the NAS (Donovan & Cross, 2002) report did not acknowledge these factors. To assume that poverty is equivalent to poor parenting and absence of family strength is an insult to the centuries of adaptive processes that oppressed families in the United States have used to protect their children from discrimination and to nurture family bonds and children's individual strengths.

The absence of such insight from the literature on families reflects not only the deficit perspective of the research community as a whole, but also the lack of interest in

research methodologies that can capture the dynamic, interpersonal aspects of family life. It is easy to measure children's emergent literacy skills or toxins in the blood. Factors such as internal resilience, interpersonal affiliation, and creativity are much harder to quantify and are generally not seen as the stuff of science. This is why we believe that the type of research we report in this article will make a significant contribution to the field's understanding of family strengths.

Family and school responsibilities in special education placement of minorities should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. The NAS report (Donovan & Cross, 2002) did not focus exclusively on social and biological factors. Rather, it argued that the effects of these factors are often exacerbated by poor schooling. Thus, to acknowledge the existence of family-based difficulties is not to release schools from responsibility for children's outcomes. Schools can and should make a difference. The research reported here was concerned with the role of schools. Our focus was not on whether the parents did their job but on whether the schools did their job. Thus, we asked, What is the role of schools in educating children, regardless of their backgrounds? Does schooling actually exacerbate or even create children's learning difficulties? Interesting enough, the National Academy of Sciences (Donovan & Cross, 2002) answered this question in the affirmative:

We ask whether the school experience itself contributes to racial disproportion in academic outcomes and behavioral problems that lead to placement in special and gifted education. . . . Our answer is "yes." (p. 358)

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Our purpose in this research was to study the processes by which Black and Hispanic children are placed in special education programs. We were concerned with documenting the quality of early instruction, referral decisions and processes, psychological evaluation, and the quality of ultimate placements in special education.

Our research was conducted in a multiethnic, multi-lingual urban school district, which is one of the largest in the nation. Criteria for the selection of 12 elementary schools included race and ethnicity of students, socioeconomic levels as represented by the frequency of free and reduced lunch (FRL), and the schools' rates of special education placement. Of the 12 schools, 4 served predominantly Black students, 4 predominantly Hispanic students, and 4 mixed populations of Black, Hispanic, and White students. As White students represent only 17% of the district's public school population, we had only one school where there was a predominance of such students and where the FRL rate was only 18.5%. In the rest of the schools, rates of FRL ranged from 65% to 99%.

The research design was funnel-like, moving from the broadest information on the district, to overall rates and

placement processes in the 12 schools, to 12 target classrooms, and finally to 12 selected case study students. Data collection was based on open-ended, semistructured interviews with district and school personnel, parents, and students as well as observations of classrooms, special education conferences, psychological evaluations, and a wide range of school activities. Wherever possible, parent interviews were conducted in the homes.

Overall, our data amounted to 272 audiotaped, open-ended or semistructured individual interviews with students, parents, and school-based and district personnel; 84 informal conversations; observations of 627 classrooms; 42 child study team (CST) meetings; 5 psychological evaluations; 15 special education placement meetings; 14 other meetings; and 15 observations in home and community settings relevant to target students. Interview length ranged from 20 minutes to 2 hours, classroom observations ranged from 30 minutes to a full day, and CST and other meetings lasted from 5 minutes to more than 1 hour. The documents we examined included individualized education programs (IEPs), students' work, psychological and other evaluations, school district guidelines and policies, and extant data on special education placement in the school district.

The main project lasted 3 years. In the fourth year, we conducted quarterly visits to schools to monitor the progress of the 12 case study students. Furthermore, the case studies of 3 students placed in programs for children with emotional disturbance (ED) were extended for a fifth year through the doctoral research of one of our students (Hart, 2003). Data were analyzed inductively in a recursive process of constant comparison through coding and thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

For a full explanation of the research process, see Harry, Sturges, and Klingner (in press). Various other aspects of the study have been reported elsewhere (Hart, 2003; Harry, Klingner, Sturges & Moore, 2002; Harry & Klingner, in press; Klingner, Harry, & Felton, 2002). In this article, we focus on one subset of this very large body of data: the stark discrepancy between school personnel's views of Black families and the views developed through research interviews and home visits.

THE DISCOURSE OF EXCLUSION

We found that the stereotype of the neglectful and incompetent African American parent was alive and well in the belief system of school personnel. The term *dysfunctional* was applied to families based on single pieces of information that were often unsupported by any evidence. Beyond the belief that the families were themselves dysfunctional was the opinion that lack of support for schooling was one of the main contributors to children's school difficulties. We learned of school personnel's views of families through interviews and informal conversations and through observations of formal

and informal school settings, such as team conferences and casual interactions.

In describing the special education referral process, school personnel told us that "parents are involved from the beginning." However, we saw little evidence of this. Certainly, across the schools, there was considerable variation in the behavior of school personnel toward parents. In our observations of conferences, we saw both sensitivity and insensitivity to parents' feelings. Some teams practiced consistently respectful and meaningful interactions with parents. In the best of these meetings, parents were carefully and respectfully questioned about their views of the child's difficulties. In a few meetings, we saw team members respond warmly to mothers who broke into tears as they told sad stories of family tragedies or disappointments.

By contrast, we saw many conferences where parents were treated insensitively or with disrespect. On one occasion, a grandmother was brought to tears by a team member's questioning. Our field notes read,

Denise's grandmother revealed that Denise's mother was in jail. She has been abusing drugs for some time. When the Assistant Principle (AP) asked about the father, the grandmother stated that he was dead. The AP asked, "How did he die?" The grandmother responded, "He was shot." The AP asked again, "How did he die?" The grandmother stated that someone shot him. As the AP pushed, the grandmother began to cry uncontrollably.

In this school, there was no question that children were under tremendous pressure from family- and community-based circumstances. All four children whose placement conferences we observed had close relatives who abused drugs or who were in trouble with the law. This school and one other were in one of the most deteriorated and crime-ridden areas of the city. Yet in both schools, out-of-school suspension was used at a rate 10 times higher than in the other schools in the sample. Although the teachers we talked to objected to the policy, and some tried not to use it, the administrators saw themselves as implementing an appropriate zero-tolerance approach.

We saw conferences where parental input was all but actively discouraged by the use of excessive jargon, a tone of impatience or sarcasm, or outright ignoring of caregivers' questions or comments. In one meeting, the mother had brought along her child's reading tutor from an outside agency. This African American man, dressed professionally, took a seat, but his presence was not acknowledged until he finally took the initiative to speak up and to report his perceptions of the child's reading difficulties. Another negative behavior was team members' ignoring of caregiver's questions or comments by simply moving on to the next point. Frequent side conversations among team members portrayed indifference to the process.

The fact that several school personnel would make derogatory remarks about parents in front of the researchers made us wonder what they would say in our absence. At the end of two consecutive meetings, one of which lasted only 5 minutes, the teacher commented that the brevity of the conference did not matter because the parent "wouldn't have understood it anyway." Of the parents in those two conferences, the teacher scoffed, "One's retarded, the other one's crazy!"

It was evident that shared ethnicity did not ensure respectful treatment. We saw rude treatment of parents by school personnel of the same ethnicity as the parents as well as of different ethnicities. Furthermore, we noted that some team members would be polite and respectful to parents whom they saw as worthy and outright rude to those whom they disdained. This was noticeable in one team where two African American team members expressed open disdain of some parents, whereas the European American psychologist and a Hispanic administrator were consistently polite and attentive to all parents. Our notes on this team are rife with examples of the two former team members laughing inappropriately or addressing parents in a sarcastic tone. On one occasion, one of these team members gestured about an African American mother behind her back. We will give more detail on this incident in our story of Jacintha, Robert's mother.

Across the 12 schools, the voices of school personnel were frequently harsh as they spoke of African American parents. One third-grade European American teacher contrasted the three ethnic groups in her school, stating,

I don't see a male figure in the [African American] family, a steady male figure, whereas in the Haitian household, it may not be the father of all of the children, but there's usually a male figure involved in their upbringing. In the Hispanic family, it may be a stepfather; but there's usually a male family member involved. But in the African American family it's this week's boyfriend, in this neighborhood. I can't speak about elsewhere because I've never worked anywhere else. It's five children with five different last names. It's nobody's daddy. There doesn't seem to be a steady male influence in the family, even a grandfather. It's always grandmother. Very rarely do I hear them talk about grandfather or father or uncle or whatever it is they are going to call this person.

Many school personnel did not hesitate to speak their minds openly to us. In our very first conversation with a Hispanic teacher in an inner-city school, she exclaimed,

The parents are the problem! They [the African American children] have absolutely no social skills, such as not knowing how to walk, sit in a chair. . . . It's cultural. Because most of these chil-

dren have been to preschool, and they're still so delayed. Their physical needs are not attended to. They're often dirty, head lice among the Hispanic children, poor hygiene and clothing . . . hungry, cold. . . . The big problem is poverty. I spend 50% of my time taking care of them other than teaching, and this includes downtime because of behaviors such as fistfights, tantrums, aggression.

Although it was true that for children in this neighborhood, "the big problem" was poverty, it was also true that this teacher had never visited the home of any child in her class and had no idea of any of the strengths that families had. We had the opportunity to get to know the mothers of two of this teacher's students. We will tell their stories later.

In the inner-city schools, personnel who worked directly with families in a paraprofessional role were more likely to be from the neighborhood and tended to speak in more understanding tones. For example, family liaison personnel hired by Title 1 funds frequently spoke in a kindly tone, as indicated by the following statement:

The parents are not more involved because they are not educated. . . . They didn't like the school when they were here. They didn't finish school. And it's kind of hard to be excited about something you didn't like, to pass it on to your children. . . . I have one parent who tells me she only got as far as second or third grade herself. . . . They are embarrassed to even let their children know. . . . Some of the ones I've dealt with—it is easier to push a child away or talk down to them to keep them from being aware of the real situation. They don't want them to know. A lot don't volunteer at the school because they'd have to watch a child read. And they don't want to do that because they can't read the book [themselves].

FAMILY CONFIGURATIONS

Whereas our conference observations gave us a considerable amount of general information on the families of children we were observing, we were able to gain more in-depth information on the families of our 12 case study students. These students were chosen to reflect a range of issues emerging in the referral and placement process and also to reflect each of the three high-incidence disabilities (Educable Mental Retardation [EMR], Learning Disability [LD], Emotional Disturbance [ED]) that we were focusing on in the study.

We emphasize that we met the families because we had selected the children, not the other way around. We had no way of knowing what the families would be like, apart from any stereotypical snippets of information offered by school personnel. Thus, we did not select the families with the intention of making any particular point about the nature of their

family structures or lifestyles. Nor was this a volunteer cohort in the true sense of that term, because their participation was entirely in response to a direct, personal invitation from the research team. Although a couple of families were hard to reach initially because of hectic work schedules, we gained the permission of all 12 with relative ease.

It turned out that only 1 of the 12 families fit the model of the nuclear family headed by two biological parents that is assumed to be the ideal in American society. This one family was Haitian, with both parents in the home and the father working two full-time jobs. The range of configurations among the other 11 families defied any traditional classification of "single-parent" or "intact" families. As far as we could discern, there was more than one adult in all the homes. Three families were headed by fathers only, one by a grandmother, five by mothers, two by a mother and stepfather, and one by an uncle. In two cases, there was a parent with a mental illness. In two families, an absent parent was living abroad. In the case of the uncle who cared for his young nephew, several deaths in the family and the uncle's own terminal illness made this a very sad family situation.

In addition to these 12, there were a few families we interviewed or visited whose children did not become full-fledged case studies because of our need to limit the numbers. There was one home that we did not visit, despite two interviews with the mother. This mother was an alcoholic, whose efforts to participate in her children's education were poignant; she would visit the class to observe, but in a state of inebriation. However, we observed her participation in two conferences, where she was sober and subsequently made efforts to follow up on the team's recommendations. Ultimately, her alcoholism proved to be out of control, and both her children were removed from the home by the state's family protection department. Her son was not referred for evaluation because the team concluded that he was progressing in spite of his difficult circumstances.

On paper, this portrait of family configurations might prompt an image of dysfunctionality. In several cases, this was the view of the school personnel involved. Certainly, the families we visited all had problems of one sort or another, but our visits to their homes introduced us to another side of the picture—the side that spoke of families' expressions of love and responsibility for their children.

What we learned was that school personnel really knew very little about the families they described in the most derogatory terms. We came to understand that school personnel's views were frequently based on single pieces of information that had some basis in fact but were taken out of context to construct portraits of family identities that were far from the truth.

There were certain features of families that seemed to trigger these beliefs. First, the families who most readily earned these images were Black and living in poverty. These seemed to be necessary but by no means sufficient requirements for the negative image. In fact, many school personnel

spoke of poor families, regardless of ethnicity, in sympathetic and understanding tones, pointing to the many challenges they faced. However, it seemed that the reputations of families that were both poor and Black could not survive any additional stigmatizing features. Specifically, we noted that school personnel's image of family dysfunction seemed to be much increased by information regarding single parenthood, large family size, drug abuse, or incarceration.

We turn now to more detailed portraits of three African American families from whom we learned a great deal about the damage that can be caused by stereotyping. We will refer to these families by the pseudonyms we gave the mothers: Mrs. Smith, Jacintha, and Elaine. The title accorded to Mrs. Smith reflects the fact that she was a woman probably near to 70, whom accordingly we addressed more formally than the two younger mothers, with whom we were on a mutual first-name basis. These families represented what we could describe as three gradations in socioeconomic status and relative stability. All lived in historically Black neighborhoods in the city, although Mrs. Smith's neighborhood was somewhat better off. Elaine lived in well-kept, subsidized public housing, whereas Jacintha lived in one of the most desolate corners of the inner city.

Jacintha: "Bring Momma's Pen, Baby"

Jacintha was a petite, soft-spoken woman, perhaps in her late 30s, whose deferential manners and undulating accent marked her as a southerner. She told us that she had nine children, the first four of whom lived with their paternal grandparents in a neighboring state and the younger five with her in her tiny apartment. She said that she had so many children because she loved children and loved being a mother. She told us also that she had a history of drug abuse but had been "clean" for several years.

Robert, the eldest child in the household, was one of the most troublesome in Ms. Q's first-grade class of troublesome children. At the end of that school year, Ms. Q exclaimed that she had never had such a bad class. Robert seemed hyperactive and inattentive, though not confrontational with teachers. He was promoted to the second grade, where he was placed in the classroom of a veteran African American teacher who was known for her strict classroom management. Our observations in her classroom, however, revealed that this reputation was based on a harsh, even unkind manner that showed little concern either for children's feelings or for their learning. Although the class was team taught, there was little evidence of teaching and learning. Ms. P's reprimands to children would include threats such as, "Do you want me to snatch you?" and, to Robert, "I don't appreciate your acting like somebody crazy today! Did you take your medicine? I can't take this every day. I will get on the cell phone and call your mamma."

Jacintha agreed immediately to the invitation to participate in our research project. On our first visit, her tiny, dilap-

idated apartment, just a block or two from a bridge that provided shelter for several homeless individuals, spoke volumes about the lack of accountability of a landlord in this forgotten corner of one of the most denigrated neighborhoods in the city. On entering her home, however, a few momentary interactions revealed the power of Jacintha's intelligence and love for her children.

Jacintha's ability to organize herself in these limited circumstances quickly became evident. Seated side by side on an old love seat, Jacintha and the researcher read together through the research project's consent forms. Paying close attention, with Robert draped across her stomach, Jacintha nodded enthusiastically when asked if she was ready to sign. The researcher, digging through her briefcase, soon acknowledged that she did not have a pen. Calling to the 4-year-old curled up on the floor a couple of feet away, Jacintha said, "Bring mamma's pen, Baby." In great excitement, "Baby" leapt from his corner to a small chest of drawers by the adjacent wall, opened the top drawer, and pulled out mamma's pen, which he handed to the researcher with a flourish.

The second moment spoke of this family's efforts to mark their love for their children. As Jacintha described her family, Robert's 6-year-old brother ran in to the children's room and emerged with a collection of four small photograph albums, each highlighting one of the children, each bearing the inscription, "To . . . from Mom and Dad, Christmas, 19. . ." That these gifts were greatly treasured was evident as the three children present huddled around the researcher, excitedly naming each person in the photographs.

The third moment spoke of the high value that Jacintha placed on her children's early education. As she told the researcher that she loved to read to her children, the 6-year-old once more took the initiative to demonstrate the truth of his mother's story. As he slid open the door on the bottom of a small shelving unit against the wall, dozens of children's books tumbled onto the floor. Then, showing the researcher to the bedroom he shared with three siblings, the child pulled aside a curtain that covered a long shelf full of more children's books.

The school personnel knew nothing of Jacintha's organizational or parenting skills. They knew only that she had nine children and a history of drug abuse. Based on this information, negative assumptions about Jacintha flourished—that the four children who did not live with her were "farmed out somewhere," that her weight loss during a summer vacation was due to resumed drug use. In contrast to these myths, the researcher had the good fortune to meet Jacintha's two oldest children when they came to visit their mother during the summer vacation. Their southern manners and careful grooming made it evident that these children had not been "farmed out." The researcher also had the good fortune to visit Jacintha soon after her weight loss. When congratulated on her attractive figure, Jacintha exclaimed, "Slim Fast! Girl! It's fabulous! You wait right here and I'm a get you a tin. You'll see how good it works!"

Worse than the negative assumptions about this struggling mother was the fact that her low status in the eyes of the school administrators allowed them to take advantage of her, making a decision that proved to be very detrimental to Robert. Deciding that Robert's behavior was so bad that he "could not profit" from a full day at school, the administration placed Robert on half-day attendance in January of his second-grade year. Moreover, because Robert could not be allowed to walk home alone in this dangerous neighborhood, the administration required Jacintha to come for him at 11 a.m. every day. The school counselor told us, unabashed, that this requirement was good because this mother needed to be shown that she had to be responsible for her child's behavior. For 5 months, Jacintha complied, walking some 10 blocks each way, tagging along her 4-year-old and a toddler. It was not until she summoned the courage to refuse to come for Robert anymore that he was finally referred for evaluation for special education. This delay occurred despite the fact that Jacintha had signed permission for Robert's evaluation in January. Five months of half-day school resulted in even more deteriorated behavior by Robert, and he returned to school in May more out of control than ever.

Several school personnel continued to portray Jacintha as an incompetent, disorganized mother in spite of the fact that she attended and participated fully in every conference for her son. Always quick to provide information on Robert's medications, doctors' appointments, and home behaviors, Jacintha's model behavior seemed to have little impact on the reputation that some school personnel had developed for her. In one placement conference, the team was questioning Robert's compliance with his medication regimen. The same team member who had told us that Jacintha's having to come for Robert every day at 11 would be a good way to teach her responsibility answered the question in the following manner:

"He does not get it here." Everyone looks puzzled again, and the speaker, who is sitting behind the mother, mouths the word *she* and, pointing to the mother, makes a gesture of cutting across the throat. She is saying that the mother stopped the medication being given at school. Her facial expression as she does this appears angry and annoyed, as she scowls and points at the mother with an accusing gesture. The mother is not intended to see this, and does not. A second later, the speaker seems to realize that her lack of voice came across as a silence in the room and that everyone except the mother is looking at her. She mumbles something like, "It [the medication] was stopped." At this point, I do not look at the expressions of others, but I can feel the discomfort in the room. Everyone has seen the team member's gesture except the mother, whose back is directly to her.

This disrespectful behavior made everyone uncomfortable, but it was not the first nor the last time that we saw disrespect of parents from that particular team member.

Robert was designated as having attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and later emotional disturbance (ED). We refer readers to our other sources (Harry & Klinger, in press; Hart, 2003) for details of Robert's experience in general and special education. Jacintha was pleased when he was placed in a self-contained program for children with emotional disturbance, because she felt that he needed much assistance with his behavior. Our data indicate that this placement did succeed in keeping Robert on his medication and in helping him to do better in school. However, the placement proved to be unduly restrictive and, despite 2 years of compliant behavior, between the fourth and fifth grades, Robert was placed in an even more restrictive setting in a middle school that served only children with ED.

Mrs. Smith: "A Bunch of People in the Home"

Mrs. Smith lived in a small, attractively painted single-family home surrounded by flower beds. The house was less than a block from the school attended by her 7-year-old granddaughter, Kanita. Perhaps near the age of 70, Mrs. Smith, now a widow, was the matriarch of a family of six children, more than a dozen grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. At the time that we met her, she, Kanita, and one of her daughters and her child lived in the family home. Kanita was Mrs. Smith's son's child.

Kanita was referred for evaluation because of troublesome behavior in the classroom of her first-grade European American teacher, whose handling of her class was passive and ineffective. We observed Kanita in class talking back to this teacher, refusing to comply with instructions, and generally doing as she pleased. Her behavior was a bit more overt than that of most of her peers, but inattentive and generally undisciplined behavior was the norm in this classroom. At the referral conference, no mention was made of the teacher's management skills or the general level of behavior in the classroom. We observed Kanita's psychological evaluation, conducted by a European American school psychologist who told us prior to the evaluation that Kanita lived in a "dysfunctional" family, with a "bunch of people" living in the house, and her mother in jail.

Kanita's mother was indeed in jail, but the family was far from dysfunctional. In fact, several home visits and family interviews revealed a family that illustrated the classic descriptions of African American family strengths and adaptability. First, we learned that Mrs. Smith and her husband were pillars of the local community, having owned this small house for 30 years. Mrs. Smith's father had been the pastor at a nearby church, and the family had owned a small but thriving dry-cleaning business some blocks away. Mrs. Smith described the participation of the entire family in that business, telling of the family's unique tradition of adults and

children alike spending Christmas Eve at the business, working through the night to finish the pile of jobs that had come in for Christmas.

When we met her, Mrs. Smith's children were all grown up and gone, with the exception of the one daughter who lived with her. Kanita's mother, Mrs. Smith said, was not a bad person, but she had "chosen the wrong way." Involvement with drugs had resulted in her incarceration, and Kanita had come to live with her grandmother as a baby. Mrs. Smith's children had not gone far, however. In every one of our six visits to the home, there was, at some point, a son or daughter dropping by. One thing that kept them coming was that three or four of the grandchildren came directly to their grandmother's home after school until their parents could pick them up.

On one occasion, the aunt who lived with Mrs. Smith was in the kitchen as the researcher and Mrs. Smith talked. The aunt, listening as she went about her cooking, called out, "Ma, tell her how good Kanita did on the [statewide testing]!" The same day, as Kanita's cousins came in from school and were briefly introduced to the researcher, they exclaimed excitedly, "Miss! Is Kanita going to college?"

As in all the homes we visited, this family's treasuring of their children was evident in the photographs and children's trophies and awards that filled the shelving unit and coffee table in the small living room. Most important was Mrs. Smith's scrapbook of Kanita's school achievements. The huge album, organized chronologically by year, was stuffed with end-of-term reports, notes home from the teacher, and various memorabilia of Kanita's school activities from Head Start through to the current year. Especially touching were Kanita's mother's day cards and letters to her grandmother.

Mrs. Smith did not agree that Kanita had an emotional disturbance. At the placement conference, she stated her opinion simply, "There's nothing wrong with her. She just wants her momma." Kanita's aunt, who accompanied her mother to the conference, was more critical. She felt that Kanita was spoiled because of her mother's absence and that her grandmother, being too sorry for Kanita, was not as strict as she should be. The aunt felt that a strict program at school would be helpful.

Kanita, meanwhile, adapted readily to her new school situation. On arriving in her self-contained class for children with emotional disturbance, she quickly figured out that she needed to behave. When we went to visit the program 2 weeks after Kanita's placement, the teacher, expressing surprise at her new student's impeccable behavior, asked us if we had any idea why the child had been sent to her class. Besides being smart, Kanita was very fortunate. Strong instruction in this classroom ensured that Kanita progressed well, was soon mainstreamed, and, within 2 years, had qualified for a gifted program. On entry into middle school, she exited the special education program.

We say that Kanita was fortunate because her experience in the program for children with ED was very different from

that of the three other children labeled as having ED whom we followed. For the purposes of our discussion here, we will not go into more detail on Kanita's special education experience. Suffice it to say that our research revealed an inappropriate assessment that seemed to have been heavily influenced by the preconceived, negative assumptions about Kanita's family. For a better understanding of the educational implications of Kanita's referral, evaluation, and placement, we refer readers to fuller accounts in Harry and Klingner (in press) and Hart (2003).

Elaine: Parent of the Year

Elaine stood out as somewhat different from Jacintha and Mrs. Smith in her efforts at advocacy on behalf of her two young sons. We observed Andre, the older boy, in Ms. Q's first-grade classroom. Always nattily dressed, Andre was, according to his mother, a "momma's boy." We learned that his father had been incarcerated and was released during Andre's second-grade year.

We first met Elaine at a referral conference that had been called to discuss Andre's slow progress in his schoolwork. Accompanied by Andre's paternal grandmother and grandfather, Elaine had obviously brought them along as support in a stressful situation. The tension in the room was palpable as Elaine sat silently, with an angry expression, while her mother-in-law led the discussion. Smartly dressed and well spoken, the mother-in-law addressed the school team in an assertive but polite manner. This approach proved very productive, and she steadily softened her manner as the administrator coordinating the conference offered thoughtful support, even requesting the teacher to change a couple of her procedures to accommodate the family. The teacher agreed reluctantly, but it was evident that she was not enjoying the interaction.

Curled up at her corner of the table, Elaine gave the impression of a sullen, withdrawn young woman, except for a couple of brief interactions in which she angrily expressed disbelief at the teacher's statement that she had been unable to contact Elaine. When the teacher twice implied that Elaine did not return phone calls or send back her child's work samples, Elaine exclaimed angrily that the teacher had no idea of what her work demands were like, but that, in any case, she had not returned any calls from the teacher because she had never received any.

The researcher's visit to Elaine's home a couple of weeks later provided a startling contrast in the impression offered by Elaine. Her ready agreement to the visit on the phone was followed by a warm reception. Smiling and cheerful, Elaine welcomed the researcher into a neat, carefully decorated apartment, the vinyl tiles in the small kitchen matching the wallpaper. At the entrance to the living room was a shelving unit with attractively framed pictures of Andre and his younger brother and other family members. Most notable was a small plaque on the wall, inscribed to the "parent of the year." Asking about this, the researcher learned that

Elaine had earned this plaque for her participation in Andre's preschool program. She explained,

In Andre's Head Start year, they voted me in as the president of the Head Start at that center! . . . I was interactive with the kids, I read stories and did a lot of different things with the kids, and when I was voted in, it surprised me, because I was interactive with the school, but I was, like, I don't want to take on this big responsibility! And I went to big meetings every month with big people! And just the other week, they invited me again at this hotel downtown. . . . So I went, and it was real nice, very elegant . . . So it was a lot of things I was responsible for, like field trips and so on.

It turned out that the anger Elaine had expressed at the school conference was the culmination of a year of unpleasant interactions with Ms. Q, in whose class Andre had been placed in the previous year. One of these disputes had been regarding Andre, then a first grader, being sent home on a 3-day suspension for getting into a fight with a peer. Elaine was angry that the school called and told her to come and pick up Andre to go home on suspension. Knowing that this was not school policy, Elaine refused to go and insisted that the appropriate letter be sent home for the suspension to begin the next day. She explained,

They started his suspension the next day. She sent the letter like I told her she had to do . . . and he stayed home for the three days, and my mom kept him, and the third day I told my job I'd be late because I had to go to the school. And I told them, "every little thing Andre do you all throw him out," and she replied, "Not only Andre, everybody." And I say, "Well, that's not the way you're supposed to handle this. If two children are fighting constantly, you need to find out what's the problem. He's 7 years old in the second grade, and he has more suspensions than absences from school!" If you look at his record, you'll see that he was at school every day. My momma made us go, rain, sleet, snow, shine . . . and I don't play like that. When you have a problem with him, you call and let me know before you decide to suspend him for fighting. Children have a way of defending themselves. Nowadays, children are retaliating because the teachers don't listen to nothing the child is telling them.

When Andre was placed with the same teacher for the second grade, Elaine, believing that the teacher held a grudge against her son, tried to have him moved to another classroom. This was refused on the grounds that Andre would then have been in the same classroom as his brother, and this was against school district policy. (We were advised that this pol-

icy may have been a school policy, but it did not originate in the district.) Elaine had also had another run-in with the principal when she went to complain about her other son's teacher, in whose class she had observed and was distressed by the chaotic atmosphere and lack of instruction. Our observations in this classroom absolutely bore out her description of the teacher's lack of instructional and classroom management skills. Elaine received no support from the principal on this matter, and her son remained in this ineffective classroom for the duration of the school year. Having to repeat the second grade the next year offered the child the good fortune of a strong teacher, in whose hands he was able to catch up by the time he was promoted to the third grade. In learning Elaine's history with her children's schooling, we came to understand the posture of alienation she displayed in our first observation of her.

CONCLUSIONS

These case studies, along with the larger body of data from which they were developed, provide the other side of the "dysfunctional parent" image so common in schools and in society at large. The portraits present a dynamic picture of the tremendous value placed on cultural capital in parents' interactions with school personnel. Furthermore, they point to the inextricable weaving of race into the tapestry of culture and socioeconomic status.

Widespread stereotypes about Black families in inner-city neighborhoods fed school personnel's beliefs about the families of the children in this study. Lacking any firsthand knowledge, many teachers simply assumed that features such as single motherhood, large family size, drug abuse, or incarceration were all they needed to know about the way families functioned. It is sad to note that we were able to glean positive information on these same families in a single visit.

It seems that school personnel's preconceived beliefs were readily reinforced by various aspects of these parents' interactions about their children's educational needs. The concept of cultural capital is helpful here (Bourdieu, 1977). We are particularly struck by the applicability of Lareau and Horvat's (1999) work on the nuances of cultural capital in a society where a history of racism is ingrained in the national consciousness. In their comparative study of a low-income and a middle-income school, Lareau and Horvat noted that White parents' mode of interaction with school personnel was generally in sync with the school expectation that parents should not be confrontational. These parents generally approached school personnel with an attitude of trust and cooperation. For Black parents, however, their intimate knowledge of the school district's history of racial exclusion made a trusting approach impossible, and many Black parents tended to signal their suspicion as they attempted to advocate for their children. Lareau and Horvat observed, however, that middle-income Black parents who had the social connections—indeed, the social capital—to master the required

interaction style were successful in their advocacy because they never revealed their suspicions of racism.

In this study, we gained a similarly nuanced view of cultural capital in action. Mrs. Smith and her family had considerable cultural capital within their community. Yet this was not recognized by the entirely White school team involved in Kanita's referral, evaluation, and placement. Although Mrs. Smith lived almost next to the school, the school team seemed oblivious to her local status, and one member spoke disparagingly of this "dysfunctional" family with "a bunch of people" living in the house. Mrs. Smith's participation in her granddaughter's schooling was deferential and accepting despite her disagreement with the findings of the evaluation. A teacher at Kanita's subsequent school described Mrs. Smith as not knowing much about school issues, but "trying her best." When the time came for Kanita's middle school placement (Hart, 2003), the family's voice was paid only token attention. Rather than being sent to a high-performing school where her giftedness could be challenged, Kanita was sent to a medium-level school where she would not become "frustrated."

Elaine's participation revealed yet another aspect of cultural capital. Clearly, Elaine possessed the cultural capital needed to be effective and respected in her child's preschool program. When Andre got to elementary school, Elaine was experiencing some personal stress and was not as active as she wanted to be. As it turned out, events such as Andre's suspension and Elaine's realization that her younger son was in a chaotic classroom became the key occasions on which she initiated interaction with the school. Her actions were perceived as adversarial. After both her requests for changes of placement for her sons were refused by the school administration, when Andre's teacher called a conference to consider possible special education placement for him, Elaine lost any faith in the school to do right by her son.

Lareau and Horvat's (1999) analysis of cultural capital includes the idea that parents may possess such capital but are unable to "activate" it because of certain circumstances. We see this as a helpful interpretation of Elaine's situation. Fortunately, her mother-in-law was able to activate the needed cultural capital to be effective in this crucial conference. When we commented to Elaine on her mother-in-law's effectiveness, she exclaimed, "Oh yes! That's why I brought her. She works for the state, so she knows how to do things!" The outcome of Andre's process was positive, and he was not referred for evaluation.

We end with Jacintha, a woman whose conversation and manners indicated a solid basic education and good intelligence. We do not know if her deferential manner contributed to the school personnel's continuing dismissal of her. She did not seem to have the family support that Mrs. Smith and Elaine had. On one occasion, she brought the father of the younger children to a conference, but he did not participate much. On another occasion, she was accompanied by a young, very helpful social worker who had recently been

assigned to the family on Robert's behalf. This woman's presence seemed to contribute to a more effective conference. But it was clear that Jacintha was not seen by some team members as an effective parent or advocate. When Robert was headed for middle school (Hart, 2003), the decision to place him in a more restrictive setting seemed to have been taken unilaterally, without input from Jacintha. We believe that this mother, the poorest and most vulnerable of the three caregivers described here, was a powerful example of the terrible effects of stereotyping not only on family members but on their children's educational outcomes.

This study supports the findings of previous research conducted by the first author and her colleagues regarding the role of parental involvement in special education placement (Harry, 1992; Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999). Harry, Allen and McLaughlin found that the dominant consciousness that drove school personnel's behavior was a "we-they" mentality, in which class, education, and status seemed to empower many school personnel, regardless of ethnicity, to view and treat African American families living in poverty as outsiders. Giles (2001, p. 127) interpreted school personnel's "scripted labeling" of parents as an expression of the pressure of bureaucratic and societal "scripts," which engender professionals' fear that acknowledging parents' perspectives may undermine the power of their own roles as "experts." With regard to within-group discriminatory practices, it seems that professionals belonging to stigmatized minority groups are no less susceptible to stereotypical labeling than are majority group members. In the view of several critical race theorists, racist thinking is almost inescapable in the context of a society as racialized as the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 1996; Tatum, 1992). Whatever the explanation, our data point to the exponential power of combined racism and classism to alienate and limit the power of even the best intentioned parents.

We agree with Brantlinger (2001) that the stigmatizing isolation of children through exclusionary programs works hand in hand with exclusionary attitudes toward families. Our research echoes her statement,

A popular impression that members of the middle class hold is that poor people do not value education and choose not to do well in school and to live in poverty. . . . Because wealthy people are distanced from the poor geographically and psychologically, their impressions are likely to have little connection to the actuality of what living in poverty means. Regardless of myths and stereotypes, poor people share the reverence of the middle class for education as well as the perception that mobility depends on school achievement and attainment. (p. 4)

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