AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: MAKING THE CASE FOR POLICY INVESTMENTS IN FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES

ADVANCES IN RACE AND ETHNICITY IN EDUCATION

Series Editors: Joy Lawson Davis and
James L. Moore III

Recent Volumes:

AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: MAKING THE CASE FOR POLICY INVESTMENTS IN FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COMMUNITIES

Edited by

IHEOMA U. IRUKA
University of Nebraska, Omaha, NE, USA

STEPHANIE M. CURENTON
Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

TONIA R. DURDEN
Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA

emerald PUBLISHING

CONTENTS

PART II
HOME AND SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXTS

PART III
PREPARING TEACHERS AND IMPROVING PRACTICE

This page intentionally left blank

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Hasti Ashtiani Raveau	Department of Psychology, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA
Claire E. Baker	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA
Kimberly A. Blitch	University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA
Erika L. Bocknek	College of Education, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, USA
Gloria Boutte	College of Education, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA
Shelby Brown	University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA
Andrea Buhler Wassman	University of California, Davis, CA, USA
Stephanie M. Curenton	School of Education, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA
Tonia R. Durden	College of Education and Human Development, Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA, USA
Zoe Falls	University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA
Brandee Feola	University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA
Nicole Gardner-Neblett	Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

Marisha L. Humphries   Department of Educational Psychology,
                            University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago,
                            IL, USA

Iheoma U. Iruka   Buffett Early Childhood Institute at
                            University of Nebraska, Omaha, NE, USA

Laura Jimenez Parra   University of Maryland, College Park,
                            MD, USA

Brenda Jones Harden   University of Maryland, College Park,
                            MD, USA

Lisa L. Knoche   Nebraska Center for Research on Children,
                            Youth, Families and Schools, University of
                            Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA

Marva L. Lewis   Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, USA

Colleen Morrison   University of Maryland, College Park,
                            MD, USA

Justin Olmanson   University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln,
                            NE, USA

Tunette M. Powell   University of California, Los Angeles, CA,
                            USA

Guieswende Rouamba   University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln,
                            NE, USA

Debra R. Sullivan   Seattle Black Child Development Institute,
                            Seattle, WA, USA

Ryan Syrek   The Reader, Omaha, NE, USA

*Carla D. Thompson   W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek,
  Payton*   MI, USA

Melissa K. Van Dyke   University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United
                            Kingdom

Amanda L. Witte   Nebraska Center for Research on Children,
                            Youth, Families and Schools, University of
                            Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA

PART I
STRIVING FOR EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

This page intentionally left blank

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Stephanie M. Curenton, Iheoma U. Iruka and
Tonia R. Durden

ABSTRACT

This introduction chapter provides an overview of the key issues highlighted throughout this book. First, we tackle why it is problematic to only characterize Black children's accomplishment in terms of the "academic achievement gap." Second, we discuss the importance of the home-school environment connection. Finally, we discuss the changes that need to be made in terms of teacher preparation in order to ensure that the workforce can practice racial equity in the classroom. All these issues are woven together by a call for closing the education opportunity gap via "equity adjustments" that can target educational and health disparities facing the Black community.

Keywords: Academic achievement; opportunity gap; Blacks/African Americans; racial equity

Education … means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free. To deny education to any people is one of the greatest crimes against human nature.

– "Blessings of Liberty and Education" (1894) Frederick Douglas

We open this chapter with Fredrick Douglas' (1894) quote from his speech given at the dedication of the Manassas Industrial School chartered on October 7, 1893 in Manassas, Virginia.[1] Douglas eloquently describes the grave importance of education for Black[2] children. Unfortunately, even today too many Black children are overlooked and unheard in an education system that has yet to offer them *equality of opportunity* (Fowler, 2013). Equality of opportunity is the notion that educational inputs are equally distributed among groups of students in that all children everywhere are receiving equal quantity and quality of resources, such as access to high-quality teachers, curriculum, facilities, and extracurricular activities.

Darling-Hammond (1998) explains that in fact there is − and has always been − an *opportunity gap* due to vast disparities between the educational resources that Black children receive compared to those of White children. Currie (2011) explains that this opportunity gap is broader than education alone and extends to health disparities that are evident even at birth. It is this opportunity gap manifested by resource disparities that fuel the dreaded achievement gap (i.e., different educational outcomes by race or socioeconomic status [SES]). Researchers spend more time examining the achievement gap than investigating and documenting the opportunity gap. Likewise, policy makers devote more debates and resources to problem solving around student achievement rather than developing policies that dismantle the opportunity disparities between Blacks and Whites.

Striving for education equality is gravely important, however, opportunities cannot be "equalized" when health and education disparities exist from birth and from prior generations, and when such disparities span multiple levels of a child's bioecological system (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). The distinction between equality and equity are debated in education policy with some arguing that equality only provides comparable resources, whereas what is actually needed is equity, which provides differential resources based on the disparities children face. In essence, equity can only be achieved via disparities corrections that are multidimensional policies and programs aimed starting at birth and following through to college a "disparities correction" that could only be achieved by multi-dimensional policies aimed at equity that start from birth and follow students through college. Inherit in equity is the desire to achieve the same result/outcome, what Fowler (2012) refers to as equality of outcome. Because children start from different points, some children may actually need a *greater* investment in resources in order to achieve the same outcomes, and we refer to these as *equity adjustments*.

Providing students who have experienced disparities their entire life with "equal" education opportunities will not produce the desired results without corrections for disparity. The reason why Black children need investments for equality plus equity adjustments is that these children reside in harsher environments and are more likely to live in poverty. For example, they are more likely to live in unsafe racially segregated environments (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). In fact, the level of concentrated poverty experienced by African American children is greater than that for White and Latino children (Sampson, Sharkey, & Raudenbush, 2008), which makes them a very unique subpopulation compared to others in the United States. Also, the portion of Blacks in the United States from African American lineage have ancestors that were legally oppressed physically, economically, and psychological for nearly 250 years of slavery and then another 100 years of Jim Crow. African Americans are unique in that no other American sub-population (e.g., Whites or Latinos) was forced into legal servitude for as long a period or denied access to education for so long.

This long history of legalized oppression coupled with the current day *de facto* oppression evidenced by neighborhood segregation, racial profiling, and economic suppression have had long-term effects on African Americans' educational attainment and achievement. Olmanson and colleagues (Chapter 4) provide a riveting history of education for Blacks, dating all the way back to Emancipation. Black children have been existing in a chronosystem and macrosystem (see Bronfenbrenner & Evan's, 2000 bioecological model) that has habitually been racist against their past ancestors and is still racist against the children and families today. This racial oppression has impacted the educational opportunities of their forefathers and family members, as well as children's current opportunities. Thus, Black children, particularly those from an African American lineage, need not only "equal" investments that will provide an equivalent educational foundation, but they also need "equity" investments that would provide additional resources in order to meet the challenges that they face. Such equity adjustments could be used to provide more instructional support, greater investments in health and mental health support services, accommodations to facilities and/or supplies, and a greater investment in pre-service and post-service teacher (and administrator) professional development related to cultural competence, social justice, and trauma informed care (Bath, 2008).

Therefore, we begin this handbook from the standpoint of acknowledging that society has continually failed to provide Black children with the opportunities required for them to succeed and a call for not only equality but also equity − equality in terms of equivalent resources and

opportunities and equity in terms of additional resources targeted toward correcting disparities. In this handbook, a compilation of interdisciplinary scholars working in fields of education, psychology, and public health provide impassioned scholarly articles about the education and well-being of African American children and families. We hope this handbook provides some insight into not only the problems associated with inequality, but also ideas and strategies for how children can thrive despite the odds. However, before we begin to articulate the larger educational issues around academic achievement, home-school contexts, and the needs for teacher preparation and workforce development, it is important to present some basic demographic information about Blacks.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT BLACK CHILDREN

According to 2010 census data, Blacks/African Americans make up approximately 13% of the US population, which equates to about 40 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Nearly 7% of the Black population includes infants, toddlers, and preschoolers (i.e., those under the age of five) and another 19% are school age (five to 17 years). Among Blacks living in the Unites States, there are nearly 3.8 million people who are foreign-born, including those who have become naturalized citizens (2.1 million) and those who have not (1.7 million). The majority of the foreign-born Blacks hail from Latin America, including the Caribbean (56%), or Africa (41%), and the vast majority of them speak English (91%). Approximately 50% of these Black immigrants entered the United States before 2000, 30% entered between 2000−2009, and only 20% have entered since 2010.

In 2015, there are nearly 11.9 million Black children over the age of three who were enrolled in school: 6% of these children were enrolled in nursery school or preschool, 5% were in kindergarten, 39% were in elementary school (grades 1−8), 22% were in high school (grades 9−12), and 28% were in college or graduate school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). For those adults age 25 or older, the vast majority have some education beyond high school: approximately 8% have graduate or professional degrees, 13% have bachelor's degrees, and 33% have an associate's degree or have attended some college, 32% have graduated from high school or received their Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED), but 15% have not completed high school. The information about the educational attainment of Black

adults is an important aspect because not only is a caregiver's educational attainment important for socioeconomic status, but it is also associated with the learning stimulation they provide in the home (see Curenton, Craig, & Flannigan, 2008; Curenton & Justice, 2008).

DEFINING ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Each of opening chapters in this handbook (e.g., Chapter 2−4) attack the rhetoric of the "achievement gap." In particular, Durden and Curenton (Chapter 3) call for "rethinking the gap." In addition to the arguments posed by the authors of those chapters, we argue that the achievement gap is faulty because it does not capture the heterogeneity of Black children's achievement. Rather the argument of the achievement gap is preoccupied with the *average* performance of Black and White students while ignoring the variability within these two groups. For instance, profile analyses using a national dataset of Black girls' and boys' performance demonstrates that the majority of Black children show steady and consistent growth in their academic skills from pre-school to kindergarten (Iruka, Curenton, & Gardner, 2016; Iruka, Gardner-Neblett, Matthews, & Winn, 2014). Although there is about 20% of children whose academic performance is cause for concern, there is approximately another 20% whose academic performance exceeds expectations. This group of children with higher-than-average performance could represent the gifted and talented children that Sullivan talks about in Chapter 5.

Sullivan (Chapter 5) explains that teachers fail to understand the learning styles of Black children, and this could be one of the reasons why Black children are less likely to be referred for participating in gifted programs (Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, & Holloway, 2005). Gifted programs are some of the most segregated programs in US education. Zhbanova, Rule, and Stichter (2015) found that alternative methods for identifying African American children as gifted, such as leadership and peer-teaching, rather than standardized testing, are better measures for recognizing children's giftedness. Another one of Black children's talents that teachers often overlook is their oral narrative skills. In Chapter 6, Gardner-Neblett, Curenton, and Blitch describe the oral language skills of Black children and suggest some ways that the new educational standards could maximize on these skills.

HOME-SCHOOL CONTEXTS

Understanding the family and community context of Black families is important since it sheds light on the environments in which children are living. Based on 2015 Census estimates, most Blacks live in households with family members: 61% compared to 39% of those living in non-family households. About 50% of adults, both male and female, have never been married, 29% have been married, 16% are divorced/separated, and 6% are widowed. The average family size includes three-and-a-half people, and 6% of Black children have their grandparents living with them. Thus, Black children reside in households with a variety of family members.

One aspect of the Black family life that has received little attention is Black fatherhood. Chapters 9 and 10 (by Baker and Bocknek and colleagues, respectively) provide a rich and complex picture of Black fathers. They not only articulate what the literature says about fathering but also define family practices and values within this cultural group more specifically. Bocknek and colleagues (Chapter 10) also present evidence that debunks stereotypes of African American fathers, and instead paints these fathers as involved and nurturing. They describe how racial socialization can be a protective barrier for children, and they even mention how greater spirituality in fathers is related to less harsh discipline.

Most importantly, Chapters 9 and 10 critique the false dichotomy between warmth and strictness and describe how these two aspects of parenting functionally coexist in Black parenting styles. In fact, it is what Brody and his colleagues were referring to when they coined the term "no nonsense parenting." (Brody & Flor, 1998). Research shows that parenting is predictive of Black children's achievement. More specifically, parents who provided stimulating learning environments at home (e.g., more shared reading) had children whose teachers rated them as having better social-emotional skills that are related to school success, namely better approaches to learning, self-control, interpersonal skills, and less externalizing behavior (Baker & Rimm-Kaufman, 2014).

Another important contextual feature to understand in terms of Black children's development and academic success is related to their SES. In 2015, the median income for all families was $45,014, but Blacks' median income was $36,655 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Furthermore, nearly 31% of Black families with children under the age of 18 were living in poverty during 2015. This disproportionate level of poverty exists despite the fact that 62% of Blacks are in the paid labor force working mostly white-collar occupations like management, sales, and office clerks. Poverty is a major

risk factor for all children's healthy development, but it is especially harmful for Blacks because of the additive risk of poverty plus racism. Poverty status places children "at-risk" for health and developmental issues because there are a myriad of problems associated with poverty − one of the most harmful being toxic stress.

In Chapter 8, Jones Harden and colleagues explain how poverty exposes children to toxic stress, which is harmful because it floods the body with cortisol and can interfere with brain development. Examples of toxic stress include substance abuse, parental mental illness, or child maltreatment. Black children are disproportionately living in conditions of poverty, and more of them are at risk of experiencing toxic stress. Nevertheless, Jones Harden et al. explain that high-quality early education experiences can protect children from toxic stress by mitigating some of the toxic stress events and providing families with skills and supports to alleviate their stress.

In Chapter 7, Knoche and Witte further elaborate on how early education experiences can be beneficial for children's education and well-being, especially when there are strong home-school partnerships at play. Home-school partnerships form the basis for parent engagement that can, and should, be defined in various ways, including parent's home literacy and learning activities, volunteering at school, as well as dedication of emotional and/or financial resources dedicated towards education (see Iruka, Curenton, & Eke, 2014).

TEACHER PREPARATION AND WORKFORCE ISSUES

Teachers are a fundamental aspect of children's academic success. Research shows that teachers play an even stronger role in children's academic success when children are attending under-resourced schools (Nye, Konstantopoulous, & Hedges, 2004). Unfortunately, the myth of meritocracy is pervasive throughout the US education system, and teachers buy into this myth. For education in particular, the myth implies that school systems operate from a basic degree of fairness in that all students, regardless of their income, race, or gender, can be successful as long as they work hard enough. Unfortunately, the meritocracy myth is just that − a myth. This myth can actually be psychologically harmful for Black children because it places the burden of success solely on them while ignoring constraints such as systematic and interpersonal racism, disparities in

educational resources and opportunities, and historical racism that is inherent in the curriculum that is taught and the modes of instruction.

An example of how this meritocracy myth can be harmful is when a young child who gets suspended internalizes, "I am always getting in trouble because I make bad choices. There must be something wrong with me." Meanwhile, because the myth ignores constraints to success, teachers and administrators never have to take responsibility for their implicit biases that propelled them to be more likely to misinterpret the child's behavior as "bad," and they never have to acknowledge that Black children are more often suspended/expelled for subjective misbehaviors without a clear standard of proof (e.g., "willful disobedience"). Such misbehaviors are heavily subject to teachers interpretations and perceptions of misbehavior. Research has shown that teachers tend to rate the behavior of Black children as problematic, and they view them as less academically competent (Sbarra & Pianta, 2001). In fact, Powell and Syrek (Chapter 12) weave a scholarly, yet personal narrative, around this very issue.

A new study by Gilliam and his colleagues (2016) sheds light on how all teachers, even those who are Black, have implicit racial biases. Teachers were shown a video of four children seated at a table engaged in an art activity, and they were told to watch for any misbehavior (even though there was no misbehavior happening in the video). All teachers watched Black children more, despite the fact that the videos showed no evidence of misbehavior. Sometimes the problem with bias is so strong that teachers cannot even recognize children's strengths. For instance, Humphries, Keenan, and Wakschlag (2012) found that teachers reported Black children as being less socially competent despite the fact that trained, objective observers rated these same children's behavior as socially positive. Based on studies like these that show teachers "expect the worse" and "fail to see the best" in Black children, it is no surprise that Black children are being suspended and expelled at such disproportionate rates. Ironically, Sullivan (Chapter 5) explains that, even decades ago, Martin Luther King Jr. warned of teacher biases as an issue:

> People with such a low view of the [B]lack race cannot be given free rein and put in charge of the intellectual care and development of our boys and girls. I think the school system will have a problem…White educators especially will need training in how to deal with Black children. They will need to come to grips with their prejudices. (Vaughn, 1999, pp. 129–130)

Boutte (Chapter 11) articulates some straightforward guidance about how the pre-service and in-service training for teachers can be improved so that teachers can "come to grips with their prejudices." She shares with us what teachers need to do to achieve racial equity in their classrooms. She says that teachers must be critically "conscious" of what is taught or what is not taught about Black people; otherwise they are unintentionally harming children. Even well-intentioned teachers of all ethnicities can be complicit in causing social and emotional harm to Black students because the curriculum and policies of school are largely Eurocratic; overall, the system represents colonization and oppression. She suggests that teachers actually become familiar with the literature around decolonization and oppression. Teacher educators who seek to actively fight against oppression and to be guided by ethical principles will hopefully be moted to develop courage to speak up in an informed and collective manner with others who wish to prepare teachers to teach for racial equity.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the early childhood workforce, particularly those working in private fee-based child care centers, Van Dyke (Chapter 13) explains that the problems with the workforce extend beyond racial and equity training and are characterized by basic needs such as higher salaries. Van Dyke describes the early childhood system as rigged against the worker because the drive for higher quality is disjointed from conversations about increasing early educators' wages. Being locked in these low-wage jobs is especially problematic because the teachers working in private child care centers and Head Start are our most racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse teaching staff. They are the very teachers that might be the strongest proponents of striving for racial equity in the classroom, yet their voices are often unheard and they are struggling to make ends meet for their own families.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we echo back to Douglas' quote, emphasizing again the need for high-quality education for Black children within US school systems. The call for equality accompanied by equity adjustments for disparities is the light of truth that can uplift the souls and illuminate the curiosity of our children. Black children matter! And as adults, we must ensure they thrive (#BlackChildrenMatter).

NOTES

1. Jennie Dean, a former slave, spear-headed the founding of the school by fund-raising for over a decade. The mission of the school was to provide a private residential secondary education for Blacks, and served students from 1894−1937.

2. We use the term Black to describe the larger population of people whose ancestors descended from the African continent. As such, Blacks might include those from America, Jamaica, Haiti, Nigeria, Honduras, and the list continues.

REFERENCES

Baker, C. E., & Rimm-Kaufman, S. E. (2014). How homes influence schools: Early parenting predicts African American children's classroom social-emotional functioning. *Psychology in the Schools*, *51*, 722−735. doi:10.1002/pits.21781

Bath, H. (2008). The three pillars of trauma-informed care. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, *17*(3), 17−21.

Brody, G. H., & Flor, D. L. (1998). Maternal resources, parenting practices, and child competence in rural, single-parent African American families. *Child Development*, *69*(3), 803−816.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Evans, G. W. (2000). Developmental science in the 21st century: Emerging questions, theoretical models, research designs and empirical findings. *Social Development*, *9*(1), 115–125.

Curenton, S. M., Craig, M. J., & Flanigan, N. (2008). Use of decontextualized talk across story contexts: How oral storytelling and emergent reading can scaffold children's development. *Early Education and Development*, *19*(1), 161−187. doi:10.1080/10409280701839296

Curenton, S. M., & Justice, L. M. (2008). Children's preliteracy skills: Influence of mothers' education and beliefs about shared-reading interactions. *Early Education and Development*, *19*(2), 261−283. doi:10.1080/10409280801963939

Currie, J. (2011). Inequality at birth: Some causes and consequences. *American Economic Review*, *101*(3), 1−22.

Darling-Hammond, L. (1998). Unequal opportunity: Race and education. *The Brookings Review*, *16*(2), 28−32.

Elhoweris, H., Mutua, K., Alsheikh, N., & Holloway, P. (2005). Effect of children's ethnicity on teachers' referral and recommendation decisions in gifted and talented programs. *Remedial and Special Education*, *26*(1), 25–31.

Fowler, F. (2012). *Policy studies for educational leaders: An introduction*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Fowler, F. C. (2013). *Policy studies for education leaders: An introduction*. (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Gilliam, W. S., Maupin, A. N., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016). Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions? *Yale Child Study Center*, (September), 991–1013.

Humphries, M. L., Keenan, K., & Wakschlag, L. S. (2012). Teacher and observer ratings of young African American children's social and emotional competence. *Psychology in the Schools*, *49*(4), 311−327. doi:10.1002/pits.21604

Iruka, I., Curenton, S., & Eke, W. (2014). *The CRAF-E4 family engagement model: Building practitioners' competence to work with diverse families*. London: Academic Press.

Iruka, I. U., Curenton, S. M., & Gardner, S. L. (2016). Preschool to kindergarten transition patterns for African American girls. Manuscript in preparation.

Iruka, I. U., Gardner-Neblett, N., Matthews, J. S., & Winn, D. M. C. (2014). Preschool to kindergarten transition patterns for African American boys. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *29*(2), 106−117. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2013.11.004

Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). The neighborhoods they live in: The effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes. *Psychological Bulletin*, *126*(2), 309−337.

Nye, B., Konstantopoulos, S., & Hedges, L. V. (2004). How large are teacher effects? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *26*(3), 237–257.

Sampson, R. J., Sharkey, P., & Raudenbush, S. W. (2008). Durable effects of concentrated disadvantage on verbal ability among African American children. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *105*(3), 845−852. doi:10.1073/pnas.0710189104

Sbarra, D. A., & Pianta, R. C. (2001). Teacher ratings of behavior among African American and Caucasian children during the first two years of school. *Psychology in the Schools*, *38*(3), 229−238. doi:10.1002/pits.1013

U.S. Census Bureau. (2015). *American Community Survey 1-year estimate*. Washington, DC: Census Bureau.

Vaughn, W. G. (1999). *Reflections on our pastor* (pp. 129−130). Dover, MA: Majority Press.

Zhbanova, K., Rule, A., & Stichter, M. (2015). Identification of gifted African American primary grade students through leadership, creativity, and academic performance in curriculum material making and peer-teaching: A case study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *43*(2), 143−156. doi:10.1007/s10643-013-0628-z