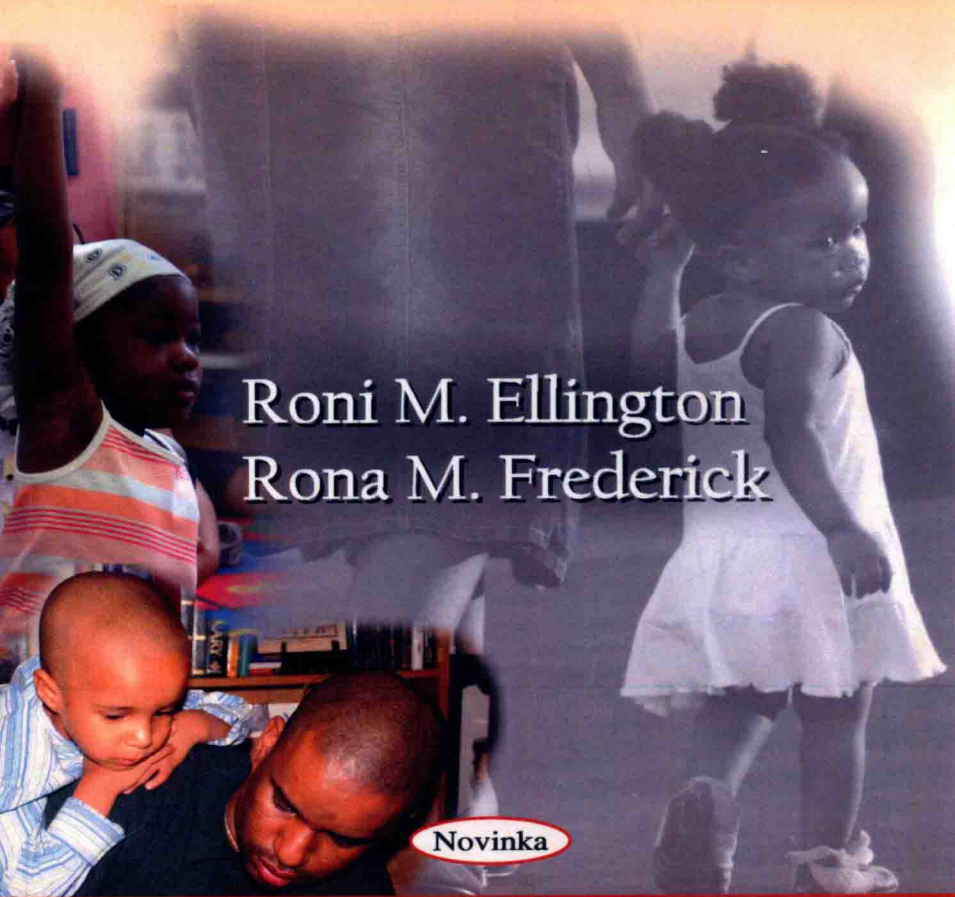
Education in a Competitive and Globalizing World

Capitalizing on Culture

Successful Patterns of Parental Participation for African American Students



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EDUCATION IN A COMPETITIVE AND GLOBALIZING WORLD

CAPITALIZING ON CULTURE: SUCCESSFUL PATTERNS OF PARENTAL PARTICIPATION FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

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PREFACE

Many current conversations in education regarding the "achievement gap" specific to Black and White children fail to consider the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral backdrop that created the dire educational circumstances experienced by many African Americans. These conversations around the "achievement gap" do not take into consideration the systemic inequities that have accumulated over centuries, resulting in African Americans' cumulative denial of quality learning opportunities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As a result, many African American students are not afforded access to adequate resources to achieve at the levels comparable to their white counterparts. Despite the legacy of the systematic inequity, many African American parents, historically and presently, continue to successfully pursue quality formal learning opportunities for their children. This book highlights examples of African American parents' use of social and cultural capital to create high academic student achievers. This book is especially instructive because it provides space for currently academically successful African American mathematics students matriculating through higher education to discuss their parents' role in fostering their success.

FORWARD

From the secret reading groups held by enslaved Africans, to A.M.E. parishioners founding the first Black university in 1856, to the elder next door who couldn't read but encouraged all the neighborhood kids to "get your lesson," to the millions of dollars that African Americans have raised for Black Colleges through the United Negro College Fund, African Americans have a long history of being invested in the education of young people. Through my years in various areas of mental health, I have seen this investment of the Black community and Black parents minimized and misinterpreted by the larger society. While administering "intelligence" and achievement tests I have seen parents that are supposedly disconnected invest hundreds of dollars for possible answers to explain reasons for their child's failing grades. I have also sat on school admission boards and witnessed the tireless measures that parents have gone through to find the "right schools" so that their children can have the tools necessary to compete and succeed in society. As a Community Psychologist, I have listened for hours about stories of parents whose deepest desire is for their children to achieve; more so, than they could have ever imagined. All of this lets me know that Black parent/community noninvolvement in education is a myth that has been disproven time and time again. Are some black parents overwhelmed? Certainly. Are there parents who have been intimidated into silence, especially in the "special" education system? Absolutely. Do African American parents exist that have been duped into believing that the mainstream school systems will take care of their child's education and not leave them "behind"? Unfortunately. However, if we can network, share our educational resources, and help each other advocate for our children's futures, our community investments returns will continue to grow.

In this book, the authors present history and research to explore the social and cultural capital that is imbedded in successful African American students by their parents and the community. This work is an example of how sharing resources of proven methods for success by those high achievers themselves which focuses on a model that is strength-based. We hear from the students on what worked for them. Themes of availability, persistence, application of school lessons to real life, and instillation of values are sprinkled throughout the featured case studies making this work an introductory how-to manual of raising an academically successful child.

Satira Streeter, Ph.D.

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Our endless gratitude goes to the sparkling array of people whose support, love, and confidence made this project possible. The names are endless, but the appreciation is abundant—Thank You!

We would like to thank God for His guidance, strength, and unconditional love. Without you, nothing is possible.

A special thanks to Marcel Taylor who created the space to make this book possible.

To all Black parents. We know that you want the best for your children and through enormous odds, provide your children with the love and support that they need to become phenomenal. Your work does not go unacknowledged.

Finally, to our unofficial editors, Dr. Glenda Prime, Dr. Marvin Lynn, Gloria Malachi, and the audiences at American Educational Research Association and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, thank you for your invaluable feedback!

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

"Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom."

George Washington Carver

There has been much discussion in the media and in both academic and political domains about the 'No Child Left Behind Act' (NCLB), and particularly its intention to close the achievement gap between poor, non-Asian minority children and their white middle class counterparts, particularly in urban environments. There has been little agreement among scholars, government officials, and community leaders concerning the causes, consequences, and solutions to this gap. The achievement gap is particularly alarming when it comes to the performance of African American students. Research suggests that African American students lag behind their White counterparts on nearly all measures of achievement including performance on standardized tests (Livingston & Wirt, 2004), college admissions and completion rates (NCES, 2002), SAT performance (NCES, 2007a,b), and advanced placement course taking (The College Board, 2003).

Nowhere is the achievement gap between Black and White students more prevalent than in the discipline of mathematics. When examining the mathematics achievement of African American students, one finds a pervasive history of underachievement, lack of persistence and overall disenfranchisement; especially post Brown v. Board of Education. Because of a history of low performance, cultural insensitivity, and negative experiences in mathematics classrooms, there are relatively few African-American students pursuing rigorous mathematics or completing degrees in mathematics related disciplines (Bailey, 1990; Bentz, 1990; Cooper, 2000; Kenschaft, 1993). This reality is disheartening given the importance of mathematics to future educational and labor markets in the technological

age. Several scholars argue that the pervasiveness of the "mathematics achievement gap" is a particular concern because it limits the educational and career options of students, and there is little evidence that this gap is significantly decreasing (Davison *et al.*, 2004; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Townsend, 2002).

Although there has been much discussion about the causes and consequences of the achievement gap between African Americans and white students (Townsend, 2002), these discussions have failed to examine how African Americans have individually and collectively addressed this gap. Specifically, one of the key questions that has not been adequately answered is what are some of the ways that African American parents have empowered themselves currently to compensate for this achievement gap? As educators, researchers, and parents, this book was shaped by our desire to answer this very question. In particular, we examined the participation patterns of African American parents and how they successfully navigated the educational process for their children throughout their educational career. This study provides the necessary qualitative insights into how African American parents have participated in their children's education in ways that lead to academic success and achievement in urban public schools, particularly in the field of mathematics. We begin by reviewing the literature on African American parental participation and the achievement gap. We couch our methods section in a discussion about social and cultural capital. As we discuss social and cultural capital, we infuse examples from the literature that illustrate patterns of African American parental participation from the past. This section is followed by the current ways in which African American parents had an impact on their children's success in mathematics by examining qualitative interview data from eight high achieving mathematics students and their perspectives on how their parents participated as they matriculated through U.S. public schools. We discuss how these parents used social networks to help propel their students towards academic achievement. We conclude with implications about how African American parents can participate in their children's education, specifically their mathematics education to increase the likelihood of their children's achievement.

This contribution is important because little is known about successful parental participation in the field of mathematics in urban public schools. Although much has been written about strategies for participation, a comprehensive study of how parents used their social and cultural capital to foster their children's success has been scantly examined (Harowboski *et al.*, 1998; 2002). Specifically absent from the literature are studies that

investigate the role of parental involvement from high achieving African American students' point of view. This study is especially important given conversations in larger media that continue to focus on what parents can do to make a difference in their children's education (Cosby *et al.*, 2009). In fact in President Barack Obama's acceptance speech for the democratic nomination, he stated the importance of individual and collective responsibility among parents. This paper responds to the desire of parents, policy makers, and other stakeholders who care deeply about the educational outcomes of African American children by sharing authentic examples of how African American parents have successfully participated in their high achieving children's education.

PARTICIPATION PATTERNS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

When African American parental participation is discussed (Darling *et al.*, 1994; Dornbusch *et al.*, 1987; Spera 2005); it is, in many cases, inaccurate (Mandara, 2006); or limited (McKay *et al.*, 2003). Unfortunately, in much of the literature, parental participation in schools is assumed to look exactly the same across cultures (Mandara, 2006). As a result, conversations around parental styles and academic achievement have largely ignored the cultural perspective (Mandara, 2006). Hence, a comprehensive understanding of African American participation must take into account how they participate from their perspective. This could, in turn, shed light on how African American parents could shift their modes of participation in the current educational environment to insure academic engagement and success for their children, especially in the area of mathematics.

In the same vein, African American parents, in some educational arenas, are perceived as non-caring with regard to their children's academic lives (Chavkin, 1993). In many cases, "care" is viewed as visibility in the school, participation in the PTA, attending school events (Epstein & Daubar 1991; Stone & McKay, 2003) and discourse that matches the language and cultural norms of the teachers and administrators. This narrow view of parental participation results in a limited understanding of the varied ways that African Americans perceive schooling, and the consequences are long lasting. Lareau (2000), an educational researcher found that many working class African Americans intentionally turn the responsibility for education to the school and teachers. This action, by African Americans, does not

demonstrate a lack of care, but moreover, a way of perceiving the educational system that may be embedded as a cultural style. As we discuss later, this cultural style may be a function of how the schools and community have, historically, functioned as partners in educating African American students. However, as the data in this study reveal, African American parents may need to adopt other ways of participating that under the current climate of NCLB could ensure their children's academic success.

FRAMING THE SO-CALLED ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Researchers offer numerous explanations for disparities in academic achievement for African American students attending public schools. Some argue that there is a widespread problem of low expectations by many white, female pre-service teachers with regard to the academic achievement of children of color (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ziechner, 1993, Ziechner & Melnick, 1995). Others believe that there is a lack of cultural congruency among teachers and students (Irvine, 2000), while other scholars see structural inequalities reinforcing racism, classism, and sexism in educational institutions (Darling-Hammond, 1995).

Ladson-Billings in her 2005 Annual Education Research Association (AERA) presidential address offered a different explanation for understanding the achievement gap. The explanation she provides has the most potential to shift the conversation in ways that communities can respond in meaningful ways. She argued that explanations of the achievement gap fail to consider the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral backdrop that laid the foundation for the current crises in education. Ladson-Billings suggested that rather than viewing the ongoing underperformance of African American students as an achievement gap, it can be viewed as an "education debt." The "achievement gap" or rather the "education debt" is the result of systemic inequities that have accumulated over hundreds of years which denied access to quality education to African Americans. As a result, African American students were not given the appropriate resources to achieve at the levels of white students and so were systematically left behind. She contends that even if the "achievement gap" is closed for any given period of time, this would not abolish the "education debt" that has accumulated over the past 400 years.

We agree with Ladson-Billings argument to shift the academic language of achievement gap to one of "educational debt." By couching the

achievement argument in the language of "debt" we can now respond to paying down the debt with "capital." By capital, we mean resources that can be leveraged for goods, services or other resources that yield social profit (i.e., access to knowledge, networking etc.) (Lareau, 2000). We argue that in spite of the systemic inequality that has historically impeded full access to knowledge and resources for members of the African American community, there are examples in which members, both historically and currently, utilized various forms of capital to close the "educational debt."

HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF PARTICIPATION

Based on our review of the literature, we found that prior to integration many members of the African American community utilized their money and resources to build and maintain schools in their neighborhood. By the close of the 19th century, people of African descent relied upon each other to develop and control their own schools (Anderson, 1988; Butchart, 1980). African Americans emerged from enslavement with a strong desire to learn to read and write (Anderson, 1988). This is best evidenced by many members of the community who worked together with the charge of self-education. As of 1865, only 10% of Blacks in the South were literate. By 1940, the black literacy rate had increased to 89% (Blum 2007), demonstrating the desire to learn in the face of systemic racism and oppression.

There are a number of instances in which members of the Black community sacrificed in order to build and support their own educational institutions. For example, Fortress Monroe (founded in 1866) was one of the first Black schools created by Africans, and its teachers were educated southern African Americans. In another case, Savannah Education Association, founded in Georgia in 1865, organized and sustained its own Aid society. As Butchart (1980) notes, the Association schools were entirely self sufficient, relying exclusively on the local Black community for their support and [housed] all Black faculty. There was no separation of parent and community.

Siddle-Walker (1993) gave evidence of another striking example of how Black self-help efforts led to the closing of the "educational debt" during the Rosenwald era in her examination of the Caswell Training Schoolthat opened in 1906. In this case, African Americans pooled their resources to hire twenty-two teachers who taught 735 students. The financial commitment and support of the parents and the larger community ensured

the schools' existence despite the lack of support from the all White school board. As Siddle-Walker notes, the Parent Teacher Association meetings focused not only on financial issues and mission statements, but also on specific issues concerning the students. Walker shares that the principal used a portion of the meeting to report to parents the educational objectives, current happenings in the schools or ways in which the parents could help their children improve academically (p. 168). During this period, forms of social capital were marked by self-help, monitory sacrifice, and community responsibility. In addition, parents played "advocacy roles by soliciting funds and providing a home based support for the principal and teachers (Siddle-Walker 1993). Parents and the school worked together as socializing units for the children. As Walker conveys, one student commented that, "my mommy and daddy are pushing me and my teachers are pushing me...oh well, I got to do good." Although the Rosenwald movement ended in the 1930's, they became a living testament to the ways in which African Americans and the overall community utilize their resources in spite of the systems working against them to develop culturally appropriate, community-based schools for their children.

Although we highlight examples of how African Americans have used their social and cultural capital as a way to respond to the educational debt, we understand that the educational debt is a result of social and cultural inequities that exist in society. In order to fully eradicate the educational debt, social and cultural institutions must be transformed. However, until then, we must continue to showcase how African American parents have empowered themselves to address these inequities as a way to empower and educate our people. In what follows, we describe social and cultural capital theory as it was used to frame the current study and use data from this study to illustrate current examples of how African American parents used their social and cultural capital to foster an atmosphere of high achievement for their children.

Chapter 1

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL THEORY

The theoretical lens used in this study was grounded in social and cultural capital theory. Although there are various conceptualizations of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Franklin, 2004; Lin, 2001), researchers contend that social and cultural capital, just as economic capital, can be invested and mobilized by a group or individual to yield positive outcomes in society such as wealth, power or reputation (Lin, 2001). According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital refers to the system of attributes, dispositions, language skills, cultural beliefs, values and knowledge derived by one's parents that indicate class status; thus the more these values reflect the dominant culture the more cultural capital the person or group possesses. Hence, those who have values, beliefs, and dispositions of the dominant cultural group have "capital" that they can use to profit from social and cultural institutions such as educational systems. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as:

> "the aggregate of actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition--or in other words, to membership in a group-which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word." (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248-249)

In other words, social capital is the social resources available to a group or individual that can be accessed and used to promote positive outcomes. Forms of social capital include understanding of "the system," using social

and community networks to help facilitate academic and social success, and drawing on social contacts and community resources to help gain access to educational systems and successfully navigate these systems (Yosso, 2005).

In the same vein, Franklin defines social capital as "the network of social organizations, cultural institutions, voluntary civic associations, family and kinship groups in the community that assist in the development of an economic enterprise (Franklin, 2004, p. 36). Although Bourdieu and Franklin's conceptions of social capital differ, each recognizes that social capital consists of resources embedded in the social relations and social structures to which a person has access. These resources can be mobilized when one wishes to increase the likelihood of success in an institutional or social setting (Lin, 2001). "Collective" cultural capital, defined by V. P. Franklin, is the sense of group consciousness and collective identity that serves as an economic resource for the financial and material support of business enterprises that are aimed at the advancement of an entire group (Franklin, 2004, p. xiv).

A growing body of research is applying social capital theory to understanding educational outcomes, particularly of African American youth (Perna & Titus, 2005; Yan, 1999; Yosso, 2005). Results of this research reveal that social capital, as measured by family structure, parental education, and parents' aspirations, had a positive impact on educational achievement and attainment (Dinka & Singh 2002). This current study draws on the notion that parental involvement and values are vehicles of both cultural and social capital because it is the parents who instill beliefs, attitudes, and values into their children that can be used in ways to benefit them in academic and social institutions. In addition, parents have access to various social and community networks that can be garnered to help their children successfully maneuver systems that were, in many cases, not designed for their success (Yosso, 2005). Hence, African Americans have a distinct way of wielding their resources in order to navigate in U.S. society. As evident in our findings, students possessed several forms of social and cultural capital that they accumulated and mobilized that were critical to their success and persistence in mathematics.

In the following section, we present findings on how parents of successful college mathematics students used forms of social capital (i.e., advocacy, and social networks) to foster high academic achievement in their children in urban public schools. These findings reflect current ways that parents participate in the success of their children, particularly in mathematics.

Chapter 2

CURRENT MODES OF PARTICIPATION FROM THE STUDENTS' VOICE

Eight high-achieving African American students were interviewed in order to understand the social and cultural factors that shaped their success and persistence in mathematics. All of the students are multi-generational African-Americans born in the United States and received their pre-college education in the United States and have cumulative GPA of 3.0 or better as mathematics majors. Six of the eight participants were female and the remaining two participants were males.

HIGH ACHIEVING MATHEMATICS MAJORS

Anita James is a 20 year-old mathematics major from a predominately white mid-sized public university on the east coast. She hailed from Prince Georges County, Maryland and attended a large public high school, where she was in a talented and gifted program (TAG). At the time of the study, Anita was a junior mathematics major with a 3.5 GPA and was a student in the Sterling Scholars Program, an elite university-based science and mathematics scholarship program for minority students.

*Karen Johnson*is a 20year-old mathematics major from a predominately white mid-sized public university on the east coast and had a cumulative GPA of 3.6. She was also a Sterling Scholar. She was originally from Frederick, Maryland and attended a mid-sized predominately white high school where she was also in the TAG program.