CHAPTER 5

The Construction of Family Identity: Stereotypes and Cultural Capital

> Imagine that you are a parent and I say to you, talk to me a little bit about Kaura. Who kept Kaura before she started at school? . . . I am sure you will tell me it was one of your relatives, it was your church nursery . . . somewhere that you were comfortable with because you believed in those people. So we [the school] didn't touch Kaura until she was already 4, 5, 6 years old and these beliefs were already in her. . . . So you can't come in here and say that if Kaura is not reading and writing and can't pay attention and always wants to play, it's because the White teacher did it, or the Black teacher did it, or that Hispanic teacher did it. There are some things that happened long before Kaura began school. . . .
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> But now that Kaura is in school we need to work together. Now what are we going to do to make a difference in Kaura's life? But all too often, what happens is that when that child hits school and they hit one of these teachers who are not really teachers, they want you to take Kaura home and send them a better Kaura! Send them a Kaurine! These are people who do not accept that the parents are sending us their best kid everyday. They do not have another one at home that they can send us. But we have people that have not accepted that fact—that this is the product and we have to work with this product.
>
> —African American principal

THE FOREGOING STATEMENT by an African American principal at an inner-city school illustrates the complementary influences of the two contexts that exert the greatest influence on children in their formative years: home and school. This insight can be framed in the terminology of risk: Either family risk or school risk, or both, may influence children's educational outcomes (Keogh, 2000). A third factor in the mix is individual risk, the possibility that the source of children's difficulties may lie beyond either home

or school, in children's own biological makeup—that some children simply "have" intrinsic deficits, regardless of their circumstances. We contend that inappropriate attribution of learning difficulties to individual or family risk is itself an element of school risk, and that it arises from a failure to carefully consider the individual/family/school interface.

So far, this book has focused on some of the risks in schooling. The majority of the school personnel in our study did not acknowledge this element of risk. Rather, they focused on family and community roles in the "nature/nurture" argument. While many expressed a strong belief that school-identified disabilities represented genuine intrinsic deficits, the majority added the nuance that there is a "fine line" between intrinsic and environmentally induced deficits. While many school personnel spoke of poverty as the key factor, many seemed to assume that poverty was synonymous with poor parenting and lack of interest in children's education. Overall, the most powerful message from practitioners was "It [disability] comes from the home."

In this chapter we focus on school personnel's views of family contexts in children's education and on the impact of those views on children's educational careers. We present examples of these views, juxtaposed with portraits of those families that we were able to interview, visit, or both. In some cases the information we were able to glean did corroborate school personnel's beliefs about the families. In most cases our information provided a very different picture. Overall, four concerns are most striking in these stories: First, stereotypical images of families were usually based on a single piece of information that was enough to damn the family in the eyes of school personnel. Second, school personnel made no effort to counter negative beliefs with information on family strengths. Third, the families lacked the social and cultural capital to effectively challenge these stereotypes. Fourth, the accumulation of negativity around a family actually affected the outcomes for some children.

SCHOOL VOICES: "IT COMES FROM THE HOME"

School personnel's descriptions of the role of family contexts in children's school failure centered on four aspects: The "fine line" between nature and nurture, the impact of poor parenting, children's limited cultural and social experience, and caregivers' lack of support and monitoring of their children's schooling. Although we will not detail it here, there was a common sentiment among Hispanic and Anglo American school personnel that African American family and community environments tended to be more detrimental to children than those of immigrant families.

Nature/Nurture? "A Fine Line"

The delicate balance between detrimental circumstances, school failure, and special education placement was illustrated by the words of an Anglo American teacher at a predominantly Haitian school in a low-income neighborhood:

> They [the parents] really don't understand [what the school is expecting]. They can't help their children. They're not home. These children are very much latchkey kids. They fall behind. So, yes, they end up in a special education program because there's nobody there and the longer that goes on the further behind you get, and I think our hope is . . . when you get into special ed and you're working in a smaller group at your level and you get brought up to where you should be, then you get out. . . . If you continue to stay in a class with 35–40 kids, you're never gonna get what you need.

Despite this description of the interconnectedness between minimal home support, academic failure, and subsequent special education placement, the same teacher went on to say:

> I don't think you can just manufacture these deficits. You know, they're either there or they're not there. . . . These problems are really . . . they're real. . . . Whether it's from outside or within. And if it's something extrinsic that can be fixed then they get out of the program. . . . This is not a placement for life.

The belief in intrinsic deficits came through clearly in many interviews, as typified by the following statements:

> Basically . . . there are minority children who do have these problems. They're not social, and they're not administrative, and they're not due to any devious behavior. Don't misunderstand, there are children who belong in these classes because they do have problems that're intrinsic to the child.

In the simplest words:

> Some children, you know, are just born with it. . . . You know, like some children have blue eyes.

Some teachers also expressed the opinion that minority children were actually underreferred, many needing special education services and not

getting them. We particularly heard this at one of our predominantly Haitian schools. For example:

> People say that there is disproportionate representation, but I don't see it, not here anyway. They are underrepresented. I think the process is too slow, takes too long, and by the time they are finally placed, it's too late. There are many reasons for this, associated with poverty, malnutrition, low-birth-weight babies.

"The Parents Are the Problem!"

While many emphasized the interplay between nature and nurture, most school personnel were inclined to blame nurture, with a focus on both family dynamics and broader societal contexts, including historical influences, economic circumstances, personal crises, cultural/social experience, and immigration status. Some school personnel spoke of families' problems in a tone of negative judgment, but others spoke with a sympathetic understanding of the impact of many negative influences on family adjustment.

The comments below, all made by personnel at schools serving low-income predominantly Black or mixed Black and Hispanic populations, placed the blame squarely on family life factors:

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

> This woman asked her class: "How many kids have been exposed to guns?" And everyone except four kids in her classroom had either seen a gun, held a gun, or something.

> This child has severe behavior problems. His mother was a crack addict and gave him up at birth. The foster mother adopted him several years ago . . . and her husband, who was like the child's father, was shot and killed.

While there were, no doubt, factual bases for many of these statements, it was disturbing to note that, for many school personnel, labeling parents

with derogatory terms seemed to be an acceptable part of school culture. One teacher, on the way from two CST conferences, rolled her eyes and exclaimed to the researcher: "The first mother is retarded; the second one is crazy!"

"A Lot of Them Think the World Stops Right There at 14th Street"

Another aspect of detrimental family circumstances reported by school personnel was what we came to refer to as "cultural-knowledge set." This view tended to place the blame on culture and experience rather than on parents' own actions. The following statement by an African American professional at a predominantly African American school in one of the poorest neighborhoods typified this perspective:

> Most of the kids think the world stops at 10th Street. . . . I would give children a ride home in my car and they really didn't know how to get in the car, sit down, and close the door. It was hard for the child to open the door. I remember once we went on a field trip to the zoo and these kids were on the bus on the highway and they, I mean it was like the best experience they ever had to be on the bus, riding on 836 way up there and they saw all the houses and the trees and the buildings. And were like, "Wow! What's this?" A lot of them think the world stops right there at 14th Street so they don't dream.

Other versions of this theme focused on immigrant children:

> Many students come from Central or South America and they come and develop little countries or little cities within this country and most of . . . their parents are illiterate, you know, they can't read or write so they don't get the help at home. So, I feel that comes into play, not that I would place a child like that in special ed, but that comes into play where teachers lack the efficiency and want to place them because of that sometimes.

"With Parental Participation, They Will Not Be in Special Education"

The majority of teachers identified poor parental participation as a key factor in special education placement. These comments focused mostly on parents' failure to monitor homework and respond to school recommendations or requests for conferences. For example:

> I don't have a lot [of caregiver involvement] and I don't know if they understand what they're supposed to do. A lot of times they'll come

> to me and say, "I haven't seen any homework," or they'll say, "They don't have homework." And then they say, "I have to look in their book bag." And I'm just wondering, shouldn't you be looking in the book bag as a parent, you know, why are you taking a 6-year-old's word for it that they don't have homework? Look in their book bag!

In the school at which African American students from a low-income area were bused into a predominantly affluent Anglo American student body, school personnel described a dramatic difference in students' preparation for schooling according to community background. The implications for parental input were implicit in the following speaker's meaning:

> This is a unique community in that these children come into our school well prepared academically, and so there is a blatant, blatant disparity when you look at a child who is coming from the community and one who is coming from [the African American area].

Moreover, some personnel saw the effects of parent participation on student educational outcomes as very direct:

> With parent participation, they will not be in [special ed] programs. Typically, the children who are being placed do not have any parent participation at all from caretakers.

As our case studies in later chapters will show, we did not find this last statement to be true. Moreover, despite this strong trend of complaint about lack of parental involvement, we noted that high levels of involvement in school-based conferences did occur in schools or even classrooms where school personnel made consistent efforts to "get parents in" and to develop respectful relationships with parents. We found that school personnel's efforts were far more predictive of parental response than were the parents' SES or ethnicity. For example, the success of intensive efforts to include parents was powerfully demonstrated in one school with a mixed Haitian and African American population. The counselor reported that parental turnout was "remarkably good, though not yet 100%." When asked what accounted for this, she replied, "We make a pest of ourselves!" Our observations corroborated this: Efforts to encourage parents' attendance included letters, phone calls, visits by the community involvement specialist (CIS, paid for by Title I funds), who was Haitian, and even the giving of rewards to children for taking home letters to parents about conferences. In our observations of 12 CST or placement conferences there were only 2 for which the parent did not come in.

The job of the CIS was to act as a liaison with families. These personnel were usually of the same ethnicity as the predominant group of students, and some were very effective in assuring high parent turnout at CST and staffing conferences. In these Title I schools it was the CIS and the counselors who worked most closely with the parents, and they tended to speak of families in much more understanding tones than did the teachers. For example, in one predominantly African American school, a Hispanic teacher said, "There's virtually no parent participation. Only a few cooperate," while the African American counselor estimated that 70% of the parents cooperated with school requests, despite the presence of what several personnel described as a general sense of despair in the neighborhood. This counselor explained that, for many parents who did not cooperate, "a lot of the problem is that they don't know." The CIS spoke in the same vein regarding parental participation through assistance and attendance at conferences:

> 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. . . . It is easier to push a child away or talk down to them to keep them from being aware of the real situation. . . . 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]. . . . I've heard [teachers say], "These people just want money. They don't care." The parents do care about their children, they just don't know how to deal with it or respond to it like you would.

Overall, negative indictments of families constituted the most pervasive view in the entire set of perspectives offered by school personnel in our study. Fortunately, we were able to use observations of school-based parent-professional interactions, as well as home visits and interviews, to gain some balance to these views. We were particularly interested in more close-up information on African American families, in view of the extreme negativity regarding this group. We learned that school personnel often did not attempt to gain the information needed to arrive at a true picture of family situations. Rather, they seemed to rely on stereotypical images for their constructions of family identity. We focus here on what we learned about family environments, and we refer readers to a further discussion of attempts at parent advocacy in Harry, Klingner, and Hart (2005).

HOME VOICES: "DOING THE BEST I CAN"

Our views of parents' perspectives came from two sources: school-based conferences and home visits. In this chapter we will refer to the former source only as a background to the more in-depth, personalized information we garnered from the latter. Thus, after a brief overview, we will focus on two case studies whose details illustrate the disservice that can be done to families by deficit assumptions and stereotypical thinking.

Fleeting Views

We observed many school-based conferences with parents who were obviously in dire need of help. We saw one young woman whose demeanor, dress, and apparently nonchalant attitude during the conference would readily lead school personnel to assume that motherhood was low on her priority list. We saw another who seemed desperate in her denial of her child's need for help. In the low-income, predominantly African American schools, we observed several conferences for children whose families seemed to fit the profiles described as detrimental. For example, in one school all four children whose conferences we observed had close relatives who abused drugs and who were in trouble with the law. In one conference, a grandmother, distraught by her daughter's drug abuse and incarceration, and the murder of her grandson's father, burst into tears under the school personnel's questioning.

One parent whom we came to learn a lot about, but whose home we did not visit, was Ms. Brown, an alcoholic whose efforts to participate in her children's schooling made her the butt of much amusement and criticism. In this inner-city school, an open-door policy encouraged parents to drop into classrooms and Ms. Brown frequently appeared in the classroom obviously inebriated, much to her son Jimmy's chagrin. After two CST conferences, both attended by Ms. Brown, the decision was made not to refer Jimmy for evaluation, because the multidisciplinary team felt that he was progressing as well as he could under the circumstances. A year later, Jimmy and his sister were removed from the home by the state's child welfare department because of extremely detrimental physical surroundings, and a teacher who visited Jimmy in his foster home reported that he seemed much happier. What was surprising in this case was that although school personnel had visible evidence of the mother's alcoholism, it was at least 2 years before the case was reported to the relevant state agency.

Taddeus was another child whose home was reputed to be detrimental, in this case because of a history of involvement in drugs and violence. Taddeus, a handsome, nattily dressed second grader with a wide, shy smile, was

described by his teacher as "knowing nothing" and being "on the moon." Having been tested in his first-grade year and found not to qualify for special education services, he had been retained in the second grade. The teacher said that she heard that there are gangs at his home and that his cousin was killed recently, and she could not figure out why Taddeus had not qualified for special education. In our only visit to this home, the mother confirmed that a sibling and a relative had been seriously injured as a result of being "caught in crossfire." The mother's description of Taddeus was very different from the teacher's, emphasizing that, although he was not doing well at school, "he's great with his hands and can fix anything." Pointing to a child's bike in the corner, she explained that people in the neighborhood pay Taddeus "to fix bikes and things."

Miles was another child whose family we visited only once. An African American kindergartner in a low-income neighborhood, Miles was found eligible for LD services and was retained in kindergarten. On our visit to Miles's home, his mother apologized that she had no living room to invite the researcher into. Her half of the house consisted of a series of three rooms off a hallway, so the interview was conducted in her bedroom. When the researcher commented on her son's excellent vocabulary (his suggestions for zoo animals included *sea lion* and *otter*), the mother said that Miles had never been to the zoo, but learned a lot of vocabulary from the Disney Channel, which the family watched together once a week. Showing great interest in the meaning of the "learning disability" label that was being applied to her son, Miles's mother exclaimed, "Well, you see, I'm doing the best I can!"

Another parent we came to know beyond the school walls was Janey, mother of Anita, a first grader placed in special education. Janey described herself as a "hillbilly," and her daughter's father as a "wetback" (a Mexican migrant). This mother was a regular volunteer in her daughter's classroom, but was described by school personnel as "retarded." Our interviews with her revealed that she had been in a special education program herself, but her keen understanding of the special education system belied the belief that she was retarded. While acknowledging that she did keep her daughter home too often, Janey argued that the school was not doing its job. Indeed, when her daughter was placed in the LD program, Janey accurately described to us the poor instruction the child was receiving and the lack of adherence to her IEP, which we also observed.

These brief vignettes point to the range of challenges faced by families of whose lives we were able to gain only a fleeting glimpse. In search of in-depth understanding of family situations, we relied on information from the 12 case study children as well as 3 others whose families agreed to participate in interviews, home visits, or both. These 15 cases were as diverse as the entire cohort of participants in the study, but most of them did have

problematic family circumstances that typified the kinds of complaints school personnel expressed about families.

Close-up Views

Although school personnel often used terms such as *single parent* or *intact* to describe families, these classifications were meaningless in light of the array of family configurations to which we were introduced. Contrary to the mainstream notion of a "single parent" family, we found that all the families we met had more than one adult in the home—whether a stepparent or members of the extended family. All had other children—whether siblings or cousins—living in the home.

The configurations of the 12 families of case study children were as follows: One Haitian family appeared to be headed by two biological parents. Two other families, one African American and one Haitian, were headed by fathers as the primary caregivers; one mother was hospitalized with a psychiatric illness and the other lived in Haiti. Another African American child lived with her paternal grandmother and an aunt, since her mother was in jail; her father was a frequent visitor to the home and participated in school-based conferences. Five children (two African American and three Hispanic) lived with their mothers; in one case the mother had a psychiatric illness and was the child's legal guardian, while the father also was involved in child care; in another case, the father was in Puerto Rico and the child lived with her mother, siblings, and an infant nephew. Two other children—one Haitian and one African American—lived with their mother and a stepfather. The 12th child lived with an adult relative and had experienced the deaths of adult family members, including his father; the caregiver he lived with was himself quite ill and passed away toward the end of our study.

Many of these configurations represent what school personnel tended to describe as "dysfunctional." However, when we stepped inside children's homes we saw another side of the picture—a side that spoke of families' caring for and pride in their children. Their ways of caring and the sources of their pride were not always consonant with what school personnel would count as important, but it was evident to us that the parents were making an effort to fulfill what they perceived to be the important responsibilities of parenthood—providing nurturance and love.

We will focus here on the family environments of two case study children whom we were able to follow extensively. Details of how the children came to be designated as having disabilities will be given in Chapter 10, where we address the social construction of the ED category. We visited these homes six times each, and we emphasize that, although we do not know the families well, our visits were enough to dispel the cloud of suspicion that had been

the following excerpt from a field observation indicates. The committee chair asked whether Robert was receiving his medication at school:

> A team member replies: "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 can feel the discomfort in the room. Everyone has seen the team member's gesture except the mother, whose back is directly to her.

The faculty member's negativity on this occasion was but another example of her vindictive attitude to Jacintha and the advantage that was taken of this mother's deferential attitude to school personnel. In the previous year, Robert had been placed on half-day suspension, and the same faculty member told the researcher that this action was taken to show the mother that she had to be responsible for Robert's troublesome behavior. Jacintha, meanwhile, had easily understood this message, explaining to the researcher that Robert was put on half-day suspension to "punish me." This "punishment" involved Jacintha being required to come for Robert at 11:00 A.M. every day, which she did for 5 months, walking approximately 10 blocks with her two younger children in tow. The half-day placement meant that Robert had to miss school sometimes when his mother had a medical or other appointment for herself or the other children, because she could not be back at school by 11:00 A.M. When it was suggested that she should go to the school district to complain about this action, Jacintha replied that she would "just leave it to God."

The principal of the school was the same African American woman whose insightful comments about a hypothetical "Kaurine" were cited as the introduction to this chapter. Yet it was the principal herself who ordered Robert's half-day attendance in school, arguing that because of his behavior he was, at that time, "not capable of benefiting from a full day of school." This arrangement remained in place from January until the end of May, despite the fact that, in January, Jacintha had signed permission for a psychological evaluation. In May, when Jacintha refused to come for Robert

any longer, he was reinstated in the full-day program and evaluated for special education placement.

Grandma S: " There's nothing wrong with her. She just wants her momma!"

Kanita was an African American second grader who was placed in an ED program in an inner-city school. The stereotype that dominated school personnel's view of Kanita was that her mother was incarcerated and there were "a bunch of people living in the home." On the basis of this information, school personnel expressed the belief that the family was "dysfunctional."

Six visits to Kanita's home provided us with a very different picture. The attractively painted single-family dwelling had belonged to Kanita's paternal grandparents for more than 30 years. In this house Mrs. Smith and her husband had raised her family of six children on the prized American principle of hard work. The family's small business had, for more than 20 years, been the location of weekend and vacation work for all the children, and Mrs. Smith told us that many a Christmas Eve would find the entire family over at the business working until midnight. Mrs. Smith's father had been the founding pastor of a nearby Baptist church, which she and some of the grandchildren still attended. Mrs. Smith's children had all moved on to establish their own families, and her living-room shelves attested to the many grandchildren and three "great-grands" who now enriched her life.

At the time of the study, we learned that Kanita and one of Mrs. Smith's daughters and her child lived in this home. This family had considerable cultural capital in their community. In contrast to school personnel's view of this home as a place where a "bunch of people" lived, the strength of the extended family unit was evident in the home's function as a center for the grandchildren to come to after school until their parents could pick them up. Cousins, aunts, or uncles were frequent visitors during all of our six visits to the home.

Kanita had lived with her grandmother since she was a baby, when her mother was incarcerated. Her father, who lived elsewhere, was in close touch with his daughter and either he or one of his sisters would attend school conferences along with Mrs. Smith. At the placement conference, Kanita's grandmother and aunt both acknowledged that the child's behavior was troublesome, but when told that Kanita had qualified for an ED program, the grandmother stated flatly: "There's nothing wrong with her. She just wants her momma."

It was evident that Kanita was treasured by this family. Her school awards, sports trophies, and photos were prominent among the family mementos in the living room. Mrs. Smith loved to bring out her album in which she kept Kanita's school records and awards all the way from Head Start to the time of our study. Report cards, classroom certificates, a certificate of

Kanita's participation in a regional mathematics competition, notes from classroom peers and teachers, and Mother's Day cards from Kanita to her mother and grandmother were all carefully pressed into this album. Pride in Kanita's accomplishments was evident in the family: On one visit, an aunt, standing in the kitchen as the researchers talked with Mrs. Smith, called out to remind her mother to tell us about Kanita's excellent performance on the statewide testing. On the same day, her cousin, coming in after school and realizing our university affiliation, asked quickly: "Is Kanita going to college?"

Kanita's psychological evaluation offered a sobering picture of the power of negative stereotyping. Prior to the actual evaluation, the psychologist reported to us that this child was from a "dysfunctional family," the mother being in jail. The first 2 hours of evaluation were based on the Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC)-III, on which Kanita cooperated fully and earned a composite score of 107 with a score of 118 on the "freedom from distractibility" subscale. When the psychologist began the projective testing by asking Kanita to draw a picture of her family, the child did so eagerly, with a big smile. As the questioning on these tests focused increasingly on personal family information, however, Kanita became more withdrawn. For example, when the psychologist asked Kanita to name one of the figures, the child did so in a soft voice. The psychologist repeated, "Who is it?" Kanita replied, "My cousin." The psychologist asked, "How old is he?" Kanita's replies were too soft for the researchers to hear, but we saw her shrug several times. The psychologist asked if this cousin lived in the house and if he slept in Kanita's bedroom. As the subsequent series of questions focused on details of Kanita's bedroom, the child answered softly, gradually becoming more restless, fiddling with the tabletop and moving around in her chair.

The psychologist then turned to a series of questions about Kanita's mother, including why she was incarcerated and whether she had been on drugs. The family questions finally ended with the psychologist asking Kanita to tell her "everybody that lives in the house," to which Kanita listed about nine names. The psychologist asked Kanita if it was a big house and Kanita said yes. From these tests the psychologist went on to the sentence-completion test and the Roberts Apperception Test. By the end of the session, Kanita had slid almost halfway under her desk and was giving virtually no answers.

After the evaluation, the psychologist offered the researchers the interpretation that Kanita's growing recalcitrance was a sign of "denial of her feelings" in the context of a "dysfunctional" family. The psychologist rejected the suggestion that Kanita's withdrawal may have been indicative of embarrassment or distress, arguing that children in this neighborhood were so accustomed to having family members who were on drugs or incarcerated that they were generally quite "blasé" and would speak openly of these matters. Thus, the psychologist concluded that Kanita's resistance to the topic was not normal for a child in this social environment. Nor did the psychologist entertain the possibility that the child, like many children in inner-city neighborhoods, had likely been taught not to reveal family information to strangers, especially White strangers. Finally, it was evident that the psychologist's line of questioning regarding the sleeping arrangements for Kanita's cousin represented poorly veiled hints at the possibility of improper relationships within the family. We feel certain that Kanita's sensitivity to this insinuation contributed to her increasing reluctance to participate in the projective testing.

The outcome of the evaluation was that Kanita qualified for a placement in a self-contained ED class at a different school. Kanita's placement in this program turned out to be a "double-edged sword," since, in the hands of an effective teacher, she did very well both academically and behaviorally and was soon partially mainstreamed. However, she was so stigmatized by the ED label that her behavior in the general-education settings, though no different from that of many of her peers, was frequently interpreted as problematic. By the fourth grade, Kanita was placed, part-time, in a gifted program, where the teacher asked us if her status as a child with ED was "a mistake."

STEREOTYPES, CULTURAL CAPITAL, AND "RISK"

The two preceding cases point to the power of racial and socioeconomic stereotypes to exacerbate the difficulties of children whose families lack the cultural capital valued by schools. In both cases, school personnel constructed their images of children's families on the basis of uninformed and untested negative assumptions. In the face of the families' lack of cultural capital, school personnel used their unchallenged power to make decisions that were not in the children's best interest. These stories illustrate a statement by Skiba and Peterson (2000) that "information about inadequate family resources or family instability is used to affix blame, creating an adversarial climate between home and school" (p. 341).

"Risk" in Family Configurations

The NAS report on minority overrepresentation in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002) emphasized the impact of detrimental social and biological

influences on children living in poverty. The authors devoted a chapter to a detailed summary of findings regarding the detrimental effects of such factors as lead-based toxins, alcohol, iron deficiency, and maternal depression on the cognitive and behavioral development of minority children living in poverty. The history of American racial politics prompted some scholars to express concern that the NAS's highlighting of these issues was another version of "blaming the victim," suggesting that poor, in particular, African American, families were at fault for raising their children in detrimental circumstances. We believe that what was missing from the NAS's analysis was insight into the responsibility of public policy for many of these circumstances. Indeed, around the same time, the NAS (2002) also published a report, which detailed the extensive discrimination against minority groups in the health care system.

Another line of research on family "risk" factors is found in Nichols and Chen's (1981) family profiles, which focused on poverty; unsafe neighborhoods; large family size; residential instability; and parental characteristics, including absence, poor mental health, criminality, and substance abuse. Sameroff and colleagues (1993) developed similar profiles but stressed that it is the combination of several such features, rather than any single feature, that indicates risk. Blair and Scott (2000) applied the question of demographics directly to special education placement and found high correlations between key demographic indicators and special education placement, which, they argued, proves the lasting influence of early environments and experiences.

While we do not doubt the importance of the formative childhood years, we contend that demographics do not tell the whole story. As researchers have demonstrated (e.g., R. Clark, 1983), dynamics within families can provide protective factors that result in considerable resilience. Moreover, research on culturally responsive pedagogy shows that schools *can* make a difference (Hilliard, 1997). If children who have started life with detrimental influences are further exposed to detrimental schooling, we cannot place all, or even most, of the blame on the preschool years.

Kanita's family did not fit the profile developed by Sameroff et al. (1993). To the contrary, it was based on a strong extended family unit, supported by the flexible extended systems known to be typical of traditional Black family structures (e.g., Hill, 1971). These include grandparent involvement, adult sharing of financial and practical responsibility, and sibling responsibility. Information on Robert's family suggested that this family was indeed particularly vulnerable by virtue of several "risk factors." Nevertheless, two aspects of the story are particularly disturbing: First, school personnel made no attempt to ascertain the family strengths that did exist, and, second, decisions made about Robert suggested an attempt to undermine rather than to assist this vulnerable family.

Social and Cultural Capital

The concepts of cultural and social capital are very helpful in interpreting the interactions between school personnel and the parents in these stories. Lareau's (1989) comparison of the home-school interactions of working class versus professional parents showed how social connections and the cultural styles of parents accounted for differential reception by school personnel. Proposing an analysis of what constitutes parental cultural capital in school contexts, Lareau and Horvat (1999) offered a list of characteristics that included "parents' large vocabularies, sense of entitlement to interact with teachers as equals, time, transportation, and child care arrangements to attend school events during the school day" (p. 5). These researchers argued also that school personnel approved only those "socioemotional styles" that reflected trust in school personnel and acceptance of their recommendations.

Meeting these expectations can be difficult to achieve. As Bowers (1984) argued, because social interaction is premised on unspoken, "taken-for-granted" beliefs, parents' mastery of the "communicative competence" needed for home-school interactions requires an "explicit and rational knowledge of the culture that is being renegotiated" (p. 29). Studies by Harry and colleagues (Harry, 1992; Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995; Harry, Kalyanpur, & Day, 1999) illustrated how difficult this challenge was for Puerto Rican, African American, and other culturally or linguistically diverse families from low-SES backgrounds.

What does cultural capital look like when low income, minimal formal schooling, and linguistic difference intertwine with race in a racialized society such as the United States? Lareau and Horvat's (1999) study of contrasting interaction styles of White and Black parents indicated that cultural capital and race are often inextricable in the context of the U.S. history of racism. While traditional conceptions of cultural capital, as outlined by Bourdieu (1986), tended to focus on material and symbolic indicators of cultural capital, Lareau and Horvat (1999) attended to something far more intangible—the psychological impact of historical racism on parents' access to cultural capital and the means needed to activate that capital. Thus, they found that Black parents' knowledge of the school district's history of racial discrimination resulted in their inability to approach school personnel from a posture of trust. In contrast, White parents, not wounded by this history, generally did trust the school and interpreted any inappropriate actions of school personnel on an individual basis. Lareau and Horvat argued that in this context, being White became "a type of cultural capital" (p. 42), "a largely hidden cultural resource that facilitates White parents' compliance with the standard of deferential and positive parental involvement in school" (p. 69). These researchers did not present this as a fixed characteristic, however. Rather,

their study showed that middle-class Black parents, while also suspicious of the school, mastered the interaction style that was valued by school personnel and succeeded in "customizing" their children's education without ever revealing to school personnel that they harbored misgivings based on race.

Lareau and Horvat's (1999) findings were relatively clear cut in the context of a school in which Black students were in the minority as compared with their White peers and, more important, in which the majority of school personnel were White. In our study, however, the schools that had large proportions of Black students usually also had significant proportions of Black faculty and often Black administrators. What is the role of race in such contexts?

Cultural Capital in a Racialized Society

The neighborhoods where Kanita and Robert lived reflected three commonly held criteria for stereotyping: Black, poor, and dangerous. While the school that Robert attended had a growing population of Hispanics (19%), the neighborhood had a long history of being predominantly African American. Moreover, Robert's school itself was the alma mater of many African Americans who were of considerable status in the city and who were reported to be quite involved in supporting the school's needs. However, over the years, city restructuring and funding patterns contributed to the neighborhood becoming one of the most denigrated in the city. Kanita's neighborhood was seen as more "working poor" than Robert's, but would also be considered "inner city," in the common use of that term to indicate low-income Black residents.

To what extent did race contribute to the stereotyping of these families? At face value, race does not appear to be an essential ingredient. In Kanita's case, the three key school personnel involved were all White (Anglo American ethnicity)—a referring teacher with very poor classroom-management skills, the administrator who handled the referral-team process, and the psychologist. However, in Robert's case, with the exception of the psychologist, the key personnel involved were African American—the team member who gestured rudely behind Jacintha's back; the administrator who made the decision to place Robert on half-day attendance; and the referring teacher, whose negativity and poor classroom management made it impossible to know what Robert's potential was.

If we understand racism as an insidious ideology rather than as a simple matter of prejudice between individuals of different races, it is easy to see how members of a racialized society are predisposed to make intuitive negative associations based on race, even within their own group (Bonilla-Silva, 1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). This type of ingrained racism seems a likely part of the negativity we noted, operating more like a lens that colors,

even distorts, one's view. Through this lens, the image of these neighborhoods as beset by guns, violence, drugs, and family dysfunction condemned all who lived in them.

We do not dispute that many detrimental influences did affect the quality of life of many children in these schools. We do contend, however, that in the family stories told above, generalized knowledge of the neighborhoods combined with minimal and superficial knowledge of these families to produce a mindset that was detrimental to the children. Looking at each family as an individual unit, we argue that these stereotypes did a great injustice to these families and children.

CONCLUSIONS

The contrast between our findings and school personnel's views of families illustrates the terrible power of stereotypes. Certainly, our observations showed the tremendous challenges of poverty, personal loss, and limited education faced by these families. We acknowledge also that there is a strong likelihood of volunteer bias, in that those families who agreed to participate were those who knew they had nothing to hide; who knew that they were, as one mother put it, "doing the best they could." So our discussion here is not intended to put forth the case that there were no families whose lifestyles and challenges contributed to their children's difficulties in school. Indeed, it seems reasonable to assume that even the strong families we met were struggling against odds so powerful as to place children at increased risk for school failure or even special education placement.

Nevertheless, we believe that our portraits of family strengths are also irrefutable and that tapping into these strengths could have made an important difference. No one knew that Miles's surprising vocabulary reflected his mother's use of the Disney Channel as a source of educational activity and family solidarity; that Robert's mother's tiny apartment, in a building for which no landlord was held accountable, housed a large collection of children's books from which she taught the toddlers "their ABCs"; that Taddeus's mother, against a background of family tragedy, took great pride in her son's mechanical abilities; or that Kanita's grandmother, cherishing and nurturing the talents of a gifted child whose mother had "chosen the wrong way," had carefully preserved all of her granddaughter's school reports and awards from Head Start until the fifth grade. Although all these caregivers came to CST conferences and participated to the best of their ability, the image of the ineffective, minimally involved parent persisted, because most of these efforts and activities did not meet the criteria school personnel had in mind when they spoke of "parental involvement."

The saddest part of these stories is that the family strengths we were able to discover in just a few visits and conversations went unnoticed by school personnel, whose views and decisions were central to these children's educational careers. This lack of recognition, a recognition supplanted by disdain and disinterest, contributed directly to decisions that were not in the children's interest and that were not challenged by any of the parents, although the parents disagreed with some of them. These parents had neither the social capital, in the form of social connections, nor the cultural capital, in the form of knowledge of rights, logistical supports, or faith in their own voice, to challenge such decisions.

In the preceding few chapters we have addressed systemic as well as personal biases that affected outcomes for children. Overall, we believe that a powerful combination of biases interwove race with poverty and marginalized family structures or lifestyles. Explicit negative biases were most evident when these factors were thought to coexist with African American ethnicity. The implications of this legacy of historical racism are enormous and should be directly addressed in teacher-preparation programs. Our findings echo Delpit's (1995):

> Teacher education usually focuses on research that links failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single-parent households. . . . When teachers receive that kind of education, there is a tendency to assume deficits in students rather than to locate and teach to strengths. To counter this tendency, educators must have knowledge of their children's lives outside of school so as to recognize their strengths. (p. 172)

CHAPTER 6

At the Conference Table: The Discourse of Identity Construction

> I test; I write my report; I write my recommendations and I give it to the placement specialist. . . . We discuss it and we come to a decision. And we discuss it prior to the meeting just to make sure we are providing the best for the child. And once we have a unified front for the parents, we can bring them in just so they know what is going on.
>
> —School psychologist

THE STATEMENT ABOVE typifies the argument of Mehan et al. (1986), that the special education placement conference is essentially a "ratification of actions taken earlier" (p. 164). Mehan and his colleagues emphasized that this process should not be interpreted as a "conspiracy," but as a "culmination, a formalization, of a lengthy process that originates in the classroom . . . when the teacher makes the first referral" (p. 165). They continued:

> We should not disparage this process of everyday decision-making by comparing it with rational models, formal reasoning, or scientific thinking. . . . Instead, it seems more appropriate to call into question the efficacy of scientific reasoning as a model of everyday reasoning. There are good organizational reasons why decision-making occurs as it does. The decision-making circumstances assumed to exist by the rational model are not available to problem solvers in formal organizations like schools. . . . Furthermore, the rational model assumes that all the factors being considered in the decision-making calculus have equal weight. . . . But, as we have seen, a single factor, such as the space available in the program, may outweigh all others in its consequences for decision makers. (p. 166)

Certainly, the reasoning we observed in the decision-making process was far from scientific or rational, if we understand these terms to mean a process that moves logically from a particular premise or set of premises, with the