Persistent Disparities:
The Impact of Race and Class
on Young Children –
And What Michigan Can Do About It

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Let us close our eyes and envision a child.

Envision the face of an "at risk" child in Michigan. Imagine the face of the child who is not ready for school. Who is the child not fully immunized? Acting out in preschool? Assigned to special education? Subject to marginal parenting?

Chances are that, disproportionally, the child one envisions is a poor child, a child of color, and/or a male child. That vision did not necessarily emerge randomly.

Poverty is a huge developmental obstacle for babies, toddlers, and preschool children. After reviewing the extensive literature on young children, a panel of the National Research Council summarized the data this way:

> "Young children are the poorest members of society and are more likely to be poor today than they were 25 years ago. Growing up in poverty greatly increases the probability that a child will be exposed to environments and experiences that impose significant burdens on his or her well-being, thereby shifting the odds toward more adverse developmental outcomes. Poverty during the early childhood period may be more damaging than poverty experienced at later ages, particularly with respect to eventual academic attainment. The dual risk of poverty experienced simultaneously in the family and in the surrounding neighborhood, which affects minority children to a much greater extent than other children, increases young children's vulnerability to adverse consequences."[1]

When it comes to the disparities among our young children in the United States, poverty is almost always mentioned hand in hand with race and ethnicity. Significant, persistent racial disparities in health and developmental outcomes have been well demonstrated[2] if not effectively remedied. Indeed, there is evidence that since the 1960s when the "War on Poverty" began, race and ethnicity have been the underlying causes of disparities in poverty.[3] When we look at data surrounding disparities in health, early education, and family support services, the faces of young children of color are at the top of the list.

For centuries, racism and classism have formed a highly combustible duo in the United States - and in Michigan. Either of the two has the potential to inflict great pain and

havoc in the life of a child. Together, they ignite and multiply risk, with effects more difficult to extinguish. Declaring a "war on poverty," for example, cannot fully succeed without taking the legacy of racism into account. And, while the attack lines for children of color have never been wholly defined by income,[4] their intersection with poverty can not be overlooked without peril. At times, our nation has made considerable progress in efforts to reduce and contain the twin tortures.   But, as we begin the 21st century, both race and class persist as "childhood risk" identifiers, despite many worthy challenges to their power.

There is growing debate about whether race or class should have primacy in efforts to reduce disparities.[5] Each is worthy of efforts on its own merits. Still it must be recognized that, although the two concepts overlap, class consciousness alone may not reach children of color. In addition to class, young children of color - of any class - may be victimized as a consequence of social expectations or service characteristics that impact the quality of care they receive.

> "We must continue to talk about the significance of race as long as race continues to be significant, and race will not become insignificant simply because we refuse to talk about it."[6]

As persistent as the inequities themselves, two paradigms have framed our thinking about the poor child or the child of color. The first paradigm focuses on the primacy of class relative to the legacy of racism; the second paradigm wonders who might be blamed for the poverty experienced by the child. Given that neither paradigm appears to be either productive or constructive in efforts to redress disparities, today we have the opportunity to consider a paradigm shift:

- To change questions of primacy to <u>strategies of effectiveness, and</u>
- To shift our national tendency to view poverty as a personal failure[7] to efforts to view poverty as a frequent <u>consequence of policy</u> that one might actually be able to do something about.

This perspective is not intended to deny that there is a proportion of social context as well as a proportion of individual choice in every life story. The opportunity we have, once again, is to reconsider the proportions - from a heavy share of focus on choices that individuals make in our "ownership society"[8] to a productive analysis of class and race variables that policy makers and service providers can redress.

The goal of this brief paper is to present the unmistakable picture of how race and class impact children of color and their families, and to bring to light actions that need to be taken to assure that the Great Start system in Michigan addresses disparities and brings to the decision-making table people who represent the diversity of the state's population. Other papers in this series are providing more detailed analyses of five topical areas: health, child care and early education, socio-emotional health, family support/parent education, and children with special needs. Here, snapshots illustrating disparities in two of these areas (family support and early care and education) are offered to illuminate the impact of racial and class disparities.

Race, Class, and Michigan's Young Children

In a just society or meritocracy, one might imagine that race and ethnicity would not be predictors of disparities. This is hardly the case in the United States – or in Michigan.

According to the United Health Foundation, poverty in Michigan, particularly among children, has decreased in the past six years.[9] According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, in 2006, 18% (453,477) of Michigan's children lived in poor families (Nationally: 17%), defined as income below 100% of the federal poverty level. Children in poor families in Michigan, by race, in 2006 are 12% (210,601) of white children, 41% (177,223) of black children, and 30% (40,974) of Latino children.[10] Further assessing the poverty rates based on low-income children (defined as income below 200% of the federal poverty level), Michigan's low-income children are comprised of 29% (508,366) of white children, 65% (282,377) of black children, and 61% (82,242) of Latino children.[11]

Children of color - disproportionately low income - are becoming a greater proportion of the young population of both Michigan and the United States. In Michigan, for example, the proportion of children of color has increased from 27% in 2001 to 30% in 2006.[12]

It is unreasonable to deny the impact of race and class on Michigan's future, as well as on the future of our nation. From conception, the life born into a poor family, or a community of color, faces hurdles. Here are a few examples along the developmental timeline.

A black baby in Michigan is less likely to have a mother who had had **prenatal care**. In Michigan, in 2006, the percentage of women who received prenatal care varied from 71% among blacks to 89% among whites.[13] Michigan has one of the highest rates of **infant mortality** in the nation, ranking 43rd among the 50 states.[14] African American babies in the state are three times more likely to die before their first birthday than their white counterparts.[15] Nationally, Hispanic and black children were less likely to be in excellent/very good health than white children (72%, 29%, and 90% respectively) and were more likely to be uninsured (31%, 18%, and 9% respectively). Providers also referred Hispanic and black children significantly less often to specialists (11% and 17% respectively compared with 22% for whites).[16]

The newborn child is then more likely taken to a **neighborhood** that will subject him or her to risk. The fraction of poor children living in high poverty neighborhoods doubled from 1970 to 1990 with urban poverty especially concentrated in the Midwest in cities such as Detroit.[17] Residence in high poverty urban neighborhoods is much more likely for black and Hispanic than white children.[18] In January 2007, the State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network examined national census tracts, and characterized them by their "child raising vulnerability" based on ten indicators that look at education, wealth, income, and social structure of its residents. The analysis showed that our most

vulnerable census tracts are over 80% people of color in direct contrast with those without vulnerability factors, which are over 80% white.[19]

As reported by the eleven-state study of prekindergarten - the most definitive study to date of preK education in the United States - African American, Latino, and Asian children were more likely than white children to be in a prekindergarten class with a high concentration of poor children.[20] Voluminous research documents **disparities at kindergarten** entry faced by Hispanic and African American children.[21]

These school readiness indicators persist even though, among children from poor families, the percentage of black children who had **preschool enrollment** (65%) was higher than the percentage for white (45%) or Hispanic children (36%). Overall, in 2005, the percentage of children from poor families who were enrolled in these programs (47%) was lower than the percentage of children from nonpoor families who were enrolled (60%). Among nonpoor children, higher percentages of Asian/Pacific Islander (73%), black (68%), and white children (61%) were enrolled in center-based programs than was the case for Hispanic children (48%). The percentage of nonpoor Asian/Pacific Islander children who were enrolled was also higher than the percentages of their nonpoor American Indian/Alaska Native (53%) and nonpoor white counterparts.[22]

Although attending preschool more frequently, black children, especially males, are more likely to be subject to **preschool expulsions.** Michigan has fewer expulsions than the national average. Nationally, expulsions indicate racial disparities: Expulsion rates were highest for older preschoolers and African Americans, and boys were over 4.5 times more likely to be expelled than girls. [23]

By elementary school, the pattern of **disparate achievement** is emerging. For example, by fourth grade, in 2007,[24] the National Assessment of Educational Progress found that black students had an average score that was lower than that of white students by 30 points; Hispanic fourth graders had an average score that was lower than white students by 17 points; and "poor" students trailed the nonpoor by 26 points.

By eighth grade, the pattern of differential achievement is well established: In 2007, black students had an average reading score that was lower than that of white students by 31 points; Hispanic students had an average score that was lower than that of white students by 26 points; and poor children had an average score that was lower than that of the nonpoor students by 25 points, a performance gap far wider than that of 2002 (13 points).[25]

Many more statistics could be cited in areas such as juvenile justice or foster care, but the picture that emerges is quite comparable. The fact of disparity - by race and class - is unmistakable. And, the price tag of disparities is high: Childhood poverty costs our nation $500 billion a year because of adverse effects on health, social conditions, and economic growth.[26] Racial disparities further suppress the well-being of both our nation as a whole and of our states.

An Example of Race and Class Impacting the Young:
The Case of Family Support and Early Care and Education

To support the young who face such massive hurdles will require policies that "create a web of support around children and their families"[27] Indeed, there is evidence that "family support" and leadership help to build this web of support. Yet, our approach to disparities too often falls short of offering these two strategies with demonstrated success.

Family support

A sustained relationship with families is a cross-cutting theme across many interventions on behalf of poor children and children of color. Yet, family support and parent education is often not an item that state legislators place high on the funding priority list, despite its demonstrated effectiveness. States have increasingly expressed a willingness to invest in "preschool" as a means to redress disparities in the achievement gap.[28] Missing, however, is a full understanding of the comprehensive nature of effective preschool for the poor and for children of color.

Consider the three most commonly cited studies used to build public support for publicly financed preschool: the Perry Preschool Project, the Abecedarian Project, and the Chicago Child Parent Centers (CPC). The landmark Perry Preschool Project from Ypsilanti, Michigan, demonstrated an impact so powerful that the financial, social, and educational effects of high-quality early care and education on low-income three- and four-year-olds were evident 40 years later.[29] While many states cite these effects to talk about the benefits of preschool on the poor, state initiatives do not typically include the family support components that were intentionally embedded in the landmark studies.[30] Further, it is rarely recognized that all three of these oft-studied projects are really studies of black children. Notice that:

- The Perry Preschool program consisted entirely of 123 African American children who had two years of high-quality preschool plus weekly home visits.[31]
- The Carolina Abecedarian Project states that: "Ethnicity was not a selection factor, but of those who took part, 98% were African American due to the confound between poverty and ethnicity at the time and place of participant recruitment." This project provided biweekly visits; a resource teacher who served as a liaison between the school and home for the first three years that the child attended public school; individualized curriculum packets; and continuous feedback from the parents.[32]
- The Chicago Child Parent Centers program group was 95.6% black; the comparison group was 94.8% black. The program included a paraprofessional home visitor, a multifaceted parent program, outreach activities, health and nutrition services, free breakfasts and lunches, and a comprehensive school-age program that supported children's transition to elementary school. Parent involvement was one of three factors specifically linked to the success of the CPC children in their likelihood to graduate from high school, experience grade retention, or be placed in a special education classroom.[33]

These studies suggest that, for poor children and children of color, "early education" without intensive family support, is necessary, but not sufficient to replicate the outcomes of the Perry, Abecedarian, and Chicago projects.

Representative leadership

Shared leadership may also be an essential element toward the reduction or elimination of race and class disparities among young children. The early care and education field has not resolved important questions of shared leadership among various ethnic or racial groups. [34]

When asked their perceptions of leadership in the field, Latino, Asian, and African American early educators stated that diverse leadership is often overlooked, yet important for equity and quality in early education.[35] A recent racial and ethnic profile of preschool teachers found that the teachers have less diversity than the children they teach.[36] And, although about 98% of child care providers are women, including one-third of whom are women of color[37] "acknowledged leadership" in our profession has a greater proportion of males, Caucasians, and associates of universities and institutes of higher learning[38] Further, females of color in the early childhood workforce are concentrated in classroom or support roles, important contributors who nevertheless do not have the flexibility in their schedules to attend professional meetings or policy discussions that often occur during the workday.[39]

How Do We Begin to SHARE? [48]

1. **S**EE. Are people who reflect the diversity of our community actually present and represented when meetings and discussions are held about important program, policy or professional issues? What are some critical areas of disparate outcomes for young children and families in my community? Are certain ethnic groups excluded from leadership or concentrated in certain roles? When my group wants the viewpoint of (fill in the group) do we always call on (fill in the individual's name)? Are there any patterns that I didn't notice before?

2. **H**EAR. Are there any important stakeholders in our population that I do not hear from routinely? Would I, like some participants in these dialogs, be surprised to hear what some of my colleagues really think and experience? How might facilitated cross-cultural dialogs or communication training be useful in my professional community? How can I and my organization increase our capacity to listen to different voices with respect?

3. **A**SK before you ACT. How can I - and my organization - be a catalyst for change? Are there others interested in questions of diversity? What might we do with

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(not for) others? Are we willing to bridge boundaries of race, class, and gender? Diversity dialog participants passionately reflected on early education as a vehicle to advance social justice, equity, and inclusion; how do these values intersect with my beliefs about our profession? What is my theory of change? What actual policy, program, or personal development goals do I have?

4. **R**EFLECT. Am I aware of the cultural contexts in which I, my colleagues, families served, and others in my environment exist? How can increased attention to diversity help to achieve my organizational, professional, and personal goals? How have I planned to address any discomfort or unease that I may experience in this learning process? To what extent has my organization engaged in cultural self-assessment of its policies, structures, and staff attitudes or practices?

5. **E**NGAGE. Is there a group of colleagues with whom I might engage in a study or dialog group? Does my program meaningfully involve consumers, community stakeholders, and key constituency groups? Has our organization or group created alliances and partnerships with leaders from community-based organizations or cultural institutions who have complementary goals or who serve the families we serve? How are these allies involved in designing, as well as in implementing, initiatives together with us? Do I have a long-term commitment to realize the desired outcomes?

A sense of professional isolation and marginalization is expressed poignantly and repeatedly by accomplished professionals of Asian, African, and Latino heritage.[40] Among early education professionals, virtually every individual related experiences of being "the only" person of color at key program or policy meetings. Participants spoke about the pressures they felt to be the spokesperson for an entire group. Another common experience was having their general ideas and contributions ignored - often to be embraced later when voiced by a white person. Participants affirmed that, all too often, members from their communities were asked for feedback about a policy or program after it was already designed. Further, their suggestions were often met with resistance or, even worse, were "unheard" or patronized. Cultural differences in group participation were also noted. Passion in speech is "authentic" in some cultures, but was interpreted as angry or ethnocentric in others. Some people of color felt their "voices" were often stereotyped; "fitting in" meant having to "re-voice" or strip their speech of the urgency felt in their communities. Overall, these communities of color indicated that they have not been called upon to play major roles in shaping the course of change for poor children or children of color. As a result, these communities have relied heavily on developing their own structures and institutions.[41]

**What Michigan Can Do –
Key Strategies to Respect Differences and Uproot Disparities**

Key Strategies to Respect Differences and Uproot Disparities
1. **Intentionality** – Purposeful, Focused Efforts
2. **Leadership** – from Diverse Communities, Families, and Cultural Competence for Everyone
3. **Priority Investment** – of Talent, Time, and Resources

Creating a web of support around poor children and children of color requires **intention**. Policy change leading to increased public investment in quality preschool is seen as an antidote to the high social, economic, and educational costs of these disparities. Such investment would benefit children of color because they are more likely to be poor. Influencing public policy, therefore, is a priority strategy to facilitate equity and justice. Without ambivalence, our forthright intention would need to build on a foundation of respect for diversity, support for families, and intentional commitment to eradicate disparities. The Great Start system in Michigan must commit to this level of intentionality and purpose.

Concentrating on the needs of poor children and children of color does not mean creating a separate pathway for their success, but it does require that we intentionally create the institutional infrastructures, cultures, and environments that support the many ways in which children and families develop. To do this will require **leadership** that is representative of the populations served, that includes families, and that supports cultural competence for everyone. Unless policy makers and service providers have cultural insights and language skills to develop rapport with families and offer meaningful support, their efforts are likely to fail. At the same time, professionals and organizations must be prepared to work with parents to ensure that racial, linguistic, and cultural differences do not constitute barriers that prevent families from gaining access to needed supports and services.[42]

Sensitivity to race, class, and culture requires new ways of thinking: a focus on prevention; an emphasis on families' strengths; and offering service where families can easily access them in terms of geography and language. The desired impact must include ameliorating the effects of environment on children and families. Because it is impossible for any one person or group to intuitively understand the strengths and needs of all the different families living in our communities, our diversity means that taking an inclusive leadership approach to planning and designing services is more important than ever.

The growing racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the early childhood populations[43] requires that all early childhood programs and services periodically reassess their appropriateness and effectiveness for the wide variety of families they are mandated to serve. Poor outcomes are not at all restricted to specific racial groups, but nonetheless

raise serious questions about whether those who design, implement, and staff early childhood programs fully understand the meaning of cultural competence. For example, it is estimated that making preschool enrollment universal for all three- and four-year-olds in poverty and increasing the quality of care could close up to 20 percent of the black-white school readiness gap and up to 36 percent of the Hispanic-white gap.[44]

Villegas and Lucas' Characteristics of Cultural Responsiveness

1. *Sociocultural consciousness* means understanding that one's way of thinking, behaving, and being is influenced by race, ethnicity, social class, and language.
2. *An affirming attitude* toward students from culturally diverse backgrounds.
3. *Commitment and skills* to act as agents of change.
4. *Constructivist views* of learning promote critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and the recognition of multiple perspectives.
5. *Learning about students' past experiences*, home, and community culture to help build relationships
6. *Culturally responsive* teaching strategies.

Reference: Villegas, A.M., & Lucas, T. (2002). *Educating culturally responsive teachers*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Finally, Michigan's Great Start must **invest** in poor children and children of color – invest its talent, time, and its resources as a priority even more so in these financially difficult times. Michigan is already among the few states that designate a separate funding stream to support community-based pre-kindergarten.[45]

In fiscal year 2000, Michigan was in the middle tier of states in per capita state spending on child development and family support efforts. Nevertheless, child care assistance has declined since 2004. In fiscal year 2006, total Child Development Care (CDC) payments for subsidies were $445 million, over $18 million less than 2005 and over $44 million less than 2004. Approximately 59,000 families received a child care subsidy in fiscal year 2006. This number has remained unchanged since 2000. This is not a result of fewer children in need. Limiting access has been affected by a number of policy decisions. Michigan has the fifth lowest eligibility level in the nation for child care subsidies when compared to median income and is only one of two states that have not updated its reimbursement rate since 1997.[46]

According to Schweinhart and Fulcher-Dawson, in 2006, Michigan ranked fourth in the number of providers receiving funding from the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), more than $80,600 in fiscal year 2004. Only California, Illinois and New York (three states with significantly higher populations) have more providers receiving subsidies each year. This is due to Michigan's large proportion (46%) of subsidized relative care providers. Nationally, 74% of CCDF funds go to regulated centers and

family day care. Seventy percent of Michigan's CCDF funds are spent for Relative Care or Day Care Aides, three times the national. (Child Care Centers are the most regulated and have the most quality assurance provisions on their settings. Four percent of subsidized care is provided by Child Care Centers.)[47]

Conclusion

Intention. Leadership. Investment.

Race and class are clearly important factors in policy. Clearly the abandonment - or failure to engage - issues of race or class is unjustified given their historical and continuing significance for young children. Further, it is important that policymakers and service providers are sensitive to the racial and class differences that, because of a racially-tinged history, lie just below the surface of most debate in the field and can quickly emerge as deeply felt anger and mistrust. Leaders in the field often are unwilling to name the dynamic that is occurring, preferring instead to focus on abstract concepts like "quality" and "universal accessibility." Yet, as Marilyn Smith noted in her 1987 NAEYC 60th anniversary address, before concluding with her list of dichotomies that divided early care and education: "For all of the dichotomies I've mentioned, those that undermine and are most destructive to our field and to society are racism and classism." [48] Twenty years later, we find that, predictably, silence about race is not productive and, instead, causes frustrations and communication mishaps.

As Michigan's Great Start recognizes that child policy is not "race neutral," the state can more productively advance strategies of effectiveness grounded in intentional policy design. The goals are to articulate a statewide vision and outcomes; to improve access, decrease fragmentation, and increase coordination; and to support a network or team approach, bringing together everyone involved for a coordinated, multidisciplinary response. Notably, when we unravel race and class, we will ultimately feel that the decisions made were "simply good policy."

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[25]Ibid. By 8th grade, the gap between blacks and whites is widening. In 2007, black students had an average reading score that was lower than that of white students by 31 points; in 2002, the gap was 28 points. In 2007, students who were eligible for free/reduced-price school lunch, a proxy for poverty, had an average score that was lower than that of students who were not eligible for free/reduced-price school lunch by 25 points; this performance gap was wider than that of 2002 (13 points).

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