This article is taken from the Rethinking Childhood Series book: Diaz-Soto, L. (Ed.), (2000). *The Politics of Early Childhood Education*. NY: Peter Lang. In the specific text reprinted here Swadener challenges the deficit label "at risk" and argues that we should adopt a more diverse construction of children and families. The reader is referred to the complete book for further discussions from reconceptualist scholars such as Marianne Bloch, Henry Giroux, Shirley Stienburg and Joe Kincheloe on topics ranging from ECE's over-reliance on child development to Disney's influence on modern day children.

"At Risk" or "At Promise"? From Deficit Constructions of the "Other Childhood" to Possibilities for Authentic Alliances with Children and Families

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In this chapter, I draw from my work in comparative child and family social policy, critical feminist analysis, and unlearning oppression/ alliance building to frame a number of issues that relate to the dynamics of social exclusion in the United States. I also draw briefly from some of my research in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly my work with street children and their mothers in Nairobi, Kenya. I raise several questions derived from an applied semiotic analysis of ways in which the "other" is constructed in dominant education and policy discourses, as well as in popular constructions of those who inhabit the "margins" of contemporary society and are systematically excluded from many of its benefits. Throughout the chapter I will be making reference to, and deconstructing, the rhetoric of "children and families at risk," the currently popular language for describing those who are *socially excluded* or at risk of failure in various systems or contexts, including education, future employment, and access to "the good life," or middle-class opportunities. I will attempt to frame these issues in nested contexts (Lubeck, 1987) within which children and families operate, including cultural and linguistic, community, school, national, and political.

When I began a critical analysis of the evolution or "etiology" of the risk rhetoric ten years ago, I found over 2,500 articles, conference papers, and monographs that used this label and assumed its validity. In the U.S., the

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terminology had shifted from "culturally deprived and deficient" (used widely in the 1960s and 1970s) and "disadvantaged" (used in the 1980s) to the currently popular label "at risk" (Swadener, 1990, 1995). Questions I grappled with then, and which are still relevant today, include the following: Is "at risk" merely a cultural deprivation/deficit model retooled for the 1990s? In what ways is the discourse of risk preventing an *authentic dialogue* in which voices of the "real" stakeholders-parents, children, and communities would be heard? In what ways are our "common sense" assumptions about children and families labeled "at risk" racist, sexist, class, and ablest? How can "success stories" (Soto, 1993), culturally sensitive pedagogy, family literacy, and community empowerment interrupt the hegemony of the risk rhetoric and ideology-and get needed programs funded? Most recently I have been concerned with the *criminalization* of children, highlighted recently in the arrest on felonious assault charge of a 38-pound five-year-old kindergartener in our local school district. When did young children become criminals? How does this relate to the ever-expanding prison industrial complex, as Angela Davis calls it?

Since 1989, a growing number of state and national education reports in the U.S. have continued to address the "at risk" theme; perhaps the most publicized was the report titled *A Nation a/ Risk.* Countless local and state committees, task forces, and reports have made recommendations for addressing this "crisis" in American education and have received wide media attention and growing public and private funding (Swadener, 1990). In the 1990s, many states passed laws defining and mandating programs for "at risk" children and families. In short, the term "at risk" has become a buzzword, and is often added to the title of proposals in order to increase the likelihood of funding. I have argued that there is a clear ideology underlying the use-indeed the overuse-of the medical metaphor "at risk," and suggest that we reconceptualize *all children* as "at promise" for success, versus "at risk" for failure. The problem of locating pathology in young victims of oppression (and their families) is, in my opinion, the most objectionable tenet of the "at risk" rhetoric.

Concurrent to my reading and critique of this literature, I have had literally hundreds of conversations with parents-African American, Latina/Latina, Native or indigenous American, Kenyan and South African, many of whom are single parents living below the poverty line. These conversations have focused on their children, their childrearing challenges, ways in which teachers responded to their children, and their vision for the future, including aspirations and goals for

their children. At some point in many of these conversations, the issue of having their child-or their entire family-labeled "at risk" came up. To a person, they found this label highly problematic and felt that it stigmatized both themselves and their children. I believe that my passion for this critique is anchored in their concerns and active resistance to that social construction of their lives and the future potential of their children.

In the following sections of the chapter, I use two U.S. public policy issues, welfare reform or devolution and public school funding, to further unpack the rhetoric of risk and its relationship to ideological and political debates concerning private versus public constructions of the family and the "savage inequalities" or "savage distributions" of school funding and related dynamics of race and class-based stratification.

Public versus Private Constructions of Children, Families, and Poverty

In the U.S., poverty is generally seen as a private affair versus a public responsibility (Polakow, 1993, p. 46). In her book *The Tyranny of Kindness,* Theresa Funiciello (1993) uses the following quote from ancient Greece (Thuicydides): "There will be justice in Athens only when the uninjured parties are as indignant as the injured parties" (p.xiii). Self-interrogation of power and privilege is virtually absent from public policy discourse regarding poverty and educational marginalization or exclusion in the United States. The prevalent ideology surrounding poverty espouses that the poor are "deficient" in some way. This "flawed character" view is the basic tenet of recent "underclass" theory (Reed, 1992). Or, as Ayre (1996) put it, in describing French popular attitudes about parents in prison, "the roots of taboos run deep, particularly when imagination triumphs over reality and stereotypes flourish" (p. 62).

Blaming the victim is one way of locating pathology and deficiencies within the individual and/or family, and has had the devastating effect of being accepted as common sense (Reed, 1992) and a pervasive stereotype of those at the margins of dominant culture. In reality, the vast majority of impoverished people are law abiding, resourceful, and willing to work (Side!, 1992). The U.S. literature since the late 1970s (Pearce, 1978) has documented that greater social and economic forces are at fault for much of the poverty in the U.S. As a result of these forces, those most likely to find themselves poor are women and children (Children's

Defense Fund, 1994; Goldberg & Kremen, 1990; Polakow, 1993; Side, 1992), a phenomenon often referred to as the "feminization of poverty."

The language of deficiency, whether applied to parenting, academic potential, preparation for success in school and work, or 120 *The Politics of Early Childhood Education* health-related factors, is pervasive in public policy discourses concerning young children and their families. In calling for an "at promise" view of *all* children and families, we (Swadener & Niles, 1991; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) have not intended to play a semantic substitution game of trading the "at-risk" label for an "at promise" one. Rather, we would encourage everyone working with children and families to look for and build upon the promise in all children and to concentrate valuable energies and resources on building on these strengths while addressing the many structural and environmental factors that have been argued to place many children "at risk." I share the view with many colleagues that early childhood and the broader field of education should move beyond the persistent tendency to pathologize the poor (Polakow, 1993) and to construct children in poverty and their mothers as an urban, or rural, "other." Such othering is inconsistent with a more inclusive feminist perspective, which has an explicit political project of naming exclusions and oppressions and addressing these inequities while advocating for and with families.

Instrumental Individualism versus Existential Collectivism in Public Policy

Unlike the majority of industrialized nations, particularly in Europe, child and family social policy questions in the United States have *not* been universal, existential questions such as "What are the rights of *all* children and families, and how can the state respect and support these human rights?" They have been particularized and pragmatic (e.g., "How can we get low income women to stop having so many children?" or "How can we get mothers on public assistance into the labor force?").

Several of us (e.g., Grubb & Lazerson, 1982; Polakow, 1993; Swadener, 1995; Wrigley, 1991) have argued that the U.S. childcare and early education "system" has always been highly stratified or caste-like. In the past, day nurseries, which were a form of welfare that existed as little more than custodial care facilities, served poor working mothers while nursery schools existed for middle-class

children. The largest public preschool program in the U.S., Head Start, serves predominantly children and families of low income and has lower standards of education for its teachers than most private, middle-class childcare and preschool programs. Such programs become stigmatized or socially excluded from the mainstream of the early childhood education profession and function in a largely class-based defacto *apartheid* of early childhood programs in the U.S. (For a more in-depth analysis of the history of stratification in early childhood programs and policies, see Swadener, 1995.)

The inherent contradictions in many of the attempts to remedy the social inequities affecting young children and their families in the United States is reflected in this quote from *Broken Promises* (Grubb & Lazerson, 1982):

> Each time children are found in need, humanitarian and benevolent activists propose government programs to overcome the deficiencies of family life. Yet we invest reluctantly in those programs, clinging to a desperate wish that parents would adequately fulfill their private responsibilities and resenting their children tor requiring public attention and for making demands on our private incomes. The result is that public programs are the "cheapest possible care" .... We end up with a corrupted notion of public responsibility in which the benevolent assumptions of *parens patriae* are subordinated to private responsibility. (p. 51)

Single Mothers and the Dismantled U.S. Welfare State

In her history of single mothers and welfare in the U.S., titled *Pitied But Not Entitled,* Linda Gordon (1994) describes the hostility with which most people refer to "welfare." Ironically, this hostility is, in her description, "remarkably democratic" and "hated by the prosperous and the poor, by the women who receive it and by those who feel they are paying for it" (p. 2). As frequently discussed in both scholarly and popular literature, the welfare system stigmatizes, humiliates, and undercompensates its recipients. Funiciello (1993), Gordon (1994), Polakow (1993), and Side! (1992) document ways in which low income mothers suffer invasions of their privacy, inferior childcare, and

many road blocks to self-sufficiency and a living wage (including sufficient health and childcare). Such accounts convey the perspectives of women and children directly influenced by welfare policy and call for transformative policy changes to be made.

These verbal assaults on single mothers in poverty reached a peak during the 1995 U.S. Congressional debate of legislation aimed at dismantling a part of the Social Security Act, in place since 1935, which had guaranteed federal (national) aid to all poor mothers and their dependent children. During debate of the "Personal Responsibility Act," as it was ironically titled, poor mothers were vilified by Republican lawmakers as "breeding mules," as "alligators," and as "monkeys" (Polakow, 1997, p. 246). The Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee stated, in reference to restricting benefits to welfare mothers, "it may be like hitting a mule with a two by four but you've got to get their attention" (DeParle, 1994). When the bill reached the Senate, a senior senator demanded, "We've got to get a provision that denies more and more cash benefits to women who have more and more babies while on welfare" (Toner, 1995).

Valerie Polakow, from whose recent work I draw heavily in this section, examines the circumstances of the growing numbers of women living below the poverty line, and asks:

> Who are these "mules" and breeding females exploiting taxpayers' money and benefiting from what House Speaker Newt Gingrich bemoaned as "the tragedy of American Compassion?" They arc the women who do not fit the patriarchal "family values" frame of the traditional male-headed household. They are the women who choose to separate or divorce; the women whose standard of living drops dramatically when their male partners fail to support their children; the women who choose to have solo pregnancies; the women who are poor and who are unable to exercise reproductive choice due to Medicaid restrictions on abortions; the women who lack education and training and earn only minimum wage; the women in the pink collar ghetto who work part-time and receive no benefits; the women whose low wage earnings can neither pay childcare costs nor support a

> family; the women and teen girls who are molested and raped; the women who are forced to flee domestic violence with their children-in short all these women now constitute our post-modern categorization of "feminized poverty." (p. 247)

The anti-welfare and "underclass" discourses that have so brutally targeted single mothers have also promoted a continuing perception of poverty as a private and behavioral affair, leading to a proliferation of "radicalized and sexualized" fictions about *them* so that the causes of family poverty are seen as rooted in failed and fallen women, failed mothers, failed children, and a failed work ethic, but not a failed and diminishing public economy, nor the histories of class, race and gender discrimination, not the actual consequence of failed public policies (Polakow, 1997, p. 247).

If, instead of blaming the victim, the choice is made to look toward economic and societal forces and dynamics, one is compelled to ask who benefits from this growth in poverty-particularly among women and children in the U.S. (Swadener, 1995). Cook and Fine's (1995) case study of twelve African American mothers ("Motherwit") reveals:

> how deeply caught these women are between institutions which stand as evidence of their "inadequacies" as parents, and children who carry all the conflicting messages of racism and classism inside the U.S. underclass. These narratives ... suggest that radically different policies are needed to replace the current contradictory, usually punishing ones that affect them today and threaten to affect them tomorrow (p. 212).

Ironically, just a year after this was published (in a book I coedited on Children and Families "At Promise"), welfare "reform" legislation was signed into law, dismantling the national program in favor of block grants and greater state (decentralized) control, and making the deepest cuts in federal entitlement programs in over 50 years. Among those most targeted by this year-old legislation were *legal immigrants,* who can no longer obtain health and welfare benefits, including those assisting families with children with disabilities. Other limitations included a "two years and you're out" policy in which benefits were limited to two years, job training was required, and states were given far greater control of programs affecting low income families. Of many concerns regarding

this legislation, the persistent dilemma of health care, childcare, and employable skills/livable wages were all issues that the majority of lawmakers-from a safe, privileged distance-failed to acknowledge in their rush to put most entitlement programs into block grants and therefore limit benefits (Swadener & Jagielo, 1997). More recently, further immigration legislation, more aptly described as "anti-immigration" policy, has required that legal immigrants who wish to bring relatives to live with them in the United States must earn a minimum of $26,000 and have a documented sponsor willing *to repay the government* should services such as food stamps or Medicaid be used.

This protracted political shift in the U.S. to the Right is often referred to as a "new federalism" or "devolution" of more centralized, national entitlement programs and social policies, and is not without parallels in Europe and former communist and socialist nations. Yet, the "U.S. now stands alone among democratic industrialized nations in failing to provide family support policies for children and families. We have no universal health care, no national subsidized childcare system, no paid maternity or parental leave, no child and family allowances, no entitlement to subsidized housing, and now-with welfare 'reform,' no entitlement to public assistance for all children in poverty" (Polakow, 1997, p. 246). A further irony, from an advocacy perspective, is that with deeper cutbacks have come further regulations and requirements on families living in poverty; greater regulation of the lives of people in poverty, often creating new hardships (e.g., forcing families to use marginal childcare or simply leave children alone or forcing single mothers to travel long distances to where required work is available, etc.). Indeed, the current state of welfare "deform," as some welfare rights activists have named it, brings to mind Foucault's observation *that "need is also a political instrument, meticulously prepared, calculated and used"* (1979). Recently, I have found it particularly interesting and troubling to consider the multiple meanings of the large sums of money being spent to document the impact of welfare devolution. One national set of studies, focusing on four cities, has a budget of $15 million over a three-year period. It is not difficult to imagine creative ways in which the foundations who funded this study might have invested the same sum of money in microenterprise loans, education funds, and other forms of direct access to persons eligible for public assistance.

Popular (state) models of welfare reform, which are now being widely replicated across other states, have included programs such as BrideFare (requiring

mothers receiving public assistance to marry the father of their child(ren), WorkFare (requiring volunteer or paid work or work training to continue receiving benefits), and DriveFare (youth in families receiving welfare lose their driver's license for school truancy). All of these programs make the receipt of already limited benefits contingent upon meeting state-imposed regulatory demands within a climate that frequently does not provide the scaffolding or basic supplies for such "sink or swim" requirements of self-sufficiency or independence. The notion that people who are already excluded from the mainstream of American life must be highly monitored and regulated again echoes Foucaultian themes of surveillance, as well as the very "American" notion of pulling up oneself by the bootstraps. This popular bootstraps metaphor builds upon the myth of meritocracy (Mcintosh, 1988), which assumes a level playing field of equal opportunities and denies the existence of oppression, particularly racism, classism, sexism, and linguisism. I turn now to the contrasting case of European social policy and a brief overview of recent sociopolitical and ideological changes in several European states.

Savage Inequalities (Savage Distributions) in U.S. Public Education

Shifting the focus to school-age children and public education, much has been written in recent years on the dramatic economic inequities--or savage inequalities (Kozol, 1991)-of public school funding in the U.S. Public education is funded, in most states, almost exclusively by property taxes. Thus, school resources reflect the property values and income levels of their local community. Briefly stated, poor communities-particularly central city and rural typically have poor schools, and middle class to wealthy communities, often in the suburbs or settings with a healthy economy, have far greater resources for education. The range of annual per pupil expenditures for students can range from as low as $4,000 per student in a poor district to over $15,000 per pupil in a wealthy one. (This includes personnel and overhead costs, such as buildings and materials.)

Several states, including my state of Ohio, have been the target of lawsuits in recent years, based on the assertion that the current funding systems are unconstitutional in that they violate children's civil rights to equal education and are discriminatory by class and race. Similar to the earlier civil rights movement, the school funding equity battle is gaining momentum with more and more states under federal court order (including Ohio, as recently as 1996) to

change their funding formulas in ways that more equitably distribute the state's overall wealth and remove some of the vast disparities between school districts.

In several of his books (e.g., *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* and *Amazing Grace),* Jonathan Kozol has provided a dramatic expose of the economic disparities that exist between schools for white middle-to-upper-class children and schools for low income and working class children. Kozol provides a shocking journalistic account of the "present day reality in public education" in the U.S., and asks his readers to reflect on the setbacks to education caused by the Reagan-Bush conservative agenda in the form of (a) rigidly segregated schools and (b) gross disparities in educational funding. The strength of his recent books is found in Kozol's clear and impassioned analysis of the role of the government and those responsible for funding formulas for local districts in the cause and maintenance of the "savage inequalities" in public education. As he states (1991):

> Unless we have the wealth to pay for private education, we are compelled by law to go to public school-and public school is our [local] district. Thus, the state, by requiring attendance but refusing to require equity, effectively requires inequality. Compulsory inequity, perpetuated by state law, too frequently condemns our children to unequal lives (p. 56).

Throughout his books, Kozol points to racism as a connecting theme running through the deliberate and shameful neglect of children in urban public schools. Kozol also outlines the historical legal challenges led by parents and community leaders (as discussed above) against inequitable state funding formulas (Arnold & Swadener, 1993), and formulates a clear indictment of the structural and political forces that foster the "separate and unequal" public schools in neighboring communities.

Yet, even books such as Kozol' s, which have proved helpful in raising public awareness and winning battles in the school funding equity "war," have also played into the discourse of risk, with its implicit racism, classism, and sexism. A colleague with whom I do unlearning oppression workshops (Mary Smith Arnold) and I have been particularly concerned about ways in which such accounts of the urban "other" are framed in the dominant discourse or "masterscript" of risk and poverty. Implicit in accounts such as these, for

example, is the perceived lack of agency, promise, resiliency, resistance, and full lives of those living in poverty-often children and families of color.
A view of children and families "at promise" requires a critical examination of the dominant culture and popular media's "common sense" about "ghetto" schools, the urban "underclass," and "high risk" children. Accounts such as this also work within the tradition of the social meliorists, who evoke image of pity in their advocacy for social reform and change. Using pathos as an appeal can be problematic on several grounds, including the tendency for the targets of pity to also become targets of contempt, further exclusion or isolation, blame and attribution (Arnold & Swadener, 1993, p. 262). Perhaps a better question to be asking, in the face of resistance to more equitable school funding is, "Is privilege at risk?"

We would argue that without a more thorough interrogation of privilege, including the school and larger life experiences of the children in suburban and other middle-class schools, the savage inequalities described so vividly by Kozol and others will not change. What is at stake for these more privileged children who are often the victims of white flight from cities into the "green grass" of the American suburbs? As advocates for children and families we applaud the basic honesty, critical arguments, and miss ion of Kozol' s message, even as we understand it as a partial truth. While the stark picture of education for the dispossessed is captured in sharp contrasts and cold truths about material deprivation and disrepair in public schools experienced primarily by African American and other children of color, such accounts leave us with the question, "What of the white children who have so much green grass?" Implicit in this question is a deep concern for the children of privilege who are force-fed harmful assumptions-and myths-about their history, power, unexamined privilege, and world (Arnold & Swadener, 1993).

Whether we refer to the "savage inequalities" of publicly funded education or the "savage distributions" of resources and opportunities within the larger society (Polakow & Swadener, 1993), stratification, as reflected in both family and educational policy, persists in the U.S. To quote African American poet Audre Lorde (in a 1984 quote that uses the metaphor of the slave master):

> For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.
> They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game,
> but they will never enable us to bring about change (p. 112).

While equitable funding is necessary for improved schools, restructuring the educational system is *not sufficient* for creating culturally relevant, nonsexist, liberatory education. Stated another way, a subtext of accounts such as Kozol's is often that, given equal funding, the children in poor schools will approximate the children in middle-class (white) schools, which are assumed to be best and are left uninterrogated. Forced assimilation is still the master's tool particularly if dominant culture students are not educated multiculturally. Those of us who advocate on behalf of children and fight for parity in resources must not forget the insidious and multifaceted nature of oppression (Arnold & Swadener, 1993, p. 269). The elimination of persistent racist and classist educational policies, procedures, and practices requires measures that go beyond fiscal concerns and force us to honestly examine human, existential themes of both ourselves and those for whom we would advocate.

I am also concerned that our attempts to solve problems of social exclusion or inequalities in educational opportunity lock us into false dichotomies, including oppressor/oppressed, donor/recipient, and benefactor/beneficiary roles, which function to preclude authentic collaborator or reciprocal ally relationships. Perhaps one of the most powerful questions we can be asking throughout this conference and in our work with socially excluded children and families is, "How can we better *listen to,* rather than talk about or speak for, those who are at the margins of the culture of power?" This is a similar question to those asked by feminists and poststructuralists (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Greene, 1986; Lather, 1991; Polakow, 1993), including "How can educators-and parents-gain control of their discourses and practices, instead of being controlled and manipulated by them?"

Building Alliances with Parents and Strengthening Home-School/ Relations

> "No one has ever asked me what I think. They'll tell me what I should do. Lots of that. I'm feeling good-I'm getting a lot off my chest!"

This quote came at the end of an interview that a white urban primary teacher and researcher (Kay Dunlap) had with an African American mother whose son was in a special reading program for low income children. These interviews were part of a research project that looked at emergent literacy and the role of

home-school cultural continuities, discontinuities, and communication patterns, building on the work of researchers such as Heath (1989), Dyson (1990), Tay I or and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), and Delpit (1988, 1993), all of whom deal with the language and culture of power and teachers' ability and willingness to make those roles explicit so that all children have access to acquiring "cultural capital." The research focused on family literacy and strengthening two-way communication between home and school for families who had been socially excluded in dominant culture schools. Their research has also examined how some family routines support school-like behaviors and others do not. The parent quoted above addressed the sociocultural relationship between literacy in families, particularly as connected to power relations (Swadener, Dunlap, & Nespeca, 1995):

> As an African American parent, my biggest fear is that the teacher might not be genuinely able to code-switch. Can the teacher, from the child's point of view, code-switch to really communicate? Can the teacher use code-switching when she needs to? (p. 274)

These concerns are similar to Delpit's (1988) perspective on the rules for participating in power: "The codes or rules I'm speaking of relate to linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self; that is, ways of talking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting" (p. 283). Parents in our study agreed with Lisa Delpit that some African American (and other children from nondominant cultures) may need to be explicitly taught to code-switch, and teachers need to become more sensitive to the kinds of instruction that are relevant and appropriate to particular children or settings. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1992) studied teachers who were particularly successful, from both community and school perspectives, with African American students and suggests that bicultural code-switching and a *relational* approach to working with students helps create *culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally inclusive classrooms.*

Turning to implications for parent involvement and communication, another theme was the need to match parent involvement to various time, talent, and energy frameworks. The following quote from a parent illustrates this point (Swadener, Dunlap, & Nespeca,1995):

> When teachers get resistance from a parent I wonder sometimes if it's because a parent thinks, "You don't expect much cause I'm a single mother." It's the missionary zeal thing, "you poor-pitiful-people-gollygee-whiz." Sometimes people who are different will look at an organization and will say, "It's up to us to integrate, but it's just too much. I don't have the energy to integrate an organization that is already functioning well without me." The PTAs (parent teacher associations) of the world can help by saying, "It's OK for you to get involved. You don't have to work at integrating it. Just come in." (p. 275)

This quote supports much of the recent U.S. literature on the importance of authentic relationships between home and school and the need for authentic partnerships that integrate parents and the home culture into the school's instructional plan. In her ethnographic account of Mexican families in the United States, Delgado-Gaitan (1990) assetted the critical function of parent empowerment for language-minority families and children:

> The challenge for educators to prepare minority students for successful participation in the school system is dependent on the ability of schools to incorporate the parents and the culture of the home as an integral part of the school instruction plan. The concept of literacy and empowerment…challenges the stereotypes often attributed to Mexican families in the United States, particularly in regard to their participation in schools. (p. 1)

Similarly, in a book titled *Growing Up Literate: Learning from Inner City Families,* Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) emphasize a participatory and democratic vision of family-school partnerships. Using similar arguments as my critique of the construct "children and families at risk," they encourage educators to challenge mainstream assumptions about poverty, gender, and race as predictors of family literacy, as well as school, success, and failure, and forge genuine relationships with families of different backgrounds than their own:

> Sex, race, economic status, and setting cannot be used as significant correlates of literacy. The myths and stereotypes

> that create images of specific groups (families who are poor, inner-city families, teenage mothers and their children) have no relevance when we stop counting and start observing and working with people. (pp. 201-202).

This is not, of course, to deny that the most appropriate manner of teaching children or working with families may differ across socioeconomic levels or ethnically diverse groups. It is, rather, to emphasize the importance of looking beyond stereotypes, middle class, and privileged assumptions, and to ask parents what they think about the education of their children. I conclude this section with a brief example of how well this can work in a school that is rich in cultural and religious diversity.

As part of an Institute for Education that is Multicultural, a team of colleagues and I worked for several years with urban public schools undergoing school-wide reform and emphasized a better understanding of the communities they serve and more equitable and effective academic preparation of the students. These reforms have included portfolio assessment of children's progress, part of which is starting each school year with a parent-teacher-student conference in which parents are asked, "What are your goals for your child this year?" This sounds like a simple question, but it is one that is rarely asked of parents in U.S. schools-particularly low income parents and parents of color. Another change has been the "de-tracking" of the curriculum away from ability groups, which tended to have far more white, middle- and upper-middle-class students enrolled in the advanced or honors courses, and encourage a more culturally inclusive curriculum for *all* learners.

The results were evident within the first two years of this "experiment," using both qualitative and quantitative assessments; parent involvement was greatly increased, as were student achievement test scores at the end of the school year. This work is not easy and results are not immediate; many white teachers continue to resist these reforms and have recently succeeded in undermining some of the school-based reforms. Yet, we know that genuine interest in families' goals for their children, combined with follow-through based on their recommendations, can go a long way in building alliances with families to improve education for socially excluded students. Convincing teachers who already feel overburdened with their complex roles in urban schools that this is work well worth doing remains a challenge.

Preparing Teachers for Culturally Inclusive Pedagogy and Parent Partnerships

In a course I teach on "Home, School, Community Relations," we anchor many of our readings, discussions, and community experiences in the question, "How can I be a more powerful ally with families of children I teach?" We begin with an activity I call "Parent Perspectives," which uses quotes from parents who differ by culture language, gender, sexual orientation, family structure, religion, income, etc., and encourage students to say how they might feel if they were that parent. Examples of quotes include the following - Single mother: "I feel my son's behavior at school is always blamed on the fact that I am a single parent." Native American parent: "I couldn't believe when my daughter brought home a paper 'Indian headdress,' just when she was learning what it means to earn an eagle feather." Puerto Rican mother: "My children are discouraged from speaking Spanish at school and are embarrassed by my accent- I am afraid they are going to lose much of their culture in this school."

This activity is followed by a three-hour "Unlearning Oppression" workshop, in which students are exposed to a multicultural alliance model and its assumptions through experiential activities and discussion. The major *assumptions* of our model include: (a) racism and other forms of oppression are pervasive and hurt everybody; (b) oppression is not our fault-we came into the world naturally loving, zestful, and curious, but racism and other forms of oppression are our responsibility (and should be since oppression hurts everyone); (c) it is not our differences that keep us apart, it is our attitudes about difference that separate us; (d) we all stand in the shoes of both victim (target) and agent (victim) of oppression; (e) racism and other forms of oppression are learned and can be unlearned, and it is never too early to start or too late to begin (Arnold & Swadener, 1993).

Other activities include completing a family tree and oral history interview (to put them in touch with their own cultural and family heritage), interviewing a single parent, developing a monthly budget to support a family living in poverty, including visiting various social service agencies, volunteering in a community-based setting (often a homeless shelter), and developing resources for communicating with, and involving parents in, their early childhood setting in the future. We constantly revisit the question of how we can be stronger allies,

including participating in active listening activities, interrogating our own power and privilege, and continuing the challenging work of unlearning oppression. Guest speakers include many parents and professionals working in programs that actively involve parents.

I mention these specific examples from my teaching, because they relate to the question of how we can encourage teachers and future teachers to transcend some of the deficit-based constructions of children in difficult circumstances to see the promise in all children they teach. Other classes I teach involve field placements in culturally diverse, low income schools in which we use the expressive arts and social (cultural) studies to involve children. The combination of respect for children's families, ability to listen to both children and their parents, and the use of learning projects that actively involve and empower children can go far in helping future teachers find "promise" even in the most desolate "inner city" landscapes because they engage as allies with young, excited learners.

Children in Difficult Circumstances: Experiences with Street Children in Kenya

Before concluding this chapter I would like to say a few words regarding my experiences working with children in what UNICEF calls "extremely difficult circumstances." During the years 1994-1995 I lived in Nairobi, Kenya, while I carried out a Fulbright-sponsored collaborative study on impacts of rapid social and economic change on childrearing. During this time I volunteered with street children and later with some of their mothers. I started an arts program literally on the street (at the site of an informal feeding and tutoring program staffed entirely by volunteers) and helped found an arts apprenticeship group home for four of the older boys who showed great promise in the arts. Later, I helped some of the mothers organize a self-help and income-generating group and have continued to support these projects since my return home, including organizing exhibits of the children's art and fundraising for the mothers group. As others (e.g., Aptekar, 1994, 1996; Kilbride & Kilbride, 1990; Munyakho, 1992; Muraya, 1993) have documented, street children show remarkable resilience, problem-solving skills, and frequently develop a "peer culture" of survival and mutual support which their precarious existence demands. And, as you are aware, street children are not unique to the so-called third world- in fact, in sub-Saharan Africa they are a very recent phenomenon.

These are young people, ranging in age from 5 to 17, who could certainly be labeled "children at extreme risk," as they have been shot and killed, arrested and placed in terrible conditions in remand homes, have frequently experienced abuse, actively use drugs (primarily sniffing glue), and have high rates of HIV/AIDS. Yet, one has only to spend time tutoring them, seeing their work in the expressive arts, and informally observing daily life, to be struck, not in a romanticized or missionary zeal way, but in a very real, existential way, by these marginalized children's passion for life, their resilience, and indeed- their promise or human potential. Taking an existential view and showing affection, offering a hand, a lap, a story, or just a warm handshake were vital connections for both the children and for me. Getting out-of-school children back into school or enrolled in vocational programs was a major agenda of our volunteer organization, but I found that the arts program and the use of dance, drama, song, and visual arts (drawing, painting, and wood carving) were powerful antidotes to life of and on the streets. I use this brief example to underscore my intent that we view *all children as children "at promise,"* however privileged or difficult their circumstances may be.

It is also critical for readers to understand that this deconstruction of the discourse of risk is not merely emantic, nor is it a panacea for the increasingly difficult circumstances of children, as documented powerfully in reports such as *The State of the World's Children* each year by UNICEF, in Bernard van Leer reports (e.g., Ayre, 1996), and many other publications with which you are familiar. Those of us who fight for educational equity must not lose sight of the multiple forces that converge in a brutal assault against children, particularly poor children and children of non-dominant culture backgrounds, as they seek the mandated knowledge, differentially packaged, in our schools.
Advocacy for and with children and families is extremely urgent in these times and stronger alliances between educators and families, particularly families who are socially excluded-offer promise for a more inclusive and equitable future.
We must find the will and the character to view all children through the lens of promise.

I conclude with the words of an eight-year-old Mexican-American writer, who many would describe as "at risk." She has been empowered as a writer through participation in a bilingual family literacy program and "recreates the event of

her birth in universal and mythological symbols, emphasizing the central role of her family" (Quintero & Rummel, 1995):

> On the day l was born the earth shook and the angels wept.
> On the day l was born the sky turned green, the clouds turned orange.
> On the day l was born, they discovered Atlantis.
> And books overflowed my house.
> On the day l was born the earth was clean and there was peace.
> On the day I was born my family scampered in to see me.
> On the day I was born the sun fell in love with the moon.

In making a strong case for reconstructing our views and the language used to talk about children at the margins of our various societies and educational institutions, we must not forget to listen to the voices of children and to honestly interrogate our own biases, or we will never be able to hear their pride or see their promise.

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