

# Foreword

A TELLING MEASURE of any nation is how it treats its most vulnerable and marginalized citizens. This is particularly the case in a nation that places itself on high moral ground where appropriate responses to misery and suffering are concerned. In the United States, efforts to respond to national and international catastrophes, widespread loss of life, human indignities, and people in distress have been one of our calling cards. The United States often describes itself as the moral compass of the world, especially with respect to human rights and dignities. We have castigated nations the world over (e.g., China, Iraq, North Korea, and Libya) for human rights violations, and we have challenged them to be better in serving their most needy citizens, most often women and children.

It is against this backdrop that the United States has to confront some of its own citizens, namely its poor, and more specifically children. In this important work Professor H. Richard Milner offers conceptual and practical approaches that educators and teacher educators can incorporate in serving students in poverty. What Milner poignantly informs us is that if individuals have any chance of being lifted out of poverty, the quality of their schooling—from ideological, pedagogical, and policy perspectives—must be considerably transformed.

The point that Milner drives home in this work is that poverty matters in this country. It matters because it shapes life opportunities, destroys life dreams, can have a stranglehold on generations of families, and extracts hope from even the most optimistic of individuals. Even more concerning is the widening gulf between those with massive wealth and those without the means to meet life's most basic necessities. Wealth disparities in the United States are at an all-time high. According to an analysis by the

AFL-CIO, the CEO to worker ratio was 331:1 in 2013, and the CEO to minimum wage ratio was 774:1.<sup>1</sup> At a time when many people continue to work multiple jobs, yet still fall short in making ends meet, there is a greater need for compassion and understanding of children and families living in poverty. The sobering reality is that approximately sixteen million children currently live in poverty across this nation. These are some of the highest numbers we have seen in close to two generations.

Moreover, Milner effectively communicates in this book how poverty has a more concentrated and chronic influence on families and communities of color. Milner informs us that poverty cuts across all ethnic and racial lines, but we cannot dismiss the disproportionate manner in which poverty affects African American, Latino, Asian, and Native American populations. Milner is bold in taking on this challenge because many educators are much more comfortable discussing poverty than race. Milner courageously brings us back to this uncomfortable space and tells us that the nexus between race and poverty cannot be overlooked.

In 1989 critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw discussed the salience of intersectionality.<sup>2</sup> In her work she contended that social identities interact on multiple levels, contributing to systematic injustice, social and economic inequality, and layered oppression. Moreover, she stated that intersectionality operates from a framework that assumes the typical conceptualizations of oppression within a society, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and belief-based bigotries, do not act independently of one another. Milner echoes Crenshaw's work here, because he reminds us that we cannot look at issues of poverty apart from race. Moreover, he offers a framework that is thought provoking, solutions based, and empirically and conceptually sound for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers. Milner challenges educators to be mindful of the intersecting ways that race and poverty have a profound influence on the school experience of many young people in the United States. In this work, Milner is more than a reformer; he is a champion of one of the nation's most vexing challenges—the racialization of poverty. He is compassionate yet bold, forceful, and informative, and inspires us all to do better in preparing educators to work with this deep-seated problem, the intersection of race and poverty. Milner's charge will leave all educators asking, "How can I do more?"

Why does Milner push educators to look at the race and poverty nexus? Mounds of data on poverty convey a troubling reality. In 2010, according to

the National Poverty Center, 27.4 percent of blacks and 26.6 percent of Latinos were living in poverty compared to 9.9 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 12.1 percent of Asians.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the center reports that poverty rates are highest for families headed by single women, particularly if they are black or Latina. In 2010, 31.6 percent of households headed by single women were poor, while 15.8 percent of households headed by single men and 6.2 percent of married-couple households lived in poverty. Children represent a disproportionate share of the poor in the United States; they are 24 percent of the total population, but 36 percent of the poor population. In 2010, 16.4 million children, or 22.0 percent, were poor. The poverty rate for children also varies substantially by race. The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) reports that the largest group of poor children is Latino (5.8 million), followed by white, non-Hispanic (5.2 million) and black (4.1 million).<sup>4</sup> Not only are children of color disproportionately poor, the youngest children of color are most at risk of challenges associated with poverty. According to CDF data, in 2012 approximately one in three children of color were poor—11.2 million—and more than one in three children of color under age five were poor—3.5 million. Even more staggering is that black children were the poorest proportionately (39.6 percent), followed by American Indian/Native Alaskan children (36.8 percent) and Hispanic children (33.7 percent). Nearly half of black children under age five and more than one in three Hispanic children the same age were poor. And the CDF reports that in six states (Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, Oregon, and Wisconsin), half or more of all black children were poor in 2012. Nearly half the states had black child poverty rates of 40 percent or more.

These troubling statistics remind us that there is a need for educational practitioners who possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to effectively teach students who live in poverty. Moreover, we need to think about these children in a nuanced, anti-deficit, and compassionate manner. What is not helpful are reductive “how-to’s” about children in poverty. The danger in such prescriptions is that they offer simplistic and pathological accounts of children living in poverty, and fail to recognize the skills, abilities, and resilience that are demonstrated by millions of poor children every day. Indeed, Milner reminds us that children living in poverty are not poverty stricken when it comes to intellectual ability, work ethic, resilience, survival skills, and determination. It is a message that educational practitioners must constantly keep in mind.

The disheartening data on children in poverty requires us to examine the poverty-race nexus and to evaluate what it means for classroom teachers. No longer can educators look at these students as “other people’s children.” There must be a willingness to tie the fates of teachers and their students. Dr. King famously stated in his letter in a Birmingham jail that “we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” It is in that spirit that educators must come to understand the structural conditions that contribute to poverty, and how many policies and practices reify them. Milner discusses the policies and structures that contribute to poverty, but he does not leave educators to figure out solutions. He offers accessible frameworks, research-based practices, and anecdotal accounts of how educators can think, care, and act. The famous abolitionist Frederick Douglass stated it well when he proclaimed, “Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.” It is abundantly clear that the United States must respond to its most marginalized citizens in a different way. Moreover, the role that educators can play in rethinking and reframing children in poverty cannot be overstated. The importance of the moment is upon us and each educator must be prepared to answer the call in a compassionate and caring manner. This book is certain to be hailed by change agents at all levels of our education system who are looking for authentic ways to identify and assist some of our most vulnerable populations.

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