The Institute for Diversity, Equity, and Advocacy (IDEA) is proud to present these profiles highlighting our faculty's outstanding research and community engagement around grand challenges.

**November, 2015 by Amelie Hyams**

Kinship care is about family helping family. When children are raised by family members, other than their parents, it's called kinship care. Dr. Priscilla Gibson, a professor in the School of Social Work (http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/people/profiles/GibsonP.asp), tells us kinship care has been done informally in the African American culture for centuries. “My mother was raised by her grandmother, so I am from a family that did kinship care. We didn’t have a name for it, we just did it.”

Gibson feels the public’s understanding of African American culture has not often been about its strengths. “Yes,” she acknowledges, “there are lots of issues and problems but there are also strengths.” Kinship care is one of these strengths.
Even when other desirable options are available, affluent African American families have chosen kinship care for their children. One example Gibson has studied is the care provided by Michelle Obama’s mother, Marian Robinson. Through her research Gibson learned that for the Obamas, the advantages were clear.

Mrs. Robinson had concerns about raising her granddaughters in the White House. Are they missing something about African American culture, or about their FAMILY culture, that they need to know? She provides that connection for them, and cares for them as only their grandmother can.

Unlike the Obamas, most African American grandmothers providing kinship care have very few options. They step in when parents can’t care for their children due to drug abuse or other issues. “They go on emotions”, says Gibson. “They overwhelmingly do not want their grandchildren in the foster care system, with strangers.” It’s important to them that these children are cared for by a family member.

And it’s not easy. Typically these grandmothers are older, have low incomes and often have health issues. They’re doing the best they can to raise their grandchildren, but they often need resources to maintain the caregiving arrangement. However, when these grandmothers encounter the Child Protection System, things become even more difficult due to the many rules and regulations.

This system can be hard to navigate. Plus it’s designed to work with paid foster care providers, who are trained by the system. Gibson asks, “How do we train this person [a grandmother who already has a relationship with the child] and how do we assess what they may have been doing with their children and grandchildren that doesn’t work?” The system needs to adapt in order to better facilitate this type of care.

While working with grandmothers providing kinship care, Gibson found another issue, out of school suspensions “kept coming up”. African American students living in out of home placement represent one of the highest groups in out of school suspensions.

The challenges these grandmothers face with the education system moved Gibson to explore grandmothers’ experiences and later, the experiences of students, educators and caregivers. In this latter study, she worked with a team of researchers who found that the lack of a functional caregiver-educator relationship was a significant barrier.

Gibson’s paper, “Enough is Enough: Grandmothers’ strategies for mitigating out-of-school suspensions for African American youth (http://experts.umn.edu/en/publications/enough-is-enough(4aa0190f-d2f6-4426-887a-adebf47c1149).html)” (Gibson & McGlynn, 2013) came from this research. She reports that children in kinship care have often experienced neglect or abuse, prior to living under their grandmother’s care. This increases the instances of behavior problems at school.

A U.S. Department of Education report (http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rulesforengagement/CRDC%20School%20Discipline%20Snapshot.pdf) (2014) tells us that black students are suspended and expelled at a rate three times greater than white students. A research study by the Kirwan Institute (http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/racial-disproportionality-schools-02.pdf)(2014) shows clear evidence of bias in these situations. Black students are being suspended for behaviors that are excused for white students. This cycle begins in elementary school.

Education is vitally important for these children’s lives. Gibson knows education “is the only way parents can get their kids to move up economically.” So we need to end the cycle of out of school suspensions in order to educate these kids.

“I get really concerned about the blaming,” she adds. Blaming doesn’t help. “Schools ought to recognize grandparents in similar ways as they do parents.” Gibson also feels that, “Teachers and grandparents would benefit from discontinuing the cycle of blame and work together to avoid out of school suspensions.”

There is a lot that can be done to help these children. But first, Gibson tells us, “Empathy and forgiveness and problem-solving are needed.”

[Header Image Credit: Amelie Hyams, 2015]