

Fighting Against All Odds: Children Living in Urban Poverty in the United States

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Introduction

Tahriek was four years old and Terrance three when I first met them. They were your stereotypical adorable preschool boys who loved to play, be independent, and, at the same time, sit in someone's lap with a storybook and their thumbs in their mouths. I met Tahriek when I first visited my mother's preschool classroom in the downtown Head Start program of our city. Within a few weeks I met his younger brother Terrance who was entering the classroom in the fall. I was thirteen years old and thought that they were great fun but they were unlike any of the other children I took care of. For starters, they were African American. They did not live in my upper-middle class white suburban neighborhood but their home was less than five miles away. Although they did not grow up very far away from me, they seemed to live in a completely different world. My mother invited them to spend some time with us each week because she saw in them the potential to fail within the given system. She also saw in them enormous hope and potential for great success. She wanted to see them succeed and believed that the extra time and attention that our family could provide might encourage success. My family enjoyed having them around and they seemed to like coming every week, although looking back I realize that it must have been a strange contrast for them at four years old.

The first time we suggested that they have a picnic lunch in our neighbor's treehouse they looked at us as though we had four heads. "I'm not eating lunch in a tree!" Terrance cried in his then five-year-old voice. I was baffled that they had never heard of a treehouse. That fall, they came over as we were outside raking the leaves and yet again they were astonished. Raking leaves? At sixteen I was equally astonished, and a little

jealous, that not everyone had to rake fifty bags of leaves each fall. They had never seen anyone do what they perceived to be a silly and pointless task. Four years later we embarked on our longest journey yet; to visit my sister in Washington, D.C. . . . by plane. They had never been on a plane and were convinced that they were going to die. The only planes they had ever even heard of were the real planes that made the news because of a crash or the planes on television. To be honest, if that was my only exposure to airplanes I would never have boarded but our two friends followed faithfully knowing that they were going to die. To their complete shock, we made it to D.C. and back home without any crashes and not even the smallest amount of bloodshed.

My countless experiences with Tahriek and Terrance are funny, frustrating, and everything in between. More than anything, my times with these two “young brothers” opened my eyes to the reality that not all children grew up with the same support to which I was accustomed. They were born in one of hundreds of urban areas in the United States and continue to grow up there. The past nine years with these boys have given me an inside view of some of the realities of growing up in poverty today. The realities are harsh, frightening and, above anything else, sad. The differences between their childhoods and mine are vast, yet these two boys are living in far from the worst circumstances in our country. They have a devoted mother, a teacher, my own mother, who has been invested and active in their lives for almost a decade, and the knowledge that people care about them. These things do not change the fact that they live in a fatherless family because their parents were never married and their dad was in jail for a long time. Their mother is younger than my sister, twenty-nine, and her oldest child is twelve. Their neighborhood and community is plagued by violence, drugs, and apathy.

They attend a school that has classes that are too large, teachers who do not receive enough support to be effective, and little community support. Again, their family, community, and school are not the worst in the U.S. but they are far from the best circumstances for learning and growing. These circumstances are all too common across the United States. Millions of children are living in poverty much worse than that which Tahriek and Terrance have experienced. No child should have to live in communities with the poverty and violence that is present in theirs.

Children in the United States who are born into poverty are fighting against many odds. In this paper, I will examine the lives of millions of children. I will discuss their developmental needs and contrast that to their home lives, community lives, and school lives. While this topic has a tendency to be overwhelming and depressing, there is hope. Some look to a partnership among these different factions of the child's life (home, community, and school) as a possible way to fight against many of the problems they face in poverty. The emergence of community-school partnerships is one form the fight has taken. I will look at these schools and take two case studies of community-school partnerships in Boston and examine how successful they are at meeting the various needs of children in urban poverty. Children are not getting everything they need and deserve in order to grow up to be well-adjusted adults who are capable of being productive and successful, but that can and must change. While there can be no simple one-step solution to these complex realities, I believe that with commitment and concern the reality of poor children's lives can be changed. The effects of changes will be realized today and in the long term.

PART I

A Child's Life and Development

The Reality of Child Poverty Today

Today in the United States there is epidemic poverty plaguing childhood for many of our nation's children. Census data for 2000 indicates that there were about 72 million people under the age of 18 living in the United States and more than 11.6 million of these children were living below the poverty line. That means that at least one out of every six children in this country was living in poverty. More alarming is the realization that 77% of these children living in poverty lived in families that had at least one working adult. These were not children from families that were lazy, unable to find work, unmotivated, or unable to work due to illness, drug use, or some other circumstances but rather children from families that were working and still not able to make enough money to support their families in a healthy way. These children are in a situation not of their own making. For many, this is not a condition that they are surviving for a brief period of time but rather a societal context in which they are challenged to grow up. Eighty percent of children who are poor one year are still poor the following year. This is not a problem that will just go away by itself.¹

Every 46 seconds a child is born into poverty in the United States.² This means that on average, more than one child is borne each minute into a poor family in this country. A life of poverty is not simply inconvenient or uncomfortable; rather, a life of poverty is truly harmful to children. Specifically, poor children are at least twice as likely as non-poor children to suffer stunted growth and lead poisoning. More than half

¹ "Fair Start: Frequently Asked Questions." Children's Defense Fund: A Fair Start. 2003. Children's Defense Fund. January 23, 2003. <http://www.childrensdefense.org/fs_cpfaq_facts.php>.

² "Children in the States: US" Children's Defense Fund: A Fair Start. 2003. Children's Defense Fund. January 23, 2003. <http://www.childrensdefense.org/states/state_profiles.htm>.

of all poor American experience serious deprivations, which are defined as lack of food, utilities being shut off, living in overcrowded or substandard housing, or lacking a stove or refrigerator.³ Nine million three hundred thousand children benefited from food stamps in 1999 and more than half the people who receive food stamps are children. Fifteen million four hundred thousand children in 2000 got free or reduced-price school lunches.⁴ Children are struggling to eat and even though many are able to rely on subsidies from food stamps and school lunch programs they are unsure that there will be food in their homes. They are living in inadequate housing often without heat in a country that claims to provide a chance for a pursuit of happiness. In addition to these impoverished children, the U.S. is also home to 2.1 million people who have at least \$1 million in financial assets other than real estate. Moreover, 57 thousand people in the United States have over \$30 million to their names.⁵ At the same time that millions of children return home wondering if there will be any food, over 2 million others are millionaires. The contrast that exists in the United States is surreal.

The hazards of poverty go beyond hunger and a high risk of stunted growth and lead poisoning. The Center for Disease Control reported that a baby who is born to a poor mother is more likely to die before its first birthday than a baby born to a high school dropout, a mother who smoked during her pregnancy, or an unwed mother. According to the Children's Defense Fund, every year that a child spends living in

³“Fair Start: Frequently Asked Questions.” 1.

⁴“Fair Start: Frequently Asked Questions,” 2.

⁵“Number of Millionaires in the United States Grew in 2001 Despite Volatile Financial Markets.” Merrill Lynch, 2003. Merrill Lynch and Co., Inc. 18 Feb. 2003. <http://www.ml.com/about/press_release/06172002-1_us_grew_pr.htm>.

poverty is equal to \$11,800 in lost future productivity of the child's working life.⁶ According to the U.S. Department of Education, living in poverty, more than living in a single parent home or being born to a teen parent, raises a child's risk of failing to finish high school.⁷ It is clear that poverty is a factor in a child's life that affects many different things. This reality is not only scandalous, but can create universal damages if needed resources are not available.

Many children live in communities where poverty is widespread and some families have been caught in this cycle for years, if not for generations. One of the few hopes available to children in these conditions is education. In the United States all children are entitled to and are required to attend school through ages sixteen. Many think that the schools are the only hope for children in poverty. But what does this mean when we see that schools are not living up to their names in many communities? There are over 59 million children between the ages of three and eight that are enrolled in school in the U.S. yet, as of 1998, 71% of all fourth graders in this country were reading below proficiency level.⁸ In a nation that proclaims that education is the key to success, we do not seem to be doing a good job providing many children with successful outcomes to their educations.

It is sad but true that the economic lines in this country tend to parallel ethnic and racial lines. Black children in the United States are five times more likely to be poor and eight times more likely to be persistently poor during their childhood than white

⁶“Children in the States: US” *Children's Defense Fund: A Fair Start*. 2003. Children's Defense Fund. February 23, 2003. <http://www.childrensdefense.org/states/state_profiles.htm>.

⁷“Fair Start: Frequently Asked Questions,” 2.

⁸“U.S. Summary: 2000” *United States Census 2000*. July 2002. U.S. Department of Commerce: Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau. 23 Jan. 2003 <<http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kprof00-us.pdf>>.

children. Further, black and white children have very different access to material resources during their childhoods as well as to educational opportunities.⁹ These realities have not gone unnoticed by people in power in the United States. The most recent sign of this was on January 8, 2002 when President George W. Bush signed new educational policy into effect in the hopes of giving all children not only access to education but access to an equal chance of learning and leaving school with an education. This new educational policy, *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, is the most sweeping change that has been made in the world of educational reforms since the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* which was passed in 1965.¹⁰

All of the promises reflected in this new legislation remind people that the government is aware that children living in poverty are more likely than other children to fail in school, to have less qualified teachers, and not to finish school. While this policy is one attempt to help children in the United States, the reality remains that millions of children are living in poverty right now and continue to be hurt by their circumstances. This paper seeks to understand some of the reasons why and to identify several school and community based interventions that attempt to address some of the effects of poverty on urban children. To this end I will explore three of the factors that have been identified by researchers as influencing a child's development i.e., families, especially their parents or caregivers, communities and neighborhoods, and schools. These three institutions have been found to be both harmful and helpful for children in their development. Below

⁹Mary Corcoran and Terry Adams. "Race, Sex, and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty." *Consequences of Growing Up Poor*. Eds. Greg J. Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997.

¹⁰ "Introduction: *No Child Left Behind*," *No Child Left Behind*, January 2003 U.S. Department of Education 23 Jan. 2003 1. <<http://www.nochildleftbehind.gov/next/overview/index.html>>.

Examines selective needs of children in the process of development as well as the impact of each of these three institutions on the lives of millions of children who are recurrently living in urban poverty in the United States.

A Psychological Model

Urie Bronfenbrenner

When one studies children it is important to understand how they grow and develop because without this knowledge one is unable to fully understand them as people. Psychologists today do not perceive children simply as small adults but instead as a special group of people with their own characteristics and needs. According to Urie Bronfenbrenner, a developmental child psychologist from the twentieth century, to fully understand human development one needs to consider the entire system in which growth occurs.¹¹ What this means is that if you really want to understand a child and his or her development, you need to look at all of the factors and people in the child's life. Children's growth is not only a product of their psychological and biological development, but also their interactions with their families, communities and schools. These multiple systems work together and affect the life of the child. Bronfenbrenner placed the child at the center of his developmental model and looked at the effects of other people and institutions on the child's development.

These interactions take many different forms and Bronfenbrenner broke them up into different categories. One of these was what he called the microsystem in which children grow. A microsystem is a set of complex interrelations within the immediate setting of, in this case, a child's life.¹² Microsystems are made up of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relationships in the child's world. In more concrete terms, the

¹¹ "Ecological Models of Human Development: Urie Bronfenbrenner." *International Encyclopedia of Education*. Vol. 3, 2nd ed. 1994. 37.

¹² Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979, 7.

child is impacted by his family, school, and peer group. ¹³These are the very personal and frequent relationships that occur in a child's life. The microsystem in a child's life does not usually come as a surprise to people because it is within his system that most people see children. They are small people who are impacted by the people who are directly in their lives. While this is true, the extent to which this is the whole truth needs to be questioned. Children are affected by the people they see every day but there are other factors that must be considered as well. Bronfenbrenner goes into these other factors in great detail. While I will not be going into the details of all of them, there is one more level which is very important for understanding the development of the children that I will be examining in this paper.

The second and next important system which is critical for our understanding is the mesosystem. According to Bronfenbrenner, the mesosystem is the principle of interconnectedness that applies with equal force and consequence to the links between the different settings in the child's life. ¹⁴In other words, the mesosystem is the links and processes between two or more settings of personal development for a child. It is a system of microsystems. The way that the microsystems interact and impact the child is the primary focus of the mesosystem. ¹⁵For example, the interactions between the family and the school will affect the child and his or her development, in addition to the independent impacts of the family and the school. These relationships exist within Bronfenbrenner's model in the mesosystem level.

There are other levels in Bronfenbrenner's model including the exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem. While these are also important in understanding

¹³“Ecological Models of Human Development,” 39.

¹⁴Bronfenbrenner, 7.

¹⁵“Ecological Models of Human Development,” 40.

different elements of child development, the micro- and mesosystems are the primary focus of this paper. The first part of this paper will be looking at the impact of one setting on children's development and growth while the final section of the paper will examine in more detail the importance of the relationship between the various microsystems to understand children in poverty.

Bronfenbrenner argued that the interconnectedness between settings is very important in children's lives. He insisted however that it is becoming far less common for society to value this. Specifically, he argued that children's schools are becoming more and more isolated from their homes. The school building is larger and farther away from home. The feeling of the school is far more impersonal as the number of staff in the building increase and the teachers and staff often commute to school instead of living within the community in which they work. Therefore, the parents and teachers are far less likely to know each other in the midst of this distance and isolation.¹⁶ Does this sound like an argument that people make today or one that is appropriate for many of today's schools? Yes, and yet it is interesting to note that Bronfenbrenner, while a modern name and thinker, made these remarks on the presence of the schools in communities during the 1970s. Things have clearly not changed very much in many schools yet the problem is certainly not new.

Bronfenbrenner went on to criticize school communities themselves. He claimed that there was an absence of communal life within schools. In addition to being geographically distant from the students' homes and no longer neighborhood but instead large regional schools, they were also isolated within the school community. Further,

¹⁶Bronfenbrenner, 230.

classrooms were distinct and separated. ¹⁷ This sense of partnership among the classes and teachers was not always present. Bronfenbrenner felt strongly about this mesosystem in children's lives and went on to say that school had become, "one of the most potent breeding grounds of alienation in American society." ¹⁸ He saw this as evident when he looked at the rising presence of violence, destruction, and vandalism in the schools during the 1970s. He did not think that it was a coincidence that this rising violence was happening at the same time that the school was being pushed out of the community and the community was pushed out of the school. He wrote, "... alienation of children and youth and its destructive developmental sequence are mesosystem phenomena. They reflect a breakdown of the interconnections between the various segments of the child's life - family, school, peer group, neighborhoods." ¹⁹

Bronfenbrenner believed that for a child to develop in a healthy environment there needed to be multiple interactions between the members of their different microsystems. He saw the new problems that were arising in the schools as a result of the separation between the home and the school. When the interactions failed, the child was left without a supportive mesosystem and, in turn, without supportive microsystems. Specifically, Bronfenbrenner argued that members of the child's innermost circle would be unaware of the other elements of the child's life. Bronfenbrenner's model is important for understanding the complex contexts in which children develop. As importantly, it helped me identify variables that affect a child's successful development on a daily basis. In the subsequent chapters I will use this model as a guide for further exploring the lives of children living in poverty. I will examine how some teachers, parents and community

¹⁷ Bronfenbrenner, 231.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

activist has sought to redress some of the negative effects of poverty on children's lives by intervening in their mesosystems. Finally, I will discuss how these mesosystem interventions can affect the microsystem and individual child in poverty.

PART II

What Touches the Life of a Child?

The Impact of Home Life: Parents

There has been considerable research on the family life of poor children in the United States and much of this research has challenged preexisting beliefs about impoverished life. At the same time, other statistics confirm the common belief about who is at greatest risk to be living in poverty. For example, statistically, as of 1987, 80% of families that were always headed by a married couple never lived in poverty. This was the group least likely to ever live in poverty. On the other end of the spectrum, the families most likely to live in long-term poverty, living in poverty for at least seven to ten years, were those always headed by a single parent. Over 60% of the families that always had a single parent were living in long-term poverty.²⁰ There appears to be a correlation between the family structure and the length of time a family is likely to live in poverty. Based on this data, it is inaccurate to conclude that single-parent homes cause poverty or that dual-parent families guarantee that one will not live in poverty. Rather we can conclude that there is a correlation between the two sets of variables, i.e., parental family composition and poverty.

Specifically in 1987, 38% of U.S. poor children under the age of six lived in families that were headed by a married couple and another 54% of the poor children under the age of six were being raised in mother-only families.²¹ It is clear that more of the children living in poverty are from homes with only one parent and typically this parent is the mother. The question remains, what happens to children who are living in poverty? Are poor children living with two parents better off than children being raised only by

²⁰ *Five Million Children: A Statistical Profile of Our Poorest Young Citizens*, New York: National Center for Children in Poverty, School of Public Health, Columbia, 1990, 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

their mothers? As I will argue below, this is a highly debated topic in part because the statistical information does not always agree with people's preexisting beliefs about poverty, family structure, and parenting. There are many variables that affect children living in poverty some of which I will examine. We will look at the presence of child abuse, the role of teenage mothers, the implications of having substance-abusing parents, the role that parental intelligence and education has in a child's development, the presence of mental illness, specifically depression, in the home, and the current level of violence that surround urban child poverty. All of these factors have significant implications for children living in such environments. Through many of these issues runs the common theme of violence. I will be looking closely at the presence of violence and the role that the parent has in mitigating its effects. I will examine the situation of violence in more detail in the next chapter.

Child Abuse

One way that psychologists attempt to answer questions about the effects of poverty is by looking at the rates of child abuse in different families and communities. In the presence of poverty, are single parents more likely to abuse their children than parents that have the support of a spouse in the child-rearing process? The data suggests that single-parent mothers are more likely to abuse their children than are mothers in two-parent poor families. Yet, although there is no relationship between the family structure and child abuse, there is a strong relationship between the socioeconomic level of the family and child abuse. These same single mothers and mothers from two-parent families have a similar likelihood of abusing their own children but both groups are much more

likely to be abusive to their children than are mothers who are not raising their children in poverty, be they single -parent mothers or mothers in a marriage. ²²

This notion seems to challenge many assumptions about the importance of two -parented families in the lives of children. However, while it is true that all families in poverty suffer and have a harder time raising children than non -poor families, there is some evidence to support the notion that children from poor, single -parent, homes have some additional struggles. Studies show that children from single -parent homes are more vulnerable in their psychological adjustment. ²³ While it is not completely clear why this is true, many people might argue that there is additional strain on the single parent who has less support in raising children than his or her married counterpart. This could impact children and put additional strain on the child who is trying to grow up faster and be less of a burden on the parent who has the responsibility for the family's material and socio -emotional well -being.

In addition to child abuse being linked to families in poverty, there also seems to be a correlation between the rates of child abuse and neglect and the rates of unemployment and the size of the workforce. While child abuse and neglect can be predicted on the basis of family income, it can also be predicted on the basis of the unemployment status of the nation or a given community. One could hypothesize that one reason for this occurrence is that the lack of employment and the financial strains that are associated with such a life can increase the stress level of a given person. Higher stress levels can be a reason for higher levels of abuse or neglect because the parents are feeling a lack of control and a sense of uncertainty about the future so they take their

²² James Garbarino, "The Meaning of Poverty in the World of Children," *The Reference Shelf: Children in Crisis*, Ed. Robin Brown, Vol. 6. 1. New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1994, 128.

²³ Suniya S. Luthar, *Poverty and Children's Adjustment*, London: SAGE Publications, 1999, 26.

fears out on the one thing they can control - their children. Studies have also shown that not only are there more reported cases of abuse and neglect in lower class families, but the maltreatment is more severe in the poorest of the poor. There clearly is an economic relationship between the number of cases of abuse and the severity of the reports. ²⁴

Teenage Mothers

Parenting styles and behaviors vary greatly between different communities and even between families. These differences affect children because socialization by one's parent(s) introduces one to the world and prepares one for the rest of life. When psychologists have looked at women of both different and similar employment, education, marital status, and age, maternal age seems to have a stronger association with the mom's personal adjustment and parenting behavior than these other variables. ²⁵ Suniya Luthar summarizes studies that have found that maternal age and parenting behaviors are further correlated with children's behavior and problems. For example, children who are born to teenage mothers are significantly more prone to develop problems by middle school such as hyperactivity, school misbehavior and even substance abuse. ²⁶

Certainly not all children who are born to teenage mothers will be raised in poverty but never married teenage mothers are overrepresented among families who live in poverty. The sad fact is that the child who is raised by a teenage mother outside of poverty is not only not part of the norm, but that child is truly an outlying case of fortune. While there may not be a difference in being raised in poverty by a single parent or by

²⁴ Joan I. Vondra, "Childhood Poverty and Child Maltreatment," *Child Poverty and Public Policy*, Ed. Judith A. Chafel Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1993, 128.

²⁵ Luthar, 25.

²⁶ Luthar, 26.

two parents, there seem to be a significant difference between being raised by an adult or by a teenager. As importantly, in the case of teen mothers, both the children and the mothers are at risk. Teen moms are still growing and adjusting. The presence of a baby, and the quick change from child to adult, from being cared for to being the caregiver, can be a harsh and disruptive one. Teen parenting attitudes and behaviors differ from those of most adult parents. The former tend to be more insensitive and impatient with infants because they are struggling to put their own needs and desires to the side while they are forced to attend to the needs of their newborns. They have less realistic expectations of their babies and at the same time they provide less stimulating environments for their infants.²⁷ Teen parents also have less realistic expectations of their children, expecting them to be more mature and self-sufficient than they are often capable of being.

Substance-abusing Parents

Another problem in many poor communities is the presence of drugs. There is a community of people who are impoverished and use drugs. For some of these people they are poor because of their drug use or their drug use is exacerbating their situation of poverty. For others, drugs are a means used to cope with lives in poverty. Regardless of the reasons for the use of drugs, there is a negative impact on children who are raised by drug-using mothers. Research confirms extensive negative effects of drugs on children *in utero* and the lifelong consequences of drugs on child development. This evidence notwithstanding, children who are simply raised in the presence of drugs are at risk. For example, drug-abusing mothers are significantly less responsive to their babies' cues and needs than non-drug-abusing mothers. They interact with their children less and make

²⁷Luthar, 25.

many fewer attempts to engage in communication with their babies during critical developmental stages.²⁸ The negative effects of being raised by a drug-abusing mother are not only present during the critical developmental first years but throughout childhood. Further, the risk of child abuse and neglect is almost tripled for children whose parents are abusing drugs. This means that as long as a child is in the presence of drugs and people who are abusing them, they are not only in danger of having significant developmental problems, but they are also in indirect danger of being physically harmed.²⁹

Parental Intelligence and Education

There are many aspects of home life and parenting that have a significant impact on the development and future opportunities of children. One of these things seems to be the educational and intelligence level of the parent or parents. It appears as though there is a positive correlation between the maternal intelligence level and the IQ scores and academic achievement level of disadvantaged children.³⁰ It is important to remember that this is not an explanation or excuse for disadvantaged children's performance but rather a systematic association between these factors. This neither supports nor negates the argument for a genetic relationship between the intelligence of parents and children. An alternative explanation would be that children whose parents are unable to help them with their school work are less likely to succeed in school.

In 1987, the poverty rate was 62% for children under the age of six whose parent or better educated parent had not completed high school. Research has found that increased levels of education are directly associated with decreased poverty rates for all

²⁸Luthar, 42.

²⁹Ibid., 43.

³⁰Ibid., 45.

racial and ethnic groups. ³¹ Again, this does not address the issue of why this is true but it does demonstrate that the home life of a child and his or her parents' education level play a huge role in his or her educational success and future. Regardless of the level of poverty in which a child is living, the educational level of the parent has the ability to effect the child's education and attitude towards education.

The Presence and Effects of Clinical Depression

It has been reported that there are higher levels of "clinically significant depressive symptoms in inner-city pregnant and postpartum women." ³²

A background of poverty and poor education would reduce a person's chances of learning effective coping habits, and leave him or her more vulnerable to depression. Since past poverty and poor education are often correlated with current poverty... the high level of depression in these groups is understandable. ³³

This higher incidence of depression in inner-city mothers is having an impact on their parenting behaviors. Depression can hurt a person's ability to effectively parent in a nurturing way. As was mentioned previously, there are many different parenting behaviors and attitudes. The most important thing is that each parent learns an effective, supportive, and loving style that allows the child to develop normally. When a woman is living in poverty and trying to raise a child, often alone, parenting styles and behaviors are often born out of the necessity for which the environment calls. When a woman is trying to effectively raise children and is also fighting depression, her job has just become virtually impossible. The environment in which most low-income women are trying to

³¹ *Five Million Children*, 33.

³² Luthar, 41.

³³ Lenore Sawyer Radloff, "Risk Factors for Depression: What do We Learn from Them?" *The Mental Health of Women*, Ed. Marcia Guttentag, Susan Salasin, Deborah Belle, New York: Academic Press, 1980, 105.

raise their children is extremely stressful. These women are more likely to become from life experiences that are, themselves, stressful. Sixty-one percent of mothers in low-income communities reported suffering severe violence by a male partner in the form usually of both physical and sexual abuse. Stressors such as these are exactly what could exacerbate a mother's depressive symptoms. ³⁴It is no surprise that people living in stressful environments who have had stressful life experiences are at greater risk for depression. It makes sense that people who have experienced wars, been abused, or witnessed or were victims of violence would need time and help recovering from such atrocities. It also makes sense that if such people do not receive any help, and perhaps even if they do, they would be at a high risk to suffer from depression. Deborah Belle studied low-income women and depression and concluded that, "Those women who experienced more stressful and less supportive environments also experienced more symptoms of depression." ³⁵With this being said, it should come as no surprise that women in the inner-city neighborhoods of the United States are at a greater than average risk for depression. At mind-blowingly high rates, they have seen violence, experienced violence, and lived through the wars that are plaguing so many of our urban areas.

Protective Role of Parents

The urban life that many of our children experience each day is truly harmful and detrimental to their development. Even if they are born into properly stimulating environments, are well nourished, and have one or more caregivers who invest in their lives, there is still the unfortunate fact that most of our urban areas are characterized by

³⁴Luthar, 45–46.

³⁵Deborah Belle, "Summary and Conclusion," *Lives in Stress: Women and Depression*, Ed. Deborah Belle, Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1982, 236.

mild to severe forms of violence. Children who are forced to live in such communities are often in a state of fear. Preschool and school-aged children already exhibit many problems. There are marked disturbances in their sleep and ability to concentrate. They also show strong increases in their anxiety and depression.³⁶ Children learn quickly that the adults around them are only able to protect them to a limited extent. Adults, no matter how powerful they appear to children, are not able to stop the violence and, for example, the threat of gunfire as a child walks to school. They are not able to stop a burglar from entering a home and terrorizing a child. Although this is true of all adults, middle class children, for example, are unaware of this reality. In contrast, poor children experience these realities as they walk to school or as they hear fighting outside their doors at night. They learn, far younger than they should that adults are not able to be as protective as both the child and adult desire.

The Disadvantaged Parent: A Life Saver

People are generally aware of the fact that parents play a huge role in the lives and development of their children and that they are the most important figures in their children's growth and safety. The parents of the child from disadvantaged circumstances are not only important figures in the child's life but they are the totality of his or her environment to a much greater extent than that of an advantaged child.³⁷ It may be hard to imagine that the parents, who are themselves at a disadvantage, need to be extremely present, responsive, and proactive. Because of the situations in which their children are living, they need to do many things of which advantaged parents need not think. Poor

³⁶Luthar, 70.

³⁷Judith S. Musick, "Profiles of Children and Families in Poverty," Judith A. Chafel Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute Press, 1993,

Child Poverty and Public Policy, Ed. 31.

parents need to be proactive buffers protecting their children from the rest of the world. They are forced to mediate between the dangers and realities of the outside world and the world which their children need to develop.

One of their most important jobs is to foster the growth of “resilient egos”³⁸ in their children. Their children must be able to defend themselves in their neighborhoods and understand how to protect themselves from the dangers that they face every day when their parents and adult caregivers are not able to be present. The most challenging thing about the responsibility that lies before poor parents is that they must do all of these things for their children without the support and resources that middle and upper class parents have. For the most part, the majority of these parents are alone in their mission to successfully raise their children. They do not often have community support but instead must frequently confront community violence, as we will examine more closely in the next chapter. Their situation could be perceived as very harsh and yet their job as parents is the most demanding in the presence of their harsh realities.

Parents of children living in the context of severe poverty can be both literal and symbolic life-savers. As stated above, parents must prepare their children for their encounters with their worlds. In a community where there is frequent violence and severe poverty, parents need to teach their children how to recognize the dangers of the environment. Since parents cannot always be with their children they must teach them how to survive in their absence. For many urban poor parents this means teaching their children the people and places they must avoid and encouraging them to trust their

³⁸Musick, 31.

intuition and to sense and be aware of danger. In order to help their children live through the dangers of childhood, parents need to protect their children in every way they can. ³⁹

One of the literal lifesaving techniques that some inner-city parents use is close supervision. Many parents feel that they cannot allow their children to go outside and certainly cannot allow their children to leave their sights if they do go out. This means that children are not allowed to explore or to begin to do things for themselves and on their own because their parents are often more concerned about their physical safety than about their social and emotional development. As one scholar noted, "Parents are afraid for their children to walk back and forth to school: some of them may try to lure them into selling drugs; they may have to walk over a dead body. This is a reality in poor communities."⁴⁰ When confronted with these realities, parents cannot always worry about their children's social development because their first priority is keeping the children physically safe and alive. There are consequences for having to raise children in such environments but for parents, given their circumstances, safety comes before children's socio-emotional well-being. Unfortunately, this can have a negative impact on the child's psychological development.

The Number One Priority

Not only does close parental supervision and firm discipline help to keep children alive, but it is also important for reducing the risks for kids today. Children are more likely to have better behavior, do better in school, and survive childhood with such a

³⁹Musick, 30.

⁴⁰Clementine Barfield, Elizabeth M. Groves, and Betsy McAlister, "How Community Violence Affects Children, Parents, and Practitioners," *Children in Crisis*, Ed. Robin Brown. Vol. 6. 1. New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1994, 166.

parenting style.⁴¹ Above, we saw that many of the families who live in long-term poverty are headed by single-parents and more often single-mothers. Since these parents are alone and have to address the needs of their families in so many ways one might conclude that they are unable to provide the needed support for their children. What seems remarkable is that studies show the opposite. Inner-city African American adolescent males being raised in single mother homes report receiving greater support from their parents than any other group of their male peers. It appears that single mothers work hard to provide support for their sons in the absence of their fathers despite all of the other challenges and demands that they have.⁴² Their children appear to be their number one priority in many ways.

Seven Keys to a Successful Family

Psychologist James Garbarino argues that families need seven different things in order to be able to successfully raise well-developed children. The first thing needed is a stable environment. According to Garbarino, without a stable environment neglect and abandonment of children is an unfortunate and likely consequence. Secondly, families need a sense of security. When parents feel threatened by either crime or violence their ability to nurture and even protect their children decreases. The third familial need is emotionally positive and involved time together. This means that if the parents or the single parent has to work and then has to come home to a stressful environment, the likelihood of finding positive time together as a family is taken over by the time that is needed to keep the family fed and safe.

⁴¹Luthar, 56.

⁴²Ibid., 27.

Fourthly, Garbarino also believes that a strong belief system and spiritual dimension to life is needed to raise well-developed children. The fifth thing that Garbarino calls for is that the families are woven into the social fabric of an active and caring community. Families that are isolated and not supported by their community in raising their children are likely to suffer. The welfare of both the children and the parents is threatened in such cases. Another interesting, and sixth, element that Garbarino claims as a necessity for a family is a strong societal presence and sense of justice. The greater the sense of justice is in the family's community and society the more likely the family is to find the support that they need. When the family feels supported in their lives and their mission as a family, parents will have more time to focus on their roles and the less they need to worry about their place in society and the likelihood that they will be protected in their society.

Finally Garbarino argues that for a family to be able to raise a well-developed child it needs access to the basic resources of home, food, and health care. Life without these resources is putting children in jeopardy and their ability to develop in harm. ⁴³ Garbarino's arguments support the notion that families in urban poverty are lacking many of the resources they need to be able to raise children successfully. They are starting from a deficit and attempting to create not only the necessary family environment but also wider contexts and resources that really need to be present in the community and society at large.

⁴³Garbarino 1994, 120 -121.

Conclusion

What becomes abundantly clear when examining the research on the role of families and parents in the lives of children is that family involvement has a significant impact on the future of children. This is so widely accepted that national legislation has been forced to include family involvement because it is understood that this is one element that is virtually vital for the success of our children.⁴⁴ The importance that researchers have placed on the family may contribute to policymakers emphasizing more support for families who are trying to do their part in raising children in a context of community violence and lacking many needed resources.

What becomes even more obvious from all of this information is that while the role of the family is extremely important in the futures of children across the nation, families and parents cannot do it all alone. The realities of urban poverty affect children through their parents' handling of poverty as well as through the other people that experience poverty and interact with children. This, of course, involves the schools, neighborhoods, and communities. It is not only the presence of parents that impact their children's futures and it does not need to be the sole responsibility of the parents to help children develop and understand their lives, communities, and situation of poverty.⁴⁵

If children were only exposed to their parents then it could be argued that their parents had the sole responsibility for socializing them to be well-developed adults. However, children are touched by their communities and schools as well on a daily basis.

⁴⁴Mavis G. Sanders, Glenda L. Allen Jones, and Yolanda Abel, "Involving Families and Communities in the Education of Children and Youth Placed At Risk," *Educating At-Risk Students: One Hundred Years - First Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, Ed. Sam Stringfield and Deborah Land . Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 2002.

⁴⁵Luthar, 52.

If these places are sites of interaction they are also sites of learning, development, and responsibility.

The Impact of Community Life

Violence in Cities

The rate of violence in urban communities was rising during the second half of the twentieth century. Between 1989 and 1990 the rates of violence in Boston alone rose over 45%.⁴⁶ The increase had multiple effects on urban communities. As this happened, people found themselves asking many different types of questions about this change. Some asked, what has changed in the lives of so many people to push them toward violence? Others looked at the present and asked what could be done to protect these communities as violence continued. Yet others wondered what needed to be done to end the cycle of violence. All of these questions are important as each of them addresses a different element of the situation. Together, these questions look at the past, present and future.

These changes in the level of violence clearly have a huge impact on children living in these communities. Millions of urban children are especially caught in the crossfire of this violence. These rates were rising especially quickly in poor urban communities of the United States. While the violence rate in Boston skyrocketed (1990), a study in Cleveland revealed that the percent of poor people who were living in neighborhoods that had a concentration of poverty, which is defined as more than 40% of the population classified as poor, had also risen dramatically. From 1970 the rate had increased from 21% of the poor living in such communities to over 60% in 1990.⁴⁷ Thus,

⁴⁶Steven, Marans, "Community Violence and Children's Development: Collaborative Interventions," *Children and Violence*, Ed. Colette Chilant, and J. Gerald Young. London: Jason Aronson Inc., 1994, 110.

⁴⁷James Garbarino, *Raising Children in a Socially Toxic Environment*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995, 128-129.

if there is a greater percentage of violence in the poorest communities and there is a growing trend of poor families living in the same communities, children of poor families are being especially exposed to increased levels of violence.

Child Victims and Witnesses of Violence

According to psychologist James Garbarino one-third of children living in high-crime neighborhoods have witnessed a homicide by the time they are fifteen years old. In addition to this, over 70% of the children have witnessed a serious assault.⁴⁸ It is significantly more likely than not that children living in such neighborhoods will be witnesses to extreme violence even if they themselves are never a physical victim. What is especially frightening is that additional studies have found much worse percentages of exposure in many communities. A study conducted with children between the ages of six and ten in Washington, D.C. and fifth graders in New Orleans found that over half of the fifth graders had been the victims of some type of violence and 6% of them had been the victims of severe violence.⁴⁹

These statistics are frightening because they confirm that our children are being placed in serious dangers solely by their home addresses. So many of their communities are plagued by poverty and violence, which statistically have a strong correlation, and these children are “caught in the middle”. It is surprising that it should not be terribly surprising that in communities such as the ones studied in New Orleans and Washington, D.C. the percent of children who have seen horrible violence at a young age is high when there is already a high percentage who have been the victims of such experiences. In this

⁴⁸Garbarino 1995, 75.

⁴⁹Barfield, 163.

same study over 90% of the fifth graders question had witnessed violence with 37% having been witnesses to severe acts of violence and 40% of these young children having already seen dead bodies.⁵⁰ These children, all of them victims of exposure to violence, are suffering from these communities that are their homes. As such, young age these children are forced to make meaning of some of the worst aspects of human behavior. Most adults in this country would be challenged to make meaning of what these children experienced daily. Yet children continue growing, despite the reality that their environment is not healthy. They are forced to experience things that no humans should have to see. It is no surprise that so many report being worried about their own safety and about safety in general in their homes, schools, and communities. What is perhaps more surprising is that not all children report being scared in the face of the horrors they have seen and felt.⁵¹

The fear that is felt by their parents, neighbors, and teachers is evident to these children. Many of them have people who would do everything in their power to protect them. Despite this, these children confront the realization that their parents and adult caregivers are not always capable of protecting them. It is common for a child to have a bad dream and go running to his or her parents to protect them or to be frightened that there is a monster under the bed and need the parents to come and sit in the room while he or she falls asleep. These children believe that their parents are bigger and stronger than the bad things that scare them. They feel a sense of safety simply by having their parents present. While this is an ideal we hope all children experience, we know that some children are forced to learn at an early age that their parents and protectors are

⁵⁰Barfield, 163.

⁵¹Ibid.

not stronger and bigger than their fears. They have, perhaps even with their parents present, seen their fears come true and seen that their parents share their fear.

Poverty is Deadly

These fears are real, especially when it is known that the leading cause of death for both male and female African Americans between the ages of 15 and 34, many of whom live in urban communities, is not cancer, car accidents, nor AIDS, but homicide.⁵² So many young people are never living to see adulthood because their fears and the fears of their families and neighbors come true—they are killed. Death at a young age is a horrible part of the reality of poverty. While it is the violence that is killing these young men and women, there is a strong connection to poverty. The communities that are classified as extremely poor, with over 40% of the people living under the poverty line, are sites of the most concentrated violence. Poor people are unable to move elsewhere and are literally stuck in the middle of this “urban war”.

Poverty can be deadly in other ways. For example, the infant mortality rates in cities vary as a function of income. Neighborhoods with higher income levels have the fewest cases of infant deaths whereas communities that are much poorer have the highest level of infant deaths. Chicago, for example, has an extremely varied infant mortality rate. The poorest third of the city has a rate that is over five times the infant mortality rate of the most affluent third of the city. This means that in the neighborhood of Chicago there could be six in every one thousand babies dying while in other neighborhoods the rate is as high and atrocious as 30 infants dying out of every one thousand born. These rates rival those of many nations in the major city world. Based on

⁵²Barfield, 162.

this evidence Garbarino concludes that, “being poor is deadly.”⁵³ It certainly is much more of a challenge to be a child with dreams because you know from an early age that you may not make it out alive. Life becomes that much more precarious and your family and community become that much more important.

Psychological Effects

Leaving aside all of the children who deal with trauma as physical victims of violence, exposure to community violence is extremely traumatic for children. Beginning at an early age children are hurt by the violence that happens around them. The problems at this young age are certainly more manageable than they will become during later childhood but these symptoms must be acknowledged and addressed. Their older counterparts in elementary school and during adolescence show signs that exposure to community violence is associated with higher levels of depression, likelihood to abuse drugs and alcohol, and academic problems. In addition to these problems exposure seem to have the greatest impact on levels of aggression and antisocial behavior. What this means is that children’s greater contact with violence is positively associated with more aggressive and more violent behavior, confirming the popular belief that violence leads to more violence.⁵⁴ These children need to attempt to cope with what they have seen and experienced, and also need to fight the temptation to act out their frustration and confusion with more violence.

It is not surprising that direct exposure to violence brings about many feelings of helplessness and fear in children. Researchers have found that Post-traumatic Stress

⁵³Garbarino 1994, 127.

⁵⁴Ibid., 71.

Disorder, PTSD, is also a common result of such experiences. Symptoms include trouble sleeping, eating, paying attention, relating to others, continued states of fearfulness, and flashbacks.⁵⁵ While none of these symptoms are unknown to us, what is shocking is that children are dealing with these realities living in communities in the United States. Moreover, the number of children who are psychological victims of violence are far outnumbering medical casualties. In a study at Boston City Hospital, for example, it was discovered that one out of every ten children in the primary care clinic had seen a shooting or stabbing before the age of six. Half of them had witnessed it in their homes and the other half had been on the streets of their communities. One of the most frightening facts is that the average age of these kids was 2.7 years.⁵⁶ How in the world do we expect our children to thrive when they are learning how to walk and run only to be forced to use it to run away from death and danger?

The children who were included in this study were, in one way, the lucky ones. They were being treated for their trauma. There are so many children who have to hold this knowledge in silence for they have no venue to share their pain. Although a child's exposure to community violence often passes by unnoticed and unattended, the results will be noted. There may be self-destructive behavior as a response to what has been witnessed as well as developmental difficulties.⁵⁷ While it is hard for any child to have to experience violence in any form, when a child is trapped with the knowledge of what has happened and has no tool to use that will help him or her make sense of what happened and maintain a sense of safety after the traumatic sight, he or she is likely to suffer much more than a peer who is able to get psychological assistance. The default responses vary

⁵⁵Marans, 109.

⁵⁶Ibid., 111.

⁵⁷Ibid., 116.

from child to child but often children will become defensive and engage in defensive activities in an attempt to regain a small sense of control after experiencing a complete sense of fear and helplessness in the face of violence.⁵⁸

In the absence of assistance children are forced to process these experiences of violence and its effects on their own. They are often not capable of understanding why this happened or why they should believe that it will not happen again or be worse the next time. The frightening fact is that it may happen again and it could be worse. Despite this reality, a child needs to be reassured that what happened was horrible and that subsequent feelings are completely normal and appropriate. If the child's parent or caregiver was also affected by the experience he or she may not be able to support the child with his or her own feelings because the adult is struggling with the meaning of the violence that surrounds the community. Since children often do not know how to begin understanding what happened without adult intervention the adults are often apt to think that the children were not affected because they are not immediately reacting to the event. This provides an escape for the adults who do not know what to do anyway.

No matter how children initially react to exposure to violence, they need help and that help may be better offered by a professional when parents and caregivers are affected themselves. The problem with this is that psychological victims of violence often have limited or no access to mental health facilities. Not all victims need to seek professional help. Many are able to cope with violence because of their community of support but, for some, especially those that do not have the support of family, without access to outside resources they cannot be helped. Most urban residents, particularly those without health insurance, seek medical care in emergency rooms. Unlike physical victims,

⁵⁸Marans, 122.

psychological victims frequently are brushed aside since they will not die from their injuries. The difficulty is that while their physical life may not end in the short term because of these traumatic experiences, children's development and futures may be significantly stunted by these events and in the absence of support the likelihood that they will be able to fully recover is significantly diminished.⁵⁹

The Violent Culture and Toxic Environment of the United States

The United States has a reputation throughout the “developed” world as having a very violent culture. This worldwide reputation also includes the understanding that there is a strong sense of parental ownership over children and that the place to raise children is in the privacy of the home. The culture of the U.S. is not conducive to communal rearing of children nor is that the desire of most families. Most parents do not want others to interfere with their decisions and behaviors in raising their children.⁶⁰ One of the largest difficulties with these two reputations is that they both, for the most part, are confirmed in daily experiences in the U.S. and, unfortunately, they do not mix well together. In a culture that is plagued by violence on televisions, in movies, on playgrounds, in classrooms, in homes, and on streets, children cannot escape it. Violent culture is truly lethal for kids. Families alone cannot combat this enormous problem. Despite the fact that most families maintain a sense of ownership over their children, they cannot fight the problems their children will face as a consequence of these levels of violence alone. There needs to be a societal support for families as they raise children. This is especially true for the families that do not have the necessary material and

⁵⁹Marans, 122.

⁶⁰Vondra, 135.

psychological resources to effectively protect their children from these multiple forms of violence. Society needs to step up and take a good look at the reality of life for many of our children. After close examination, I argue that we need to step in and let go of our cultural belief that it is on a man for himself and on a family for itself. Based on evidence thus far, I believe that we need to turn towards those in greatest need and support them in their attempt to protect our children, our future, from the ills of today.

Garbarino spent a lot of time studying the effects of four urban environments on children and concluded that any socially toxic environment, such as that of impoverished urban America, is truly detrimental to children. He argues that, “social toxicity undermines self-confidence and feelings of self-worth.”⁶¹ This situation is harmful to children and will erode their childhoods. Children across the nation are losing precious years of childhood to the social toxicity that surrounds them in their homes, schools and communities. Our society is one that is full of many problems that contribute to the environment that Garbarino describes as toxic. In our socially toxic environment, as Garbarino refers to it, there are many more guns, a growing threat of AIDS, an undermined sense of security, higher parental divorce rates, and an increased presence of weapons at school. These changes are both what make a society toxic and are what are causing the problems that so many of today’s children are facing. They are dealing with problems that are new to their generation or are at least significantly more serious.⁶² As we saw earlier, one response children learn is that they cannot rely on the adults around them for protection. This realization often is what pushes them to change their own actions in order to protect themselves. They learn that for protection they need to carry a

⁶¹Garbarino 1995, 6.

⁶²Ibid., 5.

gun and perhaps join a gang. Their sense of survival takes over their decision-making processes and they will do whatever is needed to better ensure their daily survival. ⁶³

In the face of limited options children will grow up more quickly and take their lives into their own hands. Once they learn that the adults in their lives cannot stop horrible things from happening around them they often feel as though there is no other option. Sometimes the younger children find their outlets in misbehavior in school or acting out at home but as they get older their modes of coping often change to more proactive options.

At a time when a sense of community could be extremely helpful in counteracting the bad things that are happening, there is seldom a community to step in and no longer tolerates such violence. Everyone is living in fear and no one is left to stand up. The lack of community is also very harmful, in itself, especially for older children and adolescents. They need a sense of roots and security from outside of their home, that is, from their community. When the community is the site of the violence and trauma there is seldom a sense of ownership and history within the community. Without these roots children can feel lost, especially if they are coming from weakened homes. ⁶⁴ One of the larger failures of our society is that we have failed to give our children a place to call home and a place with which they are able to identify and go to for support and resources.

The Effect of Community Resources

Not surprisingly perhaps, communities with higher than expected rates of child maltreatment and neglect report fewer neighborhood resources and services for their

⁶³Garbarino 1994, 125.

⁶⁴Garbarino 1995, 128.

children and families. In contrast, communities with lower rates of child maltreatment and neglect report many more resources and services as well as residents who are more informed about the services that do exist in both formal and informal social support networks.⁶⁵ It is clear that communities can in fact make a difference in the face of all of the violence that takes place each day. As was said above, adolescents who have no sense of roots in a community will be negatively affected but conversely, if a community gives its children a sense of home and importance it can make a huge and positive difference in their futures.

Since we know that families alone cannot provide for all of their children's needs, communities have a significant role to play. It has been shown that a fostered sense of shared community responsibility in inner-city neighborhoods greatly reduces the level of violence that are present. The level of violence within the communities and the homes both decrease when the community becomes an active participant in the lives of the residents.⁶⁶ This gives hope to the future of urban neighborhoods but only if people take an active role. Communities can be places of hope, not only fear, for children and families despite rising levels of community violence. If families and communities band together, they will have significantly more success in helping their children become well-developed adults.

One might ask why the community should want to be responsible for facing violence and other community problems in order to protect its children. Having to face these problems would not be easy and, because of the violent nature of many issues, it could be dangerous. However, the argument can be made that without protecting the

⁶⁵Vondra, 134.

⁶⁶Luthar, 70.

children the community is really writing its own demise. Without a future, there is no hope, as children are the future. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child discusses the responsibility we, as a society, have towards our children. In the Convention it was agreed that the protection that children deserve goes beyond protection from poverty. Childhood is described as a “protected niche” that needs to be supported. Children are not direct participants in the economic, political, or sexual world, according to the Convention, and need the help of society to be protected from the evils of these worlds. Garbarino agrees that it is within the realm of society’s responsibility to save children from the negative effects of certain aspects of the adult world.⁶⁷

Community Solutions and Resources

Despite the realities of violence and poverty in urban communities of the United States, described above there are ways that these communities can come together and make positive changes. As was just mentioned, communities that have and publicized resources for their residents are more likely to be able to cope with the problems that they face. They can develop a built-in support network with both formal and informal paths through which people can seek support. Garbarino suggests that another possible response to these economically impoverished neighborhoods is to look towards developing more economically diverse communities. He claims that there are advantages for both the middle class and the poor in such cases. The poor benefit from the extra resources that the middle class families may have and are able to see a different lifestyle. The middle class is exposed first hand to poor people and are able to fight the existing stereotypes and create their own beliefs about poverty and poor people.

⁶⁷Garbarino 1995, 9.

Garbarino believes his would significantly benefit both communities and create a less segregated society.⁶⁸

Yet another door to which many people turn is religion. Religion can be very helpful in raising children and in having positive outcomes. As stated above, Garbarino includes a strong sense of spirituality as a necessity for a family to be able to raise well developed children. Religious community can provide a support network in addition to the family that helps to share the responsibility in sending the right message to the children. They can help to cultivate a more positive sense of self within the child and encourage them to have dreams for their futures and to do things to accomplish these goals. In addition, religion often encourages prayer. Prayer can be an effective coping strategy to which children and families together can turn. This can take the place of alcohol, drugs or other crutches that are often used.⁶⁹

While religion can be a helpful element in people's lives, it too has dangers. Unfortunately, religion can lead people to hold on to fatalistic beliefs. Such a belief can stunt people's ability to improve their lives because they either see no way to change what God has provided them with or they come to believe that there is a better life after this one and one just needs to suffer through the here and now to get the rewards of the next life. Either of these beliefs would stunt anyone's attempt to improve the conditions of poverty and violence.⁷⁰

There are many ways in which communities can both cultivate and combat the issues of violence and poverty that are often rampant in the cities of the United States today. Similar to families, communities possess both strengths and weaknesses that they

⁶⁸Garbarino 1995, 129.

⁶⁹Luthar, 61.

⁷⁰Ibid.

can contribute towards the futures of their children. Children living in urban poverty and violence need all of the help that they can get to maintain a sense of hope for their futures and to have a realistic chance to become well-developed adolescents and adults. It is only with the best that both their families and communities can offer that children are able to move forward to a third institution, the school, for yet another step towards a successful and healthy future.

The Impact of School Life

As we have seen, there are many ways that children are affected by poverty. At least one-fifth of all children in U.S. schools are living with the poverty-associated problems that we have described above: substandard housing, inadequate diets, lack of health insurance, chronic dental or health problems, and violence in their communities.⁷¹ Further, they are much more likely than other children to have physical problems, such as stunted growth and anemia, and some of the psychological challenges described above. It would be horrible enough if this was all that these children had to face because these things alone could destroy their futures but one final thing has yet to be mentioned in any depth: education.

Education is a tool that people use to succeed. Children are told and believe that education is important for their futures. What they are not told, but many learn along the way, is that this key to success does not work for everyone. Statistically, children's success is determined by many factors: socioeconomic background, school neighborhood, and teachers, to name a few. The role of the school and educational system is critical in children's lives. The goals and expectations that schools and teachers have dramatically impact lives of students. It is nice to be able to tell our children that if they work hard in their job, school, they will be able to do anything. Unfortunately, this is often not the case. This chapter will examine these factors that impact children in school.

⁷¹Bruce J. Biddle, "Poverty, Ethnicity, and Achievement in American Schools," *Social Class, Poverty, and Education: Policy and Practice*, Ed. Bruce J. Biddle New York: Routledge Falmer, 2001, 5.

The Key to Success

There are many crucial educational issues that impact the current lives and futures of millions of children in this country. Children are told that if they try hard in school they will be successful but we do not fulfill this promise. Instead poor students have a high educational failure rate. It has been found that children who are poor and grow up in poor neighborhoods in the United States are much more likely to repeat at least one year of school, will have lower educational test scores, will complete less education and, as a consequence, will be lower wage earners in their adulthoods. ⁷²From a very early age, there are many barriers impeding many children's future success.

There is so much rhetoric in this country that talks about the importance and value of education. We refer to education as the key to a good future and we tell children that they will be able to do well if only they try hard and do their best in school. Education is described as the key that will unlock the secrets of success. What is extremely frightening is that we tell this to so many children yet we do not follow through with our promise that if they do their best in school they will succeed. More specifically, if almost one of every four children under the age of six was poor in 1987, and it is only slightly better than that in 2003, then we need to be setting up an educational system that can target the realities of this problem. ⁷³Children under six are more likely to be poor than any other age group. How does this impact the education system? This is the age at which all children in this country must be in school. A huge proportion of our students are coming to school on the first day already fighting against these odds.

⁷² Arloc Sherman, *Poverty Matters: The Cost of Child Poverty in America*, N.p.: Children's Defense Fund, 1997, 1.

⁷³ *Five Million Children*, 18.

The Odds

It is frightening to actually look at the statistics about the future of children growing up in poverty because they confirm so many people's worst fears: they fail at a much higher rate than children who do not live in poverty. We are no longer saying that these children have to fight much harder to make it but instead we are saying that they may fail due to circumstances that are completely out of their hands. Children raised in poverty are 3.4 times more likely to be expelled than non-poor kids and they are two times more likely to have to repeat a grade. Many of our kids are being forced to leave school because of their behavior for which we have already seen many of the causes and are struggling in the class that they are twice as likely as non-poor children to have to repeat just to be able to perform at a similar level. Poor children are one-third less likely than other children to grow up to attend at two or four year college and they are half as likely to actually go on to earn a bachelor's degree.⁷⁴ Already it is becoming easy to see why they will be lower-wage earners in adulthood and they will be likely to continue living in poverty and raising their future children in this same cycle.

In this nation, as we saw earlier, the economic lines often follow a racial and ethnic line. Recently a study done discovered that while 17% of sixteen and seventeen year old black students had dropped out of school only 9% of their white peers had done the same. The study went on to show that only 3% of sixteen and seventeen year olds from white-collar families had dropped out whereas 13% of their peers from other socioeconomic levels had done the same, including teens from blue-collar, farm or

⁷⁴Sherman, 3.

unemployed families. ⁷⁵It is clear from the evidence that there is a strong correlation between economic background and academic success and longevity.

What Happened to the Safe Haven?

There are not two ways about it: urban schools are not the safe havens that children need. The increase in violence has penetrated schools in ways that are impossible to ignore. In Chicago in 1990-91 alone there were over 9,800 arrests made by Chicago police officers on or near school grounds. These arrests were for things such as burglary, sexual assault, battery, weapon possession, and murder. ⁷⁶Inner-city children are no longer able to enter their schools and know that they are safe. There seem to be no places that they can go and inherently know that they will be safe and protected. This means that they are always on the defensive and never able to completely focus on anything else, such as school work.

While there are many schools that are having to fight the presence of violence it remains true that schools in poor communities are less able to act as safety nets than middle class schools. These schools represent the community of which they are a part and this means that oftentimes in poor communities the schools are just as impoverished as the students. ⁷⁷Together, they are fighting similar problems and one of these is the reality of violence.

⁷⁵James Samuel Coleman, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1966, 27.

⁷⁶Nancy Dubrow, James Garbarino, Kathleen Kostelny, and Carole Pardo, *Children in Danger: Coping with the Consequences of Community Violence*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1992, 61.

⁷⁷Musick, 33.

When one looks at the nation as a whole, white students have smaller elementary class sizes, on average, than any group of minority students.⁷⁸ One could think that this should come as no surprise since we have already established that schools often represent the communities of which they are a part, but it is deeply problematic that the majority population is being given so many more advantages than they received at birth. In the United States, the correlation between economics and race is staggering and cannot be overlooked. Now we see that this is played out in many different places including in the education system.

Reports and results show that pupils of different ethnicities seem to respond differently to the school which they attend. According to James Samuel Coleman, a scholar on educational opportunity, "The achievement of minority pupils depends more on the school they attend than does the achievement of majority pupils."⁷⁹ What this means is that not only do most white, middle class students attend better schools but when they do not, this often does not negatively affect their academic success. Perhaps this is because they have more support from home, their parents have more education and are able to help them, they are not dealing with poverty, and their community has a positive attitude towards education. Whatever the reasons are, white students tend to do better at whatever school they are attending while most minority pupils, who are unfortunately more likely to be the poor students as well, are more dependent on the school environment for their academic success.

Another factor that appears to play into the success of students and a school is the educational backgrounds and aspirations of the other students at the school. Students at

⁷⁸Coleman, 9.

⁷⁹Ibid., 21.

schools where the students plan on going to a four-year college and come from families with strong educational backgrounds will do better. The students who attend this school who come from poor families that do not have strong educational backgrounds will do better simply by being in the presence of others who have such high aspirations.⁸⁰ The atmosphere and prevalent attitude of the school has a significant impact on the future success of its students. This is one of the fears that exists in a school that has a predominantly or completely impoverished population. Generally, the atmosphere created and fostered in such a school is not one that values higher education or, in some cases, education in general. Without the support of the community and families it is very challenging for a school to cultivate an environment in which students want to learn and see this as a tool for future success.

The Power of School

Regardless of what school a student attends, the school is one of the most continuous institutions in a child's life. Further, it is an institution that impacts the lives of virtually all children in the United States. Despite the family's central role in a child's life, the school is critical in the developmental process.⁸¹ This puts considerable power in the hands of the educational system. Schools, and perhaps most importantly, teachers touch children's lives every day. Many people will disagree as to what the role of schools is today but one suggestion was offered by James Garbarino. He views the school as an institution that is able to build and foster resilience in children. According to Garbarino, a successful school would be one that provides coping methods to its students and helps

⁸⁰Coleman, 22.

⁸¹Dubrow, 121.

them to build and understand a planful approach to life. All children need to be taught that there are more and less successful ways to approach life and its difficulties. Every child would learn coping models to deal with some of the hard and stressful things that happen in their lives. It is easy for adults to look at the lives of children and think that they are carefree simply because they do not have to deal with all of the problems that face adults. Although children do not have the same stresses as the adults in their lives, they have difficulties for many reasons. One of these reasons is that they often do not yet know how to handle stress. According to Garbarino, a successful school would provide a model of coping and help students to think through situations and build a plan to approach different situations. If children have the ability to think through situations they will already have an advantage and an improved future.⁸² To be successful in life, children need to know how to handle what happens to them and they need to be able to dream and plan for the future. If these are the things that children need to be successful then one criteria for determining what would make a school successful would be the extent to which a school could ensure the future success of its students.

The Education System: Equalizer or Stabilizer of the Status Quo?

Many people have debated this question. Does the current educational system help to give all children a better future or does it aid in maintaining an inequitable status quo? People argue both sides of this issue but I argue that traditional education does not provide students with enough opportunities to change the status quo. I do not believe that educators maliciously try to hold children back but given the children's situations, education, as it currently stands, is not enough to change things. Educational historian

⁸²Garbarino 1995, 161.

Diane Ravitch agrees and believes that the government needs to give means-tested scholarship to needy families so that they can have the option of sending their children to the school of their choice whether it is public, private, or religious.⁸³ She believes that the fact that many needy families do not have a choice in what school their children are able to attend is one reason why the education system fails to help people improve their lives. Specifically, she argues, students' economic situations dictate the type of education they receive. She believes that if families had a choice, then children from poor families would not be lumped together to be forgotten and the families would have more control over their children's futures.

Others question whether the government even wants to help families get their children out of poverty. One resource, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, takes a fairly economic and pessimistic view of the situation. This work argues that educators are interested in reproducing, through schooling, the social classes that exist in society.⁸⁴ If this were true then it would be true that the government would have no interest in changing the system because the way the system works continues the cycle of society as it is. There is always some opportunity for a lucky few to break out of the cycle but that is encouraged for it perpetuates the myth of the American Dream. The authors of this work, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis wrote:

The educational system legitimates economic inequality by providing an open, objective, and ostensibly meritocratic mechanism for assigning individual students to unequal economic positions. The educational system fosters and reinforces the belief that economic success depends essentially on the possession of technical and cognitive skills—skills which it is organized to

⁸³Diane Ravitch, "Somebody's Children: Educational Opportunity for ALL American Children," *Social Policies for Children*, Ed. Irwin Garfinkel, Jennifer L. Hochschild, and Sara S. McLanahan, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1996, 85-86.

⁸⁴Biddle, 17.

provide in an efficient, equitable, and unbiased manner on the basis of meritocratic principle.⁸⁵

This is a strong assertion that the education system is actually fostering inequality instead of working to educate all pupils and give each of them a real opportunity to improve their lives. They claim that the current system reinforces the preexisting belief that economic success is dependent on something that a person possesses. This belief allows people to justify their own wealth and write off those that are not as fortunate. The wealthy are able to say that they earned their wealth because they had “what was needed” while others who did not fair so well clearly did not have “what was needed”. This leaves no room to examine why some people “have what it takes” to succeed while others do not. Immediately it is assumed that there is something inherently inferior about those that do not make it.

This is a predominant belief in society. It does not originate in the schools but has detrimental consequences in such a setting. Bowles and Gintis went on about the educational system:

The educational system is an integral element in the reproduction of the prevailing class structure of society. The educational system certainly has a life of its own, but the experience of work and the nature of the class structure are the bases upon which educational values are formed...⁸⁶

It is important that one not write off what Bowles and Gintis have to say simply because it is uncomfortable. Many of these problems might not exist if the educational system was not flawed. As they point out, the educational system has a life of its own and is part of a society that has differentiated classes, despite its claim that everyone has an equal opportunity.

⁸⁵ Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*, New York: Basic Books, 1976, 103.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 125 -126.

It is interesting to look at what is valued within the educational system and to realize that one of the main measures of success within the system is not the checklist that Garbarino produced of well -developed children who are able to think through situations and problems but rather children whose success is measured by standardized achievement tests. Many argue that these tests do not measure intelligence, as is often believed, but rather the skills that are viewed as the most important in our society for getting a good job.⁸⁷ These tests are good predictors of who will succeed in society but not necessarily who is the smartest or most creative or who should succeed. In this way, we can see that the current educational system neither actively challenges society's dominant norms nor teaches to students' strengths but rather reinforces what society views and wants as strengths.

The Pygmalion Effect

It is important to look at what within the educational system impacts directly the lives of children. As important as the equitable policies are for any given school, if they are not implemented they have no effect. What matters to an individual child is what he or she sees and experiences during any given day. To understand this it is crucial to look at the role of teachers. Teachers interact with pupils each day and it is their job to implement effective policy that will help their students. Thus, there is considerable power and responsibility within the position of a teacher. One of the unfortunate powers that come with the position is the ability to discourage a child from learning and reaching his or her best potential.

⁸⁷Coleman, 20.

Teachers are men and women who are typically trying to help improve the futures for many children. Despite this goal, sometimes, without knowing it, teachers actually hurt a child by not understanding the potential that the child possesses. This has been described as the "Pygmalion effect". Specifically, some teachers treat a student differently simply because he or she thinks that the child is either bright or dull. For example, if a teacher believes that a child is really smart, the child is more likely to do better simply because the teacher expects him or her to do better. Conversely, if a teacher does not think that a particular student is very bright, the student is more likely to perform poorly simply because that is the expectation of the teacher. When teachers are teaching students living in poverty, this effect is, unfortunately, often seen. Many people, teachers included, associate poverty with a lack of intelligence and therefore, usually without knowing it, can discriminate against these students through expecting that they will be less intelligent.⁸⁸

Although the theory may not be widely known, many people concur that this happens in far too many classrooms in the United States today. Teachers who have low expectations of their students create self-fulfilling prophecies.⁸⁹ When a teacher expects less of his or her students, he or she will be happy with lower results and will be less likely to push them to do better than he or she had expected of them. This is a dangerous phenomenon because it can be found in classrooms of even well-meaning teachers. These teachers can undermine students' self-confidence simply by giving them praise all of the time and accepting failure with sympathy based on an understanding of what other

⁸⁸Biddle, 16-17.

⁸⁹Luthar, 62.

thing the child is dealing with in his life. ⁹⁰It is important that a teacher understand the complex realities students face in their daily living particularly if he or she is teaching at risk students. However, it is crucially important that the other factors in a student's life do not create an excuse for a lower -quality performance in the classroom. This fine line must be drawn and respected by every teacher despite the challenge of the task. "Teachers are second only to parents in their potential impact upon children's development..."⁹¹This responsibility must be recognized as a value. When a parent has little faith in his child, the child is able to tell this and will not only be hurt, and potentially have lower self -esteem, but he will also act down to the expectations. As it turns out, the same is true for teachers. They have a huge impact on their students' lives and their expectations for the students will strongly determine the students' success.

What Does a Teacher Need in Order to Be Qualified?

Training

As disclosed above, teachers are very important and influential in children's lives. Moreover, it is known that there is a strong relationship between the quality of teachers and pupil achievement. ⁹²That is, the better qualified and prepared teachers are the better their students will do. It is crucial to look at what teachers need in order to be better qualified to serve as role models for their students. Teacher preparation faculty are attempting to discover what a teacher really needs to know about children before meeting the students and entering the classroom.

⁹⁰Luthar, 62.

⁹¹Simpson, 169.

⁹²Coleman, 22.

There is a growing recognition of the need for a diverse curriculum in the education and training of future teachers and scholars on poverty and child development. One methodist uses narratives about the real lives of children living in “non-traditional” circumstances.⁹³ Such stories help people to frame questions about how situations affect children’s development and learning ability. Without this understanding, scholars are simply looking at statistics and theories, and teachers are approaching each group of students as a completely new problem to be unraveled anew. If people are able to understand the similarities of situations through the implementation of narratives, teachers and scholars will be able to better understand how to approach an individual child. In addition to narratives, existing information on issues facing families and children in poverty need to be included in the graduate teaching curriculum. Many teaching programs do not devote any time to looking at the homes and communities from which their students will be coming.⁹⁴ If this occurred they would inevitably have to look at the realities of impoverished urban communities. Understanding the context from which many of their future students will be coming would enable teachers to plan an approach for teaching children whom may be coming into their classrooms having already suffered in the educational system and they would be more aware of what issues could be affecting their students. Studying this aspect of the context of children’s lives could help combat the problems of the Pygmalion effect. If this context is never analyzed, the best intentioned teachers may undermine their students unintentionally as they try to compensate for some of the other hardships their students are already facing.

⁹³Luthar, 94.

⁹⁴Ibid., 91.

Teachers need to have preparation in child developmental theory and practice and be familiar with the developmental consequences for children of living in poverty. With such knowledge and understanding teachers would be better equipped to create and foster protective factors and resilience in their own classrooms. ⁹⁵If teachers do not know about warning signs they will not be well prepared to recognize the problem, let alone try to intervene and help. For example, when teachers are working with an at-risk population, especially in a low-income urban setting, they must understand the concept of regression and understand it as a response to stress and a coping strategy that many children use who have experienced, either physically or visually, trauma. ⁹⁶When one is able to identify a child's behavior as a coping strategy in response to the stress in his or her life, then one is able to probe to find the real problem, instead of attacking the one thing the child has the coping strategy. This is not to say that teachers will have to put up with bad behavior or low performance but instead that they will be encouraged to find the root of problem that is manifesting itself in symptoms in the classroom.

Support

Not only do teachers need better training to understand children's developmental processes and the signs of risk, but they also need significant support in the process of working with children who are coping with extreme stress and, in some cases, trauma. As we learned earlier, the home and community have a significant impact on the lives of children. One of the realities in their lives is the presence of community violence including death. The statistics that were reported earlier about the number of children who had seen dead bodies are unnerving. In the presence of this reality teachers who

⁹⁵Dubrow, 177.

⁹⁶Ibid., 178.

work with children who live in such communities must also be trained to understand how children react to and understand violent death. In the process of training teachers it is important that the teachers' reactions are understood as well. When a teacher has to help a child cope with death, especially a violent death, it is important that the teacher understand his or her own feelings about death. It is not uncommon for adults to be fearful of talking with the children about topics that are complicated and are difficult for the adults. Death is certainly one of these topics. ⁹⁷The problem is that oftentimes the death that is affecting the child will also be affecting his or her family or support network. The teacher may be one of the only people who will be capable of having a discussion with the child about his or her thoughts and feelings about the death. If the discussion is not facilitated then the child is forced to carry those feelings and fears alone. It is in such situations that a child's less proactive coping strategies may emerge.

Teachers do not only need support around the discussion of death but also around so many of the harsh realities of the lives of their students and oftentimes their own communities. They need support and training to be able to teach and be a resource and role model for their students and not have the same sense of hopelessness and despair that many of the students feel. Children look up to their teachers and if they see their role models feeling hopeless about their situation the children will be left with little or no hope. In order for the teachers to maintain any hope they need support from those around them and those in the teaching community. ⁹⁸If teachers are able to be supported in dealing with their own feelings they will be much more effective in helping children. When they are well supported and trained, teachers should be able to help children

⁹⁷Dubrow, 179.

⁹⁸Luthar, 62.

recognize their own feelings, clarify issues that could be confusing in their young minds, solve problems that they encounter, and seek alternative solutions.⁹⁹ This is something that children desperately need and yet cannot always find. If a child can trust his or her teachers and sees in them a sense of hope and stability, then she or he will be more likely to go to them for help for both little issues as well as big issues.

Many adults are unaware of the fact that they are trapped in “domains of silence”. This is the descriptive term for a situation in which adults who are not clinically trained are reluctant to address with children difficult topics such as sexuality, domestic or community violence, family disruption, or death.¹⁰⁰ Many adults become trapped in a place of being uncomfortable or unwilling to speak due to their fear of saying the wrong thing or of not knowing what to say, especially since the audience is a child who, in the mind of many, should not have to deal with or worry about such big topics.

Unfortunately, many children experience violence at an early, and many would argue premature, age. It is important that those adults who are present in at-risk children’s lives are not afraid to share in such conversations. Because of this, teachers must be trained and supported to participate in this process. This will aid the teachers in being better models and resources for their students and will help the teachers understand their own coping abilities given the reality of the situation in which they are at least working if not also living.

One way that teachers can help children understand some of the difficult challenges in their lives is by cultivating an environment of play. Garbarino reminds those who have forgotten that play is a very purposeful activity for children and not

⁹⁹Dubrow, 182.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 183.

simply a fun thing that occupies part of their days. Play is both a cause and a consequence of cultural evolution. In the U.S. we live in a society and culture which encourages children to play and engage in imaginary activities because they are not usually needed to work for the family. At the same time, our culture has evolved in a way that allows children to continue engaging in such activities because we recognize, in some way, the importance of such activities in children's lives. Fantasy play is one way that children develop needed skills that help them to become more human and fully developed. They learn, live and figure things out all through their fantasy play. ¹⁰¹

In a society inundated by media, technology and consumerism which foster passive observation, it is sad that many parents and teachers have forgotten the value of active play in the lives of children. Play cannot only help children to develop and learn life skills and lessons but it also acts as a tool or resource for children in coping with the things that they do not understand and are trying to make meaning of. Teachers can use play to understand what the children are experiencing in the rest of their days and understand what is affecting them.

School Partnerships

Research has found that parent (or other adult) involvement in the school and in the child's education contributes to children's success in school. ¹⁰² For many people this information will seem like common sense. The interesting thing is that no matter how much like common sense it seems to people, there are still many communities and schools that have not found an effective way to incorporate this

¹⁰¹ Garbarino 1995, 12-13.

¹⁰² Sanders .

knowledge into their school communities. One argument suggests that there are four different ways that schools can organize activities that fostersuch engagement. The student-centered activities involve mentoring, tutoring, awards, scholarships, and other such things. These activities place the student and his or her success at the center of the activity. There are incentives to succeed and hope given to the student through each success. A family-centered activity includes parenting workshops, adult education classes, family counseling, or family night at school. Here, the family is encouraged to be involved in the school and some of the needs of the other members of the families, mainly the caregivers, are met as well. The school-centered approach is one that focuses on staff development or school clean-up projects. In doing these things people hope to improve the skills of the teachers and staff of the school as well as increasing pride and a sense of ownership over the school within the school community. The final type of activity is a community-centered activity. This would include activities such as an art and science exhibit for the community or community revitalization projects. This is one way to integrate the school into the community and make it an active member of the community while at the same time inviting the community to be involved with the school. Each type of activity has a target audience whose needs are addressed in very specific ways. When this occurs people are more likely to feel accepted and welcomed in the school. To some people the school can be an intimidating place with people in authority including the teachers, principals, and social workers. When the school is viewed as a member of the community that can help others and that also needs the help and support of others, it can be much less frightening. When all four models are

integrated there is a greater chance of involvement and success in the school, on behalf of each child.¹⁰³

Conclusion

It is important to remember that no matter how harsh some school environments are and how unsuccessful children can become in their academics, children initially come to school excited about learning. This is true for all children including those who are labeled “at-risk”.¹⁰⁴ It is the responsibility of the adults in their lives to protect them from failing. One child’s failure is a failure of all those who surround him or her. Children must be reached at the beginning of their school experiences and their hope for the future as well as a continuing sense of excitement about school must be fostered. When a child does not seem excited about being at school it is a reflection of their past or present experience there. Children have an inherent excitement about learning and playing. School must be a combination of these in order that no child be left behind. If we as a society value our children and our future we will ensure that they remain excited about learning and have the resources they need, including well-qualified and supported teachers, to be successful.

¹⁰³ Sanders.

¹⁰⁴ Robert E. Slavin, “The Intentional School: Effective Elementary Education for All Children,” *At-Risk Students: One Hundred Years*, first Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Stringfield and Deborah Land. Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 2002.

PART III

Towards a Possible Solution

Full-Service and Community Schools

A Boston College professor of education, Mary Walsh, PhD, claimed, “We tend to divide kids into two parts – head and heart.” She went on to argue that we must not do this but instead we must be, “trying to take the dividing line out and look at each child as a whole person... we have to take care of the whole person.”¹⁰⁵ Walsh believes that the current establishment of schools is not sufficient to meet the needs of children. This belief lies behind a movement to increase the number of full-service or community schools, especially in at-risk neighborhoods and among at-risk populations. The idea behind this movement is that if students are going to fully learn they need to be viewed as whole people and not solely receptacles for information.

The History of Community Schools

Walsh is in good company in her belief that there is another solution to the problems that many children, schools, and communities are currently facing. The idea of community schools first emerged decades ago. In 1954 Edward Olsen identified the characteristics of community schools that he believed to be important. His seven characteristics focused on what a community school should do. A community school:

1. improve the quality of living here and now.
2. use the community as a laboratory for learning.
3. make the school plant a community center.
4. organize the core curriculum around the processes and problems of living.

¹⁰⁵Mary E. Walsh, “No Child Left Behind – Urban Education.” Boston College PULSE Speaker Series. Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA. 4 Feb. 2003.

5. includes lay people in the school policy and program planning.
6. leads in community coordination.
7. practices and promotes democracy in all human relations. ¹⁰⁶

These ideas, while not exactly what community schools use as their model today, are part of the foundation of today's schools. The idea that the school was a resource for the entire community and not solely for its students was welcomed and exciting. This allowed the school to be a site for resource enhancement and distribution for all residents of a community. While this idea was not wholeheartedly welcomed and embraced in the 1950s, the popularity of the idea grew.

By the early 1970s the concept of community education had become more widespread. There were already almost two thousand schools in the United States that used many of the ideas and the concept of community education in their classrooms and communities. While this was an exciting time in a new educational movement, it did not last long. The movement lost a lot of its momentum in the mid to late 1970s and soon was no longer growing. The main reason for this loss of momentum was because the theory underlying the concept of community education and community schools was not well clarified. Because of this, it lost its meaning and people were confused by its true purpose, role, and benefits for both the school and community. ¹⁰⁷ While this early surge in the movement was lost, it did not completely disappear but it needed some serious reorganization and help. The hope that remained came from the success that some of the schools had at the beginning of the movement. During the first height of the trend, in 1971, the National Community Education Association defined community education as a "philosophy that pervades all segments of educational programming and directs the thrust

¹⁰⁶Theodore J. Kowalski and John A. Fallon, *Community Education: Processes and Programs*, Bloomington, Indiana: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1986, 10.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 8.

of each of them toward the needs of the community.”¹⁰⁸ This definition, while adapted in each specific community school, did not disappear and would come back on the scene and modified as the idea reemerged.

When the school was able to be a site of interaction between different elements of the community, there was far more success for the students and community members alike. The history of community education has not been one of a continued upward climb but rather a history of steps backward and forward. Historically, it is apparent that community education gained its most momentum when social unrest was increasing. Neighborhood schools were viewed as a possible place where a sense of community identity could be built in the ever-growing large, impersonal cities. The neighborhood school was one way that the city could be broken in to smaller units with which people could connect.¹⁰⁹ Community schools seemed, to many, to be the best way of approaching this problem because, not only would there be a school within different neighborhoods but it would also be committed to involving the community in the school in order to give the students the best environment in which they could learn. At the same time the community was given an opportunity to connect and form an identity around this common goal. This was one of the biggest advantages that the community school had.

The community schools were institutions that people felt good about and were happy to see develop. They had programs that many different groups were willing to support financially in order to ensure their success. The funding of a community school was a testament to their mission to bring everyone together to educate the children.

Usually, the federal government, state government, local government, local school

¹⁰⁸Kowalski, 11.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

system, and local chapter of United Way all came together to see this project flourish.¹¹⁰

These extensive and unlikely unions of the smallest of local organizations to the national governmental all began to embrace the idea of a different way of educating a community.

The face of community schools in Boston changed dramatically in 1974. On June 21, 1974 U.S. District Court Judge W. Arthur Garrity, Jr. mandated forced busing in the Boston Public School District in an attempt to integrate the schools and achieve racial balance. This decision was despised by many people but Garrity refused to consider any alternatives. He accepted the proposed "Master Plan" of the Massachusetts Department of Education without question, or even review. With over 80% of the students now bused to schools outside of their neighborhoods, community schools faced a new challenge.¹¹¹ How was a community school supposed to be supported by the neighborhood when few of the neighborhood children attended the school? At the same time, were the services provided for the families actually helpful if the families lived on the other side of town? At this time, the excitement for community schools diminished as other schooling issues emerged surrounding the issue of busing.

Today the idea of the community school is once again looked upon as a possible solution to the many problems that are hurting some of the poorest neighborhoods in the country. Clearly, as we saw in the first part of this paper, the realities of urban poverty in the United States are frightening and can be very harmful to children. In community schools lay the hope of many people. They believe that something can be done to improve children's chances and community collaboration may be needed to reduce the

¹¹⁰ "Partnerships for Excellence," *Coalition for Community Schools*, 18 Mar. 2003.
<<http://www.communityschools.org/partnerships.html>>5.

¹¹¹ Matthew Richer, "Busing's Boston Massacre," *Policy Review* Nov. –Dec. 1998, Washington, D.C.: Hoover Institution, 17 Apr. 2003. <www.policyreview.org/nov98/busing.html>.

vicious cycle of violence and poverty. A modern advocate for innovative school-based programs, Michael Krist said,

What's needed is a complete overhaul of children's services, bringing together public and private organizations to meet the comprehensive needs of children, adolescents, and parents. Schools should constitute one of the centers of a coordinated network of total children's services.¹¹²

Community schools today are different than those that emerged in the '70s. There has been a shift from a focus on the needs of the entire community to the services that can be provided for children. This shift has come about for many reasons. Community schools now are created by professionals instead of the community. In Boston, this could be a result of the busing program and the fact that families do not necessarily live near the schools. Regardless, this shift has changed the mission statements of community schools from a focus on community to a focus on children. The impact of this change has not been fully studied but it would be fair to ask what the effects have been. This change could potentially hurt the power that lay within the community schools of the '70s: the local community.

Positive Results

People are now learning and coming to understand that children who are living and growing up in poverty need more social support than the traditional school offers. The traditional public school has been set up to accommodate children who, for the most part, have stable homes or some form of adult support, basic needs, and a sense of security. This, as we have seen, is not true for many children who are growing up in U.S.

¹¹²Joy G. Dryfoos, *Full Service Schools: A Revolution in Health and Social Services for Children, Youth, and Families*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994, 6.

urban poverty. For many children, the school is the most stabilizing influence in their lives. This makes it a good site to address many different issues and provide needed services.¹¹³ While it does not have to be the sole responsibility of the teachers and principal to provide their students with all of the services that they need, it would be ideal if the school personnel were able to refer children, or walk them down the hall, to the appropriate resource. Children's needs could be met because their teachers would have the resources to refer them to others for help.

Each community school has its particular characteristics but the current model of community schools is one in which programs are located in the communities and schools that have the greatest need. Statistics confirm that the school clinics established within community schools have been used most frequently by students that are at the highest risk.¹¹⁴ What is encouraging is that the presence of clinics in schools seem to be making a difference. Specifically, students who use the clinic have a lower rate of substance abuse, have better school attendance, and have a lower dropout rate.¹¹⁵ Some people will argue that this is true for obvious reasons, that is, students who are most likely to take advantage of resources within schools are less likely to have problems. This argument makes sense, yet an alternative explanation exists: if students have somewhere to go and someone with whom they can talk they are less likely to need to turn to drugs and are going to continue coming to the place where they feel accepted and supported, that is, the school.

¹¹³Helen Raham, "Full Service Schools," *Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education*, 1998. British Columbia, Canada. 18 Mar. 2003 <http://www.saeecbc.ca/art2000_2_2.html>1.

¹¹⁴Dryfoos, 134.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 135.

People are coming to see that many community schools are proving to be very successful but they are still in need of help. They need strong leadership and good governing structures to be successful. There must also be an emphasis on community involvement. As we saw, there has been a shift away from this since the '70s but it is a vital aspect of these programs. Without the community's support there is little chance that the community school will be better than other schools. The community needs to be allowed to and encouraged to use the support and resources that are provided and to get involved in the shape and life of the school. ¹¹⁶ The more the community feels invested in the school the more likely the school is to be able to utilize the best community resources and to be supportive to the community and, more importantly, the students. While community schools can be extremely beneficial to all members of the community, the students are the main focus and it is their futures and successes that are the driving force behind these projects today.

Community schools seem to have a far-reaching effect on the lives of many people. In addition to their effect on educational outcomes, they affect other things as well. There is a strong relationship between community schools and improved social behavior, healthy youth development, better family functioning, greater parental involvement, enhanced school and community climate, and more supportive services. ¹¹⁷ These far-reaching changes are extremely important in the lives of under-resourced and impoverished children. Not only are community schools changing the academic success of their students, they seem to be having a strong effect on the homes and parents of the students, as well. The parents feel supported by the schools and the community and this

¹¹⁶Raham, 2.

¹¹⁷ "Evaluation of Community Schools: Findings to Date. Part 1: Overview" *Coalition for Community Schools*, 18 Mar. 2003 <<http://www.communityschools.org/evaluation/eval1.html>> 2.

allow them to be better parents. The support network, as we saw in the home lives of children, is often a very critical missing link.

Community schools are able to act as a vehicle for educational reform. The long term measures of effectiveness that are used are the test scores and rates of attendance, promotion, graduation, suspension, and expulsion.¹¹⁸ All of these statistics are used to compare the student body's successes after the impact of the community school is in full effect. This is a good way to compare student bodies of different schools and to support the claim that they are a good investment.

Family Support

One of the most important things that community schools provide for families of the students is the family support center. This is a place to which families, specifically parents, are able to go to learn about the most effective and supportive child rearing practices, help finding employment or job training and housing, or help understanding the process of immigration and residency in the United States.¹¹⁹ The family support center allows the parents to feel supported by the school and to feel welcome in the school. This increases the parental involvement rate in the school and therefore in the children's lives. This is one way that the community schools could provide services to members of the community other than the students and in the long run it truly does benefit the children and their academic pursuits and successes in the future.

¹¹⁸“Evaluation: Part I,” 2.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*

Defining the Term: Differences and Similarities

One of the most important, unique and sometimes challenging aspects of community and full-service schools is that the term “full-service” or “community school” is defined by the particular community in which the school will be located.¹²⁰ This is one of the most liberating and at the same time challenging aspects of community education. There is no protocol for establishing a community school because, in one sense, that would defeat its purpose. The community school needs to be present to meet the needs of the given community and in order to accomplish that goal, the school needs to identify what the needs are and implement programs and services that will uniquely meet the needs of that community. While this may lead to more successful schools in the long run, it also presents many challenges. The schools are left to balance existing demands and pressures and, in one sense, to reinvent the wheel in each school.

While each school is different, there are many similar characteristics that differentiate community schools from other schools. Most community schools are open before, during, and after the traditional school day to all students, families, and community members. They are often open seven days a week all year long. The programs and services vary slightly in the summer.¹²¹ The frequent hours and easy access to different services make the schools a wonderful resource for everyone who wishes to avail themselves of what is offered. It is, however, up to the school-community partnership to decide what services will be provided.

Many argue that school systems in general, and not solely community schools, need to recognize the community’s and students’ needs and reorganize. Community

¹²⁰Dryfoos, 14.

¹²¹“Evaluation: Part I,” 2.

agencies need to be utilized in order to bring more services into the schools. Some argue that there need to be access to health, mental health, employment, and childcare services. These are some of the standard resources found in community schools. The belief that school systems in general need to provide more of these services may lead one to believe that the rate of community schools is going to continue to steadily grow. People are also talking about their desire to see parent education classes and recreational and cultural events present in the schools. ¹²² All of this talk is moving people more and more towards community schools.

It seems that some people misinterpret the role of community schools and see them as plans to increase what is expected of teachers and schools, themselves. Director of the Center for Service Integration, William Morrill, and former Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the Department of Health and Human Services, Martin Gerry, came together over the discussion of community schools and said, "This hypothesis does not necessarily assume that the schools need to be the organizer or operator of all services to be delivered but the physical facility or the cooperation of the school administration is usually critical to integration and coordination efforts." ¹²³ People must understand that community schools are a true call for partnership, cooperation, and coordination within a community to ensure the success of the community and most importantly, the children.

Recent Studies

There have been many studies of specific community schools. For example, the elementary schools in Baltimore that had family support teams that included a social

¹²² Dryfoos, 12.

¹²³ Ibid., 11.

worker, school nurse, and facilitator, as well as integrated human services, which includes on-site health clinics, family counseling, or mental health agencies, showed signs of significant improvement in the attendance rates and a sharp decrease in the number of students that were being helped back to repeat a school year.¹²⁴ Reports such as this are not uncommon and are helping to convince people that there is substantial value in the establishment of community full-service schools. In California, a program called Healthy Start has been established that incorporates many of the practices and services that are present in community schools. The results of this program have been very encouraging to many people. Further, studies have found that the students that are involved in this program are less likely to use drugs and those that had been using drugs have actually decreased their drug use.¹²⁵ Evidence such as this is very encouraging for people who are trying to decide if providing additional services in schools will actually help children and make a difference in their futures.

Most recently, a report on community schools was compiled using the results and reports from 49 different community schools across the country. While this is only a very small sample of the community schools that are up and running, it is a start for studying the role and impact of the schools that are recurrently being established in our communities. The report showed that 46 of the 49 schools indicated positive changes in their schools since the implementation of additional services. In addition to this, 36 of the 49 were able to report academic gains in their students. While one could ask why there were not significant academic gains in all of the schools, it is important to realize

¹²⁴Dryfoos, 131.

¹²⁵“Evaluation: Part I,” 5.

that three-quarters of these schools now have students who are doing better academically.

That is an impressive first study on the community schools today. ¹²⁶

I now wish to look in more detail at two of full-service community schools that are currently open in Boston, Massachusetts. These two schools are examples of what community schools look like and the impact they are having on their students in a large urban area of the United States that has many under-resourced and low performing schools.

¹²⁶“Evaluation: Part I,” 4.

Case Study I: Boston Excel

Boston Excel is a program that helps to establish and run full-service schools. This program is presently established in three elementary schools in some of Boston's poorest neighborhoods. There are three main notions that Boston Excel holds firmly. One, the schools are natural settings for support for children and their families. Two, each child has a right to a good education and life of success. Three, children, families, and schools are best when they work together.¹²⁷ These three ideas are the foundation for and motivating factor behind Boston Excel and its mission. All of their programs and resources focus on seeing this mission come true in the lives of a lot of the students and their families.

Programs and Services

Boston Excel attempts to provide extra programs and resources that will meet the needs that their families and students have. The Excel programs include many different things. A list of the programs includes mentoring, tutoring, classroom aides, individual, group, and family counseling, training for parents and teachers on topics such as classrooms, conflict resolution, and cultural adjustment. They also provide crisis intervention, after-school programming, and consultation and training of teachers for behavior management and other relevant topics.¹²⁸ All of these resources and programs are present to help students come to the classroom more prepared to learn, to aid parents

¹²⁷“Boston Excels.” *Coalition for Community Schools*. 2000. 18 Mar. 2003

<<http://www.communityschools.org/Boston.html>>1.

¹²⁸“Boston Excels Full Service Schools: Briefing Paper” *Boston Children’s Institute*, 31 Mar. 2000

<http://www.thehome.org/site/pdf/excels_briefing.pdf>2.

in their pursuits to better raise their children, and to support teachers as they strive to find more effective ways to run their classrooms and educate their students. In addition to all of the resources they have that focus on the needs of the children, Excel has an anti-re program that is devoted to helping parents be better parents and more fully understand their own abilities, rights and role in their children's lives and in society. This program includes a family literacy program which is all-year-round classes in English as a second language, math, and computers. They focus on parent education, leadership development, workshop on parenting, helping their children succeed in school, and increasing their involvement in the school. Excel also has both paid and volunteer jobs at the school that the parents can fill so that they can be more involved on a daily basis. For parents that need it, they have skill training classes so that they can find better jobs and the program also coordinates with other resources that are outside of the school. The school partnership in the community can be used to help the parents as well as the rest of the school community. It is only with the full participation and partnership of the family, school and community that they truly see the school's goals reached.¹²⁹

The Student- Body

A case study that was completed during the 1996-97 school year found that there were a total of 1,916 students enrolled in the three Boston elementary schools that were participating with Excel at the time. Of the students, 650 had received counseling, 417 families had taken advantage of the family support services, and there had been 296 crisis

¹²⁹“Boston Excels Full Service Schools: Briefing Paper,” 3.

interventions in total in the three schools. ¹³⁰The students and families that were enrolled in the Boston Public Schools (BPS) that were linked with Excel were able to use all of the services that were being provided. These services are all in place with the hope that they will help to further Excel's mission of using the schools as a site to reach and educate the children and families of the community. Together they have made a partnership that will attempt to improve the quality of life for everyone involved. The students and families of their schools are some of the most needy in the city because all three of the elementary schools that Excel has partnered with are in very impoverished neighborhoods. All of their schools have between 80% and 90% of the school population from low-income families. ¹³¹The Excel programs all strive to educate and support poor students and families.

Excel schools recognize that some of their students are still struggling a lot and are at-risk children. These children need extra help and support beyond what traditional schools provide for every student. These students are able to receive one-on-one guidance. This service is provided for all students who have been identified as at-risk as well as for any child who seeks extra help. One hundred ninety students in the Excel schools, which is ten percent of the population in the three schools, are matched with an adult mentor during the school year. One hundred sixty-six of the students are supervised in the daily after-school program and there is always additional support for the students that want it or demonstrate signs of needing it. ¹³²The services provided at the Excel schools mean that no child is able to slip by unnoticed. Every child is assessed for his or

¹³⁰ "Evaluation of Community Schools: Findings to Date. Part 2: Research on Initiatives; Local Initiatives" *Coalition for Community Schools*, 18 Mar. 2003

<<http://www.communityschools.org/evaluation/eval4.html>> 1.

¹³¹ "Boston Excels Full Service Schools: Briefing Paper," 2.

¹³² "Boston Excels," 2.

her individual needs and there is a built-in support network for the teacher to ensure that they are able to focus on teaching while at the same time they can feel confident that their students are able to receive all of the help that they need.

Parents' Place

Former director of Boston Excels and now the head of the family literacy program, Susan Klaw wants to see the parent become an integral part of the school. They are able to do this through all of the parent education classes and her literacy program. Klaw claims, "the content and goal [of the literacy program]... is to learn how to advocate for their kids."¹³³ Klaw believes that the role of the family support programs is to teach parents how to be their child's best advocate and teacher. Parents want to figure out ways to enhance learning in their homes and the family programs allow them to use the best resources that the community has to offer, such as the public library, and the ways that they can be supportive in their child's education.¹³⁴

Results

The results of the Excel program are important to study because it is the key to the future of the school and the future success of the students and community. The McKay Elementary School is one of the BPS schools that has partnered with Excel. Between 1990 and 1993 they saw an increase in promotion at the end of the year from one grade to the next from 95% to 98%. They observed the results in reading and math scores improved and the teachers watched as classroom behavior improved and parental

¹³³ Susan Klaw, "No Child Left Behind - Urban Education." Boston College PULSE Speaker Series. Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA. 4 Feb. 2003.

¹³⁴ Klaw.

involvement was at a recent high.¹³⁵ Results such as this are very encouraging for the people at Boston Excels. In a three year span they have been able to see real results. The math scores have increased by over 50% and the reading scores in the school have increased by over 200%.¹³⁶ These are important numbers to look at because they tell part of the story. They say that the differences that have been seen since the introduction of new services and programs have made an important and drastic difference in the lives of the students. When other factors in their external lives have not changed dramatically, they are still succeeding at much higher rates and Excel believes it is due to their successful mission. Not only is there a difference in the lives of the children, but their parents are seeing changes, too. Over one hundred parents are actively involved at their child's school in the Excel schools.¹³⁷ This level of parental involvement is crucial for both child and school success and the result certainly has matched up with the increased involvement.

It appears to be true that Excel's mission statement was correct when it stated that the students, schools and families all do better when they form a partnership and work together. What continues to be impressive, though, is the academic gains of the schools. One of the Excel schools was able to achieve even better results than I just reported. This school saw an unbelievable 215% improvement on the reading scores of the students and a 72% improvement on the math scores.¹³⁸ Results such as this cannot be refuted. The results seem to get better over time they are republished and the Excel programs become more and more comprehensive. An Excel school is also able to boast at the latest title of

¹³⁵“Evaluation of Community Schools. Part 2: Local Initiatives,” 1.

¹³⁶Ibid., 2.

¹³⁷Ibid.

¹³⁸“Boston Excels,” 2.

best attendance rate in the entire BPS system. ¹³⁹ It appears as though students who attend any of the three Excels schools are improving academically, are watching their parents take a more focused interest in their school and education, and these changes are making the students want to come to school and are encouraging their parents to make sure that they show up each day. The Boston Excels program is one example of a truly successful full-service school in some of the poorest neighborhoods in urban Boston.

¹³⁹“Boston Excels,” 1-2.

Case Study II: Thomas Gardner Extended Service School

The Thomas Gardner Extended Service School (GESS) was established as a full-service community school in the early 1990s. Its birth came about from a visit and some small work at Gardner by Boston College professor, Mary E. Walsh, PhD. She was, at that time, involved with Boston College's Center for Child, Family, and Community Partnerships.¹⁴⁰ Her work with this project had put her in Gardner to do some evaluations and research. During her time at Gardner, she became aware of the need that existed in the school. Walsh has said, in a very direct statement, "Schools can't do it alone."¹⁴¹ It was this feeling that led Walsh to help create the program that is now GESS. She believes that, "If we address the non-academic barriers to learning, we're giving great opportunities to promote resilience, and the kids will be better able to learn."¹⁴² Today, GESS provides parents and students with comprehensive services that address non-academic barriers to student learning in an attempt to change the actual academic performance and the students' futures in the long run.¹⁴³ Gardner is able to provide a better learning environment because the needs of their students are met before they enter the classroom. This means that students are able to come to the classroom ready and able to learn. As stated earlier by Walsh (pg. 63), when children arrive at school they need to be treated as whole people and not only as learners in order for them to be able to succeed.

¹⁴⁰ Joan Millman, "What it Takes." *Boston College Magazine*. Winter 2001. http://www.bc.edu/publications/bcm/winter_2001/ft_keeping_what.html.

¹⁴¹ "Gardner Extended Services School," *Monitor on Psychology*, 33.8. Sept. 2002. American Psychological Association. 18 Mar. 2003 <<http://www.apa.org/monitor/sep02/gardner.html>> 1.

¹⁴² Walsh.

¹⁴³ "Gardner Extended Services School," 1.

Steps to Overcome the Achievement Gap

In the world of education and educational reform there is always a lot of talk about the growing achievement gap that exists in the United States. Walsh believes that it is very possible to close this achievement gap if only people understand what makes a successful approach. She recognizes that urban areas, for the most part, have fewer resources and are at the bottom of the achievement gap. Walsh argues that we, the well educated people with resources and power, must make the closure of the achievement gap possible. There are very clear steps that need to be taken in order to make this happen but it is very possible. According to Walsh, 8% of the achievement gap would be closed if the size of classes was reduced, as many people, including the federal government, have encouraged. Another 46% could be closed by putting qualified teachers in every classroom. The final 46% would be closed if there was health support and needed resources in communities and families available to those that lacked them. ¹⁴⁴If Walsh is right in this belief, GESS is certainly well on its way to closing the achievement gap for its students.

Problems and Services

The principal of Gardner ESS, Catalina Montessa said, "I've learned that commitment and hard work aren't always enough. It truly believes it takes the effort and goodwill of the entire community to help all our children succeed." ¹⁴⁵She and Walsh create a powerful combination of determination and belief in the effectiveness of community-school partnerships. GESS is a school that is serving many different students

¹⁴⁴Walsh.

¹⁴⁵"Partnership for Excellence," 6.

and families that are in need of many different services. Over half of the five hundred students at Gardner are English as a second language (ESL) learners and in the kindergarten through sixth grade student body there are 36 different languages represented.¹⁴⁶ The diversity of the school creates a wonderfully rich sense of culture in the school but also could create many problems because the needs of the families, who come from so many different places, are so vast. The reality is that there are many different barriers to learning that the teachers and staff at GESS face every day. Barriers such as homelessness, lack of access to adequate medical care, undocumented children, and language barriers are only some of the issues for which the GESS personnel need to be prepared.¹⁴⁷ Walsh is a firm believer that, “schools and community agencies need to pull together and work in a web to help kids achieve.”¹⁴⁸

In an attempt to deal with all of the various needs that are present in the community, GESS is open and running programs from seven in the morning until eleven at night every week and holds additional services on weekends.¹⁴⁹ The variety of services provided are overwhelming to some but utilized by all. The expanded services for the students and families include:

- A free law clinic that is staffed by the Boston College Law School
- A school based health and dental clinic
- Immigration support
- GED classes
- Parenting workshops
- ESL and computer classes

¹⁴⁶“Partnership for Excellence,” 6.

¹⁴⁷Walsh.

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹“Gardner Extended Services School,” 1.

In addition to these services, GESS works with the community agencies to provide assistance, job training and mental health services to those that need them.¹⁵⁰ All of these services are integrated into the school community in an attempt to make the school a place where families feel welcome and comfortable. The partnership between the school and parents is crucial for the children for it is this relationship that helps children feel a sense of connectedness and safety. This is a central aspect to Bronfenbrenner's model of child development that was included above. The development of the child can be influenced in so many different ways and the main goal of the school is to ensure the success of their students. The healthy and normal development of each child is one of the goals of the GESS program and one of the reasons why they have so many of the programs that are offered. They are attempting to support the parents in their mission to raise healthy, happy, well-adjusted children so that the children will have more hope and a better future.

Partnerships

Not only does GESS strive to integrate the family into the school, but it also has created a way in which all of the programs in which the students participate are connected with their classroom education. There is an integrated curriculum with the out-of-school activities and the normal school day. The instruction that the students receive in the before and after-school programs, the summer enrichment, and the recreational services at the local YMCA are all connected and integrated with the school.¹⁵¹ The before and after-school programs are staffed by certified teachers as well as Boston College students

¹⁵⁰“Gardner Extended Services School,” 1.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

who act as the mentors and tutors to the students.¹⁵² This means that the children are being supported by one, large, all-encompassing hand instead of getting help at three or four independent places that are not in communication with each other.

The partnership between GESS and Boston College has proved to be a wonderful match. Boston College is able to provide services from the Law School, Lynch School of Education, and simply people who will help to implement some of the services needed for the students and their families. Not only does GESS have a partnership with Boston College but also with the local YMCA, which is the fiscal agent in the project, and the Health Boston Coalition.¹⁵³ All of these partnerships strengthen the program that GESS already has and make the school a true example of community-school partnership. Nothing would be as possible without all of these agencies and GESS would not be serving its students, families, and community nearly as well, effectively, or efficiently.

Results

The results at GESS speak for themselves as proof of the success of the programs and partnerships. The standardized test scores and attendance rate increased dramatically and the results were so successful that the programs at GESS are now being implemented at ten other elementary schools by Boston Public Schools.¹⁵⁴ In 1999, Gardner was the eighth most improved elementary school in the entire state of Massachusetts in the literacy based on the state-wide exams.¹⁵⁵ The performance of the fourth graders at

¹⁵²“Partnership for Excellence,” 7.

¹⁵³Ibid.

¹⁵⁴“Gardner Extended Services School,” 1.

¹⁵⁵ “Evaluation of Community Schools: Findings to Date. Part 2: Research on Initiatives; National Models” *Coalition for Community Schools*, 18 Mar. 2003
<<http://www.communityschools.org/evaluation/eval2.html>> 2.

Gardner on the Massachusetts state language arts test gained GESS recognition for being one of the ten most improved schools in the state. ¹⁵⁶ While the results are not always the sole indicator of the success of the school and the new programs, they certainly help to confirm the beliefs that additional resources that address both academic and nonacademic barriers to learning and performance makes a huge impact on the success of children in low-income and under-resourced communities.

Goals and Practices of GESS

In the proposal that the partners of GESS wrote together, they state that the goal of GESS for its children was to:

foster attendance, promptness, respect for authority, eagerness to learn, motivation to be productive, honesty, integrity, loyalty, initiative, and good citizenship and enable... children to make choices that contribute to their personal well-being and the well-being of the community. ¹⁵⁷

This goal, the foundation for the activities that take place in the model of Gardner, is a statement of commitment to ensuring the future success of the children of their community by giving them all of the set of tools that they will need in the future. One of the practices of teachers at Gardner is to recognize each child's strengths and challenges in order to best teach them. ¹⁵⁸ This clearly takes a lot of time and effort for the teachers and staff but the rewards of this work are that every child's educational level will be identified. Teachers can use this knowledge to teach to the child's strengths but not focus on them but rather spend the majority of time and attention on the areas that the child is

¹⁵⁶ "Partnership for Excellence," 6.

¹⁵⁷ "Evaluation Plan for the Thomas Gardner Extended Service School." Dr. George Madaus, Dr. M. Walsh and ED/PY 561 students. 1997. Boston College. 18 Mar. 2003
<<http://www.csteep.bc.edu/CSTEPP/CSTEPPpdf/ED561eval.pdf>> 6.

¹⁵⁸ "Evaluation Plan for Gardner," 7.

most challenged by. The ability to focus on a student's challenges is a wonderful gift to give the students. This is certainly one method that has been implemented in GESS to meet their goal of helping to raise well-developed people.

Teachers

From the beginning, GESS has placed a strong emphasis on the teachers in the school. There is a strong drive that promotes teacher enhancement by increasing the opportunities for reflections upon teaching practices. The community of teachers is called to be strong and supportive of each other. They are encouraged to strive to find the best and most effective method to teach each child in their classrooms. People hope to see an increase in the satisfaction of the teachers at Gardner at the same time that there is a push to see all children improve and succeed. Hopefully, one of the ways that the satisfaction will improve is through time and stress-management strategies that are taught so that the teachers will be better able to cope with the heavy demands of their jobs.¹⁵⁹ The increased satisfaction of the teachers at the same time that the demands of their jobs seem to be increasing seems unlikely but the school is striving to find ways to show the teachers that they are valued and invaluable to the success of the mission.

Parents

The role of parents has also been taken into great consideration throughout the entire process. Before Gardner was even in full force, the role of parents was seen as crucial in the success of the program. One way that parents were incorporated into the school was through cohesive teams of parents that were established in an attempt to increase parental partnership and participation in their child's life and school.

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¹⁵⁹“Evaluation Plan for Gardner,” 7.

¹⁶⁰Ibid.

Throughout the entire program, the founders of GESS valued considering the effect of the programs on the parents and in turn examining the effect of the parents on the programs and goals. The value that has been placed on parents has been a strength to the program and its success thus far. ¹⁶¹In addition to the focus that there has been on the parents since the first proposal for GESS and in each report since then, there has been an important role placed on the links between the partner organizations and the school. These partnerships are viewed as crucial to the success of the programs because for there to be a community-school partnership there need to be two very active participants. ¹⁶²

In the Long Run

The intention of the Thomas Gardner Extended Service School is to “improve [e] the quality of educational and career development opportunities for the Gardner School community, and, in the long run, to enhance [e] the life chances of the students, their families and communities.” ¹⁶³While there are many different elements to the Gardner School that address the needs of the community, families, school, and students, the children are always at the center of all of the activities. The parents, teachers, and community benefit from the services of the school but all of the improvements that affect these individuals will, in turn, increase the life chances for the children. ¹⁶⁴The long-term goal of the school is to ensure the academic and social success of all of the students who are involved in the school and programs. ¹⁶⁵The Gardner School is another

¹⁶¹“Evaluation Plan for Gardner,” 5.

¹⁶²Ibid., 6.

¹⁶³Ibid., 3.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., 8.

¹⁶⁵Ibid., 3.

exampleofacomcommunity -schoolpartnershipthat isworkingonmanylevelsandseeingits
effortspayoffinthelivesandachievementofthestudents.

Discussion and Conclusion

Children living in the context of urban poverty face many issues that are unique to their situation. As we have seen, they often come from families that are under-resourced and unsupported, communities that are struggling with unimaginable levels of violence, and schools that are ill-equipped to meet the needs of the students. Something must be done to help these children gain control of their futures. As it currently stands, they are fighting against so many obstacles on their own. They need support and resources that are not usually available in their contexts. It is from knowledge of this reality that I argue that the responsibility does not lie solely in the individual home, neighborhood or school. Instead, there is a combined responsibility which lies within all of these components of society. The community schools that we just reviewed are one such alternative. As stated above, though, there are limitations to these schools. Specifically, in Boston the goal of such schools is somewhat compromised by the fact that the students do not live in the neighborhood of the school. The presence of busing has made the resources that the school provides somewhat obsolete to families who live across town. At the same time, many schools currently do not offer many resources to the local community since their focus is on the children and their families. The breakdown of this relationship will continue to undermine the effectiveness of this alternative approach to schooling until the needs of the entire community, school and local, are assessed and the program revamped.

The Jesuit Model

I have come to understand the issue of child poverty and education from the context of a Jesuit model while attending a Jesuit university. In part, it is the pedagogy of Jesuit educational ideals that has helped me to shape my own beliefs on the situation of urban child poverty in the United States. The values of the Jesuit model center on educating the whole person and understanding the context in which the child is learning.

According to a Jesuit document on education, “The ultimate aim of Jesuit education is . . . the full growth of the person which leads to action.”¹⁶⁶ It goes on to say, “Such a goal requires a full and deeper formation of the human person, an educational process of formation that calls for excellence – a striving to excel, to achieve one’s potential – that encompasses the intellectual, the academic and more.”¹⁶⁷ If this is the Jesuit idea of education’s purpose, it should be no surprise that a Jesuit university, Boston College, was interested in partnering with an urban neighborhood school in order to improve the quality of education and the availability of resources for all of the individual’s needs. For the Jesuits, an education without attention paid to the entire person is not a complete education. This is very similar to Mary E. Walsh’s belief about treating the students as whole people with both heads and hearts.

Another aspect of the Jesuit model stresses the importance of an integration of experiences between the classroom, home, work and peers.¹⁶⁸ This ideology clearly would support the full-service community schools since it is a place where there is a meeting of many parts of the child’s world. The community school, as we saw in Part III,

¹⁶⁶ P. Kolvenbach, “Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach,” *Foundation* Ed. C. E. Meirose, Washington, D.C.: Jesuit Secondary Education Association, 1994, #12.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, #14.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, #75.

is a place where people unite with the hope that they can change the futures of the children. Statistically, poverty is a vicious cycle in which people can easily get caught. As we saw James Garbarino say above, poverty can literally be deadly. The community school is a response to this reality. In its best form, it unites the three main arenas of the child's life: family, community, and school.

In looking for a solution to overcome the obstacles of child poverty, there are many discouraging realities. We have seen these realities in this paper but they are not a reason why things cannot change. There are solutions to be found in the midst of poverty. Schools, more importantly, teachers impact the lives of children every day. These men and women typically desire to see their students thrive. While teachers cannot be the entire solution, they provide an important and powerful place to begin.

The Influential Role of Teachers

There are many complex factors that affect children and, as we have seen, children living in poverty are especially challenged. What seems abundantly clear is that no one person or institution is able to be responsible for the success of a child, especially when that child comes from an under-resourced community. Full-service and community schools offer one solution for people attempting to combine forces and give all children a fair chance. Educator John Dewey once said, "What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must be what the community wants for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; it destroys our democracy."¹⁶⁹ This is a high standard for our schools and communities and yet I agree with Dewey when he says that anything short of this ideal is not acceptable and, in fact, destroys our democracy.

¹⁶⁹Ravitch, 84.

One way that the government has tried to restore our democracy is by passing educational reform legislation, as was mentioned earlier. This new legislation, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), has many provisions for students and schools that are at -risk. One goal of these new measures is that no student will pass through the educational system without being noticed. One aspect included in NCLB is a focus on teachers and their roles. I believe that teachers are a huge part of the key to a solution that will work for children who are at -risk. NCLB provides funds to help pay the salaries of full - or part - time teachers that are hired with the specific purpose of reducing class size.¹⁷⁰ Smaller classes would allow teachers to give more attention to their students. The key factor here is that schools are required to reduce class size by hiring fully qualified teachers. Further, teachers need to receive new training and be fully qualified in order to be in a classroom. By 2005, every classroom needs to be staffed by a fully qualified teacher.¹⁷¹ This is a beginning step to address the problem of teachers who do not have the proper training to be effective. This national legislation is, thus, one step in a process that needs a lot of work. It addresses the importance of teacher qualifications for classroom engagement without specifying what makes a teacher qualified. For example, many teacher education programs never address the issues of child poverty and under -resourced communities. Students who do not have someone at home to help them with their school work and encourage them to value their education need to have that absence filled at school. Yet the better, more desirable teachers who could meet these needs usually end up in the better resourced school districts where there is a strong family and community value for

¹⁷⁰“Class Size Reduction Program Legislation” Inside Class Size Reduction October 29, 2002. U.S. Department of Education, January 30, 2003. 1.

<<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/ClassSize/legislation.html>>

¹⁷¹“Elementary and Secondary Education Act.” National PTA, February 2002. February 4, 2003. 1. <<http://www.pta.org/ptawashington/issues/esea.asp>>.

education. Large, urban school districts have a record of being more inefficient and untimely in their hiring process of teachers than their affluent, suburban counterparts. This means that by the time the urban schools get around to hiring a new teacher, the best teachers have already accepted jobs at the better schools.¹⁷²

Even if the highly trained and desired teacher was to take a job in an urban school, his or her teacher training will not have, in all likelihood, prepared him or her for this type of teaching environment. Traditional teacher training does not expose people to issues of urban poverty or teaching “non-mainstream” students.¹⁷³ If teachers are to be an important factor in closing the growing achievement gap and are to be able to support their students, we need to provide them with the proper training and support for this demanding role. As we saw, teachers have every influential role in their students’ lives and this role needs to be cultivated to help children learn and grow.

The role of teachers in this process is clearly very important. Teachers need to understand the world of their students in order to be able to effectively understand them as individuals and be able to teach them as whole people. Dr. Janet Williams, Deputy Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, agreed with this when she said, “You can’t teach effectively if you don’t have background on your students.”¹⁷⁴ She went on to say that she sees a cultural iceberg in the schools. By this she means that the teachers and schools are only able to see ten percent of their students. They can only see what the kids wear, how they walk, and with whom they are friends. This iceberg, according to

¹⁷²Michael S. Knapp, “Policy, Poverty, and Capable Teaching: Assumptions and Issues in Policy Design,” *Social Class, Poverty, and Education: Policy and Practice*, Ed. Bruce J. Bidle. New York: Routledge Falmer, 2001, 198.

¹⁷³Knapp, 197.

¹⁷⁴Janet Williams, “No Child Left Behind – Urban Education.” Boston College PULSE Speaker Series. Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA. 4 Feb. 2003.

Williams, has left 90% of a child's identity underwater and unseen. "You [the teacher] need to get a little heat in you to get below... to get to know your students."¹⁷⁵ Part of a teacher's job is to do the digging work to get to know his students.

Conclusion

The Jesuit model for education focuses on the teacher getting to know his students and the Deputy Superintendent of the Boston Public Schools has a strong focus on the same thing. Why do these people, and many others, focus so much on the relationship between the teacher and student? What do they know? They know that, as stated above, the teacher is one of the most influential people in a child's life, only second to his or her parents and family. They know that not all children have people at home who are able to fully invest in their lives. They know that even when children do have someone at home they are living in poverty and there are many reasons why that person is not able to foster the best environment in which the child can grow. This is not to say, in any way, that it is solely up to the teacher to give children a chance of success in the future but rather that teachers have the potential to truly educate students and, thereby, to give them a huge boost in the world.

I am not arguing that better training for and support of teachers combined with full-service schools will end all of the problems of children who are living in poverty. However I do believe that these steps will and must play a huge role in providing needed resources for children living in poverty and is the first, and most immediate, step towards the elimination of the achievement gap, the chance for future success, and the eradication of child poverty. The fact remains that right now there are millions of children who are

¹⁷⁵Williams.

being told that they must perform at the same levels as their peers in order to have a chance to succeed. At the same time they are being held to lower standards, given fewer resources, and forced to live in the midst of an urban war. We are fooling ourselves if we believe that the currently established education system is able to help all children equally. The education system, as it currently stands, is an institution that provides resources to all children but is not capable of recognizing that not all children have the same needs. In this sense, it is not the fault of the system but it is a flaw in our thinking that we can expect all children to have an equal chance under the current system. For this to be true, we need to be committed community members and partners with the schools and families in order to give children more of the “key” that we claim we lead them to successful futures.

I do not pretend to have all of the answers to these hard questions about how we got ourselves in this situation or how we will ever become completely out of it but I do believe that we need to figure something out today that will make a positive difference in the lives of millions of our children. This paper is not about some distant, nameless children but rather it is about real people who are less than a mile from where I, and any other person in a city in the United States, currently live. This is about Tahriek and Terrance and so many of their peers. This issue is real and life threatening and the solutions demand real people to become dedicated to the cause of improvement. When teachers believe in their students, schools share the responsibility and burden with the communities and partnerships between ordinary low-income public schools and institutions with many resources are valued, we will see a new reality emerge; a reality

that includes a brighter future for everyone in the United States - poor children, wealthy adults, and everyone in between.

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