

Poverty and its Impact on Education: Today and Tomorrow

by Theresa Capra

Education is an international must, a veritable human right, yet education—especially higher education—in the land of the free is still remarkably elusive.¹ As a community college professor and recent high school teacher and administrator in low-performing, economically depressed urban schools, I have witnessed the many obstacles associated with preparing students for college. Advanced courses are rarely offered in these schools due to a lack of perceived eligible students, and most instructional time is spent on remediation and preparation for standardized tests. Creativity is not highly valued; instead, obedience and repetition are applauded. Practically all of these students live in households where no one has any experience of higher education; thus, the expectation of attending college is not as important as the message to “stay out of trouble” and “finish high school.”

Because teacher quality is tantamount to student achievement, the revolving door of teachers in poverty-stricken areas exacerbates the inferior education and also discourages pursuit of higher education.² Motivating this population of students means being involved in every aspect of their well-being and, in many cases, monitoring them closely inside and outside of the classroom. This approach is quite different from what these students will experience if they attend college. Becoming a successful college student requires discipline, autonomy, responsibility, as well as minimally developed communication and social skills. Needless to say,

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students graduating from disadvantaged public schools are not prepared for college—and generally prove this reality by failing their classes and dropping out within the first year.

In the fall 2008 *Thought&Action*, Michael Kirst advocated for a better relationship between high schools and colleges in preparing students for college. He offered many insightful strategies for improving the transition between high school and college, including calling for a provision in state budgets aimed at increasing college attendance.³ These are necessary measures, but the real issue is the pervasive culture of poverty festering below many of our public schools.

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America must acknowledge that education is a public necessity and not a luxury for the privileged. For this to happen, our nation must address, and treat poverty as a condition that erodes our future and impedes any attempts at educational reform.

When I cover poverty in my education courses, many of my students—most of them future teachers—are shocked to learn that the U.S., among the world's wealthiest nations, has one of the largest gulfs between the rich and poor. The top 1 percent of U.S. families has more money than the bottom 40 percent; this gap has steadily increased over the past 70 years.⁴ My students continue to be shocked by the fact that despite the trend of an overall stabilization of nationwide poverty (although the number of people in poverty has increased slightly from 36.5 million in 2006 to 37.3 million in 2007, the percentage has remained constant), numerous states and communities have witnessed increases. Further, poverty does discriminate: 24.7 percent of the African American population and 20.7 percent of the Hispanic population are below the poverty line compared to 10.2 percent for Caucasians. Although real median income of Black households rose between 2006 and 2007, these households still claimed the lowest median income in 2007. American poverty continues its discrimination by affecting single women at far greater numbers. Households headed by women are more likely to experience poverty than households headed by men. This statistic is, of course, indicative of the fact that women earn approximately 78 percent of what men earn.⁵

Eradicating poverty and improving education are inextricably connected. In 2005, Chairman of the Federal Reserve Alan Greenspan looking at the widening income gap between the rich and the rest of the U.S. population, remarked that it might eventually threaten the stability of democratic capitalism. Greenspan also

noted that average U.S. workers have not seen any income growth and that this is in part due to a lack of education.⁶ That was four years ago, when the economy was still on the upswing. Now, it is more likely that more families will slip into poverty as unemployment increases and wages remain low. Greenspan confirmed an important social point: higher levels of education can indeed lead to a better future. According to the U.S. Census, Americans who receive a college education are less likely to experience poverty at any time in their lives.⁷

Kay Ann Taylor, a professor of education at Kansas State University, who has studied poverty and its impact on education, maintains that, “inequalities are root-

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ed in many areas of the U.S. education system.” She asserts that because teachers are not trained to work with this population and generally lack a background for comprehending the culture of poverty, their efforts in the classroom are obstructed. Additionally, educators from kindergarten to college use textbooks that do not address poverty and tend to lionize white male achievements, while relegating women and lower classes to the margins.⁸ For example, the poor selection of textbooks for elementary social studies often leads to an illogical presentation of content, major historical discrepancies and the presentation of women and working class people in textboxes which are largely ignored by students and teachers. Elementary school teachers are often uncomfortable with history, so they cling to a textbook for support. If that textbook provides a disjointed account of history and society, chances are the discrepancies will not be addressed.⁹ Compounding this problem is that the standards movement of the 1990s and No Child Left Behind have forced high poverty schools to concentrate on literacy and math to meet testing requirements, while subjects like science and social studies are generally reduced to short vignettes that lack both content and critical thinking.

Perhaps our efforts should shift from increased testing, impossible restrictions, cycles of curriculum change, and repackaged legislation to the treatment and true acknowledgement of the poor. Although our public schools have steadily increased their function in our society by providing social, mental, and physical services, it’s not enough. Richard Rothstein, a researcher at the Economic Policy Institute, contends we must recognize and treat the poor and admit that socioeconomic disparities do impact achievement in our society. Public schools must serve the poor with additional school-based clinics, low income housing subsidy initiatives to reduce mobility, expansion of early childhood education, drop-out inter-

vention programs, and after school programs to avert dangerous time for children.¹⁰

Programs that directly address poverty and its impact on education do work. Geoffrey Canada, a social activist and author, founded the Harlem Children's Zone in 1990. This ambitious project began as a one-block experiment, but rapidly spread to nearly 100 blocks as its success became apparent. The goal of the project is simple: fully support families devastated by poverty and create a culture that values education and positive behavior. The program begins with a baby college that targets early childhood and infant/toddler development. It continues through elementary and secondary school by enriching the educational experience with highly qualified teachers, a diversified curriculum, individual mentors, and after school programs. Finally, students are guided through the college application process and because the expectation to attend college has been present since infancy, it becomes a natural process.¹¹ According to the Harlem Children's Zone, the budget for the program is approximately \$40 million a year, which averages about \$3,500 per student—quite a bargain compared to the more than \$15,000 New York State spends per pupil.¹² These initiatives, if adequately supported, will increase the chances of a poor child remaining in school and attending college.

At the national level, an increased minimum wage to reflect the rising cost-of-living and an increased earned income tax credit may defray the stress upon poor families and enable them to support a full-time college student.¹³ Higher education, however, should not be absent from this equation. We can no longer maintain the myth that by the time students make it to college, they are academically and socially prepared—even if we believe it's egregious that they are not. Higher education must make deliberate efforts to reach out and work with improv-



erished communities creating a bridge to education and training. The City University of New York (CUNY), has several programs that specifically target at-risk populations and strive to empower students from disadvantaged areas. The Search for Elevation, Education and Knowledge program (SEEK) and College Discovery (CD) are two programs for low income students who are academically and socially unprepared to attend college. Once accepted into the program, students are given academic, financial, and social support—exactly what most disadvantaged students need. These programs, instituted over 40 years ago, have provided access to higher education for hundreds of thousands who would otherwise

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be excluded.¹⁴

The Center for Economic Opportunity, established by New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg in 2006, recently released a report describing successful programs that are beginning to penetrate the deeply rooted intergenerational poverty plaguing so many communities. CUNY Prep is an initiative targeting troubled teenagers and high school dropouts with a combination of intense preparation for the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and college preparatory courses. Since its inception, 76 percent of its enrollees have successfully passed the GED exam compared to the 44 percent throughout the rest of the city. CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Program (ASAP) places low income students in a fast track program leading to associates degrees resulting in gainful employment.¹⁵ Programs like these are in effect throughout the nation and are successful in mitigating the impact of poverty, but more is needed. Poverty stills stands as the most insidious enemy of education.

As faculty members in a community college, my colleagues and I ask ourselves: How do we best educate our students today and tomorrow? Students are entering college lacking basic skills in math, literacy, geography, and writing. Too many students spend time in remedial courses before entering into credit bearing courses. To address this situation, professors are adapting their teaching methods to embrace a more student-centered methodology, which encourages student participation during class sessions. This is certainly a step in the right direction. Finding ways to engage students in learning is a way to support and retain students, particularly an unprepared population. Many of the students now sitting in our college classrooms will continue on to become teachers. Sadly, they will graduate without ever taking a course exposing them to the reality of poverty or, more

importantly, how to work in this environment.

Teacher preparation programs, including graduate degrees, should require courses that provide an overview of poverty and methods of working with this population. Survey courses in sociology are not enough. The New York City Teaching Fellows program was initiated nine years ago to address the shortage of high quality teachers, particularly in poverty stricken areas. Fellows are tapped from various professions including law, finance, medicine, and sales. Mostly, they are individuals wishing to make a career change. Candidates who complete this program are exposed to the realities of teaching in impoverished communities before they enter the classroom (albeit it's a very short exposure—one summer). In 2005, I had the pleasure of instructing a methods course for in-service fellows and found that their pre-service experience in the New York City public schools provided them with a strong understanding of the connection between poverty and achievement. Traditional teacher preparation programs could easily replicate this model by requiring pre-service teaching, or at least intense observation, in economically disadvantaged areas. Additionally, course work that explicitly explores the relationship between socioeconomic factors and learning will better prepare students for the challenges of public school teaching.

History and evolution have shown that inequality is a reality. As the human race advances, however, it is plausible to think that civilization can prevent the decay of its social constructs through quality, accessible education. Embracing this perspective may help us to completely rethink education, leading to a more progressive system for our future. 

ENDNOTES

1. The United Nations, "The Millennium Report."
2. Machinger, "What Do We Know About High Poverty Schools?," 3.
3. Kirst, "Secondary Schools and Colleges Must Work Together," 117.
4. Schifferes, "U.S. Inequality Gap Widens."
5. DeNavas-Walt, "US Census Bureau: Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance," 6-7.
6. Grier, "Rich-Poor Gap Gaining Attention."
7. Bishaw, "US Census Bureau: Income, Earning, and Poverty," 18.
8. Taylor, "Poverty is Rooted in U.S. Education System."
9. Duplass, "Elementary Social Studies," 137-144.
10. Rothstein. "Whose Problem is Poverty," 8.
11. Harlem Children's Zone. "100 Blocks, One Bright Future."
12. U.S. Census Bureau, "Public Education Finances: 2007."
13. See note 10 above, 12.
14. The City University of New York. "Seek and College Discovery."
15. New York City Government. "News from the Blue Room."

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