
CLASS MATTERS —

In and Out of School

Closing gaps requires attention to issues of race and poverty.

By Jayne Boyd-Zaharias and Helen Pate-Bain



There is no question that those poor and minority children who participate in prekindergarten programs are better prepared for school

LOW achievement and high dropout rates among poor and minority students continue to plague U.S. society. And we say “plague” purposefully, because these children are all our children, and our nation will profit by or pay for whatever they become. While much attention over the past quarter century has focused on reforming the schools these students attend, little or no progress has been made in actually closing the achievement gaps or reducing the number of dropouts.

Why? Aren’t Americans a “can-do” people? We eradicated the childhood scourge of polio, built the best road system since the Romans, put men on the moon, outlasted the Soviet Union, and created universities that are the envy of the world.

But the problem of underachievement by poor and

minority students has confounded us. High-level commissions issue warnings, governors hold summits, think tanks produce reports, scholars write books, and Congress passes laws. But the U.S. has failed to deliver on its promise to provide a high-quality

■ *JAYNE BOYD-ZAHARIAS began work on Project STAR in 1986 and was named director of Class Size Studies at Tennessee State University. She is currently executive director of Health & Education Research Operative Services, Inc. where she developed the National Class Size Database and continues her role as a co-principal investigator on STAR Follow-up Studies. HELEN PATE-BAIN was one of four original Project STAR principal investigators. She has been a classroom teacher, a professor of educational administration, and is a past president of the National Education Association. The authors wish to express their thanks to David Sheridan of the Human and Civil Rights Division of the National Education Association for his advice and input on this article.*

ity education to every child.

In the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr., forced our nation to face the inequities of race, poverty, and war. But today, these three inequities still exist in this country.

RETHINKING THE PROBLEM

Surely schools need to be improved, especially the schools that serve poor and minority children. But school improvement alone will not suffice. We believe in the power of good teaching, but educators alone cannot do a job so large. We can inspire individual students to break through the boundaries of social class, but we cannot lift a whole social class of students to a higher level of achievement. Low achievement and dropping out are problems rooted in social and economic inequality — a force more powerful than curricula, teaching practices, standardized tests, or other school-related policies. Richard Rothstein summed it up best:

For nearly half a century, the association of social and economic disadvantage with the student achievement gap has been well known to economists, sociologists, and educators. Most, however, have avoided the obvious implication of this understanding — raising the achievement of lower-class children requires amelioration of the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just school reform.¹

Once acknowledged, this truth has profound implications for educators and policy makers alike.

If all efforts to close achievement gaps concentrate exclusively on schools and school reform, they will fail, leaving schools and teachers to shoulder the blame. In turn, good administrators and teachers, who are doing their best under difficult circumstances, will be driven *out* of the profession, a prospect that can only make matters worse. As Gary Orfield sums it up: “Doing educational reform while ignoring the fundamental cleavages in society is profoundly counterproductive.”²

A useful way of visualizing the remedy for the chronic problem of low achievement of poor and minority students is to return to Abraham Maslow’s 1954 hierarchy of needs for self-actualization. We have patterned a hierarchy of needs for a self-actualized society after Maslow’s (see Figure 1).

AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN STABLE NEIGHBORHOODS

Nearly one-third of the nation’s poorest children have attended three different schools by third grade.

FIGURE 1.
A HIERARCHY OF NEEDS FOR A SELF-ACTUALIZED SOCIETY



Such high mobility depresses achievement. One study found that reducing the mobility of low-income students to that of other students would eliminate 7% of the test-score gap by income and 14% of the black/white test score gap.³ Other studies have shown that low-income families and children benefit when integrated into middle-class neighborhoods. This integration requires housing subsidies for poor families.⁴

After *Brown v. Board of Education*, “white flight” became common across the country. Middle-income white families moved to the suburbs, leaving only poor families in the inner cities. The challenge today is to integrate low- and middle-income families into stable neighborhoods. Margery Turner and Susan Popkin have identified several ways to afford this mix of income groups: 1) low-income housing tax credits, 2) housing choice vouchers, 3) HOPE VI (a public housing plan that has been successful in Seattle and Kansas City), 4) new communities, and 5) linking supportive services to affordable housing.⁵ The most effective integrated communities will include:

- elected local committees to keep residents informed and active;
- public schools with small classes, teachers who make home visits, family resource centers with health-care services available to the community, active parent/teacher organizations, and after-school-care and summer programs;
- support services: adult education, job training, and financial and budgeting classes.

A LIVING WAGE WITH HEALTH-CARE BENEFITS

One in four American workers today earns poverty-level hourly wages. What's more, 33% of black and 39.3% of Hispanic workers earn poverty-level hourly wages.⁶ These are appalling numbers, and they have a profound impact on poor and minority children. Poverty, especially long-term, chronic poverty, takes a terrible toll on children's health and their readiness for school.

In 1968, 12.8% of America's children lived in poverty. In 2006, that proportion had risen to 17.4% — an increase of 1.2 million children.⁷ Raising the minimum wage, protecting workers' rights to organize and join unions, and implementing living wage ordinances will certainly benefit poor children and families.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

There is no question that those poor and minority children who participate in prekindergarten programs are better prepared for school, especially in terms of letter/word recognition, pattern recognition, and ability to work with others. As Clive Belfield has noted, "Model pre-K programs show extremely powerful effects over the long term. There are significant reductions in special educational placement and grade retention. Pre-K participation reduces high school dropout rates dramatically."⁸

Arthur Rolnick and Rob Grunewald conclude that the case in favor of investing in early childhood education is closed. "Now," they continue, "it is time to design and implement a system that will help society realize on a large scale the extraordinary returns that high-quality early childhood programs have shown they can deliver."⁹

Today, we are indebted to researchers in education and to economists for providing us with proof that early childhood education saves money and children. By acting on their findings, we can improve the lives of the 13 million children living in poverty.

PUBLIC EDUCATION: SMALL CLASSES

Teachers have long known intuitively that small classes allow them to devote more attention to individual students. Hence, class size has been one of the most researched topics in education. But studies prior to Tennessee's Project STAR, with which we have

both been intimately involved, were found to be inconclusive because of weak methodologies. STAR was independently reviewed by Frederick Mosteller of Harvard University, and he declared it to be "one of the most important educational investigations ever

Attending small classes in K-3 reduces the black/white gap in the rate at which students take college entrance exams by an estimated 60%

carried out and illustrates the kind and magnitude of research needed in the field of education to strengthen schools."¹⁰

Because of STAR's strong research design, there is widespread confidence in its major finding that small classes in K-3 provide extraordinary academic benefits to students, especially low-income and minority students. STAR is where intuition met empirical proof. And since STAR, other studies (SAGE, Success Starts Small, Burke County, etc.) have shown the positive impact of small classes in the primary grades.¹¹

Small classes in the early grades also provide long-term positive outcomes. STAR students have been followed through high school and beyond. Research from follow-up studies indicates that students who entered small classes in kindergarten or first grade and had three or more consecutive years of small classes showed gains in academic achievement through at least eighth grade.¹²

In addition, Alan Krueger and Diane Whitmore found that attending small classes in K-3 reduces the black/white gap in the rate at which students take college entrance exams by an estimated 60%. Their research also showed that attending small classes raised the average score on the exams by 0.15-0.20 of a standard deviation for black students and by 0.04 of a standard deviation for white students.¹³

But cost is the bottom line when education budgets are developed. When the value of reducing class size was first introduced, the initial response of policy makers was that it would cost too much. However, recent research provides evidence that small classes produce long-term savings.

Follow-up data from STAR have shown that criminal conviction rates were 20% lower for black males assigned to small classes than for those assigned to regular size classes. Maximum sentence rates were also

25% lower for black males from small classes. Teen birth rates were shown to be one-third less for white females assigned to small classes than for their peers assigned to regular size classes, and the fatherhood rate for black teenage males from small classes was 40% lower than for those from regular size classes.¹⁴

Small K-3 classes have been identified as a cost-effective educational intervention that reduces high school dropout rates. They are a wise investment.

From a societal perspective (incorporating earnings and health outcomes), class-size reduction would generate a net cost savings of approximately \$168,000 and a net gain of 1.7 quality-adjusted life-years for each high school graduate produced by small classes. When targeted to low-income students, the estimated savings would increase to \$196,000 per additional graduate.¹⁵

Although research related to small classes in later grades is somewhat scarce, new findings suggest that class size reduction at the middle-school level will also provide substantial benefits to students.¹⁶ More studies need to be conducted to determine the impact of class size reduction beyond the primary grades.

PUBLIC EDUCATION: IMPROVED INSTRUCTION

Most school improvement efforts don't focus sufficiently on instruction. It is time that policy makers recognize that teaching, which is at the very core of education, involves complex tasks that require specialized skills and knowledge. It is not enough, for example, for a teacher of mathematics to know mathematics. Knowing math for teaching is different from knowing it for one's own use. The same holds for other subjects.

"Teachers can't learn for students," notes Deborah Ball, dean of the School of Education at the University of Michigan.¹⁷ No matter the instructional format — lecture, small-group activity, or individualized assignment — students make their own sense of what they're taught. Ideas don't fly directly from teachers' minds into learners' minds. Effective teaching requires teachers to be able to assess what students are taking from instruction and adapt their instruction to meet the differing needs of students.

There is an old but wise saying in teaching, "If my students can't learn the way I teach, then I must teach the way they learn." This requires teachers to ask probing questions, listen carefully to student answers, and create assignments to provide appropriate help. Moreover, teachers today must do all of this with an ever-increasing variety of students, spanning gulfs of

social class, language, and culture, to ensure that each student learns.

CONFRONTING THREE INCONVENIENT TRUTHS

To achieve a high-quality education for every child, policy makers in Washington, D.C., and in state capitols must confront three inconvenient truths.

Inconvenient truth #1. Our nation's social class inequalities are vast and growing. If we are serious about providing equal educational opportunity for every child, we must address these inequalities. They are not immutable. Barack Obama has addressed such inequalities directly and vowed:

This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn; that those kids who don't look like us are somebody else's problem. The children of Americans are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st century economy.¹⁸

Inconvenient truth #2. Schools alone cannot close the achievement gap or solve the dropout problem. The renowned sociologist James Coleman has written, "Inequalities imposed on children by their home, neighborhood, and peer environment are carried along to become the inequalities with which they confront adult life at the end of school."¹⁹

According to Thomas Bellamy and John Goodlad:

Collaborative decision making and collective actions depend on leaders who can cross boundaries within and among various groups involved in setting school priorities. The ability to frame issues in ways that support broad participation, bridge communication gaps across groups, and facilitate local deliberation is critical, but often missing. Consequently one important way to support local renewal is by identifying individuals who are attempting such cross-sector leadership, connecting them with one another, and offering learning experiences related to local challenges.²⁰

Inconvenient truth number #3. It is going to cost a lot of money to ameliorate the achievement-depressing social and economic conditions of lower-class children's lives and to improve the public schools they attend. But the costs of allowing another generation of children from lower-income groups to grow up undereducated, unhealthy, and unconnected with our economy or society will be even greater.

A black boy born in 2001 has one chance in three

of going to prison in his lifetime. A Hispanic boy born in the same year has one chance in six of going to prison in his lifetime.²¹ Faced with such stunning indicators of things gone wrong, one can only conclude that a serious course of correction is in order.

ADVOCATING FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

Educators have a special insight into the damage that deprivation does to children's learning. We and the organizations that represent us must speak up and keep the policy makers on task. It won't be easy. They are pushed and pulled in many different directions, so that even the more sympathetic ones are easily distracted. We will have to stop being so defensive and go on the offense. We will have to be bold without being beligerent. The stakes are high, but we must be heard.

In the words of David Labaree, "In a democratic society, everyone is affected by what schools accomplish as they educate the majority of each generation's voters, jurors, and taxpayers. So all have reasons to stay involved in the public conversation about school quality."²²

As advocates for equal opportunity, we must insist on transformational change. Incremental change that merely nibbles around the edges of long-term problems will fall woefully short — again. When a swimmer is drowning 50 feet offshore, it does no good to throw a 10-foot rope. Yet that is precisely what we do, year after year, when it comes to poor and minority children.

The federal government can start by living up to its promises. It promised to cover 40% of the cost of educating disadvantaged students under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and it has never done so. Since 2002, for example, when ESEA became No Child Left Behind, the federal government has shortchanged states and school districts by \$54.7 billion.²³ School districts and states need fewer mandates and more monetary support.

We need a self-actualized society. We need massive public investments in our children, in their schools, and in our future. It has been more than half a century since *Brown v. Board of Education*, but if Linda Brown were a girl today, we still could not guarantee her a high-quality education. It's time we heed the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Save us from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice."²⁴

1. Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap*, Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2004, p. 11.

2. Gary Orfield, "Race and Schools: The Need for Action," *Visiting Scholars Series*, Spring 2008, National Education Association, Washing-

ton, D.C., www.nea.org/achievement/orfield08.html.

3. Eric A. Hanushek, John Kain, and Steven G. Rivkin, "Disruptions Versus Tiebout Improvement: The Costs and Benefits of Switching Schools," *Journal of Public Economics*, vol. 88, 2004, pp. 1721-46.

4. Rothstein, pp. 135-38.

5. Margery Austin Turner and Susan J. Popkin, "Affordable Housing in Healthy Neighborhoods: Critical Policy Challenges Facing the Greater New Orleans Region," statement before the Committee on Financial Services, U.S. House of Representatives, 6 February 2007.

6. *The State of Working America 2005-07*, Economic Policy Institute, Washington, D.C., www.epi.org/content.cfm/datazone_index.

7. "CDF Examines Progress Made Since Dr. King's Death," Children's Defense Fund, 25 January 2008, www.childrensdefense.org.

8. Clive R. Belfield, "The Promise of Early Childhood Education Interventions," in Clive R. Belfield and Henry M. Levin, eds., *The Price We Pay: Economic and Social Consequences of Inadequate Education* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), p. 209.

9. Arthur J. Rolnick and Rob Grunewald, "Early Intervention on a Large Scale," Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, 2007, http://woodrow.mpls.frb.fed.us/Research/studies/earlychild/early_intervention.cfm.

10. Frederick Mosteller, "The Tennessee Study of Class Size in the Early School Grades," *The Future of Children: Critical Issues for Children and Youths*, Summer/Fall 1995, p. 113.

11. Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE), www.weac.org/sage; C. M. Achilles, "Financing Class-Size Reduction," SERVE, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, ERIC ED 419 288; and C. M. Achilles, Patrick Harman, and Paula Egelson, "Using Research Results on Class Size to Improve Pupil Achievement Outcomes," *Research in the Schools*, Fall 1995, pp. 23-31.

12. Jeremy D. Finn et al., "The Enduring Effects of Small Classes," *Teachers College Record*, April 2001, pp. 145-83.

13. Alan B. Krueger and Diane M. Whitmore, "The Effect of Attending a Small Class in the Early Grades on College-Test Taking and Middle School Test Results: Evidence from Project STAR," *Economic Journal*, January 2001, pp. 1-28.

14. Alan B. Krueger and Diane M. Whitmore, "Would Smaller Classes Help Close the Black-White Achievement Gap?" in John E. Chubb and Tom Loveless, *Bridging the Achievement Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002).

15. Peter Muennig and Steven H. Woolf, "Health and Economic Benefits of Reducing the Number of Students per Classroom in U.S. Primary Schools," *American Journal of Public Health*, November 2007, www.ajph.org/cgi/content/abstract/97/11/2020.

16. Christopher H. Tienken and C. M. Achilles, "Making Class Size Work in the Middle Grades," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York City, March 2008.

17. Deborah Loewenberg Ball, "Improving Mathematics Learning by All: A Problem of Instruction?" *Visiting Scholars Series*, Spring 2008, National Education Association, Washington, D.C., p. 5.

18. Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: "A More Perfect Union," Philadelphia, 18 March 2008, www.barackobama.com/2008/03/18/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_53.php.

19. James S. Coleman et al., *Equal Educational Opportunity* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1966), p. 26.

20. G. Thomas Bellamy and John I. Goodlad, "Continuity and Change in the Pursuit of a Democratic Public Mission for Our Schools," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2008, p. 570.

21. "CDF Examines Progress Made Since Dr. King's Death."

22. David Labaree, quoted in Bellamy and Goodlad, p. 570.

23. "ESEA Title I-A Grants: Funding Promised in Law vs. Funding Actually Received, FY 2002-09," www.nea.org/lac/funding/images/title1gap.pdf.

24. Martin Luther King, quoted in Michael J. Freedman, "U.S. Marks 50th Anniversary of Montgomery Bus Boycott," International Information Programs, www.america.gov/st/diversity-english/2005/November/20080225140519liameruoy0.664715.html. 

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0809boy.pdf

Jayne Boyd-Zaharias and Helen Pate-Bain, Class Matters -- In and Out of School, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 90, No. 01, September 2008, pp. 40-44.

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. MULTIPLE copies, in print and electronic formats, may not be made or distributed without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.

All images included with this document are used with permission and may not be separated from this editorial content or used for any other purpose without the express written permission of the copyright holder.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to kappan@pdkintl.org.

For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, Indiana 47402-0789
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>

Find more articles using PDK's Publication Archives Search at
<http://www.pdkintl.org/search.htm>.