FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION
A SCHOOL THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

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Abstract

This paper examines the issue of poverty in the context of education. Students living in poverty attend schools throughout the United States. Many educators who encounter poverty in their school community view it as a problem. They blame parents, saying “They do not value education. They do little or nothing to support the education of their children”. These educators develop low expectations for the academic achievements of their students, which become the norm for poor children. Consequently, students who have the potential to learn may experience failure. Many educators do not use innovative practices to promote student achievement, nor do they believe in positive parent/community participation/relations to boost overall school success. This paper explores the philosophical beliefs, effective programs, and community engagement strategies in a school that is helping poor students succeed.

KEYWORDS: Poverty, Hispanics, immigrants, training, community engagement, educational partnerships, low SES, elementary education, educators, academic success, culture, language, bilingual

INTRODUCTION

Theoretically, educational opportunity is available for all students in the United States, regardless of their race, national origin, sex, income or language. In reality social, economic, educational and political inequalities exist that negatively affect certain groups of people [Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000; Haycock, 2001] and limit their access to a quality education.

Families in more affluent communities receive greater educational services for their children [Baker, 2003; Koppelman, 2007; Spring, 2008]. These privileged schools tend to have better instructional resources, state of the art technology, well equipped labs, low teacher/student ratio, excellent facilities, more experienced teachers, high parental involvement, and funding for field trips [Kozol, 1992; Koppelman, 2007; Ovando & Collier, 2007; Spring, 2008].

Families who reside in low-income communities most often send their children to local schools that have fewer or insufficient educational resources. Inequalities exist in the degree and range of educational opportunities provided for students. In addition, schools that serve poor populations are challenged by issues related to high class size, teacher absenteeism, safety, discipline, transfer rates, struggling families, gangs, exposure to crime, student motivation, and high dropout rates [Koppelman, 2007].

Being born into poverty is not a personal choice. Many students suffer the misery of poverty, not because they choose or deserve to live in poverty, but because of circumstance of birth or misfortune experienced by their families. A culture of poverty is reinforced when students are raised in extreme deprivation throughout their school years. Each afternoon, poor students leave school and return to their neighborhoods to struggle for survival. The educational institutions that poor children attend may be the
only place where they find safety, comfort, and opportunities that do not exist in the environments where they live.

Many school districts across the United States are taking a lead in helping students overcome social, economic, educational and political inequalities. These challenges are being effectively met in schools where teachers, school counselors, and administrators are willing to provide optimal learning environments for students living in poverty.

EFFECTS OF POVERTY ON STUDENTS

All students can learn despite the environment from which they come [Thomas & Collier, 1997]. One out of six children in the United States lives in poverty, the highest rate in the industrialized world [Children’s Defense Fund, 2001]. If poverty is not addressed as a social issue, its effects on academics can be disastrous [Gans, 1995; Rank, 2004]. If poor students do not gain the benefits of an optimal education, the long term effects on economics and employment could be detrimental for all stakeholders in society, including the middle class and the affluent.

SOCIAL ILLS OF POVERTY

Poverty is gauged in different ways by different groups, and its core definition is multidimensional. In its most basic form, poverty means lack of food and other basic necessities and/or services in order to maintain an adequate standard of living [Kozol, 1992]. On a broader level, poverty is defined by conditions of social deprivation that have a negative impact on individuals’ educational and academic opportunities, and their social, economic and political lives.

Prejudices and biases towards those who live in poverty are manifested in many ways. Society may choose to ignore the root problems associated with poverty by “blaming the victims.” Society may plan in ways that try to fix them (the poor) rather than the conditions that perpetuate poverty. Another reaction to poverty may be denial, where the underlying causes are ignored rather than confronted. Poverty may also be narrowly viewed as a set of statistics or demographic information. Worst of all, persons in poverty may be held responsible for a situation over which they have little or no control.

Research indicates that when the needs of students living in poverty are neglected by school systems and the broader community, the students will suffer life-long hardships of unemployment, lack of housing, and possibility of incarceration. In addition, they will develop few if any skills and will have little or no hope for a better future [Genesse, 2007; Koppelman, 2007]. As impoverished students move from childhood to young adulthood, many perpetuate the cycle of poverty by turning to crime, drug abuse, and violence. They experience a sense of despair because prospects for change in their future lives are dim [Koppelman, 2007; Kozol, 1992; Spring 2008].

Putting a human face on poverty provides a deeper understanding of the culture of poverty, and challenges more privileged members of society to question their own attitudes [Gans, 1995; Oaks, 2005; Rank, 2004]. This transition may be painful, especially when those who seek change realize that they lack the resources, knowledge, and skills to serve populations of poor students.

Poverty in the Classroom

Poverty does not discriminate. Most students living in poverty are commonly described as minorities or people of color, and comprise a large percentage of the urban public school population in the United States. Although African American and Hispanic communities have been known to have the highest rate of poverty and population growth in the country, other ethnic groups have experienced the evils of poverty [Koppelman, 2007; US Census, 2000].

The effects of poverty on schooling and academic performance can be disastrous. Most schools with high concentrations of poor students lack state of the art computer labs and/or infrastructure, have deplorable facilities, overcrowded classrooms with limited seating, a less rigorous curriculum, and lack programs such as those designated for gifted/talented, advanced, or college track students. Such schools have high teacher turnover rates; many teachers exhibit low expectations and fatalistic attitudes toward their students [Koppelman, 2007; Kozol, 1992].

Inequities have ripple effects. The social implications of poverty in schools seem to reflect those of society at large. Attitudes of school officials and teachers toward populations in poverty imply that families
do not value education, are negligent in meeting their responsibilities such as attending school meetings, are not motivated, and do not work hard enough to support their children in school. The underlying belief is that poor people are the source of the problem, not the schools, and that schools must fix them to be more like us [Chavez, 2008]. The us vs. them mentality is marked by prejudices and biases. Such a view aims to put and keep people in their social place. Unfortunately many educators function and teach from this deficit model instead of the difference model when working with students living in poverty [Rank, 2004].

To say that all educators function from the deficit model would be misleading. Many schools across the United States have embraced the issue of poverty. They find effective pedagogical methods when working with underprivileged students. One such school community shares its story.

CASE STUDY: WHEN FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION

Despite the alarming effects that poverty has on student achievement and academic performance, Wayne Elementary School embraces all students regardless of social class, income, language, culture, immigrant status or ability. Administrators, teachers, counselors, staff, and parents (as part of the larger community) maintain high expectations for all students. High expectations guide the teaching/learning environment. Pedagogical approaches, practices, programs, and professional development opportunities are designed to help each student reach his/her potential. Students at Wayne Elementary are predominately Hispanic, poor, and bilingual. Some are native citizens and others are immigrants from various Latin American countries. In addition, there are African American and White students [See Table 1]. Poverty, at this school, is viewed as an issue and opportunity, not as a problem. Accordingly, the school has scored well on its state mandated standardized tests. Much of its success is due to the vision and philosophy of committed educators who want to make a difference in the lives of students living in poverty.

Wayne Elementary School must deal with numerous issues on a daily basis. Poverty is just one of them. Wayne Elementary is part of the seventh-largest public-school system in the nation and the largest in Texas [See Table 2]. The district has more than 202,000 students, over 300 schools across the city and encompasses more than 301 square miles [Houston Independent School District].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>% of All Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>59,274</td>
<td>29.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>6,368</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>120,354</td>
<td>59.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>16,801</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>202,936</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1
DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS
Most schools in this district are part of a *feeder pattern* or a geographic region in which the majority of students in a given community move from elementary school to middle school to the high school located in their neighborhoods. These feeder patterns [See Figure 1] are categorized into five regional offices, which are led by regional superintendents who in turn are responsible for administrative oversight, service support, and parental assistance for an average of about 50 schools in each region.

The philosophy and vision of educators at Wayne Elementary School is a driving force in helping and supporting students achieve academic success. In addition to their educational values and beliefs, practical approaches to teaching and learning play a critical role in the academic success of all students as they move through the educational system. All personnel embrace the point of view that they are investing in the youth of today for a brighter future for them and the nation.

**FIGURE 1**
**REGIONS OF THE DISTRICT**

[Houston Independent School District]

**PHILOSOPHY: ALL CAN AND WILL LEARN**

Many educators seek quick fix formulas and recipes to accelerate academic gains with students living in poverty. However, there are no quick remedies when working with poor populations. At Wayne Elementary School, success begins with the vision and mission of the school: *All students can and will succeed*. It is the first step in making a difference in the lives of students who live in poverty. Educators at Wayne Elementary believe there are no excuses for failure. Their philosophical beliefs provide a foundation for success.

The second step is applying philosophy to practice. Educators at Wayne Elementary are committed to nurturing academic success for students who have known only failure in their personal and academic lives. Following are core values and principles that guide their teaching and interactions with students:

- All students are **VALUED** as individuals;
- All students have the potential to **LEARN** in spite of the struggles they face;
- All students are treated with **RESPECT**, regardless of who they are or where they come from;
- Students are best served by **COLLABORATIVE/COOPERATIVE** teams in the different content areas;
- Each student’s culture and language is **APPRECIATED/NURTURED**;
- Teachers **CAPITALIZE** on the strengths that students bring to the classroom;
- Students are viewed from a **DIFFERENCE APPROACH**, not a deficiency model;
- Educators **TEACH** to the individuality of the child;
- The School’s Motto is: **CHILDREN FIRST!**
By valuing, respecting, and appreciating the students’ language and culture, educators support the notion that when students feel welcome in a nurturing environment, they are motivated to come to school to learn [Voltera & Taeschner, 2007]. Teachers create environments where students can learn at their level or stage of development. They are encouraged to take chances, learn from their mistakes, explore ideas, and learn new concepts. They feel valued by their teachers and their peers. The sense of belonging to an academic community can be a powerful learning incentive. Students who feel safe and nurtured are resilient and perform better academically. They accept and appreciate the high expectations set for them [Darling-Hammond & Post, 2000].

SUCCESS FOR ALL

The teachers at Wayne Elementary believe they have a vocation - a special calling to educate students who are challenged by poverty. They share responsibility for the academic success of their students regardless of race, color, creed, socioeconomic status, or language. The school offers diverse educational programs that promote ongoing academic success. Following are examples of programs that the school implements, monitors, and assesses with the goal of providing optimal educational experiences for the students.

Programs that Serve Students

Wayne Elementary has a science and math magnet program available in grades kindergarten through fifth grades. Every magnet student receives additional mathematics, science, and computer instruction. A Neighborhood Gifted and Talented Program is offered to students who qualify from first through fifth grade. The following additional programs are offered as well: Resource; Life Skills; Co-teach; Preschool Program for Children with Disabilities (PPCD); Behavior Services Class (BSC); and other type of services available for Special Education students. Bilingual classes are provided for each grade level starting from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade. In grades 3-5, the bilingual classrooms are departmentalized. In 1995-96, Wayne Elementary became a school-wide Title I school. Title I funds and staff were used to supplement classroom instruction and provide tutorials for their students [Houston Independent School District].

TABLE 2
WAYNE ELEMENTARY DEMOGRAPHICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Overview and Information:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enrollment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male 51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free and Reduced lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilingual/ESL Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title 1 Enrollment:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[Houston Independent School District]

A major goal is to maintain programs that are both cost-effective and provide services that help students reach their full potential. However, programs of themselves will not produce results; the programs are viewed as a means to an end. The educators in the various programs individualize their
teaching, ensuring that students’ needs are met. They implement, monitor, and assess programs through formative and summative procedures, making changes in the curriculum to achieve desired results [Cummins, 1985; Cummins, 1996; Freire, 1970].

As the need for different programs grows, finance becomes an issue. Money is required to sustain existing programs and create new ones. To address these monetary needs, educators at Wayne Elementary School have initiated a collaborative grant-writing project together with twenty-five parents. The parents are eager to participate because they have a vested interest in quality education for their children. The collaborative effort of grant writing and formative and summative evaluation builds and maintains strong community ties.

**IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Community engagement is vital to the success of any school [Fram, Miller-Cribbs & Vanhorn, 2007]. An overarching goal is to empower parents and students by demonstrating that Wayne Elementary educators will do what it takes to promote student achievement. The school’s success depends heavily on the relationships it maintains with community members who provide resources, expertise and support. Without parent and community engagement, the success of students would be minimal [Houtenville & Conway, 2008]. Parents and other members of the community, such as businesses, become stakeholders and share responsibility for the success and failures of the students. [Schaller, Rocha, & Barshinger, 2006]. To promote community involvement, many different activities are planned throughout the school year.

**School-Community Activities**

‘Parental Involvement/Math night’ is one event in which all grade levels participate at least once a year. Families are invited to attend on a scheduled night and find innovative ways to support their children’s learning through a series of hands-on activities and experiments. The sessions are conducted in both English and Spanish to accommodate bilingual parents, so that they may comprehend and understand the material and better assist their children. Parents feel valued and welcomed when the school takes time to teach lessons in a language they can understand [Ovando & Collier, 2007].

Another community engagement activity is the early childhood ‘Make and Take Home’ project. Parents, side by side with their children, create projects together. This interactive activity helps the parents understand the cognitive process and levels of their children, and demonstrates ways they can facilitate learning in their home environment [Milne & Plourde, 2006].

A “college night” for students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade is held for children at the beginning stages of their academic endeavors. The purpose of the event is to introduce parents and children to the possibilities of a college education early on, and to promote life-long learning. This activity encourages parents to engage in long-range planning and to set goals for their children.

An evening is dedicated to “dancing with dad” where young female students invite their fathers to come and learn dance routines with them. The idea is to engage the father figure to take a greater interest in the child’s education while creating a strong bond between the two.

To gauge the pulse of the community, parents are asked (using surveys) what they would like to see happening in school. From the responses, many ideas for community engagement evolve. Through this effort, the needs of the community are respected, appreciated and supported.

Parents are invited to attend ‘professional development days for teachers’ to learn together with the teachers. Through these joint activities, not only the teachers, but also parents better understand what the school is trying to accomplish. This creates a strong bond between the school and the parents/community and contributes to the success of students [Weaver, 2007].

Professors from a local University also assist in providing information that is useful from an outsider’s perspective. Sessions such as tips in helping parents prepare their children for state mandated tests are offered. A professor from the counseling department offers valuable information on how to form strong and lasting relationships between the school, students, teachers, parents and community.

Following are other successful community involvement projects:

- An important community event for fifth graders is the annual art show. Student projects are displayed at a local art gallery every year. The art community has developed strong ties with Wayne Elementary. Proceeds from the students’ paintings benefit Habitat for Humanity. Students
learn how to stay connected to their community by giving back even when they may not have everything they need. A personal finance consultant speaks to the students on ways to save, manage and administer their money. Practical, age-appropriate examples are provided.

- Middle School students tutor and read to first graders. Students across grade levels build relationships that foster a community of learners. The practice not only builds self-confidence, but encourages helping others in need. Fifth graders read and tutor and assist fourth grade students. This practice develops high self-esteem and builds friendships, while fostering academic achievement.

- Another school wide event that engages the parents and community is the yearly Christmas card drive for senior citizens. The initiative is to create and collect as many Christmas cards as possible. The cards are then given to elderly people who reside in assisted living facilities. Caregivers are also remembered.

- The Houston police department assists in providing seminars on the topic of bullying. The talk for students, conducted by police officers, is open to parents as well. Students and parents learn to recognize the acts and signs of bullying and how to address such behavior. Role-playing and small scenarios engage the community in learning how to deal with real situations should they occur.

- Fiesta Mart, a local business enterprise that is actively involved with Wayne Elementary. The company underwrites the yearly Fun Run race by providing money, door prizes, drinks, food, event publications, certificates for store purchases, products, toys and many other amenities that children and families enjoy. The yearly event is a huge success. Participation is widespread, funds are raised and community comes together.

- The Houston Heights Rotary Club supports Wayne Elementary students in collecting items for the Victory boxes that are being sent to soldiers in Iraq. The students collect items that the soldiers need and appreciate.

Students who come from low socio-economic environments and who live in poverty gain a sense of efficacy through their ability to help others, and are empowered to achieve academically and socially. They learn not only to care for themselves, but to work collaboratively with others.

CONCLUSIONS

Thomas Jefferson equated citizenship with literacy. In the twentieth century, basic literacy and math skills were sufficient for citizens to be successful in society and the workplace. A century later, in a society dominated by technology, greater intellectual capacities and skills are required to compete on a global level. Educators are challenged so that no student is left behind. Teachers must be prepared to work effectively with diverse populations of children and families, including those who have fallen into poverty.

At Wayne Elementary School, educators teach to the strengths of the students and do not see students as being academically or experientially deficient. They understand the needs of their students and utilize creative and innovative ways to integrate the students’ knowledge, culture, language and life experiences into the teaching/learning process, making learning meaningful and relevant to their lives. The school provides students with an educational foundation that will allow students to grow and mature. This foundation will empower students to become productive citizens with a voice that might otherwise have been silenced [Delpit, 1995].

Poverty is a way of life for many students. It may represent all they have ever known. Poverty steals dreams, ambition, creativity, confidence, opportunities and self-esteem. Poverty scars the psychological, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical and societal beliefs and connections of an individual. This paper challenges the stereotypes, statistics, perceptions and low expectations that have had a negative impact on poor populations.

Using a case approach to study poverty provides students in teacher education programs with insights and techniques on how to best serve poor communities, and how to work effectively with a student population many view as uneducable. The case study, 'When Failure Is Not an Option', is based on the premise that poverty alone does not cause students to fail in school, that schools can make a difference, and that teachers are part of the solution.
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