

POVERTY AND SCHOOLING IN THE U.S.

Contexts and Consequences



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Sue Books

State University of New York at New Paltz



2004

LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS

Mahwah, New Jersey

London

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2008.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to <http://www.ebookstore.tandf.co.uk/>.”

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following:

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Part of Chapter 6 appeared in slightly different form as “Funding Accountability: States, Courts, and Public Responsibility” in *Educational Studies*, 34(3), 317–336. Copyright © 2003 by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

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Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers
10 Industrial Avenue
Mahwah, New Jersey 07430

Cover design by Kathryn Houghtaling Lacey

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Books, Sue.

Poverty and schooling in the U.S.: contexts and consequences / Sue Books,
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8058-5193-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 0-8058-3893-7 (pbk. : alk. Paper)

1. Poor children—Education—United States. 2. Poor children—United States—Social conditions—21st century. 3. Educational equalization—United States. I. Title: Poverty and schooling in the United States. II. Title.

LC4091.B66 2004

371.826'942'0973—dc22

2004046921

CIP

ISBN 1-4106-1078-0 Master e-book ISBN

*To my mother and father, Fred and Teeny Thompson,
with many thanks.*

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Preface

This book is in part a plea, especially to colleagues and future colleagues in the profession of education, to undertake the intellectual and emotional work of learning more about the social causes as well as the sometimes life-altering consequences of poverty. Will such efforts eradicate poverty? Almost certainly not. Will they help make us better educators, administrators, policymakers, and researchers—which is to say, more insightful human beings able to discern and respond to the needs of others? I believe they will. I believe efforts to understand the causes and consequences of poverty will help us all gain perspective, make difficult decisions more thoughtfully, and remain truer to that which matters most: the bonds of love and care among people.

This book is also an effort, undertaken in the spirit of a Freirian dialog, to bring to the table of a larger conversation about the educational significance of poverty information about the social policy context of poverty, about typical school experiences of poor children, and about the law-and-policy context of schooling as it affects poor children. Although the long struggle for social justice and equal educational opportunity requires much more than information, good information helps us ask better questions and transcend a dangerous consciousness of “us versus them” that relegates poor children to second-class status.

“Many of the liberal intellectuals I know who are concerned with questions of unequal access to good secondary schools tend to focus more on inequalities that may be caused by our selection systems than on those that are engendered by environmental forces and are neurological in nature,” Kozol (1995) writes in *Amazing Grace*. “In human terms, it’s understandable that people would prefer to speak about examinations than about brain damage” (p. 156). As Kozol

suggests, owning up to the real consequences of poverty is not always easy; nevertheless, educators need to undertake this work.

Because poverty affects children's physical, emotional, and cognitive development, it is an educational issue. Because ideas affect beliefs about what is fair and unfair and affect assumptions about what is inevitable or merely a function of human choice and decision making, education and poverty are linked in a complicated relationship. Along with whatever else schools do, they traffic in ideas. Especially in times such as ours, times challenged by the problems reflected in the statistics cited throughout this book, taken-for-granted ideas about poverty and poor children must be scrutinized and reconsidered. In this task, education remains profoundly relevant.

The chapters that follow build on this argument. Chapter 2 describes what I regard as the informational component of good teaching—that is, what teachers need to know or understand about the contexts and consequences of poverty. Chapters 3 through 5 focus on the situation of poor children outside schools. Chapter 3 provides information about the social context of poverty (post-1996 welfare “reform,” wages and job opportunities, economic polarization, and tax cuts and budget crises) and considers the “dependency” not of the poor on the well-to-do, but vice versa. Chapter 4 focuses on the experience of many children and families living in poverty. Chapter 5 documents the demographics of poverty and offers a critique of the official U.S. poverty metric.

Chapters 6 through 9 focus on the situation of poor children inside schools and on the law-and-policy context of educational reform. Chapter 6 reports on continuing and significant disparities in school funding. Chapter 7 provides historical context through a broad-brush review of some of the landmark moments in the legal struggle for equal educational opportunity: *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), which found state-imposed segregation in schooling based on race to be unconstitutional; *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez* (1973), which found that education is not a fundamental right protected by the U.S. Constitution; and *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), which blocked efforts to integrate racially isolated city schools through interdistrict, city-suburban remedies in the absence of proof that suburban or state officials contributed directly to segregation. Chapter 8 looks at some typical school experiences of poor children, and Chapter 9 considers the consequences for poor children of the No Child Left Behind Act, the most recent enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush, and of other federal education-related initiatives.

The book concludes with thoughts about the kind of educational reform that would make a difference in the lives of poor children—namely, a reform movement driven by a realistic and advocacy-oriented agenda, by a public discourse that owns up to the real consequences of poverty, and by a willingness to eradicate the systemic injustices that reproduce inequalities in social opportunities, including and especially educational opportunities for poor children.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people, far too many to name, influenced and supported me as I wrote, and prepared to write, this book. A few, however, shaped my thinking significantly, and I want to thank them by name, without suggesting that they necessarily agree with anything I have written: David Purpel, my mentor as a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Valerie Polakow, a brilliant scholar whose intellect is deeply rooted in her outrage and compassion; and my father, the Rev. Fred Thompson, whose lifelong struggle to live in accord with his own moral ideals has shown me both the possibility and the stead-fastness required in this most human of challenges.

I thank my new husband, Paul Edlund, for his endless patience and strong support, which enabled me to see this project through; my daughter, Cora, for her love and for the many years we have spent growing together; and my wonderful editor, Naomi Silverman, for her faith in this project long before I could imagine it coming to fruition. I thank Sandra Winn Tutwiler and Kathy Farber for their thoughtful comments on the prospectus for this book; Leslie Bloom, Nirali Parekh, and my colleague Michael Muffs for comments on selected chapters; and Nirali for help with the index. At Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Sara Scudder and Erica Kica helped make the book a reality.

Parts of this book revise and expand earlier scholarship. Parts of Chapter 3 build on a chapter in *Kidworld: Childhood Studies, Global Perspectives, and Education*, edited by G.S. Cannella and J.L. Kincheloe (Peter Lang, 2002), “Making Poverty Pay: Children and the 1996 Welfare Law,” and on a chapter in *The Public Assault on America’s Children: Poverty, Violence, and Juvenile Injustice*, edited by Valerie Polakow (Teachers College Press, 2000), “Poverty and Environmentally Induced Damage to Children.” Part of Chapter 8 builds on an article published in 2001 in *Educational Foundations*, 15(4),

57–70, “High Stakes in New York: From a ‘Last Chance, First Chance’ Classroom,” and part of Chapter 10, on a chapter in *Schooling and Standards in the United States: An Encyclopedia*, edited by J. Kincheloe and D. Weil (ABC-CLIO Publishers, 2001), “Saying Poverty Doesn’t Matter Doesn’t Make It So.”

1

Introduction

I hope this book provides educators with a resource for teaching and learning about poverty and its effect on children and families. In writing the book, I have drawn from my experience teaching graduate and undergraduate students in educational foundations courses at the State University of New York at New Paltz. When one of my students, an educator who teaches some of the poorest children in upstate New York, told our class, “I’ve become able to see my own students differently,” she gave me the push I needed to begin the project.

My teaching has led me to few conclusions, however. Always, at the end of the semester, I have been pleased in some ways but not in others with the learning that seemingly has transpired. Consequently, readers hoping for a “how to teach about poverty” book likely will be disappointed.

Instead, I hope the book encourages reflection about the experience of growing up poor in a wealthy society, about a society that tolerates this on a broad scale, and about what this means for teachers and teacher educators. Such reflection likely will lead people in different directions. Some might seek to influence social and educational policy. Others might initiate projects of advocacy within schools. Yet others might quietly reshape their perceptions and, therefore, their pedagogy to create classrooms more welcoming to all students, especially those whose lives have been constrained unnecessarily by the hunger, uncertainty, and distress that come so often with life in poverty. Such reflection is unlikely to lead, however, to study of the poor or to the sadly recurrent question of how best to “fix” poor children (Connell, 1994). What poor children need and deserve, but all too often do not get, are good teaching, good schools, and access to opportunities passed through social networks.

Educational reform efforts focused on the poor historically have drawn on and spurred research that amounts to studying the poor, including and especially their alleged deficiencies. This book starts in a different place. I wrote it in the hope that it would encourage practicing and prospective teachers and teacher educators to consider what’s wrong not with the poor, but rather with a social system that provides a wealth of opportunities for some and constraints for others. I hope this book helps educators consider what this system means for poor children, and how they might best respond in and outside their professional roles.

I often have shared this story (origins unknown to me) with my students as a way of illustrating the importance not only of responding to immediate needs, but also of gaining understanding of their causes and consequences:

Three men walking along a riverbank noticed children in the river, floundering and struggling as if they were drowning. Two of the three jumped in and pulled the children out—one, then another, then another. The third man wandered upstream. The first two rescued all the children without the help of their friend, who finally came back.

“Where were you?” they asked in exasperation. “We needed help!”

“I know” the third man replied, “but somebody needed to find out who was throwing all the children in the water.”

Teachers must respond with competence and compassion to “drowning” children. Yet teachers also need to understand why so many children are in this situation to start with and to know more than many do about their students and the broader social/cultural context of their lives.

I will not be surprised if some readers find this book lacking in that it fails to provide “answers.” This would be a fair observation, and perhaps a fair critique. I have not tried to provide a solution to “the problem of poverty” because I believe this is far beyond the powers of individual educators or even the profession of education. Significantly reducing poverty will require abolishing ghettos, providing all workers with a living wage, and allowing parents and other caregivers to devote adequate time to childrearing. At the same time, although teachers cannot “cure” poverty by themselves, they can—indeed, cannot help but—respond to the poverty that walks into their classrooms in the minds and bodies of millions of children. Public schools are sometimes the safest place many students ever will be, places where children potentially can eat breakfast and lunch, see a nurse, and encounter adults who treat them as “children of promise” (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) whose intellectual lives and personal development matter tremendously.

In some ways, I have been writing this book most of my life. I grew up in a middle-class family in Charlotte, North Carolina, where both my parents also were raised, albeit in much different circumstances. Poverty was something they both had known and wanted me not to experience. Long before I acquired a vocabulary of social class, I understood it emotionally. In the early 1980s, as a divorced single mother with a very young daughter, I lived on the edge of poverty for several years, although with a safety net in the form of a mother, father, and sister willing to help, as well as a master’s degree and 10 years’ experience in the fields of journalism and publishing. Many people helped make

those years less difficult than they might have been—most of all, my lovely, vibrant daughter. Still, the experience affected me deeply.

When I moved with my young daughter from Pennsylvania to North Carolina in the early 1980s, I encountered landlords who did not want to rent to someone with a child, prospective employers who worried that I would miss too much work as a single mother, and a doctor who refused to continue seeing my daughter when we joined the ranks of the uninsured. Yet, I recall clearly the day at a public health clinic when a receptionist grilled an African-American woman standing next to me about her relationship with her child's father while questioning me only about relevant matters, such as what immunizations my daughter had had and when. I recall also the day a worker in the county child-support system told me her full-time job paid less than my graduate teaching assistantship and part-time work as a courier for a travel agency.

Those years drove home to me the social foundations of identity. In my own eyes, I was the same person when I arrived in North Carolina as an unemployed single mother that I had been in Pennsylvania as a news reporter and wife. Yet I felt the shift as, in other people's eyes, I inched toward "them" and away from "us." I felt myself become, in the eyes of others, a problem.

As perhaps is already clear, this book has a point of view. I believe people in this country without much money are exploited, treated as second-class citizens, and deprived of many of their rights, and I hope this book provokes more outrage, especially among educators, about this social injustice and its educational significance. As Purpel and Shapiro (1995) argue:

To know without a sense of outrage, compassion, or concern deadens our souls and significantly eases the struggle of demonic forces to capture our consciousness. We need an education that produces moral indignation and energy rather than one that excuses, mitigates, and temporizes human misery (p. 156).

Reflecting on poverty and schooling brings us face to face with injustice, exploitation, and our own implication in all that has been lost, all that is now being lost. Owning up to this can be difficult work, fraught with the temptations of denial, evasion, and blame. Such honesty also can be empowering. We live not by incentives, whether carrots or sticks, but rather by the ideals and commitments that give our lives meaning and purpose.

When we offer a curriculum that skirts, downplays, or trivializes the moral weight of the glaring injustices of our time—unnecessary hunger, homelessness, and poverty; the ghettoization of entire communities; exploitation of the poor and the vulnerable for profit or sport—we encourage students to regard their time in school as no more than a series of hoops to jump, to gain a reward or avoid punishment (Kohn, 1999). Instead, education ought to push in the opposite direction by helping us to affirm ideals and strengthen commitments through ever deeper and more generous perceptions of the lives and relationships that make up our shared world.

2

What Teachers Need to Know About Poverty

We have yet to grapple with what knowledge does to teachers, particularly, the difficult knowledge of social catastrophe, evidence of woeful disregard, experiences of social violence, illness, and death, and most generally, with what it means to come to terms with various kinds of trauma, both individual and collective.

—Britzman (2000, pp. 200–205)

Poor children bear the brunt of almost every imaginable social ill. In disproportionate numbers, they suffer hunger and homelessness; untreated sickness and chronic conditions such as asthma, ear infections, and tooth decay; lead poisoning and other forms of environmental pollution; and a sometimes debilitating level of distress created by crowded, run-down living spaces, family incomes that fall far short of family needs, and ongoing threats of street violence and family dissolution. These same children are assigned, again in skewed numbers, to the nation's worst public schools—schools in the worst states of disrepair and with the lowest levels of per-pupil funding. Not surprisingly, therefore, poor children as a group lag far behind others in educational achievement.

I start with these facts because the social horror of poverty and injustice, two sides of the same coin, is so often overlooked or discounted, as if it doesn't really matter. Yes, I can imagine someone saying, some do get more than others, but whoever said life was fair? And what about the significance of personal initiative and the courage to "go for one's dreams?" Certainly, luck, talent, and determination figure into the winding path any person's life takes. This book is not about that, however, but rather about the social, and especially the educational, significance of poverty. Many children who grow up in poverty thrive despite tremendous hardships. This testifies to the amazing strength of their young spirits, but cannot, or ought not, be used as a reason to deny the profound significance of poverty in young lives. That some children flourish despite the poverty they suffer is a credit to them, not a justification for nonchalance in the face of socially induced hardship. Blake's (1789/2003) young chimney sweep of the 18th century spoke prophetically to one of the horrors of our time too: