The Rise of Childhood Poverty in Georgia:

Implications for Public School Planning and Pedagogy

by

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Abstract

The rapid and steady growth of poverty in Georgia's public schools is a clarion call to re-examine the extent to which educators are reaching and teaching all students, regardless of their economic standing. The traditional view of poverty as a marginal condition affecting a minority of students no longer holds as 56% of Georgia's 1.6-million public school students are now eligible for free or reduced lunch, an increase of 13 percentage points in ten years. This paper examines the rapid growth in childhood poverty in the state of Georgia and discusses implications of this trend for school success and completion. In the absence of school-based interventions, the rise in poverty and decrease in high school graduation rates portend growth of a permanent underclass that will struggle to support themselves, their families, and their communities. Because school completion has the potential to interrupt the cycle of intergenerational poverty, Georgia public schools will need to make concerted efforts to provide innovative experiences that will result in fewer dropouts and more completers. The paper concludes by discussing how schools must be configured and staffed to enable all children, regardless of the circumstances of their birth, to have the highest possibility of reaching their potential.

Introduction

If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature,
but by our institutions, great is our sin.
~Charles Darwin

By all measures, poverty in America is growing. Between 2008 and 2009, poverty rates increased in 31 states, with no state experiencing statistically significant declines. The 2008 poverty rate of 13.2 percent increased to 14.3 percent in 2009, representing the second statistically significant increase since 2004. Meanwhile, the number of people without health insurance coverage rose from 46.3 million in 2008 to 50.7 million in 2009, while the percentage of uninsured families increased from 15.4 percent to 16.7 percent over the same period (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The insidious nature of poverty is seen in its intergenerational persistence that is passed from parent to child as an uninterrupted and burdensome inheritance. Once viewed as a marginal condition in society, the rise and expanse of unemployment,

mortgage losses, and bankruptcies requires a paradigm shift in how poverty is viewed, who is impacted, and what it means for families and children (Murphy, 2010).

Using measures of gross domestic product (GDP) per person, it is generally recognized that poverty is the most powerful determinant of quality of life. Data trends verify a strong correlation between family income and nutrition, health care, housing, employment, incarceration, education, and ultimately, mortality (Messner, Raffalovich, and Sutton, 2010; Wash and Douglass, 2009; Eudy, 2009). Specifically, people living in poverty are disproportionately unemployed, convicted of crimes, housed in prisons, living in homeless shelters, and suffering from untreated illnesses (U. S. Labor Department, 2010; Centers for Disease Control, 2010; Federal Bureau of Prisons, 2010). Poverty also correlates highly with child bearing of young teenagers (Santelli and Melnikas, 2010; Kirby, Coyle and Gould, 2001). Increasingly, babies born into low-income families experience higher occurrences of fatal health conditions, collectively referred to as diseases of poverty. Kaler (2008) asserts that common medical conditions that are persistently fatal to children of poverty are readily addressed and successfully treated among non-poor children.

Despite the fact that educational completion is the single most powerful intervention with the potential to interrupt the cycle of generational poverty, it is estimated that one-third of U. S. students leave high school each year without earning a diploma. The dropout problem is particularly acute in urban cities where fewer than half of the students in the largest school districts graduate each years. (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Using the national common core of data formula of the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, the state of Georgia's graduation rate is 56

percent (NCES, 2010). When disaggregated by race, these rates drop to 41% for Hispanics and 46% for African Americans. Clearly, the drop out problem is a crisis in the state of Georgia.

Purpose and Importance

The intent of the study is to document rapid changes in childhood poverty in the state of Georgia over the last decade and discuss implications of this trend for public education. The rise in poverty and decrease in high school graduation rates portends an expansion of a permanent underclass that struggles to support themselves and their families. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education, the annual earning gap between dropouts and high school graduates is $10,000. Further, the persons who dropped out of the high school class of 2008 will cost Georgia over $15-billion over their lifetime (2009)

While there have been notable "pockets" of success and innovative initiatives, it is clear that most educational reforms have failed to make a noticeable dent in the academic performance of the vast majority of American school children, particularly ethnic minorities and children living in poverty. Coe (2009), Maris (2003), and others assert that most claims of success of educational reforms are questionable with frameworks that are difficult to replicate and questionable claims of direct causality. There is a frequently used metaphor of the boiling frog to explain why people seem incapable of reacting to incremental change. The story asserts that if a frog is placed in a pot of room temperature water, which is gradually heated to boiling, the frog dies. But if a frog is dropped into water that is already boiling, it will jump out. The interpretation suggests that gradual changes over time often fail to register until it is too late.

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Background

*"The school is the last expenditure upon which
America should be willing to economize."*
~Franklin D. Roosevelt

Over the past forty years, a significant number of national, state, and local policies have been enacted to improve the academic prowess of American children. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (PL 89-10) ushered in an era of increased federal spending in public education leading to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (PL 107 110). Major organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2011, 1980), the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS, 2007; Vallani and West, 2011), and the National Academy of Sciences (2005) enacted directives to assist teachers. Individual states responded by strengthening academic standards, upgrading core curricula, and tightening exit criteria. In spite of these initiatives to improve academic outcomes, concerns over scholastic performance, retention and graduation rates persist (Muijis, 2004; Brends et al, 2002).

While most reform movements place the job of improvement squarely on the shoulders of schools, teachers, and classrooms, it has become increasingly clear that factors that influence the academic achievement of a child are present throughout the community (Magolda and Ebben, 2007). The popular notion of "taking a village to raise a child" recognizes the importance of creating paradigms that embrace a holistic approach to education and identify a myriad of factors that may influence academic performance (Arriaz, 2004).

The failure of school reforms to create sustained improvements in student academic prowess, particularly among children of poverty, is frustrating to policy

makers, educators, parents, corporations, communities, and governments. One of the challenges to this dilemma lies in dynamic shifts in the demographic, ethnic, and cultural landscape of school communities over the last decades. Populations that were once viewed as marginal are quickly becoming mainstream and schools must develop paradigms to assist teachers, schools, and communities to insure academic excellence that incorporates diverse cultural needs. Murphy (2005) and his colleagues discuss the growing dilemma of understanding the new poverty as it ventures into suburban America.

The extent to which schools design strategies for instructional delivery, parental involvement, and community engagement to match the needs of the changing clientele is not clear. The attempt to initiate top-down school reforms driven by federal legislation or state policies with a "one size fits all" approach defies an intuitive understanding that education must be based on the specific nature and needs of the children being served (Proefriedt, 2010; Brand et al, 2008). Further, the inflexible nature of educational legislation is viewed by many as a counterproductive and, in many cases, a significant part of the problem (Coe, 2009; Heckman & Montera, 2009; Vinovskis, 2003).

The pressure from stakeholders for schools to demonstrate success has resulted in increased charges that districts are providing misleading and inaccurate appearances of success. States have been accused of using liberal formulas to create inflated graduation and retention rates. School systems are embroiled in accusations of cheating on high stakes testing (NEA, 2007; Economist, 2010).

Changing Student Demographics in Georgia

People who shut their eyes to reality simply invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster.
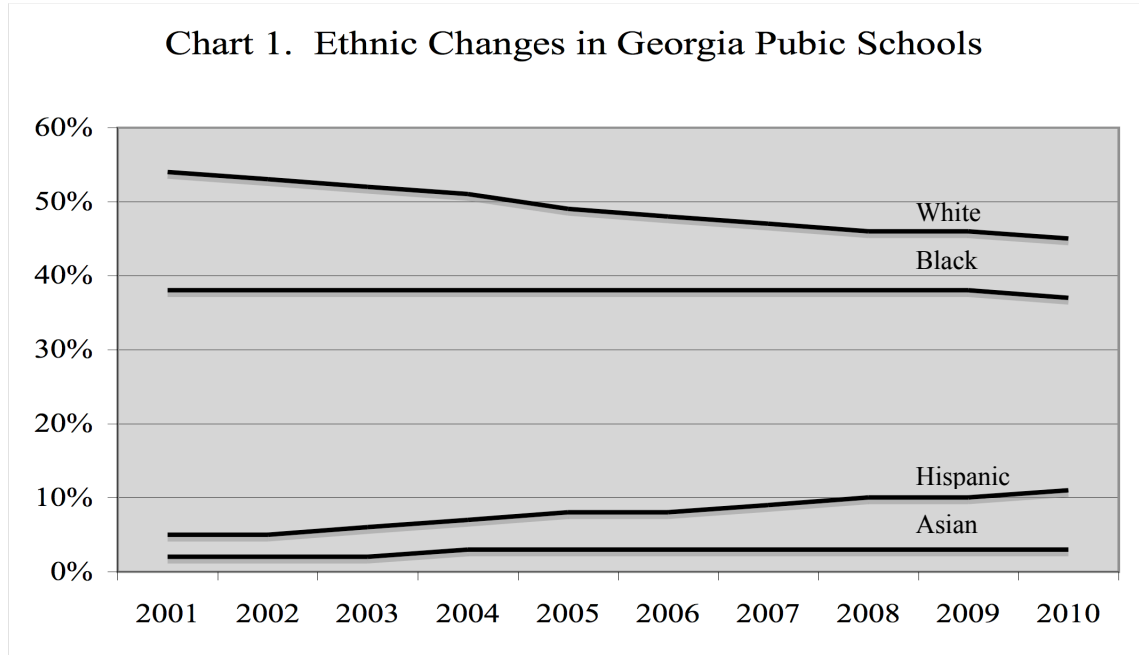~ James Baldwin

The need to know the population that is being served is critical as major shifts in demographics are occurring in Georgia public schools. State data, as displayed in Table 1, show that over the last ten years, the African American public school population remained unchanged at 38% until 2009 when it dropped by one percentage point to 37%, the Hispanic enrollment more than doubled, growing from 5% to 11%, and the percentage of white students dropped from 54% to 45%.

Table 1. Ethnic Changes in Georgia Public School Students 2000 to 2010

	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Total	1,413,527	1,437,294	1,496,012	1,486,125	1,515,646	1,559,828	1,589,839	1,609,681	1,615,066	1,625,745
Asian	2%	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%	3%
Black	38%	38%	38%	38%	38%	38%	38%	38%	38%	37%
Hispanic	5%	5%	6%	7%	8%	8%	9%	10%	10%	11%
White	54%	53%	52%	51%	49%	48%	47%	46%	46%	45%
Multiracial	1%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%	3%	3%	3%

Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement
Report Card (2010)

Chart 1 is a visual companion to Table 1 and provides a visual representation of changes in Georgia's public school population by ethnicity since 2000.

Chart 1. Ethnic Changes in Georgia Pubic Schools

A line chart showing ethnic changes in Georgia public schools from 2001 to 2010, with the y-axis ranging from 0% to 60%. Four lines are plotted: White (declining from about 54% to 45%), Black (steady around 38%, declining slightly to 37%), Hispanic (increasing from about 5% to 11%), and Asian (steady around 2-3%).

The most dramatic change in the state's public school population is seen in the steady increase in the percentage of students who are eligible for free or reduced lunch as documented by Table 2.

Table 2

Changes in the Percentage of Georgia Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch

2000-2001	2001-2002	2002-2003	2003-2004	2004-2005	2005-2006	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010
43%	44%	45%	46%	48%	50%	50%	51%	53%	56%

Governors Office of Student Achievement (2010)
Georgia Department of Education

These figures show an increase from 43% in 2001 to 56% in 2010. These percentages indicate a steady annual increase since the year 2001. Beginning in 2007, more than half of all Georgia public school students were eligible for free or reduced

lunch, the standard measure of poverty in public schools. Chart 2 is a visual companion to Table 2 and provides a visual representation of changes in poverty status of Georgia public school students since the year 2000.

These numbers will continue to be volatile as Georgia's population growth increases. The U. S. Census Bureau ranks Georgia as the fastest growing state in the South and the 5th fasting growing state in the U.S. (following Nevada, Arizona, Utah, and Idaho) Between 2000 and 2010, the U.S. population grew by 9.7 percent and the population of Georgia increased by 18.3% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010)

Another major concern is the implications of the rise in childhood poverty for school attrition. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the state of Georgia's current graduation rate is 56% (2010). Recognizing that students of poverty tend to drop out of school more frequently than their higher income peers, increases in poverty status of Georgia's students does not bode well for increasing the state's graduation rate.

The School-to-prison Pipeline

"He who opens a door closes a prison"

~Victor Hugo

Several studies document that differential treatment of children living in poverty begins early in their lives. There is evidence that as early as first grade, at-risk students are more likely to receive school discipline referrals compared to their more affluent peers (Rusby, et al, 2007). Losen and Skiba (2010) found that poor African American males are three times more likely to be suspended from school than their peers. Rouse

and Barrow (2006) reported on the disproportionate rate of grade retention occurring to children from lower socioeconomic families.

In too many instances, children living in poverty are viewed through a lens of pathology (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). If left unchallenged, this designation of poverty as a disability can absolve educators from the responsibility to reaching and teaching all children. The unfamiliarity and discomfort of teachers with the culture of poverty can result in decisions that unconventional behavior of poor children should be handled by extracting them from the classroom. Children who are routinely disciplined are most often suspended and eventually become dropouts. High school dropouts are nearly 3.5 times more likely to be found in prison than their peers with diplomas (U.S. Census, 2009). There are many urban areas where the percentage of adolescents of poverty in juvenile justice facilities exceeds their ranks in schools, creating what has come to be known as a "school-to-prison pipeline for poor children (Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, Valentine, 2009).

Implications for Policy and Pedagogy

"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance."
~ Derek Bok

The single most powerful intervention with the capability of arresting the negative outcomes of poverty is educational completion. This was echoed by Horace Mann's words on national welfare, "Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (p. 3, 1848). The global economy continues to demand the education of an informed

citizenry, capable of taking care of and improving the world.

The dynamic changes in the poverty status of children attending Georgia's public schools requires the development and implementation of plans that demonstrate understanding of and responsiveness to the documented needs of a diverse population. Trend data verifies that Georgia public school children who live in poverty can no longer be viewed as a "minority" group. Instead, this population has become the mainstream. Recognizing that children living in poverty represent the highest percentage of students who leave school without a diploma, Georgia's most recent graduation rate of 56% (NCES, 2010) cannot be expected to improve without targeted intervention. Now is the time for serious discussions of school restructuring that will include input from a variety of sources (Curran, 2009).

Educators already know a multiplicity of theories of teaching and learning. This wealth of knowledge must be translated into actions that make a difference in the lives of all children, including those living in poverty. A paradigm that refutes a pathological view of poverty as a disability is essential. Effective programs can be fostered through in-house district workshops, partnerships with universities, and input from professional associations that encourage a connection between theories, research, and practice. For example, an incorporation of local data and input from the literature could result in pre-emptive school attrition programs that occur prior to middle school, recognizing that ninth grade is when the majority of students drop out (McCallurmore & Sparapani, 2010).

Conclusion

"Every man and woman is born into the world to do something unique and something distinctive and if he or she does not do it, it will never be done."
~Benjamin E. Mays

The traditional view of poverty as a marginal condition affecting a minority of students no longer holds as 56% of Georgia's 1.6-million public school students are now eligible for free or reduced lunch, an increase of 13 percentage points in ten years. The vast majority of school dropouts are from lower socio-economic families. In the absence of structured intervention, these figures do not bode well for improving Georgia's current high school graduation rate of 56% (NCES, 2010). Trend data confirms inequitable treatment of children of poverty who are disproportionately retained, suspended and ultimately found at higher rates in juvenile detention facilities. These trends will require school districts to insure that educators rebuff pathological views of poverty as a disability. Rather, the potential genius in each child will be routinely empowered and encouraged.

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