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The War on Poverty Must Be Won: Transformative Leaders Can Make a Difference

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The War on Poverty Must Be Won: Transformative Leaders Can Make a Difference

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Abstract

According to reports, almost one billion children worldwide live in poverty, many of whom find it difficult to attend school on a regular basis. Moreover, when they are able to attend, they too often find themselves unable to succeed, falling farther and farther behind their more affluent peers. By attending to a number of relevant research findings, educators can reverse this situation. First, it is important to understand and address both generational and situational poverty by challenging and eliminating deficit thinking. We must understand the difference between a child's prior opportunity to learn and his or her ability to learn; hold high expectations of every child and provide them with a rich and engaging learning environment. To accomplish this, transformative leadership offers a way forward. It is also important to ensure our curricula, our pedagogies, and our policies are inclusive, that they acknowledge the lived realities of every child, and that they openly address the social and societal inequities that marginalize some and privilege others. Educators must become advocates, when necessary, for those who desperately need the advice and encouragement of a caring adult. Only then can we change despair into hope.

Keywords: leadership, social justice, poverty, education, deficit thinking

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La Guerra Contra la Pobreza Debe Ganarse: Los Líderes Transformativos Pueden Marcar la Diferencia

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Resumen

Según los informes, casi mil millones de niños en el mundo viven en la pobreza. A muchos les resulta difícil ir a la escuela de forma regular; y si tienen la oportunidad de asistir a clase, se sienten a menudo incapaces de tener éxito, quedando cada vez más atrasados en los estudios que sus compañeros más pudientes. Los educadores pueden revertir esta situación utilizando como herramienta de consulta los resultados de investigaciones pertinentes al caso. Es importante comprender el concepto de pobreza y saber abordarla, tanto en su concepto generacional como situacional, y de combatir y eliminar el pensamiento déficit. Debemos entender la diferencia entre la oportunidad que ha tenido un niño de aprender y su capacidad de aprendizaje; mantener altas expectativas de todos los niños por igual y proporcionarles un entorno de aprendizaje rico y motivador. Para lograrlo, es importante asegurarse que los planes de estudio, los métodos pedagógicos y nuestras políticas son inclusivos, que reconocen la realidad que viven todos los niños, y que abordan abiertamente las desigualdades sociales y las impuestas por la sociedad, las cuales marginan a algunos y privilegian a otros. Los educadores deben convertirse en defensores de aquellos que precisan desesperadamente el consejo y el aliento de un adulto comprensivo. Sólo entonces podremos cambiar la desesperación por la esperanza.

Palabras clave: liderazgo, justicia social, pobreza, educación, pensamiento déficit

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A recent Oxfam report captured the attention of many educators and researchers worldwide when it proclaimed that the richest 85 people in the world possessed more wealth than half of the world's population (Fuentes-Nieva & Galasso, 2014 p.1). The statistic is staggering. A group of people that one can gather together in a room the size of a university classroom holds more wealth than half the world's population! The report also asserted that "seven out of ten people live in countries where economic inequality has increased in the last 30 years" (with the US leading the way) (Fuentes-Nieva & Galasso, 2014, p. 3). In fact, over three billion people—almost half of the world's population—live on less than $2.50 a day. Children comprise 2.2 billion of the world's population and one billion—almost half of them—live in poverty. Further, according to UNICEF, 22,000 children die each day due to poverty (Shah, 2013).

Despite the United Nations' longstanding mandate for free, universal, elementary education, over 120 million of the world's children never have the opportunity to attend school at all; and many others who struggle to attend school on a regular basis find it difficult to achieve academic success. Indeed, almost a billion people worldwide, most of them poor, were unable to read a book or sign their name at the beginning of the 21st century (Shah, 2013). What is important, as Bailey (2014) acknowledges is to understand that

> Through no fault of their own, poor children live in more dangerous neighborhoods and attend underperforming schools. They are increasingly less likely to complete high school and college and more likely to live in poverty as adults. Over 40 percent of children born to parents in the lowest quintile of family income remain in the same quintile as adults. (Bailey, 2014)

We have long been aware of this situation. Over 50 years ago, American President Lyndon Johnson said in his inaugural State of the Union Address:

> Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope—some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity.… It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won. (1964)

Today, 50 years later, the need to address the issue of poverty is as pressing as ever, although in many countries it is an issue that polarizes and divides people politically. Some in the United States, for example, believe that the country does not have a poverty crisis; others think that helping the poor serves to rob them of a work ethic and to create a culture of dependency. Still others argue that the poor are increasingly falling behind their peers, both in the United States and globally, and that something must be done.

The issue of child poverty is, therefore, of pressing interest internationally, and of critical importance to school leaders everywhere who must grapple with the question of how best to educate all children and perhaps especially those living in poverty. In this article, I will first examine how, using concepts drawn from research, including the concept of transformative leadership, educators and educational leaders can create more socially just and inclusive environments for educating children who live in poverty.

Poverty and Education

Poverty is defined in numerous ways and with many different statistics depending on one's context. What is important to know is that globally, "1.4 billion people in developing countries live on $1.25 a day or less" (IFAD, 2011), that "842 million people—or one in eight people in the world—do not have enough to eat" (State of Food, 2013), and that "66 million primary school-age children attend classes hungry across the developing world, with 23 million in Africa alone" (Hunger, 2014). In general, in the United States, a family of four attempting to live on $23,300 a year is considered poor. By this calculation, 46.5 million people, over half of them children, live in poverty in what is generally referred to as the richest country in the world.

Moreover we know that when children are poor or worse, homeless, they attend school less frequently, if at all; they face less school success, they change schools more often, experience higher push out or dropout rates, suffer poorer health and nutrition and so on (Love, 2009). But one thing is clear; children who are living in poverty do not care about these statistics. They only know they are hungry, or that they have no bed to call their own, or that they can barely remember when their parents last had time to hug them. Certainly, they wonder why they can't do things the other children do.

They do not understand that poverty is a social problem that can and should be addressed by society; they simply think something is wrong with them or their family. Thus, by every measure, society is failing a large number of children and we, as educators, are failing these children if our schools do not serve them well. Because children do not choose to be poor, educators must take a stand.

Too often educators declare that we can't be social workers – and we cannot. We say we cannot teach kids who come from dysfunctional or disadvantaged families—but we must. We know that the greatest predictors of school success are the socio-economic status of families, and the parents' levels of education (Duncan & Murnane, 2013). But this means that unless we intervene—and make no mistake, education is an intervention—we will continue to fail our poorest and most disadvantaged children.

In this paper, I will describe some of my personal experiences, examine some research about teaching and learning, and share the stories of two individuals who illustrate the two basic kinds of poverty and the impact education may have. But first, let me describe the eight tenets of a concept called transformative leadership (Shields, 2009, 2013) which I believe offers a useful approach for educational leaders wanting to make a difference in the lives of impoverished children.

Transformative Leadership – A way Forward

Often educational leaders, both those in formal positions of leadership and those who are in less formal teacher leadership roles, enter schools in which the playing field is not level, and in which some groups of students (in this case those living in poverty) are disadvantaged. Rather than tinkering around the edges of change, a transformative leader first acknowledges the need for deep and equitable change. Once this need has been acknowledged, it is important to help those in the organization to deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate an inequitable status quo and to reconstruct frameworks that promote inclusion and equity. This includes, as we will see later, the elimination of deficit thinking and the acceptance of the lived experiences of all children. The third tenet of transformative leadership is a focus on democracy, liberation, equity, and justice. This requires that schools be organized and operated in ways that set children free from the constraints of poverty and that permit them to complete on a more level

playing field. The next tenet of transformative leadership is to address the inequitable distribution of power. This posits that schools must become more inclusive, listening to more voices, and accepting more forms of knowledge than is often the case. It means that educators must differentiate between a child's prior opportunity to learn that may have been constrained by family circumstances and his or her innate curiosity and ability to learn. Fifth, transformative leaders recognize that schools confer a public good as well as private good. In other words, having a good education may offer to individuals the opportunity for greater lifetime earnings and a better career, but it also offers general societal benefits. For example, a higher level of education results in overall better health and savings on health care, less crime, fewer people incarcerated, and a higher level of civil engagement. Thus, educating all children, including the most disadvantaged becomes of critical societal importance. The sixth tenet of transformative leadership is the need to balance critique with promise. It is easy to discuss and criticize what is wrong; it is much more difficult to change circumstances to offer the promise of a better future to children. This may well require that transformative educators take on the roles of advocates and sometimes even activists, always speaking on behalf of those who may have difficulty speaking for themselves. Finally, transformative leadership requires educators to have moral courage. Speaking out on behalf of those who are sometimes disadvantaged because they are perceived to be less meritorious is not always easy. Changing schools, curriculum, or policy to be truly welcoming and inclusive for all sometimes brings with the attempts, complaints from those who are afraid their own power and privilege will be diminished.

In the following sections, you will see how these eight tenets, taken together, form the basis for a way to address the needs of all children living in poverty.

A Personal Awakening

I first became aware of the impact of poverty on children's education when I was a young teacher in the remote village of North West River, Labrador, in northern Canada—at the time accessible only by cable car or boat. Many of the children came from very poor and, even more remote, coastal

communities and lived in a Grenfell Mission dormitory during the school year.

Sonny sat at the back of my 7th grade French class, slouched over, inattentive, hair falling over his face. I tried everything: I cajoled, I begged, I ignored him; I yelled, I threatened, I gave him detentions. Nothing seemed to convince Sonny that he should learn to conjugate "avoir" or "être." He did not do his homework; he did not respond in class. Finally one day, in exasperation, I said, "Fine, if you won't do your work now, come to my house after school and we will do it then." And to my surprise, Sonny came. We sat at my dining room table, working on irregular French verbs, when suddenly Sonny blurted out, "I just found out that my Mother was married Saturday." As he talked, he shared that he had been living with his mother, a welfare recipient, in a small house in a nearby village. She had become involved with a man who took a dislike to Sonny and kicked him out of the house, forcing him to live in an unheated shed behind the house in the frigid Labrador winter weather. A welfare worker discovered that Sonny was living alone, in this unheated shed, and took him to the dormitory in North West River. And the day before my class, he had learned his mother had married her new man.

At the time, I was not aware of the pervasive and abject nature of child homeless or poverty, but I immediately understood how ridiculous it was for me to expect Sonny to concentrate on French verbs when he had so many other, more important things, on his mind. What I also learned was that once I began to know him, to listen to him, to let him share his fears and details of his lived experience, he began to pay attention, to do his homework and to learn. He never became a star pupil, but he did pass 7th grade French. As the years pass, the image of Sonny remains firmly etched in my mind. He reminds me of the importance of getting to know our students as individuals, as people with lives outside of school that are important to them, of attempting to understand school from their perspective, and of the importance of not giving up on a single one of them—as we attempt to educate all children.

What Do We Know?

So what do we know about educating impoverished children? We know that a number of things do not work: good intentions, pity, low expectations;

deficit thinking or blaming the victim; new, packaged programs (by themselves); technical solutions that simply move pieces around; transmissive, repetitive pedagogy; a singular focus on testing and test preparation; any emphasis that narrows the curriculum; or even more teacher-assistants and more remediation. Educational leaders will, therefore, need to consider effecting deep and significant change to make our schools more equitable. They cannot simply ensure that their schools are running efficiently, but must help their teachers to reconsider a number of beliefs and assumptions, particularly those related to poor children. The good news, however, is that we know a number of things that do work—and the even better news is that most of them do not cost a lot of money. They do however cost in commitment, in effort, and sometimes require the very hard work of addressing and changing our belief systems.

What works begins with building relationships, as Sonny taught me long ago. It continues as we understand and build on the strengths or cultural capital of each child and create an inclusive, socially just school culture. To do so requires educators to ensure that school is for all children and that each student knows he or she is valued and respected. It demands that we hold high expectations for each child and provide them with enrichment instead of low-level remediation. This may seem counter-intuitive if students seem to lag behind their more advantaged peers, but if we simply engage them in slow, repetitive, and often boring remedial approaches, they will never catch up. What less advantaged children need is to become excited and involved in higher level activities so they will be able to learn and compete with their more advantaged classmates. These changes do not simply happen but must be modelled and emphasized by the leaders in every school.

In the following paragraphs, I provide some research-based suggestions related to these assertions to demonstrate how educators can better support students from impoverished settings and ensure they are able to succeed in educational environments today.

Two Kinds of Poverty

Educators must understand that there are basically two kinds of poverty—situational and generational (Jensen, 2009, 2013). Moreover, each has different characteristics and requires different educational strategies to assist students to succeed.

Situational poverty. Situational poverty is often temporary, and is usually caused by a crisis of some kind. It may ensue after an environmental disaster (flood, hurricane, tornado) that may have caused the destruction of houses and material goods; or it may result from a family member having severe health problems that have strained family resources, or it may perhaps occur as a result of a breakdown of the family unit, again due to death, disease, or divorce. Many adults experiencing situational poverty may be very well educated and even have engaged in professional careers; nevertheless, situational poverty has a severe impact on the well-being of every family member. It creates stress, unhappiness, and disadvantage and it has a serious and deleterious impact on the ability of children to concentrate and perform in school as well as on the possibility of parents providing support and assistance for their child's education.

In other words, the trauma of situational poverty may bring with it shame, an inability to concentrate, and a feeling of worthlessness. Gabriel[1] was a child of situational poverty caused by political unrest in his home country. He grew up in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua. The youngest of five children, Gabriel's early life was relatively comfortable. His father made a decent living as a government engineer and his mother owned a hair salon. However, the family's comfortable life-style was shattered when the Sandinista regime took power from the Somoza dynasty. In the mayhem of military combat, two of Gabriel's uncles were killed and his father became a target of the Sandinistas who confiscated nearly everything the family had so worked hard to build. Gabriel explained:

> That was when my parents knew it was time to leave the country. We escaped on foot; I remember my dad holding me so tightly as he carried me across the river. After weeks on the road, we finally arrived in Miami, Florida, to join relatives who had immigrated previously.

The trauma of having to leave everything, of knowing his uncles had been killed and of having to escape to a new country where everyone spoke a different language and where everything was unfamiliar would obviously affect Gabriel's school performance. And this is also the experience of many immigrant and refugee children today. Some have moved to a new country; others have lost their homes and are living in temporary housing in more familiar settings, but all have experienced trauma, loss, and even the death of

a loved one. Educators must consider how experiences such as this affect the ability of children to succeed in school and find ways to offer encouragement and support.

Generational poverty. On the other hand, Sophie[2] comes from generational poverty. Sophie describes how she grew up with parents who were on welfare and thus, who struggled to put food on the table. And she describes how in school, she was the "lost little girl at the back of the room whom teachers ignored." She states that immediately she could "feel the prejudice" at school, as she heard her teachers whispering scornfully when she had been absent, that she had "gone with her parents to pick up their welfare cheques."

Sophie comes from generational poverty. Like many others in this situation, as she grew up, she suffered from malnutrition, generally poor health, and had a lower vocabulary and less general knowledge of the world than Gabriel. Her parents, and their parents, had struggled to make ends meet and to support and care for their families. In school, Sophie was ignored, neglected—a nobody (she says). Generational poverty affected her motivation, her speech, and her general knowledge. Her parents were poor, so they had little time or energy to help her; however, no-one expected them to do anything different. The family was written off as unimportant.

Gabriel began school in the United States as an English language learner. He was quiet and shy and struggled to learn English and to interact with his classmates. The school considered him to be learning disabled and by the time he was in 3rd or 4th grade, tracked him into a self-contained classroom for students who were considered learning disabled (LD). He explained:

> I really didn't think school was that hard because the teachers didn't really care about giving us much homework and stuff; they all thought we were LD and couldn't learn anyway. I didn't have to try that hard, I mean the teachers didn't really expect much of us.

Sophie described more of her school experience. One year, when she was 14, for reasons she does not reveal, she was forced to quit school in the middle of the school year. The following year, when she was assigned to the same math teacher with whom she had not succeeded the previous year, her father, never comfortable going into the school, summoned up his courage and went to see the principal. Unfortunately, the blunt response was that

Sophie could not learn and that the school was simply babysitting her; so, the teacher to whom she was assigned did not matter.

Sonny had experienced the impact of both generational and situational poverty. His mother's history of little education and of being on welfare combined with his sudden new living situation in a shed all seemed to make school success unattainable. Like Sophie and Gabriel, he had not chosen to be poor; his poverty and living situation were not his fault. All three remind educators that we must never make a child feel embarrassed or ashamed because he or she is poor—whether the poverty is temporary or long-standing.

Eliminating Deficit Thinking

Unfortunately Sophie, Gabriel, and Sonny were victims of a phenomenon that is commonly known as *deficit thinking* (Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005; Valencia, 1997). You have seen and heard it frequently in your schools—you know, "These parents don't care. These kids don't try. They will never amount to anything." In fact, I was once conducting some research on the Najavo reservation in SE Utah and asked teachers, during an interview, what would help the children learn. To my surprise one teacher responded, "Better parents." These assumptions are examples of knowledge frameworks that must be deconstructed by educational leaders. Both are incorrect and extremely destructive and must be addressed by any educator wanting to help impoverished children succeed. We know, from Sophie's father's visit to the school and from Gabriel's parents' sacrifices, that both families cared very much.

Research shows that "the single most important factor in the academic achievement of minoritized children is the active rejection of deficit thinking on the part of the principal" (Wagstaff & Fusarelli, 1995). The key is for the educational leader to set the example, to challenge instances of deficit thinking wherever and whenever they are observed, and to ensure a schoolwide change of perception. We must never treat differences as though they are inherently deficiencies. Educators must never make assumptions that children cannot learn based on their parents' levels of education, home language, general knowledge, or their current financial situation. Sophie and Gabriel written off, left to languish in a public school classroom. But unlike so many other children from impoverished situations, both were

survivors, in part because of a later fortuitous interaction with a caring adult. Unfortunately this is also too often the case. Children from impoverished situations too often fail to succeed because they lack an understanding adult who supports, encourages, and even advocates for them.

Ability vs. Opportunity: High Expectations for All

If leaders are to ensure that education liberates children from the effects of poverty (the third tenet of transformative leadership), it becomes important to help teachers differentiate between a child's ability to learn as opposed to their prior opportunity to learn. Consider the following situation which I present as a metaphor for what too often occurs in schools and classrooms worldwide. Assume that Sophie entered kindergarten and was given a sheet of paper and told to paint a picture. She may have enthusiastically dipped her brush in one pot of paint, and then another, and still another; but as she continued, her excitement might have turned to dismay because the bright colors turned to a kind of muddy brown. No-one had taught her to clean her brush between colors. Linda, in contrast, may have come from a home where her parents had money, time, and energy to paint with her, teaching her to use a different brush for each color or to clean the brush well between colors.

Too often, without considering the child's prior opportunity to learn, we make snap decisions: "Poor Sophie. She is so far behind; she is such a weak student. We'll have to put her in a remedial class, while Linda, on the other hand is such a gifted artist….!" Recall this is a metaphor that is repeated in numerous situations—math class, reading, social studies. We make assumptions based on current performance rather than ability and, instead of taking the few minutes required to show Sophie how to clean her brush, we relegate her to a lifetime of lowered expectations and remediation. Moreover, too often, our approach is to place students from poverty in remedial situations where we exacerbate the situation by giving them flashcards, drill and kill, or slow sequential bits of information—teaching them in ways that are so slow (and boring) they will never catch up but always remain behind. Yet research has clearly demonstrated (Jensen, 2013) that it is the opposite that is required. Children who are from impoverished home situations learn best when they are in a rich, stimulating learning environment.

This is supported by numerous studies that have shown that children from poverty, especially generational poverty, need language-rich, stimulating, and welcoming environments (Gorski, 2013). They need engaging activities to take their minds off their home situations, to immerse them in the excitement of learning, and to teach them what they have not been able to learn at home. Unless we captivate these children's imaginations and hold high expectations for them, they will never "catch up."

Create an Inclusive Curriculum

Another key to reaching children in poverty is to attend carefully to the assignments we give and the homework we require and to ensure that every child has an equal opportunity to succeed. If, for example, a science teacher asks a group of students to read the electric meters on their homes, to record the peaks and valleys of electrical use, and to graph the results over a week, many in the class will likely succeed, but children like Sophie, Gabriel, or Sonny would not be able to complete the assignment as given. Gabriel, for example, recalled his early years in Florida, saying:

> My father worked three jobs, mostly washing dishes, because that was the only work he could find. He never slept; he worked so hard just to put food on the table; we were so poor. We lived in a one bedroom apartment, can you imagine? All of us slept in one room. But, somehow, my mom and dad always found a way to provide for us. I know now how hard they struggled and I owe them so much.

He may not have been able to complete the original electric meter assignment because they lived in an apartment that did not have a separate meter. Similarly Sonny could not complete the assignment because he lived without electricity. Yet, both could certainly have contributed to the work. In fact, despite the fact that a friend had told him he was not smart enough to learn about computers, Gabriel had succeeded in teaching himself some pretty advanced skills—skills that resulted in some of his teachers actually asking him to fix their computers. So he could have graphed the results, written the description, and contributed in many different ways. But no-one recognized his ability. Even the teachers who asked for his help with their own computers somehow did not make the connection. And unfortunately, if

a teacher does not introduce these and other choices into an assignment, children from poverty will always find themselves on the borders, wondering how to fulfill the course requirements.

It is difficult to leave it up to every teacher to imagine each child's life outside of school, to provide alternatives, to give choices – for working alone or in groups, for assignments that require extra materials and those that don't, so that every child can succeed. Hence, this must become a matter for schoolwide dialogue and reflection. Time at staff meetings could be allocated to investigating barriers to children's success. It must not simply be children from better educated, middle-class families who can succeed. No child should ever have to summon his or her courage and approach the teacher, embarrassed, hoping no one else will hear him say, "I can't afford this. Can the school help?' or "I can't do that assignment; may I do something else?" It is up to educators to know our students, to understand their situations, and to build in alternatives so every child knows he or she belongs in school.

Let me provide a further illustration. A friend of mine who works with children who are homeless once told me about a small sixth grade boy whom she was tutoring. His class was studying the "United States" and each child was asked to pick a state, develop a report, and bring food typical of that state to share with the class. He worried, reflected, and finally chose Florida, because he believed orange juice would fulfil the requirements of the project and that he could afford juice for the class. Imagine his devastation and my friend's anger, when his teacher told him juice was not a food. He was not trying to avoid the work. He desperately wanted to fulfil each requirement, and, for a moment, thought that he had found a solution. We must make school work accessible for all children. We must also not make it more difficult or even impossible for some already challenged children to accomplish. Every time we make a child ask for an alternative—"I don't have an electric meter," "I can't afford food—or a book, or this field trip"— we are giving them the message that "school is really not for the likes of them." They are just being babysat—they truly don't belong–and we certainly don't believe they can succeed. Moreover we do this for children from impoverished settings from day one—remember Sophie says she "felt the prejudice." School leaders must know what is going on in their classrooms and must ensure that attitudes and practices like these are addressed and eradicated.

Otherwise, we will continue to send children from impoverished settings the message over and over, day after day, week after week, year after year—that school is not for them—and then we are surprised when they drop out of school (we should more accurately say, are "pushed out") at higher rates than their peers. In fact, 16 to 24-year-old students who come from low income families are seven times more likely to drop out than those from families with higher incomes. This is unacceptable and we, educators, can help to turn this around (Jensen, 2013).

Become a Patient and Caring Advocate

Just before Gabriel turned 16, he walked into a social security office, seeking employment. He was ready to quit school, believing he "*was not smart enough to graduate.*" He had internalized the deficit thinking of his teachers and failed to acknowledge that his ability to recite long strings of computer code, link whole apartment buildings to a single Internet connection, and restore crashed systems in a matter of minutes were indications of the intelligence and skills he needed to succeed. Fortunately, a friend of mine was working in that office, recognized Gabriel's ability, and had the patience and determination to work with him, until he finally believed he could be successful. Gabriel had simply accepted what educators had told him as matter of fact, internalizing the labels they had placed on him and repeating them at will to explain why he could not learn. In fact, it took many months of working with him and offering support and encouragement for my friend to finally convince Gabriel to talk to his 10th grade teacher about attending college. Once she began to advocate for him, however, the struggle was not over as other teachers and even the school administrator were not convinced. Once again, educational leaders must put policies in place to remove barriers to children's attainment, rather than to support marginalizing placements.

For Sophie, it was a crisis later in her own life—her husband leaving her with two small girls and her own desire to learn to read so she would be able to read notices sent home from her daughters' teachers—that made the difference. She describes how she gathered her courage and went back to school at night to get an equivalent high school graduation certificate. In her night classes, she encountered a teacher who understood how to make learning engaging and fun. She explains how they laughed and studied, and

how, for the first time in her life, she knew she could learn. In fact, at one point, her night-school teacher told her she should consider going on to university because she would make a wonderful teacher. Despite Sophie's incredulity, the teacher persisted, telling her that her own experiences would give her empathy and understanding. Yet Sophie resisted, explaining how she was dumb and could not do math—until suddenly she realized she was repeating all the negative messages she had internalized over the years.

For both Sophie and Gabriel something wonderful happened. They encountered a teacher who understood them, believed in them, and advocated for them. For both of them, the caring adult came into their lives very late. Gabriel was 16 when he met my friend in the social security office; Sophie was an adult with two children when she encountered a supportive night-school teacher. Having a caring, knowledgeable teacher who understands how to help children learn must not be the luck of the draw. It must not be a rare occurrence. It is what every child deserves. And it must happen from the earliest school experience. Gabriel's teacher was convinced to go to the dean of the school, and to argue for him to be placed in regular classes. At first no-one wanted to move him, but finally, they agreed. Gabriel took night school classes for two years and also attended summer school, but he finally graduated. Sophie went on to university and is now a successful elementary school teacher, motivating and assisting her students, and advocating at every possible moment that teachers "believe in every student."

It may be that as you think about children in your classes who are not succeeding, you are comparing them to Sophie or Gabriel and thinking that they just don't seem as motivated. But, I urge you to remember Sonny. I thought he wasn't motivated either, but as I developed a caring relationship with him, he wanted to uphold my trust and worked hard enough to succeed. I also think of my own adopted son, who suffered (I learned much later) from fetal alcohol effect—and seemed very disinterested and unmotivated at school. I often had to drag him out of bed in the morning, or force him to return to class after lunch—but when he had to get out of bed at 5 a.m. to meet his friends to catch the bus to go skiing, my urging was no longer needed. He was motivated to do what he wanted and believed he could do. He was not motivated to try when he believed he would fail.

Acknowledge Children's Lived Realities

The message is that we must acknowledge the lived realities of every student and ensure that each feels fully welcomed and accepted at school. No-one should have to hide who they are or what their situation is. No student should be made to feel ashamed of his or her circumstances or his or her parents. No student should have to ask for a modified or different assignment. And we must ensure that our rules as well as our classroom practices and pedagogies are fair.

Thus, we must carefully examine our school policies, including our approaches to discipline, because in an attempt to ensure a calm and safe learning environment, many schools have developed inflexible policies that disadvantage children who are already disadvantaged. One common policy is to suspend students who fight or swear. Yet it is important to examine the consequences, and to determine who is disadvantaged by such a policy. When a child comes from a middle or upper class home with professional parents, he or she is likely to have learned to use appropriate language and specifically not to swear in inappropriate situations (for instance, within earshot of adults). When a child lives on the streets, hearing swearing as a matter of course, seeing fighting as the only way to solve problems, it becomes much more difficult to self-censor language and behavior at school. We must reflect on how to teach appropriate behavior without punishing some children for behavior they have learned to think of as normal. Unless and until we make sure every child is valued and not punished for their lived experiences, we have lost the education battle before it has begun. Thus, as I have suggested elsewhere (Shields, 2003; 2009), it is important to ask several questions, every time we create a policy or make a decision:

- Who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged?
- Who is included and who excluded?
- Who is privileged and who marginalized?
- Whose voice has been heard and who has been silenced?

School leaders must examine policies for unintended consequences if we are to overcome the inequitable distribution of power and to ensure that every voice is taken into consideration in every school.

Discuss Social Conditions Openly and Explicitly

I recently listened to a group of older teenagers discussing their own experiences with poverty. What struck me was how they all believed their situation was isolated, that there was something wrong with their parents and their families. No-one had ever discussed poverty with them; and, growing up, they claimed they had no idea poverty was a social phenomenon—something that could and should be widely addressed. This is important. Our school curricula must become inclusive; they must recognize social issues as well as individual challenges. Educators must be willing to discuss the hard realities of our society as well as its lighter side; otherwise children will never know that poverty is a social condition that should be addressed instead of just something wrong with their family. A group of us once conducted research in a small school attended by both middle class children and their peers who lived in a nearby trailer park. One day, after the local paper wrote an article in which a number of families were described as living in poverty, the school received calls from several more affluent members of the community objecting to the characterization. So the 6th grade class decided to take on the question. Here is just a little of the conversation recorded by the school principal (and previously reported in Smith, Donohue, Vibert, 1998, p. 149):

> J: I don't know if we should talk about violence in our community
>
> D: Are we saying that poverty and violence are things we should not talk about? I'm just asking…
>
> V: And violence and poverty are things we have to talk about if we want them to go away. The thing is, it isn't personal … and people taking it that way makes it worse—sort of like there's some shame in being poor.
>
> T: But the article says "many" and "many" sounds bad… like shame or blame…
>
> K: But, poverty is not poor people's fault and not having everything you need shouldn't make you feel less of a person.

Engaging in open dialogue is one way to help children understand the true nature and the extent of poverty as a social reality and hence, as a war which must be won. Leaders must ensure that teachers not only teach the formal curriculum but that they understand the importance of teaching

children about social issues; they must not consider this as wasted time as we work to ensure every child sees himself or herself reflected in the curriculum and classroom discussions.

Concluding Thoughts

The previous sections of this article have emphasized some steps educational leaders can and must take to ensure that children from impoverished settings have a more level playing field at school. First, it is important to understand and address both generational and situational poverty by challenging and eliminating deficit thinking whenever and wherever we find evidence of it. We must never assume that a child's prior opportunities to learn prescribe his or her abilities to learn; and we must hold high expectations of every child, providing a rich and engaging learning environment. To accomplish this, it is important to ensure our curricula, our pedagogies, and our policies are inclusive. We will need to acknowledge the lived realities of every child, openly address the social and societal inequities that marginalize some and privilege others, and become advocates, when necessary, for those who desperately need the advice and encouragement of a caring adult.

In other words, we must begin to exercise transformative leadership—to effect deep and equitable change whenever and wherever it is needed. We must change inequitable knowledge frameworks, overcome the inequitable distribution of power, and emphasize the public and private, the local and the global impacts of poverty as well as the potential of education to overcome them. It will take the ability to critique and to identify inequities as well as the ability to find and implement solutions that offer promise. It will take willingness on the part of educators to move beyond our comfort zones and to speak up and speak out whenever necessary, raising our voices on behalf of those who need us to walk alongside them.

If we fail to make these changes, impoverished children will continue to fail in greater numbers, to drop out of school in greater numbers, and to attain lesser educational outcomes. Making these changes to ensure that schools become more inclusive and more socially just has been shown to improve the educational outcomes of all students (Shields, 2009). These are steps that all educational leaders can take, wherever they may find themselves—in district offices, in formal school leadership, or in the

classroom. It does not take extra resources, so everyone can participate, but it does take everyone! Each educator and educational leader must summon his or her moral courage and act. No-one can assume it is someone else's responsibility. Educating children who live in poverty is a moral act. Failing to educating them is also a moral act—of omission. Educators cannot wait until social policy overcomes poverty, for this may take generations and too many children are lost each day.

Ultimately, Sophie fulfilled her dream and rewarded the faith of her teachers. She became a teacher—and pleads with all educators to "believe in every child." She explains that when "there are people who believe in you, who help you, who encourage you, you can do anything." Gabriel recalls how his father never slept, working three jobs just to put food on the table, how all seven of them lived in a one-bedroom apartment, and slept in one room. He acknowledges how much he owes his parents for their love and sacrifices which became the motivating force that helped him rise above the station in life assigned to him by the school. And now, he is working toward a Masters' degree in Information Technology while he enjoys his career as a Network Administrator and director of network administration for a luxury resort corporation with locations around the world. In fact, ironically, when my friend recently spoke with Gabriel, he was relaxing in his own private hot tub on the patio of his $3,000/night suite overlooking the Caribbean Sea from Anguilla. Each of these examples demonstrates the importance of educators developing strong and supportive relationships with the children in their schools.

Unfortunately, Sonny did not find the continued support and encouragement he needed, and ultimately joined the hundreds of underserved youth who drop out of school and subsequently struggle to support themselves and their own families. Sonny's situation should not be the norm. Gabriel and Sophie should not be anomalies. They are all reminders that the war on poverty can, and must, be won. Even though, worldwide, income inequality is worse now than it ever has been, there is also hope because we know what it takes to help children like Sonny and Sophie and Gabriel succeed. We know that strong and effective leadership is important (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Sillins & Mulford, 2002). We know that when children are worried about their family situations it is almost impossible for them to succeed in school. But we also know that when they are in welcoming and inclusive schools, when their classroom

experiences are inviting and challenging, they can overcome their social situations and succeed. This must be the goal of every transformative leader.

We must put an end, as President Johnson said, to the lost generations of children who live on the outskirts of hope. We must do our part to bring the war on poverty to an end. The education battle can and must be won. As United Nations Ex-Secretary-General, Kofi Annan United Nations Ex-secretary Kofi Annan stated on the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty in 2006:

> The campaign to make poverty history—a central moral challenge of our age—cannot remain a task for the few, it must become a calling for the many … I urge everyone to join this struggle. Together, we can make real and sufficient progress towards the end of poverty.

As educators, we cannot solve all of the problems of disadvantaged youth and their families, but we can and must help them make progress. By exercising transformative leadership that attends urgently to the above strategies drawn from extensive research, we can, together, as Lyndon Johnson said, "replace despair with opportunity."

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Gabriel is a friend of one of my doctoral students who sent his story to me, with Gabriel's permission. The words that are italicized reflect Gabriel's own words, although the material is not publicly available.
[2] Sophie's story is one I heard personally from a French Canadian woman at a conference in Montreal in 2009. It is also retold in French in a video made for a research project, *Supporting Montreal's Disadvantaged Schools*.

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