



THE EDUCATIONAL  
**Forum**

# Probation and Head Lice: The Intersection of Corrections and Education

by Robert F. Kronick

## ***Abstract***

*The critical incident that drove this article involved a single mother who was on probation for drug offenses. Her two daughters were sent home from their Title I urban elementary school on a frequent basis because of head lice. This situation prompted several questions: Can we and should we be able to legislate and enforce cleanliness? Is cleanliness a middle-class value? Is cleanliness peculiar to high-content cultures (Pedersen 2000)? Is cleanliness really the issue when we examine what is occurring systemically?*

When children have head lice, they suffer the indignity of having their heads checked. This condition often is exacerbated by parents' lack of caring and concern, absence of expertise and know-how, or being overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of life. Regardless of the circumstances, children are sent home from school because of the condition; days of education are lost. Often, these children come to school the next day only to be sent home again. Frequently, parents, extended family, or neighbors will not pick up these children from school. If the school has a viable clinic, the children while away their time there until the end of the school day. Due to the highly contagious nature of this condition, other children, faculty and staff members, and human services workers—especially in Title I urban schools—are placed at risk by the affected children. Though an easily remedied problem, head lice requires swift intervention. At the same time, the problem must be considered and analyzed from a multicultural perspective (Pedersen 2000).

## ***Multicultural Theory***

This article describes the efforts of a full-service community school team in dealing with head lice. While this group was embarking on a plan to permanently rectify the situation, Paul Pedersen (2005) visited the author's university. His lecture "Listening

to the Voices of Culturally Different Clients” raised many difficult questions regarding ethics and advising people who are different in many ways from their counselor. Pedersen stated that working with culturally different people without understanding their culture is unethical. The process, therefore, must start with the counselor learning the culture of his or her clients. Pedersen (2005, 79) said, “I believe that the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association and the American Counseling Association are culturally biased. These guidelines presume an individualistic perspective, and they make no provision for responsible disobedience of their own guidelines.”

Counseling should focus on the needs of clients, understanding fully the clients’ cultural context, making seamless connections in their lives, and emphasizing how each aspect is related to all other aspects. Though many European Americans acknowledge that minorities and women are at a disadvantage in the current system, few realize or recognize their own privileges (Sue and Sue 1999). The middle-class values of counselors compared to the non-middle class values of clients is consistently a factor in situations such as the case of head lice.

Pedersen’s (2000) triad model of awareness, knowledge, and skill is at the center of culturally centered counseling and is viewed as being equally relevant to thoughts, feelings, and actions in psychology. According to Pedersen (2000), cultural counseling helps to functionally define the person, identify reinforcements, and focus on explaining the situation. Kiselica (1998) posited that one can identify at least a dozen assets by developing multicultural awareness. Opatow (1990) emphasized social justice, which typically requires an inclusive rather than an exclusive perspective. Moral exclusion consistently has resulted in classifying society according to the oppressed and the oppressors. Pedersen (2000) stressed that attempts to impose external behavior changes on people with a culturally different context are unlikely to succeed. Ivey (1987) adumbrated a relational view of ethics in the form of a dialectical inquiry between counseling providers and client communities. Most problems are viewed differently across cultures and, therefore, must be dealt with differently.

One question raised by the head lice case is whether or not morality can be legislated. Can children be prevented from attending school, and are mothers violating their probationary status by not ensuring that their children come to school without head lice? Hence, the head lice issue involves multiculturalism, ethics, law, and the coordination of services for the entire family. Family, society, and significant others are affected by this systemic issue.

### ***Labeling Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, and Differential Association***

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) microsystems theory, as well as Parsons and Shils’ (1951) systems theory, must be considered when addressing this problem on a systematic basis. To appreciate these theories, however, one first must understand labeling theory.

According to Schur’s (1971) labeling theory, audiences that respond to behaviors are more adept in explaining those behaviors than explicating individual attributes. The audiences that shape behavior are society-at-large, significant others, and agents of so-

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cial control. Labeling theory focuses on social and human interaction as emphasized by intellectual forebearers and symbolic interactionists, such as Cooley (1918), Mead (1934), and Thomas (1967).

Society-at-large sets the limits on issues such as cleanliness. The more interactive a culture, the more cogent are issues such as cleanliness. The higher the content of the culture, the more prominent are cleanliness issues (Pedersen 2000). Contagious problems, such as head lice, are especially salient because of their association with uncleanness and dirty living conditions. Head lice seem to be especially heinous to teachers.

From a societal point of view, head lice cases clearly should be handled by the social system and agents of social control, though significant others may positively or negatively affect behaviors. In the case of head lice, if extended family members, neighbors, or friends condemn the behavior, the problem is likely to disappear. However, if these groups of people exhibit the same behavior themselves, then the eradication of head lice is difficult.

Agents of social control include human service workers that may be part of the criminal justice, mental health, welfare, or educational system. The most effective human service systems are those that are multidisciplinary and collaborative. Agents of social control have the power to label or deter behaviors. If labeling occurs, the labeled persons accept that what they have done is part of who they are. The labeled persons become role-engulfed as a result of the agents of social control labeling them, rather than deterring their behavior. They see themselves as dirty, slovenly people. This is an undesired, but predictable outcome from the labeling theory perspective. In the case of head lice, deterrence clearly is the desired goal. Agents of social control must teach clients not only the virtue of cleanliness—an attitudinal process—but also the micro-processes of how to clean to get rid of head lice. Learning is at the core of transformation.

Differential association emphasizes that attitudes toward behavior, as well as techniques of performing the behavior, must be addressed; while symbolic interactionism posits that interaction is the primary behavior of concern. Differential association often applies to deviant or criminal behavior, but not always. For instance, in dealing with head lice, the attitudes of having a clean home precede the techniques of getting and keeping the house clean, along with proper hygiene for the affected children.

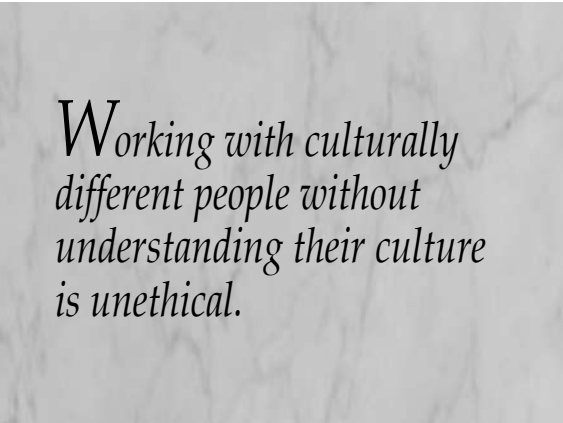
Thomas (1967) stated that if you define a situation as real, the reality is evident in the consequences. This is the world of subjective reality, or the world in which we live. If counselors' clients do not define their homes as dirty and their children as needing their hair washed, neither is likely to occur. Cooley's (1918, 10) "looking-glass self" stated that we develop a self based on the reactions we get from others. This concept plays a crucial role for agents of social control, teachers, and counselors, because it may help them do the right thing. These models are part of a qualitative, applied field theory that is social-psychological and gives human service workers theoretical homes that work for them. These models are utilitarian and more than inert knowledge.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the importance of language, symbols, referents, and behavior resulting from the interaction of the individual in his or her environment. Symbolic interactionism (Taylor and Bogdan 1984, 136) focuses on four questions:

1. How do people define themselves, others, their settings, and their activities?
2. How do people's definitions and perspectives develop and change?
3. What is the fit between different perspectives held by different people?
4. What is the fit between people's perspectives and their activities?

In addition, symbolic interactionism (Kronick 1974, 178–79) makes the following assumptions.

- The behavior of concern is interaction, or social and group behavior, not internal, biological, or sub-individual behavior.
- Such behavior is in response to symbols and is not determined biologically. Individuals respond to the labels they place upon one another, and not to the phenomenon involved. Efforts to achieve consensus of meaning are constantly underway and most likely are never completely successful.
- People can see and experience what a label calls for, even though it may not empirically exist. In their perception, people can symbolically provide missing elements. People respond to what they believe exists rather than what is there.
- Symbolic perception is always selective. Symbols are used to define the aspect of the phenomenon of concern to which attention is being given. Communication problems arise when interactants perceive something differently, even though they may use the same label to identify what they mistakenly believe to be the same thing.
- No inherent relationship, except the human one, exists between symbols and that to which they refer. People decide which symbols will identify a particular referent, thus making referents dynamic and subject to change.
- The behavior of the individual is in response to internal, biological factors, and to the label he or she uses to identify it, rather than in direct response to the biological factor per se. Social behavior is in response to socially provided motives, not biologically provided ones. Decisions about behavior are emergent; they have no prior existence. They can, however, achieve an existence, independent of the individuals who make the decisions, in the form of symbols. Such symbolic preservation is, in fact, necessary if human societies are to persist.



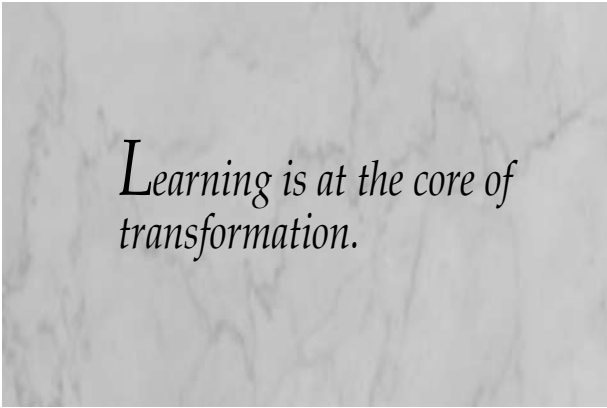
*Working with culturally different people without understanding their culture is unethical.*

### ***The Client***

The client in this article is Star Delaney (pseudonym), a single mother of three children. The oldest child is a boy in middle school. The two younger children are girls who are

enrolled in a Title I urban elementary school. None of the children attend school regularly. The girls have been sent home on a weekly basis because of head lice. Both of the girls' teachers are concerned for their welfare. They want them to be in class. They describe the younger of the two girls as intelligent and outgoing. The older child is in a special class and

described as faltering. The nurse and special programs coordinator described the mother as pleasant and friendly, but noncompliant. She has a two-year probationary sentence for drugs. She is described by her probation officer as a person who makes bad choices.



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On September 30, 2004, the author, the University Director of the Full-Service Community School project, was in the school when the school counselor, school nurse, one of the girl's teach-

ers, and the director of special programs approached him to discuss a situation that was of grave concern to them—Star Delaney and her two daughters. As director of the Full-Service Community School project, the author, with the support and trust of corrections and mental health providers, had developed a school-based multidisciplinary model of service delivery for children and families. These broad-based services are termed “full-service community schools” or “comprehensive schools” (Dryfoos 1994, 2003; Kronick 2002).

The author, after listening to all of the school personnel's concerns, suggested a phone call to the local probation and parole officer. This recommendation was based on past success he had in bringing nontraditional professionals, such as the Department of Probation and Parole, into school situations. The idea was that if the client was on probation or parole, some leverage might be used to get her to clean her house and shampoo her children's hair so that they would not be sent home from school.

At the behest of all, a meeting was scheduled on October 8, 2004 at the girls' elementary school.

### *The Meeting*

The principal, assistant principal, coordinator of special programs, school nurse, school counselor, and Star's probation officer were present. The probation officer began by stating his role vis-à-vis Star. He was concerned not only about Star meeting the rules of her probation, but also that her house be clean and safe so that her children could succeed in school.

Comments were made by each person in attendance. The teachers particularly were glad to see something getting done because they wanted the children in class and learning. The coordinator of special programs emphasized that because the children would be in school, they would pass the state test, which would help the school improve its No Child Left Behind status. The school nurse was pleased that she would be able to work with other children and not spend as much time on the Delaney girls. The school counselor

served as a case manager to ensure that the myriad services needed were delivered in a coordinated fashion. The principal and assistant principal also were relieved that action was being taken. The author was pleased that the full-service community school program brought together a diverse and somewhat unorthodox group to see that the head lice case was resolved.

The outcomes of this meeting were that a family was kept together, three children were not thrown into state custody, and the mother would learn appropriate behaviors, such as parenting skills. If the children had been taken into custody, a great deal could have been lost. Many children in state custody, whether in foster care or in a correctional or mental health facility, end up incarcerated in the adult department of corrections. Therefore, keeping them out of state custody was a goal.

From a theoretical perspective, this meeting had a human relations frame—one that emphasizes lateral communication and relationships that are an end, rather than a means to an end (Bolman and Deal 1997).

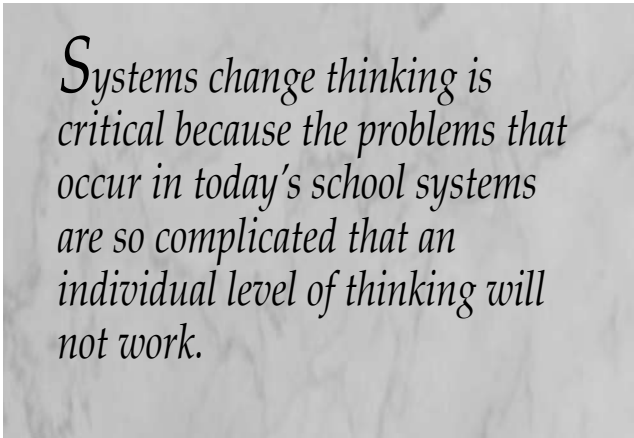
The objective of the meeting was to ensure that the girls continually came to school, learned, and were not sent home for having head lice. Hence, the outcome objective was a simple dichotomy—yes or no. The objective also was measured behaviorally. In an open social system, ample information flows into the system to meet the needs of the clients—the mother and her children. As is often the case, the identified clients—the mother for corrections and the children for education—are seen in isolation, rather than as a system.

Keeping this family out of state custody would require collaboration, systems approaches, and family therapy. Collaboration among the individuals who attended the meeting was needed to keep Star on task. The education system indirectly would know how well Star was doing by how the children performed in school, both academically and nonacademically. Therapy also would be an important intervention.

### ***The Treatment Plan***

The team that gathered to address the Delaney family situation recommended a treatment plan. This plan involved specific steps of instruction, with care taken not to overwhelm the client, Star. The plan included involvement by agencies such as Probation and Parole, Child and Family Services, the Mental Health Association, and a faith-based organization—the Christian Women’s Job Corp. The interventions were derived from family systems theory, behaviorism, and reality therapy.

Because Star and her family were clients of the corrections and educational systems, an understanding of how each system works and how to work within them was needed.



*Systems change thinking is critical because the problems that occur in today's school systems are so complicated that an individual level of thinking will not work.*

Systems theory points out that when one aspect of the system changes, all other aspects change as well. Thus, as Star cleaned the house and eliminated two men who had been staying there, her home-life system changed. Star and her three children's family system included two significant others—a grandmother and an aunt—who helped encourage and

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teach Star how to keep her house clean. In this problem-solving, family system approach, the extended family discussed the issues within the Delaney family, including drug use, cleanliness, health issues, academic performance, and employment. From these discussions, Star experienced the looking-glass self, seeing how others saw her. Reinforcements helped her continue and strengthen her desired behaviors. An over-correctional approach was used to teach Star how to clean her home. This is a technique that often is used with lower-functioning persons to get them to do the necessary cleaning.

A counselor who does reality therapy was recommended for Star. Reality therapy (Glasser 1965) required Star to be responsible for her behaviors. Right and wrong would be clearly delineated, and the establishment of her identity through love and a sense of value or self-worth would be pursued. Her identity up until this point in her life was one of failure. The counselor would help Star move from failure to a successful identity. Her quality world would be one of cleanliness, derived from being drug-free and having her children succeed in school. Motivating her to do all of this was not easy. A focus on probation violations helped to convince Star to do the right thing. Other skills and techniques were used to motivate her to continue the behavior long-term.

Growing out of this theory amalgamation, the following treatment plan was established by Star and her probation officer, with input from all the individuals who attended the meeting.

- Star will work with a therapist at the Comprehensive Community Care Center on cleanliness issues.
- Star will attend parenting classes at the state probation office.
- Star will apply to the Christian Women's Job Corp, where a mentor will help with daily living skills, and attend classes based on identified needs. If needed, child care will be provided.
- The probation officer will conduct home visits to ensure that Star keeps the house and children clean.
- The school counselor and school nurse will work together to ensure that the children's needs are met.

- The school will try to help Star find a new pediatrician. Until then, the on-site pediatrician who is there two mornings a week will see her children.
- Star will keep all appointments at the school for her and the children.

### *Good People and Dirty Work*

*Good People and Dirty Work* (Hughes 1964) is about the Holocaust and describes how educated Germans, e.g., teachers and architects, denied that they knew about the annihilation of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, mental defectives, and Jehovah's Witnesses. In this book, Hughes pointed out that good people are no better or worse than anyone else, and that dirty work usually is done by those closest to us. In the case of the Holocaust, good people had others, or intermediates, do the dirty work for them. The individuals doing the dirty work (Hughes 1964, 33) were described as "men or women with a history of failing to adapt to the demands of work and to the classes of society in which they had been bred." The Holocaust gave these people the opportunity to be in an inner group that was superior to all others—even Germans—through their emancipation from the bourgeois morality of the people above, and beyond the ordinary morality. The people doing dirty work were better than the good people, simply because the good people weren't that good. This creation of an inner circle or cadre of people is an artifact of organizational life.

Hughes (1958) defined dirty work as unpleasant, even degrading, but necessary for the survival of society. Dirty work often involves contact with things that are considered dirty or unclean. A moral division of labor always separates those willing to undertake society's dirty work from those who would rather not get their hands dirty. Dressler (1984, 6) referred to service work as dirty work because "individuals who provide social services are located at the intersections of potentially conflicting subsystems of the welfare enterprise." In addition to delivering policies from above, service workers buffer the rest of society from the clients they serve (Dressler 1984). For example, people who deal with those Goffman (1963) described as stigmatized—the mentally ill and the convicts—keep that group separate from the rest of society.

The dirty work done by an inner circle raises some important questions. To what extent are the people doing the dirty work acting for the rest of us? Moreover, what types of

people are attracted to the trade of prison guard, nursing home attendant, or psychiatric aide? Are people changed by the organizations in which they work, or are certain people drawn, by the characteristics they possess, to certain types of jobs? These questions are significant for those who do jobs that have been described as dirty work, as well as for teachers.

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In "For the Children: Accounting for Careers in Child Protective Services" (2005), Morris opined that examining a family's most private habits is similar to other dirty work in society. The head lice case, with its issues of cleanliness, is a prime example of this conundrum.

### *Discussion*

The desired outcomes from this full-service community school project were the eradication of head lice and the continued attendance of children at a Title I urban school. Follow-up showed that the children were lice-free and their school attendance was regular and steady, the house was clean, the mother was meeting the conditions of her parole, and teachers were satisfied that the children were in class and learning. The school counselor and nurse were able to serve other children and not spend an undue amount of time with the two girls. The mother was learning some pro-social behaviors.

The presented theories—labeling theory, symbolic interactionism, and differential association—are reified by what was learned from this case. Often, a criticism of theories is that they are not testable. The handling of the head lice situation showed that labeling theory, symbolic interactionism, and differential association are, in fact, testable. Inert knowledge became workable in the community. Knowledge from a theoretical perspective was applied in school and community settings. An effective model for dealing with future, similar behaviors—particularly when a point of leverage to get pro-social behavior from parents is needed—was demonstrated.

Collaboration, systems, and prevention prevailed. Though only one small victory, this success reduced burnout and the early exit of people from teaching and counseling. The completion of dirty work did not cause them to leave the profession; rather, the dirty work was justified because the head lice were gone, the children were in school, and the teachers, counselors, nurses, and administrators were satisfied. Prevention required collaboration among all involved. Prevention is something that educational and human service professionals give lip service to, but rarely put into practice. Prevention also requires time, which sometimes just isn't there because the exigencies of proof are not immediately available. Though prevention is perceived as important, it generally is supplanted by intervention. A notable exception is the development of a prevention course at Pennsylvania State University. This course (Matthews and Skowron 2004) helps students understand that mental health counselors can play a proactive role with individuals and systems, in addition to providing a therapeutic role. Prevention as a course, and not just part of a course, gives students the opportunity to practice prevention and collaboration, and thereby increase their effectiveness as professionals.

### *Conclusion*

Nothing is as useful as a good theory. The theories described in this article—labeling, symbolic interactionism, and differential association—have explanatory power for understanding the behavior of elementary students in Title I urban schools. The works of Rothstein (2004) and Orfield and Lee (2005) reflected the importance of understanding these behaviors with interventions based on theory.

Rothstein (2004) claimed that class is so powerful in America today that it supercedes efforts to change the curricular and noncurricular behaviors of children in Title I schools. Title I schools have minimum standards of poverty, measured by the percentage of students on free and reduced lunch. The school the Delaney sisters attended was 85 percent African American and 88 percent free and reduced lunch. In American schools today, this correlation between race and poverty, especially for African Americans, is becoming more and more real. In short, more poor children are in schools that are populated with more poor children.

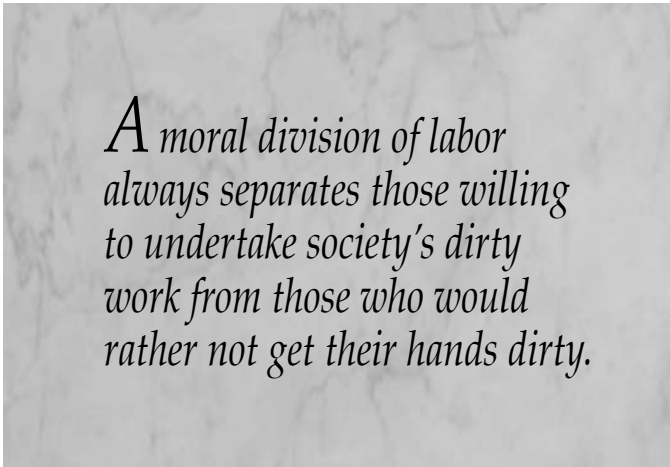
Finding ways to help the Delaney sisters stay in school was a scenario that is being played out across America today. These girls were an exception because school personnel perceived them as able to pass the state test, if only they were in school. The effect of the

labeling theory by agents of social control is illustrated by this important perception. When they are successful, agents of social control may deter inappropriate behavior or promote pro-social behavior. However, if they are unsuccessful, these interactions lead to inappropriate behaviors, the labeling of the person in a negative way, and an exclusion of this group or individual from pro-social groups and inclusion in anti-social groups. Thus, the agents of social control may cause behaviors that they are intending to prevent.

The Delaney sisters received preventative services designed to keep them in school and out of state custody as delinquents, status offenders, or foster children, all of which increase children's chances of ending up in adult corrections. The prevention of crime, poverty, and mental illness also were goals of the interactions presented in this article. Prevention works best when school and nonschool personnel collaborate to provide concrete services to children and families.

Where are these children and families? The answer is at the school, especially the elementary school. Systems change, therefore, is a key component of the model. Systems theories may be conceptualized in terms of a mobile hanging over a baby's crib. An organism is a system if when one part moves, all move. Systems change thinking is critical because the problems that occur in today's school systems are so complicated that an individual level of thinking will not work. In the head lice case, prevention, collaboration, and systems change all were used to help solve the problem of forced absenteeism caused by the condition.

Hughes's (1964) concept of good people and dirty work was illustrated throughout this article. Dirty work is a task that all who work with children—especially those in low income schools—must do. Defining situations (Thomas 1967), developing self-concepts



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(Cooley 1918), learning techniques of deviant behavior (Sutherland and Cressy 1969), and socialization (Mead 1934) were illustrated in the head lice case. All of these concepts, if used effectively, help prevent unwanted future behavior and can correct an existing problem, such as not being able to take the state test. All children know that when their peers with head lice go to the nurse's office, a stigmatized behavior has occurred and the affected children will be going home. Head lice will continue if the mother is not taught how to deal with the real problems, which in turn will cause her children to face other problems, such as academic failure and possible incarceration in mental health or correctional programs, which possibly would limit their economic future and force them to a

life on welfare. Head lice are simply the presenting problem.

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As of this writing, the Delaney sisters successfully completed the academic year. No further problems with head lice occurred. The sisters did well on the state test, and the school counselor, school nurse, principal, assistant principal, as well as the full-service community school team, felt a sense of exuberance and success.

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