

Contemporary Readings in Social Problems

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CHAPTER 17

The Paradox of Poverty Narratives

Educators Struggling With Children Left Behind

Cynthia I. Gerstl-Pepin (2006)



Cynthia I. Gerstl-Pepin explores the relationship between the No Child Left Behind legislation and class inequality. Based on qualitative research, she concludes that policymakers must acknowledge and value the challenges faced by teachers and staff who work with students and families living in poverty.

An equal society begins with equally excellent schools, but we know our schools today are not equal. The failure of many urban schools is a great and continuing scandal. Rarely in American history have we faced a problem so serious and destructive on which change has come so slowly. (Bush, 2001a, §12)

There's a perception that people living in poverty are not working hard enough. We live in a culture that blames victims. It blames poor people and the teaching profession, but as a society, we need to look at the big picture. Most employers of low-income parents do not let them take a half day to come to a school conference. They would lose pay and have to ride the bus back and forth just to get here. We need to look at what families are up against trying to get affordable housing, transportation, and a job with healthcare that pays a livable wage. It's stressful enough to raise children when you have the resources. (Westover Elementary school teacher, personal communication, May 19, 2005)

George W. Bush's comments on education, aired on CNN, might have been chilling if they had not been so familiar. Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 (National Commission on Excellence in Education,

1983), U.S. politicians and media commentators have intermittently raised the specter of failing schools, each time lamenting the glacial pace of change. Rarely, however, do policymakers do what the teacher quoted does—set school inequities in a context of social inequities. Powerful stories, such as the one President Bush promulgates, are used to justify policymaking: “Because of their simplicity and transparency, narratives can crystallize and mobilize public opinion, and force an issue to the top of the political agenda” (Hyman, 2000, p. 1149).

The far-reaching reauthorization of the Title I component of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) entitled the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2002) is one such policy. It reflects a long held belief that the public education system alone is responsible for achievement gaps between children living in poverty and children from more affluent families.

Educators are often assumed to be primarily responsible for these gaps. Research highlights the importance of an effective teacher for student success (Haberman, 1995). However, these public assumptions and representations often present a narrow view of education and do not acknowledge the very real contextual disparities in which different teachers find themselves. The social justice narrative embedded in NCLB suggests student success should not be determined by a student's economic

circumstances. Although this is a noble sentiment, it misses the deeper social justice challenges that children and parents from impoverished backgrounds and their teachers face every day. In the past few years, research has highlighted the importance of early childhood education, nutrition, health care, and the well-being of parents and caregivers for a child's success in school and society (Meyers, Rosenbaum, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2004; Pebley & Sastry, 2004). For example, Evans (2004) notes, "Low-income children in comparison to middle-income children are exposed to greater levels of violence, family disruption, and separation from their family" (p. 78). Furthermore, many of the traditional safety nets that low-income families have counted on—such as company pension plans, health insurance, and welfare supports—have dwindled significantly during the past few decades (Gordon, 1994; Piven & Cloward, 1993; Weiss, 2004).

Class inequities are also embedded in the norms that shape schooling. Middle-class families are often able to maneuver their children through public schooling in a way that results in higher achievement (Brantliner, 2003). Schools as institutions are embedded with the same economic inequities that permeate society (Apple, 2004). It is no surprise that wealthier students are more successful in schools because school curricula reflect middle-class norms about what counts as knowledge (Apple, 2004).

Yet for some reason, the public, and more importantly policymakers, assume that the individuals who inhabit schools are somehow not working hard enough. They minimize the social justice implications of poverty, such as the complex interrelated issues of improper health care, early childhood care, nutrition, literacy, and livable wages that are important factors in a child's readiness for school (McLaren, 2005). This alternative narrative is not included in the dominant stories that frame educational policymaking. Moreover, a natural human response to this social crisis is to care, which carries an additional burden for educators who seek to make a difference in the lives of their students. To examine this paradox, this article uses narrative policy analysis to examine the social justice narrative embedded in *No Child Left Behind*, specifically with respect to the economic inequities, and compares it to the narratives of educators working within a school that serves an economically challenged community.

Examining Poverty via Narrative Policy Analysis

Narrative policy analysis builds on literary theory that highlights the ways in which power is embedded in

language (Roe, 1994). To understand policy stories, it is important to understand power—the ability of a group, individual, or structure to exercise control or authority. Collins (2000) suggests that power relations are unequal and operate on an array of levels. These power relations include overt and covert exertions of control and domination, including individual experiences of prejudice and bias and structural forms of power (such as policies, organizational structures, or legislation). Policies are a form of power that operate through a "constellation of organized practices in employment, government, education, law, business, and housing that work to maintain an unequal and unjust distribution of resources" (Collins, 2000, p. 301). When policy issues are highly complex and uncertain, such as the achievement gap, narrative policy analysis provides a way of examining how policy stories shape policymaking. "Sometimes what we are left to deal with are not the facts but the different stories that people tell as a way of articulating and making sense of the uncertainties and complexities that matter to them" (Roe, 1994, p. IX). Focusing on policy narratives provides a way of exploring how stories are used to shape policy issues. Through examination of these stories, narrative policy analysis seeks to build a more comprehensive and complex picture of policy issues.

Roe (1994) articulates three key components of narrative policy analysis: dominant policy narratives, nonstories and counterstories, and metanarratives. Primary policy narratives are those used to establish and stabilize policy assumptions when an issue involves a great deal of complexity, ambiguity, or divisiveness. Nonstories are stories that do not conform to the primary policy narratives, whereas counterstories are stories that contradict the primary policy narratives. Once the primary narratives and nonstories have been identified, Roe suggests that the policy analyst can synthesize the narratives together to develop a metanarrative. The term *metanarrative* used here is different from the term described by postmodernists (e.g., Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernists are wary of "big M" metanarratives such as deterministic social theories that seek to homogenize experience. Policy narrative analysis, in contrast, uses the notion of "little m" metanarratives that seek to complicate our understanding of policy issues by integrating seemingly conflicting policy stories together. The purpose of the metanarrative, then, is to transform these polarized narratives into "another story altogether" (Roe, 1994, p. 4).

In this analysis, I focus on uncovering the interaction between dominant narratives, nonstories, and metanarratives to examine how poverty complicates teaching. Because of the polarized nature of educational reform,

this approach provides a way of examining the nonstory of poverty embedded in the NCLB policy. Narrative policy analysis provides one way of expanding our understanding of school reform and NCLB by encompassing alternative school reform stories and narratives that have not been included in the dominant school reform policy narratives.

Methods

At both the federal and local level, stories were collected via a qualitative approach to narrative policy analysis. To capture the dominant policy narrative at the federal level, semistructured interviews were conducted with three key political informants on Capitol Hill who were knowledgeable about NCLB. Additionally, a document review was conducted on federal policy legislation, public documents, and media documents such as newspaper articles and television transcripts. These documents provided a way of capturing the official stories used to promote and justify NCLB for public consumption.

These initial data were expanded with case study data (Merriam, 1992) designed to capture narrative stories within a high-poverty school. Semistructured interviews were conducted with seven teachers, the principal, and an outside reading consultant. The school is one of the poorest elementary schools in New England with 100% of the students qualifying for the free and reduced lunch program. The school was selected because it represents a unique case sample (Patton, 2002). Although the school serves an impoverished community, it significantly increased test scores in reading and was considered a state and national success story. Narrative policy analysis was used to analyze the data. First, dominant stories were identified, then nonstories. These two sets of stories were then woven together into a combined metanarrative. The next section explores the dominant policy narratives used to justify NCLB and is followed by a section on the nonstories of poverty. Then, a final section intertwines the themes from the two previous sections into a combined metanarrative.

Dominant Policy Narratives Shaping NCLB

Dominant narratives around NCLB reveal themselves in the public speeches, documents, legislation, and media reporting surrounding the reauthorization of ESEA. Similar to the Reagan administration of the 1980s,

George W. Bush's administration has relied heavily on the use of what the press term the *bully pulpit* (Wirt & Kirst, 1992, p. 252): public speeches and public relations documents serve as avenues for perpetuating stories that seek to validate NCLB on moral grounds. There is a strong sense in Washington that President Bush was the force behind the creation and passage of NCLB. As one Washington insider noted, "The bill was Bush's idea and without him it would have never gotten bi-partisan support." Although on the surface, NCLB seems to be about ensuring that all children are successful, the words used to justify the legislation focus more on describing the policy problem as holding failing educational systems accountable.

The aphorism, *No Child Left Behind*, serves as a policy narrative in itself, powerful in its social justice content but also misleading. On one hand, the idea implies that the needs of each child will be addressed; yet at the same time, it assumes that if schools only changed their assumptions about students, the achievement gap would cease to exist. Interestingly, during Bush's initial bid for the White House, he originally referred to his reform package as "Leave No Child Behind": that was the slogan that Marion Wright Edelman and the Children's Defense Fund used to focus on the holistic needs of children and encompassed a need to address housing, food, child care, health care, clothing, transportation, and livable wages ("Children Left Behind," 2001; Children's Defense Fund, 2004).

For Bush, though, the central justification for the legislation is the notion that schools and teachers are leaving children behind.

When we find failure we're going to do something about it. We're going to take corrective action in society. But if a school can't change, if a school can't show the parents and the community leaders that they can teach the basics, something else has to take place. In order for there to be accountability, there has to be consequences. (Bush, 2002, §79)

For Bush, no other factors (such as economic inequities or the geographical segregation of high-poverty communities) intrude on his narrative: failure is a result of not being held accountable. The failure is contained entirely within the schools themselves, as if they existed in a separate dimension completely independent of the other obstacles children face when they leave the school grounds.

An additional troubling aspect of the stories used to justify NCLB is that race is emphasized to the point that poverty almost disappears. The achievement gap is often referred to almost exclusively as a racial issue, but this

story minimizes the central role that poverty plays in achievement inequities. Although the percentages of students of color living in poverty are higher than White students, the reality is that low-income White students are also failing in high numbers in rural and suburban areas (Books, 2004), as this quote from Bush reveals:

And then you'll hear people say it's racist to test. Folks, it's racist not to test, because guess who gets shuffled through the system oftentimes? Children whose parents don't speak English as a first language. Inner-city kids. It's so much easier to quit on somebody than to . . . remediate. (Bush, 2001b, §30–31)

Bush's use of the term *inner city* in this quote is a codeword for students of color. In deploying the phrase, Bush perpetuates dominant stories that identify race as the central issue in school achievement differentials.

Although addressing the cultural construct of racism is critically important to understanding achievement inequities, economic factors are also critical (Books, 2004; Rothstein, 2004). The historical legacy of racism embodied in slavery and the cultural imperialism that immigrants endure have been acknowledged as important factors in school achievement (Anderson, 1988; Rothstein, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999). When cultural and economic factors are conflated, however, the racial gap dominates, minimizing the very real economic inequities that cross racial boundaries.

Untangling the Complexity of Poverty

Poverty, as a concept, is at once well researched and yet poorly understood from a policy perspective. Federal guidelines for defining poverty have been criticized for being too low, inadequate to cover basic needs such as housing, food, and clothing (Citro & Michael, 1995; National Center for Children in Poverty [NCCP], 2005). The term *low income* describes an income level that would cover basic needs, an amount twice the poverty level. In 2004, the federal poverty level was designated as \$18,850 for a family of four, so \$37,700 is the amount a family of four on average would need to make ends meet (Institutes for Research on Poverty, 2005). Under these guidelines, 38% of children younger than the age of 18 (almost 27 million) live in low-income families, whereas 17% (more than 11 million) live in poor families (NCCP, 2005). Additionally, poverty rates vary greatly between states (NCCP, 2004). On average between 2001 and 2003, the poverty rates were lowest in New Hampshire,

Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, and Minnesota (all less than 8%), whereas Arkansas and New Mexico had the highest poverty rates (18% or more) (Institutes for Research on Poverty, 2005).

Poverty is considered to be an important factor in school failure (Orfield & Lee, 2005; Phillips & Chin, 2004; Rothstein, 2004). High school dropout rates are higher for low income students, and male students who drop out are 5 to 20 times more likely to be incarcerated than men who attend college (Western, Kleykamp, & Rosenfeld, 2004). There is also a documented relationship between inadequate child care (because of the high cost of quality care) and the likelihood that a student will drop out of school and eventually end up in prison (Masse & Barnett, 2002). Although there is an awareness that economics matter, the assumption of equality of opportunity serves as the justification for looking exclusively at schools rather than wider contextual factors. Equality of opportunity assumes that schools can serve as great equalizers despite social inequities (Books, 2004).

Nonstories of Serving a High-Poverty Community

This section discusses the nonstories that emerged out of interviews with teachers, educators, and staff at Westover Elementary School (a pseudonym), a high-poverty school that increased reading scores through a comprehensive reform model. The stories gleaned from a narrative analysis suggest a more complex story of school change. Before NCLB was passed, Westover had already transformed itself through the adoption of a whole school reform model that targeted literacy. In 1998, only 44% of students met standards in reading that led to the school being identified as one of the lowest performing schools in the state. Starting in 2000, the school applied for and received a comprehensive school reform grant that allowed the school to hire a literacy consultant, purchase materials, and add additional staff. Not only did the school undergo substantial professional development, but as a staff, they made a schoolwide commitment to change. The change process generated a dramatic turnaround in reading test scores with 83% of students exceeding or meeting state reading standards.

Westover is situated in a high-poverty community with 100% of its students qualifying for a free or reduced lunch. Additionally, the school's student population is diverse with 20% of students designated as limited English proficiency, 20% qualifying for special education

services, and 28.2% representing racial minorities. Westover also has a student transience rate of 20% and has five times the state average of children in foster care or protective custody. There is no racial gap in testing; consequently the influence of poverty is pronounced at the school.

CREATING A CARING COMMUNITY BY UNDERSTANDING POVERTY

Rather than assuming that poverty should not matter in student achievement, as the dominant NCLB narrative seems to suggest, the teachers at Westover viewed understanding poverty as central to helping students learn. The leadership team at the school focused initially on changing the school culture. As one teacher noted, "We looked at really trying to create a caring community." Work with the literacy specialist helped them see that much of classroom instruction was focused on controlling the students rather than teaching them. Their awareness of this was fostered by visiting a school in New York City that served a similar community. Although many teachers expected the school to be very structured and controlled, they discovered a very different school culture. As a staff member noted,

When we went to see schools in NYC . . . we assumed there would be a lot of rules, consequences and suspensions. It was not like that. The school was really about good instruction and meeting kids' needs where they were at. The teachers didn't say, "Oh, a child has to leave the room when they act out and they are not allowed back: "[I]nstead, they said "We want kids in our room and we do everything we can to keep them learning and we know it might be really hard." So, I think . . . that really changed our thinking to focus on creating a caring community.

Creating a positive environment where students felt cared for became important. They began to realize that they had made assumptions about what their students needed because of their community and economic background.

With the leadership of the principal, the school as a whole began to look at how economic inequities might be hindering student success. Specifically, they began to try and understand what was causing students to be disruptive. One of the professional development activities targeted by the principal was helping the faculty understand how poverty shapes their student's lives. Teachers participated in workshops on poverty and read Payne's

(2001) *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* to become aware of how middle-class norms shape classroom environments. As one teacher noted,

We started to read things, like *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, just to raise our awareness of class expectations. It helped me realize that our school was operating through a middle-class lens and that our kids didn't necessarily recognize that lens. So, we started to unpack those sorts of things.

Educators at Westover recognized that they could not assume that students understood middle-class norms around behavior and attitude, so in addition to teaching reading, they were careful to educate students on expected classroom behavior. Then they also examined their own instruction and why they had been so focused on controlling students.

I think when you have kids who misbehave you tend to react by making the classroom more like prison. I think there is a human tendency to want to punish, punish, punish, and research says it doesn't work, but you know, you kind of get caught in that mode sometimes. So we started to ask questions like, "How do we provide instruction so that kids feel confident?"

This shift not only created a more positive environment for students but also created a more supportive environment for teachers and staff. By working together as a staff to address student issues through common meeting times and professional development activities, the school became more cohesive. Student behavior became more positive as did the school culture that created a more positive learning and working environment for students, teachers, and staff.

They began to realize that many of the behavioral problems in their classrooms were related to student insecurities.

I think it was pretty clear that students acted out because they assumed that it was better to be bad than stupid. They thought that if they acted out, then teachers wouldn't know they couldn't read. And I really think they were thinking, "Get me out of this classroom; it's way too hard. If I misbehave, I'll get pulled out, and then I don't have to worry that I don't understand." So, there was a lot of that going on when we started our work.

Additionally, the staff at the school worked together to develop literacy assessments to gauge student ability

levels in reading. The periodic assessments provided a way to document student skills to systematically measure student progress in reading throughout the year. As this teacher noted, "The assessments helped us identify students who were most in need of attention. What we found is that our students are really good at looking good, even if they don't understand. They are good at faking it, so you wouldn't necessarily know that they were in such deficit mode."

Educators at the school also developed an innovative approach for helping students who might ordinarily be lost. These were not students who were designated special education; rather, they were students that teachers and staff felt were in danger of failing. The team involved the classroom teacher, principal, and other educators who brainstorm ways to meet student needs and ensure they would make progress.

Westover educators have made significant progress in creating a welcoming and caring environment for students.

For a lot of our kids, they don't want the summer. They don't want school to end. They are scared. School is a stable, safe place for them. This is where they get food; they don't eat at home; they come to school dirty. It's not as easy in our school as it is in a middle-class school. Not that middle-class students are easier to teach; rather, our students come with a lot more to work on.

The teachers realize that school is an important place for students whose home lives are challenging and unstable.

SEEING LITERACY AS EMPOWERMENT AND ENJOYMENT

In addition to tackling assumptions around poverty, school staff reframed their work in social justice terms. Specifically, they saw supporting literacy as a way to empower students. They did not just want to teach students how to read but they also wanted them to enjoy reading and to engage texts that resonated with their interests.

I knew in my heart that if we were going to make a difference in the lives of these children, we needed to literally enrich their lives and not just treat reading as a task. The model that we choose is very much a model that is child centered . . . It also works at matching kid's reading lives with their real lives, so that they're not separate. They can find characters in the books that resemble themselves and their

circumstances. . . . This way of teaching reading is really a form of social action and can really open the world to a child.

These teachers viewed literacy as a form of social justice in that engagement with literature can empower students to become lifelong learners. Consequently, reading is not just a skill that is taught, as NCLB implies; rather, the focus is on encouraging students to enjoy reading and books.

At Westover, they are aware of the class inequities that add a unique complexity to the act of teaching. When teaching is reduced to NCLB's technocratic narratives such as needing to employ scientifically based instruction, dominant policy narratives can miss the passionate reasons why teachers want to teach. One aspect that can aid in teacher retention is a supportive work environment and pride in their work (Metz, 1988), as this educator notes:

For me, the greatest reward I've had so far is visiting classrooms, hearing kids talk about reading aloud and their reading plans, and knowing that they are indeed readers. When the governor visited, they asked him questions like, "What books have you been reading lately?" and "What's the book that changed your life or touched your heart?" These kids carry books around; they are part of their lives and they are reading them.

The degree of engagement of the students is apparent in how comfortable they felt questioning the governor about his own reading habits.

Teaching is a caring profession similar to nursing and social work. Teachers, who work in economically challenged communities, often do not go into teaching because they want to test students. Many have become teachers because they have a social justice interest in making the world a better place for children (Casey, 1993) For children in need, teachers often have to cross boundaries and help with the issues that can get in the way of teaching, as this educator notes:

We often have to deal with crises that do not relate to what you traditionally think school is about. We deal with issues like drugs, health, housing, or what have you. We really have to support the kids and their families. Many of our teachers make home visits. They pick kids up just to make sure they get to school. They make those kinds of extraordinary efforts all of the time. Their heart is certainly there;

they want to serve this population. All of the teachers were given the opportunity to leave with no strings attached and to transfer to other schools but they decided to stay. So to me, working in this school requires a huge commitment and personal sacrifice.

These personal sacrifices often go unacknowledged by policymakers. Instead, the cult of efficiency model dominates, which places a high value on standardization in the United States (Bracey, 2002; Callahan, 1962). The stories woven together to support NCLB are frequently laced with discussions of the need for punitive measures and consequences for failing schools and their employers.

NCLB's dominant policy narrative asserts that if teachers just worked hard enough and had high expectations of their students, there would be no achievement gap. However, this story oversimplifies the very real context of schools. Equally important are the narratives about the need for passionate and skilled teachers who are willing to make personal sacrifices for their students.

The work by scholars such as Anyon (1997), illustrates a different story. They suggest that it is difficult to truly change the life chances of a child unless you also work on the community context in which children live. Anyon does not suggest that a quality education is not possible for children living in poverty; rather that quality schooling alone will not necessarily transform the child's home life, health, or their parents' job prospects. Some children face such a challenging home situation that schools serve only part of their needs. The teachers at Westover Elementary paint a different picture. They have made a significant difference in the lives of the children they serve in terms of opening the world of literacy to them and in creating a safe, caring, and supportive environment for learning. What is different though is the emotional toll serving children with so many needs can take:

The personal sacrifice you make is immense, and that is not really recognized by the public and policymakers. The reward is certainly the difference you make in kids' lives. There is a real trade-off in terms of stress and trying to address so many needs. When you care about kids, it really hurts when you know they lack basic necessities like warm clothes, food, health care, or a stable home. It breaks your heart.

Making a difference in the lives of children is not the easy task that dominant NCLB narratives seem to imply. It is hard work to teach children who have multiple needs and sometimes it is emotionally devastating.

Acknowledging this challenge rather than minimizing it would place more of a value on the teaching profession.

The teachers and staff at Westover work hard to create a supportive environment for students but sometimes, after encountering the inequities their students face, educators themselves need support.

I have to constantly challenge myself not to become numb to poverty and the challenges these kids face every day. Just the other day, I was about to drive out of the parking lot when I noticed a child standing in the rain without a jacket. It was cold. I almost just drove off, I was tired, and I see those inequities every day. I had to stop myself and say, "Hey, wait a minute; this is not okay." I had to remind myself that in middle-class communities, this would be unacceptable. So I stopped the car and went over to take care of the child. The gross inequities you see everyday are heartbreaking.

This is one of the nonstories that are ignored by the public justifications of NCLB, namely the very real and painful aspects of serving children living in poverty. Teacher turnover in high-poverty schools is much higher (Books, 2004). When a community faces so many challenges, these seep into the school. They are part of the context in which the school and students are situated. Collectively, teachers, staff, and administrators confront a myriad of nonschool emergencies including medical, criminal justice, and human services. Distressing situations often have to be dealt with on a daily basis. For example, one teacher at Westover observed,

The other thing that stands in the way of improvement in a school like this is just the complexity of it. It's the daily trauma of a community in crisis . . . and people don't realize this is happening and that it tends to make people feel powerless, like you can't make a difference and slowly your belief in your own abilities and . . . your students starts to erode. You don't mean for it happen but it is just such a powerful force, the poverty, the complexity, the kids in crisis, the trauma. The school starts to resemble an emergency room. You're just responding, so you can't feel proactive and you don't feel confident in your responses.

Acknowledging the potentially traumatic side of the work that teachers engage in is important. Teachers need a supportive and caring environment just as much as students.

Although policymakers suggest that schools in general are failing (Berliner & Biddle, 1997; Gerstl-Pepin, 2002), the reality for the teachers at Westover is that their job is stressful and at times their work is challenged by crises that occur around students' lives outside of school, as this educator notes:

I think when we started this work teachers thought that . . . the work would get easier. But they realize now that it's never going to be easy teaching here. You always have to be well planned; you always have to be on top of things. I don't mean that teachers aren't always working hard, but you can't stay up late or have down time in the evening. I was talking to a former colleague who used to work in a similar school, and she said, "You know, now I can go to a movie on Thursday night!" You would never do that working here because you have to be ready for anything that happens.

It is in many cases much easier for a teacher who primarily teaches in communities that are less corrosive. This is not to suggest that middle-and upper-class students do not also face challenges around academic achievement, but rather that lower income children have a much greater likelihood of not succeeding in school because of economic and resource inequities.

Implications: The Poverty Dilemma as a Metanarrative

The emergence of any problem may divert public attention from a different one that can be more threatening. Such covert masking of more ominous conditions is a property of discourse about public issues and often an explanation for the willingness of a large public to accept an issue as legitimate even if they have no particular interest in remedying it. (Edelman, 1988, p. 27)

The above quote by Edelman raises an important point about how policy problems are defined. Shifting blame to schools and away from economic disparities allows social inequalities to remain firmly entrenched. Because the dominant narrative on NCLB defines teachers and schools as the heart of educational ills, the harsh realities of poverty remain hidden. Bringing together the dominant narratives around NCLB and the nonstories of teachers and staff at Westover Elementary

involves taking a step back and trying to see both stories as important. Disaggregating test scores by race and class is an important outcome of the NCLB legislation, and one agreed on by the president and lawmakers of all political persuasions. Clearly, in the stories that Westover educators tell, it is also important to recognize the particular challenges that educators face who work in high-poverty schools and to acknowledge that the neighborhoods struggling with poverty contribute significantly to a child's chances. Furthermore, these narratives suggest that it is also critical to see poverty as a distinct factor in a child's life that should not be conflated with race. Although educators, such as the ones at Westover, have made significant gains, school reform is only one of a multiplicity of factors that need to be addressed.

Policymakers suggest that the crux of the argument is that educators claim these kids are too hard to teach. It is time, policymakers argue, to stop making excuses. What this narrative ignores is that lower income children and those living in poverty are the ones who are most likely to come to school unprepared, and this adds a layer of complexity to the work that teachers do. Their students are also more likely to live in communities that are dangerous and inequitable. We also know that investing in early childhood education can reap significant benefits and has even been correlated with keeping kids out of prison.

For schools such as Westover, sustaining the change process is always challenging (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Shields & Knapp, 1997). Since the initial data collection, they no longer have the literacy consultant or the comprehensive school reform grant. Although they successfully won a Reading First grant under NCLB to assist with literacy, the federal focus on scientifically based reading instruction meant that they had to forego their successful program in favor of an NCLB-approved program. The new focus on the science of reading further minimized the importance of creating a caring learning community for children who may be emotionally fragile (Gerstl-Pepin & Woodside-Jiron, 2005). Emphasizing the science of education more than emotional connection has the potential to reinforce the institutional aspects of schooling, thus, equating schools more with prisons (Foucault, 1979) rather than a supportive learning environment where students make connections and feel cared for (Noddings, 2002).

Although plenty of schools and teachers have served children living in poverty and helped them become literate, we also know that a startling number of children

receive inadequate preschool preparation and have parents who were not successful in school themselves (Meyers et al., 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), as this educator at Westover also noted:

I've certainly always been an advocate for early child programs for kids going into really good early childhood settings. Having childcare programs where all of the people involved are trained and understand the importance of early literacy is really important. I mean, we can certainly do far more with a child who has been engaged with 1,000 books than we can with child who has had only 25. . . . I think if we could prepare children entering school by making sure that all of our childcare programs nationwide had good resources and well-trained staff, we would be a lot farther along in this whole literacy business.

What is most troubling is that we have research that highlights the importance of devastating external factors such as the challenges of single parenting, lack of affordable housing, inadequate childhood education, violence, inaccessible health care, or even lack of books, clothing, toys, or food (Books, 2004; Diener, Nievar, & Wright, 2003; Okin, 2003; Pebley & Sastry, 2004; Rothstein, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Scholars (Hewlett, Rankin, & West, 2002; Hewlett & West, 1998) have also highlighted the plight of parents in today's society and the many challenges they face with the cost of child care and employers that are not supportive of time off to care for sick children or involvement in their child's school, particularly in the service industry. Single parents face an even bigger challenge in making ends meet and rearing children (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004), which is an important consideration because 50% of children living in low income families live in single parent households (NCCP, 2004).

In the high-stress situation that many schools serving economically depressed communities find themselves, it is challenging to sustain the level of work required to help students. This is not only in terms of personnel but also resources, as a larger portion of funding for high-poverty schools is now provided through grants for which these schools must continually apply. It is also important to acknowledge the emotional aspects of working in high-poverty schools. When educators care about their students, the impact of child abuse, violence, transience, nutrition, and constant emergencies can take their toll, as Liston and Garrison (2004) assert:

Seeing the students before us as whole human beings in search of meaning is the kind of understanding that a loving perspective affords teachers. Seeing the hurt and the pain that inevitably arise from daily life is another such recognition. Love makes us vulnerable and that vulnerability invites loss and grief. (p. 2)

When you care about a student, then the gross inequities of the child's situation can be painful and challenging. It is therefore important for policymakers to celebrate the work of teachers who are making a difference, as this teacher noted:

You can take all of the scientifically based research in the world and you can have teachers who know every little move to make, but if they don't have the heart to work in a place like this, it won't make any difference. Every child will be left behind if that heart isn't there. And that's something that's really, really hard to mandate.

The NCLB narrative of accountability claims to focus on not leaving children behind, but this ignores the critical issue of early childhood education (via quality child care) and the often toxic environments in which these children live. Focusing on school reform without also elevating the stature of teachers and early childhood educators—and acknowledging the challenges they face—is a gross injustice and flawed policy.

If as a society we truly want to address the issue of children being left behind, we need to expand how inequities are described and acknowledge that the reason many children come to school unprepared is related to economic and cultural inequities. Additionally, conflating race with poverty ignores the very real impact that economic disparities have on children and the communities that they inhabit. The narratives of Westover educators show how challenging working in high-poverty communities can be. When educators transform a school into a caring environment, they open themselves to the trauma of their students' lives. This is not to say that teachers who work in high-poverty schools should not care but rather that the honorable work that they do needs to be acknowledged and supported.

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Discussion Questions

1. What paradox is Gerstl-Pepin referring to in the title of her article?

Based on her analysis of policy and educator narratives, she notes how policymakers assume that poverty has no impact on educational outcomes. As she describes, "poverty almost disappears" from their narratives; instead, racial-ethnic disparities are emphasized. From the set of educator narratives, she learns how "understanding poverty is central to helping students learn."

2. What is the consequence of policy narrative? How is NCLB flawed?

As policymakers shift blame to individual schools and teachers, social-structural inequalities remain unaddressed by the legislation. The realities of poverty and the impact of economic disparities on learning remain hidden.

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