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## The Changing Realities of America's Public Education

*Foundational Facts and Implications*

**T**he face of education is changing. As any of us who have taught or served as administrators in a public school system for 10 years or more can tell you, these changes translate into challenges we face each day. The demographic changes and educational effects of persistent poverty are foreign to many of us who look into the expectant and hopeful eyes of today's students and find ourselves at a loss as to where to start. This chapter provides a foundation for the ideas and education strategies presented in the rest of this book.

### **DIVERSITY**

While the enrollment in public schools between 2000 and 2009 has remained generally stable, other statistics surrounding public school education have transformed the daily operations of schools. One of the most visible changes is the growing diversity in our schools. Blacks, Hispanics, and children from a wide array of Asian and Middle Eastern cultures now make up nearly half

of students nationwide and are the dominant majorities in many of the schools in low-income (low SES) neighborhoods.

While the growing diversity is celebrated in many of our nation's public schools, the reality of an increasingly large number of second-language learners poses increasing challenges. Students who speak English as a second language (ESL) make up a significant percentage of our nation's school population. Schools currently provide programs for nearly 3 million ESL students, and it's estimated that this population is growing two and a half times faster than that of native English speaking students (Shore, 2005). Those of us who work in low SES schools know that the tasks that face our teachers include teaching ESL students academic skills, supporting their English proficiency, helping them adjust to the school setting, and fostering their adaptation to the American culture. We and our teachers must also develop avenues for communicating with the parents of ESL students. Quite frequently, such communication requires translators and involves scheduling conflicts around parents who often have more than one job.

## **POVERTY**

Another challenge we face is the growing number of students who live at or below the poverty line. Recent statistics reveal that an additional 1.3 million children fell into poverty between 2000 and 2005, the most recent dates for which data is available. In fact, a child's likelihood of being poor has increased by almost 9% (Children's Defense Fund, 2006). In more concrete terms, one out of every six children is poor, and one in every three Black children lives in poverty.

Of special interest to us is the clustering of poor minorities in neighborhood schools. The poverty divide is double edged for minority students. Not only are Black, Hispanic, and children of recent immigrants more likely to live in poor families, they are also more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods. While we tend to assume that all poor children live in neighborhoods that are poor, that's often not the case with poor White children. Research actually shows that in our largest metropolitan areas very few White low SES children (4%) live in poor neighborhoods, while nearly half of Asian low SES children and the vast majority of Black and Hispanic low SES children do (Harvard Public Health, 2007). White low SES students appear to be dispersed among more affluent peers. The problem for those of us who work in schools in low SES neighborhoods is that the majority of the students often lack the educational resources that promote learning enjoyed by children from higher-income homes, including parent involvement, books, educational experiences, and access to and comfort with technology, to name just a few.

## SCHOOL READINESS

Most of us would agree that the knowledge and skills that children have in place when they begin school are likely the result of their experiences prior to school. For many children, the most influential learning ground prior to the schoolhouse is the home. Past research has established that individual differences in the experiences of children can be extremely predictive in the cognitive development level achieved (Bradley & Corwyn, 1999). The National Education Goals Panel (1997) subgroup delineated five specific areas that signal school readiness for children:

1. *Physical well-being and development*, including good nutrition; immunizations; physical skills and gross motor abilities, such as running and jumping; and fine motor skills, such as using crayons and puzzles.
2. *Social and emotional development*, specifically a sense of confidence that allows children to fully participate in a classroom, experience with turn taking, following directions, working alone and as a group member, and the ability to form friendships.
3. *Supportive environments* provided by the adults in a child's life that foster learning and promote curiosity, creativity, motivation, independence, cooperation, and persistence so children can meet new challenges.
4. *Language usage*, including talking, listening, scribbling, and composing. Children who use language appropriately generally have been read to and encouraged to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
5. *Cognition and knowledge*, including being familiar and comfortable with basic knowledge such as patterns, relationships, cause and effect, and problem solving.

Poverty appears to be the leading risk factor and barrier to ensuring that the five areas of development and growth identified above are intact.

Poor children typically enter school a full year and a half behind their middle-class peers in language ability, studies show. So, millions of kids start their lives with an educational deficit. That's why we have to get to them while they are still tots. (Grundel, Oliveira, & Geballe, 2003, p. 5)

While not all children who live in poverty will have a difficult time learning, children who are underdeveloped in one or more of these readiness areas will have a greater chance of experiencing lower achievement than children with all areas intact, and they may very well become candidates for misguided referrals for placement as learning disabled.

The school readiness of children living in poverty may be seriously affected by their economic circumstances. As we know, truly rich school readiness requires access to opportunities that expose children to educational resources and provide them with nurturing experiences and relationships. Unfortunately, many children live in a low socioeconomic environment that, while rich in culture, may not provide the experiences needed to give them the foundations required for academic success. Children develop and learn at optimal levels when they're part of an environment in which they're safe and valued, where their physical well-being is tended to and they feel psychologically secure (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004). Such an environment is too often unattainable in low-income neighborhoods.

Research shows that one in three children enters kindergarten not ready for school and that, by the time they begin formal schooling, children in low-income families already lag behind their more affluent peers academically, socially, and physically (Feldman, 2001; Foster, 2000; Gershoff, 2003). A comparison (Lee & Burkham, 2002) of the environment of kindergarteners from the top five richest communities in the nation and those from the five poorest revealed that the children from the poorest communities

- owned just 38 books as compared to 150 in the top fifth;
- were read to much less often—63% of low SES children versus 93% of their more affluent counterparts were read to three or more times per week;
- spent 18 or more hours per week watching television versus 11 or fewer hours from the wealthier homes;
- had moved more—48% had moved at least three times before kindergarten; and
- were much less likely to have seen a play or participate in dance, art, music, or crafts classes.

It's not that the poorest children are incapable of school learning; in most cases they just haven't been exposed to the kinds of experiences that produce learning readiness. Children's genetic predispositions influence their attention, actions, and the responses they have to their environments. However, the opportunities available in children's various environments inevitably influence whether their inherent predispositions are realized. Naturally inquisitive children who grow up in environments that don't provide sufficient opportunities for exploration and discovery may have little opportunity to exercise their natural curiosity. During the time low-income students spend outside of school, they often find themselves in a culture that doesn't provide the kinds of stimulation that support and extend school learning (Feldman, 2001). Research indicates that close to 40% of the associations between

economic disadvantage and young children's lower academic performance are directly related to the poorer quality of home learning environments (Smith, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1997). It seems clear that children's early childhood experiences play a formative role in their school readiness and account for many of the skill gaps that low-income children demonstrate when they enter public schools (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

We all know that school readiness expectations have been elevated dramatically since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 became law. Before NCLB, kindergarteners were expected to learn social skills, tie their shoes, and learn their colors, shapes, and some letters and numbers. Now it's expected they'll *enter* kindergarten with these skills in place and rapidly build on them, and children who haven't mastered basic language, reading, and math skills enter school with barriers to their learning. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2005) cites the three most limiting environmental factors to children's readiness as (1) limited economic resources, (2) parents with low levels of education, and (3) single parenthood. Children's genetic makeup can influence the way they attend, act, and respond to their environment. However, if a child starts school intact and healthy, but the home environment provides few opportunities to stimulate the psychological, social, and emotional abilities required for school success, readiness is significantly impacted and again, too often leads to a learning disabled (LD) referral.

## LACK OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In today's economy, poor and working-class parents are more likely to work multiple low-wage service-sector jobs, and many of them find themselves ill equipped to navigate the ever-rising expectations of an increasingly competitive educational system (Van Galen, 2007). While low SES doesn't naturally equate to a lack of parents' concern or efforts to ensure a healthy environment for their children, the lack of parental supervision resulting from long work hours often reduces low SES children's opportunity for learning experiences at home.

Even though parents of low SES children rate the importance of education as a route to economic and social mobility highly, their actual involvement in the school community often falls short of the schools' expectations (Casanova, 1996). An ethnographic study by Lareau (1994) illustrated the phenomenon. Lareau compared two first-grade classrooms—one located in a low-income neighborhood and one in a middle-class community. Teachers in both schools expressed the same level of expectation for parent participation. Parents in the low-income neighborhoods were less familiar with the

school's curriculum, engaged less in teaching at home, and were less likely to attend school functions. The study found that the lack of participation wasn't necessarily due to lack of concern or commitment; poorer parents just had less time and flexibility to meet parent involvement commitments. Comments from parents also indicated that they lacked confidence in their ability to deal with matters of their children's education and would rather defer to the teachers.

A two-year longitudinal study (Pelletier, 2005) that capitalized on and contributed to a pilot initiative in one school examined the effects of an innovative classroom-based preschool program for four-year-olds and their families on school readiness. The theory behind this program emphasized the ecology of family-school partnerships and relationships in helping children make transitions to school. One significant outcome of the pilot was the differences in teachers' and parents' perceptions of school readiness. In some cases, parents were, again, just too busy with multiple jobs and life's struggles to reflect seriously on the school readiness factors that are of concern to teachers.

## DEFICIT PERCEPTIONS

Many teachers don't understand the effects of poverty on school readiness and, as a result, accept the inevitability of impending failure for children of poverty—these teachers exhibit deficit perception. For example, research (O'Hara, 2006) showed that by age three, children whose parents were professionals had vocabularies of about 1,100 words, and children whose parents were on welfare had vocabularies of about 525 words. The children's IQs correlated closely to their vocabularies. The average IQ among the professional children was 117, while the welfare children's IQ averaged 79. Teachers who face classrooms in which the majority of the children arrived unprepared to meet typical school expectations have a formidable task if they try to teach these children the way they've always taught in the past.

If you're an elementary school principal or teacher, you know that it's impossible to start a school year at the same starting point every year. You can't plan a reasonable timeline until you've assessed the readiness levels of the children who come to you in September. If you don't understand the experiences the children bring to school and simply expect that all of them can or will abandon their cultural connections and conform to a school design that's abysmally foreign to them, you'll experience a serious disconnect. The standard of contextualization recommends that teaching and curriculum be connected to the experiences, values, knowledge, and needs of students (C.A.R.E. Advisory, 2003). Unfortunately, teachers too often don't sufficiently understand the children's cultures and environments to make the necessary connections. The

majority of educators today are White and have middle-class experiences, and the manner in which they deal with children who aren't ready for school—either by minimizing the barriers or mentally dismissing the children—can seriously impact their students' education futures.

When children's experiences don't match their expectations, too many teachers tend to attribute school problems to "deficient" environments and lower their expectations for the children's success. As educators, we need to be aware of the learning opportunities that may *not* be present in economically disadvantaged homes and consider opportunities to put intervention programs in place rather than "dummy down" the curriculum to insure low SES students' success or assume the children must have a learning disability.

## SPECIAL EDUCATION AND NCLB

There's another statistic that has risen consistently in recent years: the identification of children as LD. Since 1976, children identified as specific learning disabled has grown threefold from 2% to 6% of all school-age children. The increase in LD identification far surpasses that of any other disability, including speech and language, emotional disturbance, and mental retardation. The numbers are particularly distressing when disaggregated by poverty. Between 1997 and 2004, 11.3% of all 3- to 17-year-olds living in poverty were identified as having a learning disability, as opposed to 7.9% of children from households above the poverty line (Child Trends Data Bank 2007). Is it possible that teachers are reaching out to learning disability specialists to intervene with those children whose only disability is low school readiness?

Before the NCLB Act of 2001, in many schools, children with learning disabilities were educated in self-contained classrooms at a pace commensurate with their ability to proceed. Since the enactment of NCLB, teachers have been expected to bring even the most disabled children up to grade level to meet year-end testing accountability. LD children are mainstreamed along with their normally developing peers, and educators struggle between choosing a pace that allows the disabled to keep up with the curriculum framework, leave them behind, or stop and reteach, performing a disservice to those students who are ready to move forward. These hard choices distress dedicated educators who fear their level of commitment and effectiveness will be judged solely by their students' test scores.

When we look at the numbers of low SES students identified as LD, we must also look at the possibility that the learning problems of a substantial number of children with LD placement can be accounted for, at least in part, by the lack of school readiness—not a true discrepancy between ability and

performance. According to a report published by the National Education Summit (1999), more than half of failing schools, as determined by state competency exams, were in urban areas. Of these, 40% had minority enrollments that exceeded 90%, and 75% were high-poverty schools in which

- the majority of students qualified for free lunches;
- teachers tended to be younger and less-qualified, and teacher turnover was high;
- resources, such as well-stocked libraries and up-to-date technology, were lacking;
- connections with parents were often nonexistent or hostile; and
- absenteeism and delinquency were high.

In urban schools that enroll high percentages of low SES students, two-thirds or more of students fail to reach even the basic level on national tests (National Education Summit, 1999). As teachers struggle to overcome these seemingly impossible roadblocks and face higher and higher standards to achieve Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB, they may find themselves making more and more referrals of students for learning disability placement.

Many educators feel that NCLB has taken the focus away from meaningful education and placed it solely on meeting AYP to avoid being labeled a failing school and the possibility of losing federal education funds. Many schools seem to be concentrating on following the litany of rules attached to NCLB rather than seeking ways to provide deep, meaningful, innovative instruction. If a school fails the AYP guidelines for two years, parents are given the right to choose an alternative school. This not only abandons the struggling school, but forces parents to make a choice between their neighborhood schools and those outside familiar surroundings to which their children may be bussed. Parents who are already struggling with time and transportation issues in their neighborhood schools face even higher barriers in trying to become active shareholders in a school that is some distance away.

Parents who choose to leave their children in their neighborhood schools and opt for the tutoring programs mandated for failing schools under NCLB soon find the inherent disadvantages to this facet of the law. Viadero (2007) reports that George Farkas, the Penn State University scholar who wrote the chapter on tutoring for NCLB, stated that the tutoring being offered is too little, too late. According to Farkas, it's reaching only a fifth of the eligible students and producing little or no gains in achievement. The programs are poorly funded and mismanaged. Students in tutoring programs generally receive instruction after school, when participation isn't always possible, in small groups of about five to seven, and they generally drop out of the program at about 40 hours of instruction. He recommended that in order to

optimize the possibility of closing the educational gap, below-grade-level students should be served with at least 100 *individual* lessons for 40 minutes per lesson to gain a grade-level size boost.

Many Title I schools provide excellent education but struggle to overcome the myriad issues associated with the effects of the poverty that allowed them to originally be identified as Title I schools. The focus on the noble, but extremely unrealistic, aspirations of NCLB—that every child will be proficient in reading and math by 2014—has detracted from the type of school improvement that could eventually turn education around (Hess & Kendrick, 2007). There hasn't been funding for foundation building in the form of full-day kindergartens, preschools in high-poverty areas, parent education, intervention rather than remediation, or meaningful staff development to educate teachers about the social and educational implications of poverty or programs that foster higher-level thinking skills in children. Our bias is that these types of initiatives would provide students and their communities with lifelong skills instead of spending time teaching to a test that will make no significant difference once the test is over.

Proponents of NCLB argue that the federal government has provided preschool opportunities for families in low SES neighborhoods. Yes, there is Head Start, but once again, this is a program put in place without the muscle required to make it work. In 2001, only 12% of children nationwide were enrolled in Head Start (Currie & Neidell, 2003). This represented only slightly more than half of the children who were eligible. Furthermore, the similarity to the lack of funding behind NCLB is alarming. While Head Start makes an effort to introduce social skills, healthy habits, and parental involvement, teachers' low pay and low levels of education seriously constrain program quality (Ripple, Gilliam, Chanana, & Zigler, 1999; Zigler & Styfco, 1994). Schools can't meet 100% of the requirements in reading and math when only 50% of the preschoolers are receiving the foundational support they need to succeed in the future.

We recognize that not all low SES students start out behind their more affluent peers. Some children certainly overcome societal barriers and come to school with intact readiness skills. However, there's evidence that even when they start out ready to learn, their low SES status may threaten their success in succeeding years. Gerwertz (2007) tells us that the "Achievement Trap" study, conducted by Civic Enterprises LLC and the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, urged education policy makers to take a long, hard look at high-achieving, low-income children and pay attention to the fact that, without intervention, over time, their achievement often takes a downward trajectory that can cancel out the strong start they demonstrated earlier. The children from low-income homes who score in the top quartile in nationally normed tests upon school entry come to school with on-target, but weaker, academic

skills and environments not always conducive to supporting their strengths. By fifth grade, 44% of these originally high-scoring first graders tend to drop out of the first quartile. This is 13 percentage points higher than those students whose family income is over the national median of \$48,000.

With NCLB, the federal government mandated perfection in American schools by 2014. While this is a lofty goal, it may be a nearsighted theory built on a foundation of quicksand. On an international scale, America has the highest percentage of children living in poverty of the 24 countries that comprise the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and we've held that dubious distinction for the last 10 years (Viadero, 2007). When we consider the failure of our society to provide decent health care, adequate housing, and public safety for a majority of the disadvantaged students who attend our most challenged schools, is it surprising that many children are struggling, and schools have a difficult time complying with NCLB? We believe that the focus on accountability through NCLB has caused panic and distress and eliminated the reflective aspect that any movement toward reform requires. It seems to us that without a thoughtful look at the causes of our educational failures, well-constructed, developmentally sound approaches to reform and courageous, innovative ways of addressing the specific needs of low SES children our schools—and even NCLB or any other scream for educational excellence—will be silenced without success. We think there are better ways to address the problems of low school readiness suffered by low SES children in our public schools.

## **SUMMARY**

A number of important factors challenge us to provide equal education opportunities for all of our students, including those from low SES homes. These include diversity, poverty, lack of parent involvement, educators' deficit perceptions, and the accountability demands of NCLB. As difficult as these challenges are, especially for schools in low SES neighborhoods, we believe there are effective means to overcome them and ensure all of our students are well served in regular classrooms in their neighborhood schools.