

Children, Poverty and Education

There I was, a new college graduate, eager to start the career that was the goal of my four years of study. I found my way to the elementary school, designated by my appointment letter, in the heart of the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. I located the principal's office, and after the exchange of a few introductory formalities, my new supervisor informed me that I was teaching first grade. When I asked how he had arrived at such a quick decision, he replied, "It's because I can't send you upstairs."

The school was so over-crowded that it was on split-sessions. All students attended classes for a solid four hours. First and second graders were scheduled from one to four in the afternoon, a strenuous demand on their attention span. Teachers met in a study area in the morning to do planning, and happily for me, socializing. That was how my new colleagues became my mentors. I learned more about survival skills and teaching practices from them, than from any of the Ph.D.s of my under-graduate years.

Fortunately, we did receive supplies. Newly-printed books, depicting the idyllic middle-class childhoods of Dick, Jane, baby Sally, and their pet, Spot, were supplemented by excellent suggested teaching strategies. The children were oblivious to the glaring socio-economic ironies in the choice of teaching material. The focus was on the joy of mastering a new skill. Through our mutual hard work, my red-birds, yellow-birds and blue-birds, [children grouped by ability], all learned to read. Our teachers carried the same kids from first grade to the end of second grade, by which time all my students could read and comprehend assigned material, help compose group stories, do simple arithmetic, and write legibly. The problem was, as these students advanced through the grades, their skills kept sliding below grade level.

That was a long time ago, but as I read the discouraging, current reports of the schools for disadvantaged children, my story feels less antique, and more like a window into the present. Of course, the disparity in funding between wealthy and poor school districts is an on-going problem, easily and comfortably evaded by those in power. While the federal government

can set standards, and, we hope, provide funding for teacher training, closing the social class gap may also rely on state, local, and private endeavors. A few small, encouraging examples:

In 2012, Bloomberg Philanthropies launched a Mayor's Challenge. The winning city would receive \$5 million to realize its education project. Runners-up got \$1 million. The mayor of Providence, a son of Latino immigrants, won the grand prize with his proposal. In a one-on-one program, parents are trained by professionals, to engage their toddlers in frequent and increasingly complex conversations. Other cities have launched similar programs to remind parents to enrich their toddlers lives through conversation. Researchers are validating positive results.

The city of Chicago launched an intensive one-hour a day intensive math tutoring program for poor, troubled minority high school boys. The 1,320 boys, in 12 public schools, were functioning on a third grade level. After only one year, they ended up as much as two years ahead of a control group. Neuroscientists are reporting that adolescence, like early childhood, is a period of tremendous "neuroplasticity". The teen years are beginning to be viewed as having a greater potential for change. Mayor Emanuel plans to expand the program.

Is the problem too big to fix? Can we afford to keep failing? Our AAUW State and Washington Up-Dates keep us informed of current legislative efforts in education, through e-mail and the two-minute activist.

Trudy Ruchman