

Poverty and the School

Muriel Crosby

EARLY in the present school year, the school administration building opened and I am in my new office overlooking the Brandywine Creek. I am just above the West Street falls and from my window I see below what appears to be a tiny valley, tree-crowded, trees whose stark, bare branches remind me of a Japanese print. As I lift my eyes from this valley to scan the horizon, all of northeast Wilmington is before me, with the steel mills in Claymont silhouetted against the sky. This is my new view of Wilmington. It represents the beauty which most of us have learned not to see as we live in its midst.

My new view is in sharp contrast to the old—for in the heart of Wilmington, a neighborhood crumbling with decay, my former office provided a view of people, herded together without growing space. My own “special family” of seven small children played on their second floor porch below my window. The smaller ones used this porch and the few cramped rooms they call “home” as the only world they knew until they entered school. Climbing in and out of the broken windows to a makeshift porch, these youngsters, one, two, three, and four years of age, lived out the short days of early childhood. Clad only in T-shirts on even chilly days in autumn, they sought the adventure of discovery which all children seek, with nothing to discover.

Seldom was an adult around to talk with them. Their view of the tiny fenced-in yards below revealed mounds of garbage and trash, with sinister, monstrous-

sized rats roaming freely among the debris. To me, these children symbolize all children of poverty living in the inner city. For the five most important years of their lives they are living in a world that offers them nothing to grow on. This is the view I brought with me to the new administration building. It superimposes itself upon my new view of the swiftly flowing Brandywine.

All cities present similarly contrasting views. So, too, such contrasts may be found in remote rural areas, in towns and hamlets across the nation. However, because the greatest concentration of the disadvantaged is found in the cities, the problems of city schools and communities are traumatic in their effect.

What Are the Hallmarks of Poverty?

Schools of the inner city find among their children the hallmarks of poverty—a poverty so crushing that body, spirit, and mind often reflect its effects early in life, so early that many children are crippled permanently before they enter school. These are the children for whom “dropout,” from school and from life, becomes figuratively the first entry in their cumulative records the day they enter kindergarten.

Mobility. The right to move from community to community, the right to seek something better than we have, the challenge to move upward on the economic ladder, are characteristics of the American heritage, a heritage that we cherish

and guard. Accelerated mobility, stimulated by the Supreme Court Decision on the Desegregation of the Public Schools, has resulted not only in the establishment of major "fly-ways," chiefly from the south to the north and west, but a vast intra-city movement as the "have-nots" break the bonds of the hard-core ghettos and fan out across the city.

What do new neighborhoods, new communities, different ways of living mean for children on the move? All too often they mean new neighbors who cherish the mobility of the American heritage for themselves, not for the newcomers. And their lack of neighborliness makes the child of mobility a little less sure of himself, a little more certain that he lives in a hostile world. The neighborhood school, shaken in its concept of teachable children, sometimes reflects this same hostility with the condemnation: "These children are changing our school." At this point, a new twist to the mobility factor begins, with the movement of teachers from the inner city to the suburbs. *We have let the cherished right of mobility backfire upon the children of families on the move.*

Motivation and Self-Concept. Family expectations for children are the major influence upon the motivation of the children to aspire and to achieve. Children of poverty, whose parents have known poverty as children, learn early in life to look upon themselves as the "have-nots." One such child, a first-grader, when asked by his teacher, "What is a wish?", explained, "It is something you want very much, but know you'll never get it."

Motivation is closely related to self-confidence, feelings of worth and self-respect, and a realistic assessment of ability. An economically deprived child is shaped by the climate of deprivation in which he lives. His aspiration for

something better seems to him unattainable and he often becomes apathetic, anti-social, or the rare exception who moves mountains. *We are letting the inalienable right of human dignity for all men wither. When the dignity of any man or group in our society is denied, the dignity of all human beings is decreased.*

Educational Lag. The life problems of children of poverty seriously affect their progress in school. Lacking experiences with people, with language, with a world outside the narrow confines of their family resources, these children enter school without the equipment traditionally held vital to academic learning. This lag widens and deepens as the children progress through school. Denied the excitement and exhilaration to be discovered in the great adventure of learning, many children enter the seemingly interminable waiting period for a sixteenth birthday which will release them from a school that has become unbearable. *We are selling short the human resources of our nation when we fail to provide for all children the kind of education which will help them become productive contributors to society.*

What Lies Ahead in the Education of Children of Poverty?

The great social revolution of the twentieth century, with its outposts in every American city, is demanding a new role for education. This new role embraces a conception of the schools as, not only the perpetuator of the great social heritage we have called The American Dream, but, at the same time, as the chief instrument for social change. In essence, this was the role assigned public education in the Supreme Court Decision of 1954.

For almost ten years following the decision, the schools were left to their own resources, becoming in many communities the battleground for conflicting pressures, biases and self-interests to be found, latent or active, in all communities. During this period innumerable educational foundations came to the aid of some school systems, foundations whose motivations have frequently been questioned.

Federal Aid. Early in this decade, the federal government began its efforts, not in recognition of human poverty and human rights, but in terms of its conception of the national interest. This was reflected in the passage of the NDEA, legislation to provide a bulwark for education in science, mathematics, and foreign languages. Only in recent years has this additional legislation broadened to include English and other subjects. And only in 1964 did the Congress include the teaching of English for the disadvantaged as a specific emphasis.

More directly concerned with the elimination of poverty and prejudice are two recent federal acts which have the potential for success. The first is the Economic Opportunity Act with its focus on the marshaling of total community effort and its emphasis upon education and re-education, formal and informal. If political boondoggling does not impinge upon the development of plans across the nation, this act could go far in beginning the elimination of degrading poverty. The stakes are too high for educators to permit development of any such boondoggling.

A second act, the Equal Opportunities Act, is geared to teacher education through direct grants to local school systems and the establishment of institutes to be directed by educational institutions and universities. Only those states hav-

ing racially segregated school systems in 1954 are eligible for funds. The distinct advantage of this act is that it gives greater flexibility and freedom to local school systems and universities as requests for aid go directly from local boards or universities to the government office administering the program. School systems facing initial desegregation because of recent court decisions would do well to request help offered through this act. Their problems are even greater than those experienced by other southern and border states having moved from initial desegregation in 1954, although these school systems, too, are eligible for assistance in moving from desegregation to genuine integration.

Local Initiative. Illustrations of excellent efforts by schools to meet the pressing problems of poverty through education are too numerous to describe. Notable among these efforts, for example, is the work of the Denver Public Schools.¹ Implementation of the findings of this study are now under way. The significance of this approach is in the involvement of the people of the community in the kind of education they want and need for all children.

A second type of effort is reflected in the Wilmington, Delaware, Public Schools, where a bootstrap operation,² without outside funds of any appreciable amount, is focusing on a human relations oriented curriculum through in-service education and the coordination of community agency programs.

These two efforts are reflective of cur-

¹ *Equality of Educational Opportunities*. Mildred Biddick, editor. Denver: Denver Public Schools.

² Muriel Crosby. *An Adventure in Human Relations, A Three-Year Experimental Project on Schools in Changing Neighborhoods*, Wilmington, Delaware. Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, February 1965.

rent concerns, with grass-roots involvement of the people of a community in which indigenous leadership, its discovery, and its development are of prime importance.

The Challenge

In times of crises, the American people have always rallied in strength to protect their dream. It has been said that genuine unity has only been achieved in times of war. This is a time of war, more critical than any previous threat from outside and comparable only to the dark days of the Civil War when brother fought against brother for union or disunion of a great nation. The schools have a mighty role to play as an instrument of social change. Only as the educators of

the country are able to demonstrate to the communities they serve

—a deep and abiding compassion for all human beings

—a commitment to a trust in which we guard with tenderness the children who are entrusted to our care and teaching

—a responsibility to help each other become as tall as it is in us to become

—a determination to seek and find means to make education irresistible to all children and their families

will we make of the profession a powerful force for good in the lives of the people we serve.

—MURIEL CROSBY, *Assistant Superintendent, Elementary Education, Wilmington Public Schools, Delaware.*

Project Head-Start

The Office of Economic Opportunity has organized Project Head-Start, a nation-wide preschool program which is a part of the War on Poverty. This summer more than 100,000 four- and five-year-olds who will enter school in the fall, are expected to be enrolled in eight-week sessions. This program is planned to help these children overcome the deficiencies imposed on them by poverty and help them to enter school with a better chance of success.

Julius B. Richmond, M.D., is the director of the project. James L. Hymes, Jr., of the University of Maryland, and Keith Osborn, of the Merrill-Palmer Institute, are on leave and are serving as educational consultants to the program. For further information contact Julius B. Richmond, M.D., Director, Project Head-Start, Community Action Program, Office of Economic Opportunity, Washington, D.C. 20506.

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