



Welfare Beyond Teaching: Caring for Children and Their Parents

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Social welfare is a topic I knew very little about. When I received the assignment to write a paper on how I view welfare, how it has affected me, how it will affect me in the future, and what I should do about it, I didn't really know where to start.

I come from a stable family: two parents, two sisters, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, who are all very close to me. My family was never hurting for money, we were always pretty well off, or at least I thought so. We would go on vacations and family outings. Frequently I was allowed to bring one of my friends. Those trips to Long Island were routine for me, but it was usually the first time out of Chenango County for my classmate. Now I can see my parents were always creating ways to offer experiences to the other children.

Welfare was never really a topic that was brought up in my home life, so I just assumed that I was not affected by welfare. Probably nothing was further from the truth. Now I can see that my parents did things for others less fortunate than us, but they never made it obvious to us children what they were doing or why. As I sat through the first couple of classes, my views about welfare changed greatly. I quickly realized that I am affected by wel-

fare, I always was affected by welfare, and I will always be affected by welfare.

Looking back on my early school years I remember children who did not have the "nice" things that I had. I also remember other students who had much more than I had. I believe that when children are young, they look at each other as equals. It's true there were always your "best friends" but I don't ever remember telling someone that I would not play with them just because I had something and they didn't. As I moved to middle and high school, there were just people that I did not associate with. As I look back on those years now, I realize that those people whom I did not associate with came from different backgrounds than I did. I realize now that they were probably receiving some form of public assistance.

As a prospective teacher I want to influence the views of children with respect to welfare. I want my students to realize that God made everyone equal. Everyone is special and everyone has a purpose in life. It should not matter what culture you come from, or whether you are rich or poor. In order for me to accomplish this change in my classroom, I need to first understand what welfare really is and the programs that are available through it.

I have many questions about children and welfare and I know not all of them can be answered through this paper. Some of my questions include:

- What is welfare?
- What programs are available to assist families with children?
- What are the implications for school-aged children whose families are on welfare and how does it affect their schooling?
- What strategies can teachers use when working with these children?
- Who are those on welfare?
- What factors lead to poverty?

I have learned that the New York Pub-

lic Welfare Association is a partnership of local social service districts whose focus is on improving the quality and effectiveness of social welfare policies. As I research the various programs available through Social Services, I will focus on those that have a direct impact on school-aged children. I want to learn what these programs are, what assistance they offer, and how eligibility is determined. I will need to know this information so that I can offer assistance and guidance to the parents of children I may have in my classes. Having this information will also help me to understand what some of these families may be going through as they seek assistance.

The New York State Welfare Reform Act that was signed into law in 1996 created the Family Assistance Program. Those eligible to receive assistance from this program must be households with a child under the age of eighteen (or under nineteen and regularly attending school) and living with a parent or other related adult.

Because I want to work with children, I believe that it is necessary for me to know of programs that are offered for those who are in need. One particular program really stood out for me. I decided to interview Terry Potter who is a M.S.Ed. Social Worker with a concentration in counseling psychology. Terry works for Children's Home of Wyoming Conference out of Binghamton and The Family Support Program contracted through the Chenango County Department of Social Services. Throughout the interview I asked Terry the following questions which I believed would be relevant to me as a teacher.

What does your program offer to families and their children who need assistance?

"My specific program offers preventive services (to help children stay out of 'placement' or foster care). 'At risk children' are those who are usually emotionally disturbed and have a difficult time behaviorally in various settings (school and home).

We offer individual therapy and counseling, family counseling, and group counseling (small and large group). These groups are usually divided by issues. The program is a highly structured after-school program. We transport children from their schools (only Chenango County Schools). We help the families utilize resources available as well as help them financially in some cases. We attend CSE (Committee on Special Education) meetings with the children and their families as well as help to develop structure and routine in the home setting."

What programs are available to assist the families and their children?

"Depending on the needs of children there are a variety of programs, but programs are limited; age is a factor. We serve seven to twelve year olds, however we base it on developmental age in some cases. There is Latch Key which is a program specifically for children whose parents work. Banana Splits is for children whose parents are divorced. The YMCA after-school program is available to children. Liberty Partnership is a program for PINS behavior where they are assigned an Intensive Case Manager. There is a program provided under Mental Health of Chenango County as well as Big brother-Big sister. The Place is a facility in Norwich that offers recreational activities for all ages."

You work with school-aged children. What are the implications for school-aged children whose families are on welfare and how does it affect their schooling?

"Lower income families usually do not have the same opportunities as far as financially being able to afford computers, software, or even the latest version of educational material. However, this is only a portion of the overall picture. Nurturing, proper care, adequate parenting, and proper diet are also very important. Our typical family is a single mom with more than one child, often overwhelmed with trying to

manage their lives. Sometimes children are not a priority and needs go unmet during crucial developmental stages; often times this carries over into school and other areas such as social skills and peer interactions.”

I have noticed that when dealing with the problem of “welfare abuse,” the poor receive the most public and media attention, and that other forms of “corporate abuse” of the system are not as publicized. Why do you think that is?

“Unfortunately, the majority of cases are lower income and lower socio-economic families and regions. In my opinion the bottom line problem is ultimately money. Money is a source of frustration for the majority, the only difference is the degree to which the family is affected. Often times the frustration converts to various abuse.”

Do you think that the rates at which taxes are collected across social classes could themselves be indicators of forms of abuse?

“Taxes in general have always favored the more affluent; however, depending on what side of the pendulum you’re on, opinions will always be very different. My opinion is that the current tax system is a fair one.”

From the interview I have learned about many programs that are available for children and families who need assistance in Chenango County. Terry really helped me to understand programs that are offered to school-aged children. The programs ranged from ones offered at the schools to ones offered in various places throughout the city of Norwich. One thing that stood out to me is that there are not many programs offered in rural areas. This is a deficit that needs to be addressed. There are many children in rural areas who would benefit from programs like those Terry mentioned. Transportation is a major factor in why these children do not attend these programs now. The agencies need to look at going into the smaller communities to

make these programs available to all children. If they are able to do this, then the programs would be reaching the needs of all the children.

I have read a couple of books on low-income families and disadvantaged children. One book in particular seemed to address the issues of school-aged children and low-income families. It really helped to bring the point home to me that there are communities within our state that have a greater need for social programs than I was aware of. The book I’m referring to is *Amazing Grace* (Kozol 1996).

While I was reading *Amazing Grace* I experienced a wide range of emotions and feelings. They ranged from anger to disgust, frustration to sorrow, and amazement to disbelief. I really think it would be useful to incorporate this book and my feelings about it into my paper.

I find it difficult to believe that the average income of the families that live in Mott Haven is close to my total income. The money I’ve made to help pay for some of my college expenses, as well as for my entertainment, is what these families have to live on! Is it any wonder then that the children qualify for “free lunches?”

I’ve been to New York City many times but I never realized the extent of the poverty, or the discrimination problems that exist. I remember seeing the “homes” of the homeless as we were driving to the Tunnel to leave for home—all the cardboard boxes with the newspapers along the side of the road. I never in this lifetime would have thought children could be living there. That is until I read *Amazing Grace*.

The conditions in the South Bronx are obviously even worse. Before reading *Amazing Grace*, I was oblivious to the different life-styles and conditions people live under. Knowing that children, as they walk along Brook Avenue St., Ann’s Avenue, Cypress Avenue, and many other streets, see prostitutes and drug dealers on a regular basis, makes me wonder how scared their

lives will be or even if they will survive childhood.

The living conditions are unbelievable because the families are so poor—rats biting babies, young children staying up nights killing roaches, and people all around them dying from gunshots, AIDS, or the unsafe living conditions.

Having to wait four days or more for a hospital room disgusts me. The people that are waiting are sick and need proper care. Mrs. Washington, who is an elderly lady, tells us that one time she had to find her own bedding and wash down everything, just so she could get a clean bed. When I read this, I wondered where is the hospital staff? Why are these people not getting the same care as I get?

One section of the book dealt with the maternity floors. I could not believe that on the 5th floor there were only white females allowed. These rooms were private rooms with their own bathrooms. On the 4th floor, there were all blacks and Latinos. On this floor, there were many mothers crammed into one ward with only one bathroom and other poor conditions. Segregation ended a long time ago, or so I thought.

“...as I look up at their apartment building, it occurs to me that he’s already giving her a lot—maybe even more than many wealthy fathers give their children” (Kozol 199). This really struck me and gave me some hope for these families. If you think about it, it’s true. This child’s father was a single parent, who loved his child, cared for her, fed her and her pets, and he even ironed her dresses. To me, this shows that it doesn’t matter how much money one has, or even where they come from, it’s the love and support that one gives to their child that counts. Love and support is very important and may play a role in the child’s future. This is one of the main reasons I want to become a teacher.

The most important part of the book, I believe, was about the schools and the teachers. In 1994 “15 teachers in a faculty of

54 were certified” (Kozol 155). That means 39 people who were teaching regularly had little or no formal training. If this is the case, what kind of education can these children really be getting? The lack of money for these schools has a major impact on the children. Besides a lack of teachers, there is a lack of books, supplies, and space. Some of the classes were being taught in stair landings, bathrooms, and even closets. These conditions occur because there is an increase in the “poor child” population and there is no money to build schools for them. It could also be that this wealthy society of ours does not want to spend the money for these “poor children.”

From the book, I learned that the church plays a major role in some of these children’s lives—going to the church, and feeling that security is about the only comfort these children have. Reverend Overall and Reverend Groover show their love and support for many of these families who are in need.

Today it seems as though we are living in two separate worlds. This factor scares me and I think it needs to change for our children’s sake. No child deserves a life of poverty and danger. No child deserves a life of growing up on the streets in the South Bronx, under the conditions that were described in *Amazing Grace*.

As a result of my interview with Terry Potter and the facts presented in *Amazing Grace* I became very curious about child support—what it means, and how it works.

Child Support is a program that assists children whose parents are either separated, divorced, or never married. I knew that parents not living in the same household with their children had to pay support but I did not know the process, or how much money was involved. What I found out after obtaining information from the Social Service Department was that while there is a system in place, not much financial support is given. The whole process of child

support is a legal one, mandated and enforced by the courts.

The support that the custodial parent receives is based on percentages set up by the State. These percentages are:

17% for one child, 25% for two children, 29% for three children, 31% for four children, and at least 35% for five or more children (PUB-4217 7).

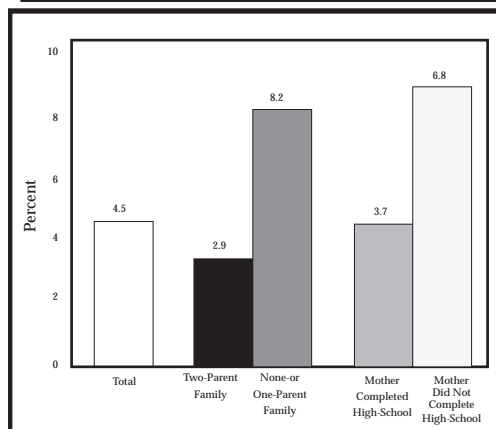
When one stops to consider that Chenango County ranks as one of the lowest in the state in income per capita, I realize the level of financial support that single parents are receiving is very little. As Terry pointed out in the interview, this factor adds to the level of frustration that the parent faces. The impact that this may have on the child and their ability to succeed in school could be great because there is not money for any extras (computers, books for pleasure, etc.). This would certainly play a role in how teachers need to address educational issues. Extra support would need to come from the schools through various programs to ensure the educational success of these children. To me that translates into teachers willing to put in extra time and effort almost on a daily basis.

Another way to help children of low-income families is to offer preschool programs. "Preschool enrollment is one measure of readiness to learn that may especially help to prepare children from disadvantaged backgrounds for elementary school" (www.childwelfare.com/kids/news/htm 184). Welcome Baby and Success By Six are two programs that offer low-income families support and help in teaching their children how to read. Books, guides and videotapes are lent to these families to assist the parents with early literacy skills.

One factor that may influence the educational success rate of a child is the type of family in which he (she) comes from. As an

example, when looking at grade retention "in 1993, only 2.9 percent of children in 2-parent households were in first grade for the second time, in comparison with 8.2 percent of children residing with no or one parent" (www.childwelfare.com/kids/news/htm 186). Another very important influence on child retention is the mother's education; "...children whose mothers did not complete high school are more than likely to repeat than children whose mothers had higher educational attainments. This suggests that parental education is related to a child's level of school readiness" (www.childwelfare.com/kids/news.htm 186). This is illustrated in the following graph.

Percentage of Current First Graders Who Were Retained in First Grade, By Family Type and Mother's Education, 1993.



Source: U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. National Household Education Survey of 1991 and 1993.

Head Start is one type of preschool program and it is funded by the federal government. It was established specifically to help children in poverty to be better prepared for school. In the late 1960s the Head Start program was evaluated. The Head Start program was basically divided into two programs. One, a summer program and the other a full year program. The eval-

uation results can be summarized as follows:

Summer programs did not produce improvements in cognitive and affective development that could be detected into the early elementary grades, and full-year programs produced only marginally effective gains for certain subgroups, mainly black children in central cities (DiNitto 301).

It is difficult for educators and the social welfare establishment to believe that education, especially intensive preschool education, does not have a lasting effect on the lives of children (DiNitto 302).

While the cognitive and affective developments were only minimally influenced by the Head Start experience, there does seem to be other successes. Children that participated in Head Start appeared to have a better attitude toward school and learning than those who did not attend a preschool program. Other preschool programs have been evaluated and the results have indicated what can be achieved, not necessarily what is being achieved. The conclusions are that more innovation is needed to help the children of current generations.

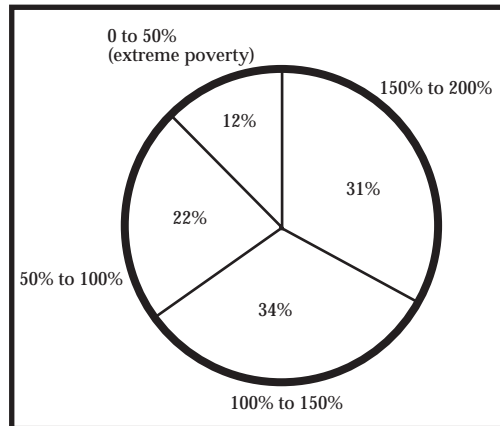
The chances of a child experiencing poverty are also strongly influenced by the type of family he or she lives in. This is illustrated by the two graphs in the opposite column.

This increase in the “extreme poverty” occurred because the number of female headed families nearly tripled in that time frame. This again points to the challenges faced by the schools to provide support and programs for these children.

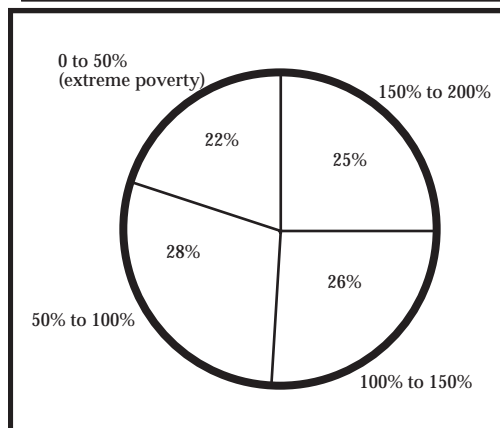
Another type of assistance that needy families receive is food stamps. Once they qualify for this program, they automatical-

ly qualify for the free and reduced school lunch program. An interesting fact is that,

Children in Extreme Poverty as a Percentage of Children Under Age 18 in Families Below or Near the Poverty Line, 1975.



Children in Extreme Poverty as a Percentage of Children Under Age 18 in Families Below or Near the Poverty Line, 1993.



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Series P-60, No. 188.

while the elementary students take advantage of this program many times the older students will not, because they do not want people to know that they qualify. When students are on the free and reduced lunch list, they are also able to receive the school breakfast. For many of these students these two meals are basically what they get for

the day (food wise). Some schools have gone to an automated system for paying for the school breakfast and lunch. Students are given an ID (identification) number to punch in. Students pay in advance, usually weekly or monthly and just punch in their ID number when they purchase items. This system provides confidentiality for students receiving free or reduced meals and therefore reduces the negative stigma.

September 11th had an emotional and financial impact on our society. Money has been diverted to the New York City area for rescue, relief, and rebuilding efforts. Because of this, there will be less money available for education and children. State aid has already been frozen for this school year at the 2000 - 2001 level. Schools have also been informed that next year state aid will also be frozen, at the same 2000 - 2001 level. This will have the greatest impact on poverty area schools because they receive the larger percentage of state aid. This also means that many programs will have to be cut (after school Latch Key programs and breakfast programs).

DiNitto did not focus much on education and children in the text. I believe that a chapter dealing mainly with education and the effects poverty has on children would help make her book more all encompassing. However, I have given this some thought and think that DiNitto may not be covering education directly because its programs may vary from state to state.

Social classes have existed throughout history and across cultures. Immigrants came to America in the early 1900s in the hopes of securing a better life for their children and themselves. While there have been many new programs to assist children in their early literacy years, I believe a teacher can have a tremendous impact on low-income children. As my parents have done, awareness of the dilemma facing these children and their families is the first step. Once a teacher recognizes the needs of

low-income families, they also need to learn what programs are available in their community and create links with these agencies. Next, they need to become advocates for these children *and* their families, meeting with the parent(s) and assisting them to seek out these programs and agencies.

I suppose teaching children is more than a job, it's like adopting a large family. It's in my blood. My father is a principal, my mother is a facilitator (counselor), and my oldest sister is a sixth grade teacher in Chenango County. My middle sister teaches first grade in a low-income, all-black school in North Carolina. I hope I can continue the tradition and have a positive impact on the lives of needy children.

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