



The Struggles and Predicaments of Low- Income Families and Children in Poverty

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Poverty can be considered a chain reaction often affecting generation after generation, a chain reaction that often interferes with health care, food consumption, resources, transportation, living arrangements, proper clothing, water supply, heat supply, electricity and phone service. Many families have needs that by far surpass the needs mentioned above. Many of us have no idea what it is to live in poverty.

We wake up each morning warm in our beds to our alarm clock blaring and the smell of breakfast wafting across the room; someone may even be in the shower, and all we can think about is not wanting to go to work, not wanting to clean off our cars after the snow has fallen and not wanting to choose from the ten pairs of shoes in our closets. We never stop to think about the family that may live next door, the family that does not have a car, that has no phone, that has one pair of shoes each, that has no heat, no electricity, no job to attend and has no idea when they will be able to take a shower again.

The simple fact is that there are many families in society today that deal with the above problems for years on end. They may have no idea where their next meal is com-

ing from or how long they will have heat, water, and electricity before it is shut off again. Families living in this type of income bracket have to make due with the supplies that they are surrounded by. They have to strive to meet the needs of their families even when they have to give up their own food, clothing, and more.

There are also the silent, but needy, voices of poverty. The voices that have never known what it feels like to live comfortably. These silent voices belong to the children of poverty. The unheard voices of youth that often have never known anything different from what they've grown up around. Many will never know what it is like to live in one place their entire lives. They may scrounge each and everyday for change just so their parents can put food on the table.

Children come from many different family setups. It is not the job of society, school, or the work place to help change the family makeup, but it is the job of society, and the school teacher to work with the positive things the child comes to school with. Children come from single parent households, two parent households, guardian homes, etc. The many different ways families are made-up today allows teachers to learn about the differences and beliefs that every family has. Children are easily influenced by what their parents tell them or by how their parents act when they are around them. If a parent is unemployed and financially unstable the child may believe that this is how life is supposed to be when they grow up therefore they strive to complete the minimal amount of work necessary to get by. I think many of these children grow up to be just like their parents. This may be because they don't have the resources to attend college or the right directions to succeed. I know as a child I was greatly influenced by the hard working individuals that surrounded me. These people often instilled values in me that pushed me to work hard and to accomplish every-

thing I could. This type of behavior also hindered my lifestyle because I often work myself to great exhaustion.

There is so much I want to learn about poverty and children living in poverty each and every day. It is hard for me to imagine not having a telephone, heat, electricity, etc., because these are things I've always had. I believe that before I can learn about the children living in poverty I need to first learn about the families of these children. I believe learning about families will help me to understand why some of these children have to suffer throughout their lives. I have tried writing about the experiences I have witnessed in my lifetime thus far as well as the factual information that I will further include from books, magazines, and movies we watched in class. I believe in my heart that many families would really like to give their children everything they need, but because poverty tends to follow a chain reaction (generation to generation), many people don't know how to get themselves out of it.

I believe children that grow up in poverty have a hard time getting themselves out of it. Poverty to me seems to be a chain reaction, meaning that it constantly flows from generation to generation. Poverty stricken children struggle to attach to the individuals around them because their parents are working many hours or are out and about scrounging for food and other resources needed by their families. Children who live in poverty may work from a very young age in order to help support their families. They may steal, pickpocket and even scrounge through garbage to find items that they will be able to sell or take home to their parent/parents. These children may get caught and arrested leading them into a life of jail time and utter depression.

I have many unanswered questions about children in poverty. I don't know a lot about the topic in general and I am very curious as to what I may be up against as a

future teacher. I have worked with low-income families for many summers now, but I don't believe I realize just what they are experiencing each and every day of their lives. I think as a future educator I will be more aware of the struggles and predicaments that families face because of the research and first hand accounts I have been subjected to since I started my college career.

My experiences with these families come from my summer work at a day-care/special children's center. Many of the children that attend this institution are low income and in need of assistance. The children often come to school/day-care without breakfast, shoes, socks, underwear, and lunch money. Their need does not just stop at the basic necessities, it goes far beyond what I could have ever imagined until I started working with them. Many of these children do not own a toothbrush, hairbrush, soap, towels, beds, winter jackets, mittens, hats, etc. I can remember checking each child individually to make sure they had all of the clothing that they needed for the day. If a child was missing an article of clothing it was my job to find them something to wear, even if what I found was too big or too small, chances were they had a brother or sister at home that could fit into the clothing. The center that I worked at had a special room filled with clothes that people had donated. There were drawers full of every possible item of clothing you could imagine. The only problem with this was that the need was so great and the rate of donation so low that many of the clothes had to be replenished on a weekly basis.

I come from a very small town named Trumansburg that can be found about twenty minutes from the City of Ithaca. There are many poor people, but the community seems to reach out to these people rather quickly and aids them in the fastest ways possible. I am not saying that Trumansburg/Ithaca has no homeless people

or any very low-income families because every community in the world has them. I am simply saying that the people who do need the assistance usually get it. I do know of this one family in my community that is in need of assistance, but they have refused help each and every time it has been offered to them.

This family scrounges through the trash of others to find items that are of use to them. They live in this old ice cream stand in the middle of our town and although this is illegal no one says anything. I hope that one day this family will take advantage of what they have been offered and allow themselves a better life. I believe some people like this perhaps don't want to help themselves or are happy living the way that they are. They have stated that they enjoy being below the poverty level because they believe living simplistically will get them farther in their lives. They are not sure where they would be right now if they were low income or even middle class, but they think there would be more negative aspects of their lives if this were the case.

This family is an example of the chain reaction mentioned earlier. I have witnessed the chain reaction of poverty from one generation to another many times. I see what families have been through, what they are facing and what they are going to face. I have talked with families that have been stricken by chain reaction poverty and many of these families really want to find a way out, a way to stop the constant generational crisis. A friend of mine lives in a family stricken by poverty. Her mother became pregnant at an early age and had to give up a career in nursing to take care of her growing family. This woman now has five children, is divorced, and is trying desperately to go to school. Three of the five children have dropped out of school, one has two children at the age of 20, three of the children are abusing alcohol and drugs and the two others are witnessing all of the nega-

tive things that are taking place in the home. The father of this family has chosen to have his own life again and is living in the lap of luxury because he chooses not to pay child support. I am not saying that all families below the poverty line are like this one. This family accepts no handouts and is not on welfare. They are struggling to live the best way they can while trying to overcome this generational problem with finances.

By carrying out the research for this paper I learned a lot about myself as a person. I acquired many answers to my questions dealing with the issue of families and children in poverty. I tried to find as much information on this topic as I could so that I can develop a new and revised opinion about poverty. I wanted to understand what children and families go through so that I can help myself become a less judgmental individual. I can say, however, that there have been times in my life when I have spoken in a negative way about low income or poverty stricken families. I believe this stems not from my upbringing, but from the media and the community that I grew up in. I often heard negative comments about welfare fraud, families on welfare, welfare abuse, food stamps, and taxes. Many people I have spoken with believe that the taxes we pay should not go towards those that are on welfare unless the need is very great. I would have to agree with this comment because I feel that there are a few families that are receiving welfare that should not be. I feel that anyone that is able to work should have to take on a job. If they are not making enough money to be considered above the poverty line, then they should be able to receive welfare. This may be why people choose not to work because they feel that there is not end in sight; therefore working only pays their bills and doesn't put food on their tables.

Through this research I have come to realize that there are many underlying reasons why people decide to cheat the system

at hand. Many people are trying to do this in order to improve their lives. I have witnessed food stamp abuse often when I worked at a grocery store in my town. Families would come in to buy groceries, but would come through the line with chips, soda, candy bars, etc., and use their food stamps. They would then use their cash to buy cigarettes and beer because food stamps cannot be used to buy these items. This type of behavior often angered me because I felt that many of the families should be buying food that was nutritious for their children. I cannot speak for all the families that came into my community store because some families did buy the items and necessities that their families needed. There should, however, be some lenience about buying these things because addictions to cigarettes and alcohol don't just occur in middle and upper class families. In my research I have tried to see the reason behind why low income or poverty stricken families buy the things they do with their food stamps. These people are just exactly that: people. They have desires, wants, and needs that have to be fulfilled just like every other person in society. They fulfill their needs by buying cigarettes, or alcohol, just like other people buy chocolate. I was glad that my misconception of these people was clarified through the discussion in class. I feel that I have not only become more understanding as a person, but I have also opened myself up to walking in someone else's shoes.

As Neubeck and Cazenave have suggested in *Welfare Racism* (2001), it is like we are all in the same room, and there is this huge pink elephant in the middle of the room. That pink elephant is racism. But nobody wants to look at it; people walk around it; they don't want to see it. But we can not begin to move forward until we name it and get other folks to actually see it. Until we can do that, we can not really change anything, we can not get the pink elephant out of the room. I borrowed the

above analogy from *Welfare Racism* because I believe it truly represents the problem that our society is facing with poverty, even though the quote speaks about racism. There are many things that we try to overlook even when they are gigantic, brightly colored, and unusual for the setting. Our society overlooks the problems it doesn't know what to do with and so we walk around these problems. We may glance in the direction of the problem once in a while, but we never take steps as a whole society to improve the negative aspects.

At this point you may be asking yourself what we can do to overcome the social problems or what we can do to see the big pink elephant that's in front of us. The first step is to make society *see* the problem; and the problem we are facing is poverty. It is easy for our society to look at poverty as being caused by those who are experiencing it; however, society has also created a type of wrapping or Band-Aid to cover up the issue. One of these types of Band-Aids is the welfare system. This system seems to put a blindfold over society's eyes and takes the focus off the real issue at hand, poor families. The problem may be caused by the minimum wage policy that seems to exist. As a group of individuals we seem to put a lot of unnecessary emphasis on minimum wage employment. Poor families working for minimum wage may only make enough to pay some of their bills and maybe to provide one or two meals a week. Therefore society is paying them the minimum wage and expecting them to live on it for years. This type of work can be exhausting, but it also gives society a chance to point fingers and blame poverty on those who work for low wages. That is how the analogy of the huge pink elephant can be more easily understood.

As stated earlier in this paper, poverty happens to all races, classes, genders, and cultures of people. It affects old and young alike and can be a very devastating facet to everyday life. Women and children are gen-

erally the population most affected by poverty. Children are pulled into this continuing circle because they are, to put it in simple terms, born. Children are born into families not by choice, but because they are simply conceived by two individuals. This family placement may or may not have been planned, but once the child is born someone has to take care of it.

Women today are still facing many of the same struggles as they were many years ago. Welfare and women have always required a great deal of discussion. The fact is that most public assistance recipients have been women. This stemmed from the days when women were required to stay home and care for the children. Women were not allowed to work and if they did they were usually offered very low salaries in low position jobs. If a woman was abandoned, widowed, disabled, or divorced they had no means of supporting themselves or their children. This was the time to look for support outside of the family and thus they began collecting welfare. The collection of welfare for many women is embarrassing and discouraging. Many women want to be able to support their family by themselves and when they have to reach out for assistance they feel like failures. Women today have many more rights than they used to have, but using these rights so that others approve is sometimes hard.

Work requirements burden mothers least able to bear their weight. Single-mother families have fewer adult resources than do two-parent families—fewer economic resources to fulfill the responsibility that distinguishes parents from other adults, namely care-giving. Moving a poor single mother into the labor market deprives her family of a caregiver (Mink 107). I wanted to address this issue raised in the book *Welfare's End* by Gwendolyn Mink because I feel that it represents the way many people in society feel about mothers in general. Mothers are often criticized for not working enough or for working too much, it

seems that there is never a happy medium in the eyes of society. Many still believe that women should stay home and take care of the family and home care needs. However, the society that we live in does not permit this type of activity and this is shown when women become pregnant and are given a certain number of weeks to have the baby and return to work.

Low-income families that contain women and children are usually struggling to make ends meet, without the added pressures of having a baby. When this occurs families are very happy to welcome the new baby into the family, but the pressures of money, food, electricity and the necessities needed to take care of the baby far exceed the happiness that comes with the new bundle of joy. Babies need a lot of time and attention and if a parent has no choice but to return to work as soon as possible, the baby and the family situations begin to falter.

The movie *Poverty Outlaw* produced and directed by Pamela Yates gives details about what it is really like living in poverty. The film showed children scrounging for change on the streets, mothers wondering where they would get enough food for their children, families wondering where their next home would be, and more. Many families worry about this each day and are trying desperately to take steps to make their lives better. In this video a community of low-income poverty stricken families fights back against the city that they live in to fix up the town and to help get poor families the assistance they need. The low-income people of Kensington decided that they needed to speak out and participate in group marches in order to get their community and city to realize that something needed to be done. The children of the community helped out and marched right alongside their parents. They participated and tried to help others see that just because they were poor did not mean that they could not do the same things as other

people.

Children are an integral part of the community makeup. They not only are the future of our towns and cities, but they also play a vital role in the stability of work-related jobs. Children and their families trust in the community around them to help them when they are having difficulties. There are two goals for welfare reform and these are explained as follows.

One is to reduce the number of children born to women receiving public assistance. During the 1990s, state legislators proposed a number of avenues to pressure women on welfare to have fewer children (Mink 153). I found this approach to be important. I think it is important that welfare reformers look for ways to reduce the number of children born to mothers on welfare. If a mother is having trouble supporting herself and her child then there should be other routes for the mother to take so that she does not have another child. Supplying birth control and parenting classes for these parents or soon to be parents would help them develop a sense of security. However, security is what many of these mothers and families lack. They never know where their next meal is coming from or when they will be evicted from their apartments, but they can be assured that they know how to take care of their children. I think this is a very important aspect to the welfare system because once a person feels like they can take charge one area of their lives then they may be more motivated to take charge in other areas.

It is too early to assess how well these exclusion laws are working, however A Rutgers University study of the New Jersey family cap law found a significant effect on the rate of abortions and births among women on welfare. It found a number of births, with welfare recipients having 14,000 fewer children in the four years after the family cap was enacted compared with what would be expected due to trend and composition changes (Mink, 155). I think

this new exclusion law has been very successful since it was first put into action. This is shown through the decrease in the number of children that welfare recipients are having. The numbers are dropping because other avenues such as birth control, abortion, and abstinence are encouraging women to think carefully. I don't think it is right, however, that the welfare department makes these women give up their babies simply because they are only allowed to have a certain number of them. There are plenty of families in this world that would like to have children and can not. I don't think abortion is the answer to the whole problem of too many children born into homes on welfare. I do however feel that women have the right to choose and I believe this new exclusion act takes away that right. There are many boundaries in life and this is one of those that have two sides, positive and negative.

Boundaries are a part of everyone's life whether you are part of a low-income family or whether you are wealthy. There are always boundaries to fence us in or to fence us out. Children have many boundaries that are set for them. Some of these boundaries are set by parents, teachers, extended family, peers, etc., and many continue until the child has proven that he or she is competent in one area or another. I think children from low-income families have the most boundaries set from birth. From the time they are born their parents have to restrict many things the child is able to do because of financial restraints. When a child goes to school these boundaries and restraints are only highlighted due to necessities. The child may feel left out because they don't have the most up to date clothing, books, school supplies, etc. This can cause the child to be embarrassed about who they are and where they come from. As a future teacher I think it is in the best interest of the teacher to try and help this child and the family financially—this, of course only if the family is willing to take

the handouts from local food pantries and shelters.

James Garbarino, author of *Children in Danger and Lost Boys* (1995), developed the Concept of the Socially Toxic Environment. He believes a Socially Toxic Environment is that the social world of children, the social context in which they grow up, has become poisonous to their development (Garbarino 4). Poverty is a poisonous element to any family situation and especially to children. Many problems exist in low-income neighborhoods and in cities all over the world. Poor air, water, and soil quality causes concern and can lead to poor health conditions if left untreated. In the man-made toxic environment pollution, violence, and economic pressures force families to lead sheltered lives. Depression, paranoia, and alienation also exist in these neighborhoods causing family relations to weaken and or be strained. Closed communication in all families is important; however, it is dually important in families that are struggling to make ends meet. Many families are working long hours at low paying jobs and therefore the communication in these families is strained and not as rich and deep as in other families.

Poverty puts many restrictions on the everyday lives of children and their families. Financial resources are moderated at a very large degree and therefore the quality of housing, diet, clothing, and amount of health care that can be acquired is greatly reduced. Poverty despairs families, and aspirations and a sense of self-worth become hard to elevate (Barbour & Barbour 100). Poverty does lay a veil of despair on families because it slowly shuts down family's hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Families in poverty have to find ways to survive each and everyday. Many families find housing the cheapest in neighborhoods that are full of drugs and violence, this then leads to fears about the environment they live in. Children cannot develop properly if they are in constant fear for their lives and their

possessions. Many low-income families work hard each day to try and remove themselves and their families from these types of living standards. This is very hard to do when the bills are piling up and there is not enough food to eat for one meal.

There are many reasons why families are poverty-stricken or are considered to be of low-income status. Just because these families are considered this way does not mean that they are not providing the basic necessities for their children and for themselves. This is not to say that all of the families are able to provide, however; the majority of them have been financially unstable for so long that they know what they need to do to survive. Many persons in society look down upon these people for living the way that they do. This can be compared to persons in society looking down upon the way a very high-income family lives. There are always two sides to the story at hand and two opinions to be presented. Each person in the situation may see the problem at hand just a little differently. This can cause misunderstandings and problems in society and families. These problems cannot be handled properly if the proper steps are not taken to address the real issues behind the colorful pink elephant that everyone ignores. We as a society need to start taking the proper actions to help children and their families get the support and necessities they need to survive.

On an internet website on "Poverty in Saskatoon," Kat Dransfield is quoted as saying "Poverty is like an amusing event being retold by a former spectator—you had to be there to get it." Many people think by taking a stroll or a drive down a city block will subject them to the lives of the homeless, low income, or poverty stricken. They may believe because they have seen the visual aspects of poverty that they understand what children and families in poverty are experiencing. The truth as restated above by Dransfield is that no

one can possibly know what poverty is like until they have experienced it for themselves. I think it is hard for me to understand homelessness and poverty because I have never experienced it. However, I also believe that understanding this limitation in my own experience and knowledge is the first step towards realizing that our society has a problem that needs to be addressed.

The movies shown in class were very powerful; however I believe they did not even begin to address the situation at hand. *Poverty Outlaw* showed real people trying to make a difference in their own lives by rallying support from other areas of the city. Although these people were recognized and did make some headway in the fight against poverty, they still came up against a wall. They were arrested for taking over buildings that were abandoned and police guarded them heavily. These people were working to get others to see the colored pink elephant that everyone seems to want to look past. There was a resistance from the city because it didn't want to address the problem for lack of an explanation of what they would be able to do.

In the movie *Patch Adams* many of the events that occurred can be compared to what families in poverty face each and everyday. The main character in the movie, Hunter (Patch) Adams, experienced many things in his life that caused him sorrow, trouble, and depression. His father had several jobs while Hunter was little and so this caused the family to move around a lot. This caused him to never feel that he had a secure base to call home. Patch tried very hard throughout the movie to improve the lives of those around him as well as his own. He was taught to see beyond the problems at hand and to use humor to make light of tough situations. A line spoken in the movie was that there is no difference between a scientist and a doctor this concept forced me to think a great deal. I understood this to mean that scientists are

constantly looking for new outcomes or ways to fix things in the environment. They are constantly looking for how and why things react the way they do when mixed in with other things. Doctors are very much like scientists in that they are always looking for cures to the ailments of their patients. They are constantly working to learn about what makes the world around them function in order to make it a better place. I found this line to be connected to poverty in that there should be no difference between the ways that one person is viewed over another because of their financial background or job description. This, however, is always going to be the case because high-income households are able to take part in more expensive family and community activities. I thought this movie contained many good scenarios that can be connected to families living in poverty. Comparing these families to everyday situations in life can help those of us who have never experienced it, understand poverty just a little bit better.

Many families in poverty have big plans for their lives. They want to provide for their children, they want to have a nice home, they want to be able to afford nice clothes, but most of all they want to live the life that they have never lived. They want to be seen as equals to those around them instead of outsiders.

I grew up in a middle class home with two full-time working parents; therefore I never knew what it was like to go without the necessities of life. I was taught, however, that there were children who needed extra help and so I was taught to give my outgrown clothes to the Salvation Army, to donate money and to ring the bell for the Salvation Army each year. I was shown how to collect, make, and donate food baskets to the local churches and I was taught to work in soup kitchens and at holiday bazaars for the needy. Through my dedicated community service I was never taught that there were levels of poverty. I was never

taught that the poor persons I was working with were not at the bottom. Many of these people could afford low-income housing and were able to get cheap clothes for their children.

I was not aware of the poor at the bottom until I went on a band trip to New York City. I can remember staring with my nose pressed against the bus window, eyes wide at the homeless. They were sitting on the sidewalk, hundreds of them, their clothes dirty and tattered. Many were covered with filthy blankets, cardboard boxes at their sides. In bewilderment my teacher explained that this street was where the homeless gathered, where they came together to help one another survive. This was the point in my life when I not only rejoiced at the life I had been given, but this was also the time in my life when I realized just how needy some people were. I wanted to jump off that bus and help them get on their feet, but I realized that I had absolutely no idea where I would start or what I would do if I had the opportunity. Although I was taught to help those less fortunate I can now understand how hard it was for the people I helped to take handouts. Many low-income families don't like to take handouts because they feel this makes them feel weak inside as well and not able to take care of their families.

When I was very young, I often got out of bed early around 5:00 a.m. I can remember trying to entertain myself because I was an only child. I remember watching television at this early time in the morning and the commercials mesmerized me. I was only five or six years old, but the poor children in the commercials made me feel terrible. The point of the commercials was to encourage people to donate money to needy children in other countries. What I did not realize at this time was that sometimes the money does not go where it is supposed to and the children that actually need the money never receive a penny of it; but I was young and naive. My mother

laughed each morning when I asked her to save the children. When she said no to my idea I would then ask her to at least adopt a child. I never got either of these wishes, but I continued to ask each and every day until I started sleeping later.

These two events in my life may seem rather minute; however they made me think often about how lucky I was to live where I lived. I learned to appreciate my life from a very young age because of this. My family has always pushed me to help those less fortunate than myself and maybe this is the reason I want to become a teacher one day. I want to help children learn that they can accomplish a lot with effort and determination. Preparing for my teaching career has also given me a chance to work with children of different backgrounds, genders, ethnic profiles, and income levels. I have come to realize that many children do not have the necessities to receive a good education because their parents' income levels have challenged their home lives.

After researching the topic of poverty and families I have come to the conclusion that I have a lot more to learn. Since I grew up in a middle class family I do not know what it's like to live in poverty or without the basic necessities. I have changed my views a lot since I first started writing this paper and feel that some low income families have very restricted choices in their lives. I have tried very hard to place myself in the shoes of low-income families to help myself to better understand what may be occurring in these families. I really enjoyed writing this paper and feel that I need to research a lot more about this topic before I become a teacher.

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