

Low-Income Parents and the Public Schools

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This article addresses the responses likely to be received by low-income parents from teachers and staff in their children's public schools in the United States. A review of the relevant literature reveals that teachers and school administrators tend to subscribe to the dominant beliefs that low-income parents do not care about their children's schooling, are not competent to help with homework, do not encourage achievement, and do not place a high value on education. This article presents examples of such middle-class bias in the words and actions of individual teachers, and research findings that tend to contradict these stereotypes. The barriers that exist for low-income parents in interacting with the schools are discussed, and suggestions are offered for ways in which schools can recognize and respect the standpoint and potential contributions of these parents.

Contemporary education theory emphasizes the importance, for children's maximum learning, of a partnership between schools and parents (e.g., Romualdi & Sandoval, 1995; Simoni & Adelman, 1993), but the desired and comfortable partnership seems to be that between schools and "nice" middle-class parents. A common assumption is that middle-class homes are largely positive environments for learning, "whereas factors present in working-class homes have negative consequences for achievement" (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991, p. 3). We need to ask, then, about the experiences of the parents of poor children in their children's public schools. Are they treated with the same respect as parents of middle-class children, or do stereotypes about the poor influence the responses they elicit from their children's teachers and school staff? An answer to this question was sought by reviewing the relevant published literature.

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It is important to note that there is not a large literature on the subject of this article, but this is not surprising in view of the tendency for social scientists to either ignore or pathologize low-income families (see Lott & Bullock, this issue). Knowledge about poor people's experiences in the public schools is limited, particularly if we are interested in learning about this experience from the perspective of low-income parents themselves. What follows here is a sample of what the existing literature reveals about middle-class beliefs about low-income parents; responses to low-income parents by teachers and school administrators, as reported primarily in qualitative studies; involvement of poor parents in the schools; and suggested prescriptions for change in the direction of greater respect for and understanding of social-class diversity.

Beliefs About Low-Income Parents

Negative views of low-income adults are widely shared and firmly held by a majority of mainstream adults in the United States (cf. Bullock, 1995; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, this issue; Mayer, 1997). Prominent in these stereotypes is the belief "that low-income parents do not care about their children's schooling, are not competent to help with homework, and do not encourage achievement" (Snow et al., 1991, p. 170). Low-income parents are generally viewed as apathetic and as not placing a high value on education (Davies, 1993), and their children are said to suffer the consequences of parental disinterest. It is assumed that little can be expected of mothers on welfare, in particular, who are characterized as "lazy, irresponsible women, sitting at home, having babies, and living off the government" (Praeger, 1986, p. 91).

Images such as these are prominent in legislative debates about welfare "reform" (Naples, 1997) and are common within the bureaucracies that regulate the lives of women in need of public assistance. What low-income mothers report (see Scarbrough, this issue, and Nicolas & JeanBaptiste, this issue) is that in such institutions they are typically treated with impatience, disrespect, and suspicion. Dodson (1998, p. 214) concluded that the "hard family work and devotion to other people" that she found among the welfare mothers she studied tends to be "dismissed as dependency and dysfunction."

The poor regard in which low-income mothers are held can be seen in the results of a study I did with a student (Lott & Saxon, in press). We compared beliefs about working-class and middle-class mothers among a large sample of adults of varied age and geographical location. Participants were asked to respond to a brief description and photograph of a woman who was presented as interested in running for the vice presidency of the parent-teacher organization (PTO) in her children's elementary school. The woman was presented as working-class or middle-class and as Jewish, Latina, or Anglo by variations in the wording of her background. We found that social class made a significant difference in the quick impressions

formed of the target woman. Across ethnicities, the working-class woman (presented as a part-time K-Mart cashier whose husband was on temporary disability) was rated as less strident and as less of a perfectionist than the middle-class woman, and as more crude, more meek, more irresponsible, and more unsuitable for the job of PTO vice president. The middle-class woman (presented as a part-time high school librarian married to an engineer) was clearly preferred for the job. Our respondents also found the Latina significantly more unsuitable for the job of PTO vice president than either the Jewish or Anglo target person.

These data on differential perceptions of working-class and middle-class mothers of schoolchildren are congruent with findings reported earlier by Landrine (1985). Her sample of respondents, asked to describe “lower-class” and “middle-class” women in terms of society’s stereotypes, rated the two groups of women significantly differently on 16 out of 23 adjectives. “Lower-class” women were rated as more confused, dirty, hostile, illogical, impulsive, incoherent, and irresponsible, and “middle-class” women were rated as more ambitious, competent, happy, intelligent, and self-confident.

Do teachers and school administrators have beliefs similar to those of other middle-class adults? It is unlikely that the prevalent beliefs about low-income persons do not affect the assumptions and beliefs of those who staff our public schools. Polakow (1993, p. 146) argues persuasively that “[t]eachers do not live above their culture.” They share the pervasive stereotypes that are part of a deficit-model viewpoint. “From maladjusted to culturally deprived; from the family as a tangle of pathology to broken, non-intact, and dysfunctional; from the pauper child as potential criminal to the at-risk student delinquent—this is a discourse embedded in time and in the American ethos” (p. 103). Thus, it is not surprising to read that a respected and admired middle school teacher in Brooklyn, in talking about her low-income children to a journalist (Sachar, 1991, p. 221), says

Neither they nor their parents have any concept of how reading can be a part of a daily life. When you have home lives like these kids— . . . it’s no wonder that these kids can’t read. . . . [N]o one is communicating to these kids why school matters.

School Responses to Low-Income Parents

The beliefs about low-income children and adults held by many teachers and administrators have real consequences. They are translated into negative, discouraging, and exclusionary behavior and are communicated to low-income parents in myriad ways. As the literature to be reviewed in this section illustrates, low-income and working-class parents, as compared with middle-class parents, receive less warm welcomes in their children’s schools; their interventions and suggestions are less respected and attended to; and they are less able to influence the education of their children. This appears to be as much the case in Britain as in the United States. Reay (1999), who studied working-class mothers’ involvement in their children’s

schooling in London, reported that they have to contend with a middle-class sense of entitlement and “the greater power of middle-class mothers to get what they wanted for their children” (p. 100).

Although positive correlations among attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are not always easy to demonstrate, they are predictable on theoretical grounds, and there is considerable empirical evidence that stereotypes have important consequences for the processing of information about individuals, for memory, and for interpretation of information (e.g., Dunning & Sherman, 1997; Wittenbrink, Gist, & Hilton, 1997). As noted by Sherman (1996, p. 1127), “[o]nce a target has been categorized as a member of a particular group, that group’s stereotype may be activated and applied.”

Stereotypes affect the responses made to members of stereotyped groups and also influence the behavior of members of such groups. Steele and his colleagues (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1998) have demonstrated that stereotype threat can affect the members of any stigmatized group. This threat is said to occur when “a negative stereotype about a group to which one belongs” can be used by others “as a plausible interpretation for something one is doing, for an experience one is having, or for a situation one is in” (Steele, 1997, p. 616). Steele and his colleagues have focused on the effects of stereotype threat on the performance of highly skilled college students, but the most detrimental effects of stereotypes are likely to be experienced by members of groups low in status and power. Stereotypes contribute to their further exclusion, negative treatment, and lowered self-confidence. The material reviewed in this section supports the proposition that the stigma attached to low-income parents has such effects.

Degrading Words and Actions

Embedded in research reports are many examples of middle-class bias in the words and actions of individual teachers around the country. Polakow (1993, p. 127), who conducted oral interviews in Michigan, reports hearing a teacher in a public preschool program for “at-risk” children tell a mother, “You people better do something about your kids.” Another teacher told her “these people lead such chaotic lives and none of these women are married, so the boys have no role models” (p. 130). Children in poverty were described by yet another teacher as “all the bad low-skilled kids . . . [who] come from broken homes. . . . They are either hillbillies or blacks from the poor section where those run-down apartments are . . . and that means trouble” (p. 142).

Two decades earlier, in Boston, an elementary school teacher is reported to have told researchers (Sennett & Cobb, 1973, p. 80), “These children come from simple laborers’ homes where the parents don’t understand the value of education.” In Texas, where Coles (1977) studied Chicano/a children, one 12-year-old boy told him:

Our teacher . . . told us that we don't learn the way we should. She said we're not "natural students" (p. 259). . . . And the principal, he came to our class, and he said he doesn't believe in taking us out of school, to go on tours, but he may take us to the jail so that we'll get to see what it is like. (p. 273)

From a study of low-income women in Boston comes the report of a mother who was sometimes late picking up her children after school because she had to travel by train for 45 min after making deliveries of her home-baked cakes. The principal would berate her loudly in front of her children. "She'd yell at me, 'What kind of example are you setting for your children?' Then she'd get in her new car and drive on out of there" (Dodson, 1998, p. 176).

Discounting the Views and Importance of Low-Income Parents

The low valuation of parents who are poor is communicated to them by the difficulty they experience in being attended to and heard by teachers and administrators. Among a group of low-income Puerto Rican families in New York City, one mother told an interviewer "La opinion de nosotros no vale" ("Our opinions are not valued"; Harry, 1992, p. 181). These parents reported receiving only formal, written communications from the schools, incomprehensible and confusing papers from a powerful and impersonal "they." The investigator in this study concluded that "the only consistent role offered to [these] parents was that of [compliant] consent-giver" (p. 239). Other studies have documented the apparent reluctance of teachers to establish contact with low-income parents, except through impersonal channels like the mail (e.g., Sullivan, 1989). A study in Baltimore of low-income African American middle school children (Cook & Fine, 1995, p. 128) found that many mothers "spoke of the intolerable way that teachers and administrators in the school treat them. 'Oh. . . . They're uppitty. They're uppitty.'" Almost 2 decades earlier, the same experiences were reported by Chicana mothers in Texas, one of whom told Coles (1977, p. 239), Anglo teachers "have no use for us."

Low-income parents have repeatedly told investigators about their experience of not being listened to when they contribute information about their children to teachers and administrators that is contrary to the conclusions they have already come to. For example, some Chicana mothers in a study in Arizona (Casanova, 1990) could not understand why their children were having trouble at school when they were so clever and quick at home. Their efforts to present what they knew about their children were rebuffed, and false assumptions continued to be made about the children's backgrounds as well as about their skills. Accepting "the value of parental knowledge" (Casanova, 1990, p. 146) seems to be especially difficult when the parents are poor and minorities of color.

Another example of the discounting and devaluing of information provided by low-income parents is reported by an investigator (Ogbu, 1990) who considers it "typical." A child whose schoolwork was poor but who previously had been

considered “smart” told his parents that he was bored because his courses were too easy for him. His parents’ explanation and request for extra work were rejected, so the boy’s achievement continued to decline. Similarly, a parent in Polakow’s (1993) study of low-income single mothers reported that her efforts to obtain assistance with helping her daughter were rejected by teachers and administrators, who instead insisted that she agree to a special education program. Kozol (1991) concluded that the parents of poor children focus on different routes to school improvement than teachers and school administrators, so that when the parents suggest things like larger library collections or the reduction of class sizes, their arguments tend to be dismissed out of hand.

Earlier Parental Experiences as Students

The demeaning treatment low-income parents receive from their children’s teachers mirrors too well what they remember from their own experiences as students. One ambitious study that involved 350 interviews found that low-income parents “carried bad memories of schools and talked about being intimidated by teachers and administrators” (Davies, 1993, p. 208). Brantlinger (1993) reported that low-income parents who were interviewed about their children’s school experiences inevitably talked about their own school days, “detailing a profusion of humiliating and painful experiences” (p. 11). Luttrell (1997) probed deeply into the school experiences of two samples of women, one from rural North Carolina, and the other from urban Philadelphia. The stories of these women

feature childhood experiences of exclusion, difference, and illegitimacy in school. . . . [T]hey came to see themselves as less than equal—if not unworthy—students. . . . [T]he streetwise or commonsense knowledge that these women brought to school was, in their view, at best disregarded and at worst ridiculed by the teachers. (p. 5)

Luttrell concluded that the low-income students “learned to recognize as ‘intelligent’ or ‘valuable’ only the styles, traits, and knowledge possessed by the economically advantaged” (p. 114).

What low-income parents remember experiencing as students is reported as well by their children. A study of middle school students in a midwestern town (Brantlinger, 1994) found that the students associated low achievement and problem behaviors with low income and that higher income students were almost twice as likely as low-income students to feel that their teachers liked them. The low-income students were aware of their teachers’ attitudes and of “their subordinate standing in school” (p. 197). These students, Brantlinger (1993) wrote, have learned that school is one of the places in which “their position as a surplus population” (p. 189) is made clear.

Involvement of Low-Income Parents in the Schools

Continued Efforts Despite Relative Powerlessness

The theme of perceived parental powerlessness is present in the reports of both low-income parents and their children. The parents interviewed by Brantlinger (1993) “felt little control over their children’s fate. When they went to school about problems, they were not confident that there would be acceptable resolutions” (p. 11). Their children felt and understood this and did not expect their parents’ interventions with school personnel to have a positive outcome. In sharp contrast to high-income students, low-income students saw their parents “as powerless in influencing school circumstances” (p. 143).

Yet despite such negative and demeaning experiences of low-income parents, as both children and adults, there is considerable evidence that they make substantial efforts to change this state of affairs for their own children. The dominant view held by teachers and administrators that the parents of low-income children care less about their children’s education than middle-class parents and resist active involvement is not supported by quantitative or qualitative data. Brantlinger (1985), for example, who interviewed a sample of low-income parents, reported that they “were not apathetic about their children’s schooling. They were appreciative of good and caring teachers and responsive, challenging school settings” (p. 99).

A study of five elementary schools serving low-income children (Snow et al., 1991) reported concern among parents about their children’s achievement and parental motivation to work cooperatively with the schools. The authors concluded that few of the parents they studied fit the stereotype of being uncaring, discouraging, and academically incompetent. Another study (Chavkin & Williams, 1989, 1993) of a sample of more than 1,000 African American and Latino parents in six states also found considerable interest on the part of the participants in their children’s education and a desire for active involvement. And an analysis of longitudinal data from two large national representative samples (Duncan, Duniform, Doran, & Young, 1998) found that welfare families were as interested as comparison working families in interactions between parents and teachers.

Schorr (1988, p. 228) has argued that “[p]oor and minority parents often have an especially high—even passionate—regard for education, and view it as the most promising means to improve their children’s futures.” This conclusion is supported by Fine and Weis (1998), who studied intensively 154 urban poor and working-class adults and found that all talked about the importance of schooling. “They know that education matters . . . and seek opportunities for advancing their own and their children’s educational credentials” (p. 228).

Barriers to Active Involvement

What research also documents, however, is a significant lack of resources on the part of low-income parents to follow through on the desire to help their children negotiate success in school and to be as effective as middle-class parents in communicating with teachers and administrators. There are barriers that exist for low-income parents that are related to poverty, time restraints, atypical work schedules, heavy family responsibilities, child care and transportation problems, and, often, barriers of minority ethnicity, color, and language. As noted by one investigator (Reay, 1998, p. 161), for working-class mothers, "actively pursuing their child's educational success means negotiating differences and social distance."

Sachar (1991), a journalist who spent a year as a teacher in a middle school in Brooklyn, wrote that, after visiting a student's home, she began to recognize that for many parents "the problem might not be lack of interest, but rather an overwhelming fatigue, and even more pressing problems" (p. 288). These pressing problems stem from trying to survive on a day-to-day basis, trying to rear children on meager and inadequate resources, and trying to "piece together a broad array of strategies that allow them to meet the basic necessities of life" (Seccome, 1999, p. 150).

What education professionals interpret as disinterest and apathy, low-income parents see as poor communication and discouragement of their efforts to participate in a world in which they have little influence (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Harry, 1992; Moles, 1993). A study of Head Start families (Webster-Stratton, 1997, p. 168) found that low-income parents "frequently talk about not knowing what to ask teachers, how to act in the classroom, and how to develop a positive relationship with teachers." These are not usually the concerns of middle-class parents.

There are, of course, teachers and administrators who take exceptional steps to help low-income parents maximize the positive benefits to be derived from their children's education. Such reports can be found in the work of anthropological journalists (e.g., Donaldson, 1993; J. Freedman, 1993; S. G. Freedman, 1990; Kozol, 1991; Sachar, 1991), who have provided in-depth and penetrating analyses of contemporary public schools. Typically the reports are anecdotal, but they tell of impressive efforts by individual teachers in low-income schools to overcome the deleterious effects of deteriorating school buildings and shabby maintenance, inadequate budgets for materials, outdated texts, and poorly nourished, demoralized, tired, and often frightened students. Such teachers, who are underpaid in comparison with teachers in more affluent districts, who are working with children who generally do not have access to a home computer or other middle-class accessories, and whose parents are probably not college graduates, struggle heroically "against the odds" with little institutional, community reward.

Prescriptions for Change

The final section of this article addresses the question of how the standpoint of low-income parents might be recognized and respected in our schools, assuming, first, that we care about the achievement of low-income children as much as we do about that of children who are more affluent. Such an assumption is not always valid. There are those who argue (e.g., Glasgow, 1981; Sennett & Cobb, 1973) that our educational system fulfills its covert purpose with respect to low-income children, which is to perpetuate a group of permanent underachievers who will continue to work in the secondary labor market of low wages, no benefits, and no job advancement. But if we do not accept this gloomy and cynical argument, there are strategies that could be adopted by our schools to ensure greater inclusion and greater respect for low-income students and their parents. The suggestions presented here have come, not directly from current programs, but from my analysis of problems and possible solutions.

1. Teachers and administrators need to communicate with low-income parents about their children's successes, not just about problems or failures. A common research finding (e.g., Davies, 1993, p. 207) is that low-income parents "heard from teachers and school officials only when their child was in trouble."
2. The initiative in parent-teacher cooperation must be taken by the schools, which have the advantage of power and resources. To expect low-income parents to bridge the social-class gap without help and encouragement is not realistic and is a "blame the victim" strategy.
3. Increase the number of ways that low-income parents can be involved beyond that of "consent-giver," or signers of notes. Expand the number of possible roles they can play in the classroom while respecting their work schedules and family responsibilities. Take advantage of the skills, experiences, and wisdom the parents can share. As noted by Fine (1995, p. 86), the typical strategy in school-community programs has been to train parents "as homework monitors or 'better parents'—not as collaborators, sources of critical information, innovators, or critics."
4. Encourage informal communications. Low-income parents say they are more interested in informal than in scheduled meetings (e.g., Chavkin & Williams, 1989), possibly because they are less likely than middle-class parents to see casually, or "run into," their children's teachers in out-of-school community settings—as neighbors, shopping at the same stores, eating at the same restaurants, etc. Thus, schools should adopt an open-school, open-classroom policy so that parents are always welcome, not just to attend formally scheduled PTO

meetings or parent-teacher conferences, but whenever they can come to visit and observe and perhaps chat briefly with school personnel.

Fine and Weis (1998), after listening to the parents in their study, concluded that how they felt about their children's schools was influenced by the extent to which they were invited in. The parents wanted informal "spaces" created in which they could talk about child rearing and schooling. The investigators cite evidence that when schools structure opportunities for participation by low-income parents, especially of younger children, "the call is heeded with enthusiasm" (p. 249). Others have argued (e.g., Snow et al., 1991, p. 173) that "[p]arents must be made to feel that they have the right to visit their children's school." It is the school's responsibility to emphasize this right and to encourage its exercise. But even further, the social climate created by a school must be one in which parents "feel not only welcome, but needed" (Comer, 1990, p. 37). Security measures that require locked doors should be reevaluated and changed so that doors are monitored and parents are not excluded.

5. Combine the education offered to children in public schools with community social services to their families so that schools can function as community centers. If schools could provide referral or direct service resources to families, they would be seen as more welcoming by parents and would encourage greater parental involvement in both the school and the community. This idea has been mentioned in Congress as a way to enhance the effectiveness of schools (H. Bullock, personal communication, June 16, 2000), and one such program already exists: school-based health centers. These centers, supported by a combination of federal, state, and private foundation funding, increase the interaction between low-income parents and their children's schools (Rhode Island Department of Health, 2000).
6. The issue of how to better communicate with and involve parents who are not mainstream and middle-class must be a central part of all teacher-training programs. "Teacher training institutions," notes Polakow (1993, p. 182), "must seriously address the diverse worlds of poor children and actively promote an anti-bias curriculum. . . . A pedagogy of equity, above all, requires an ethic of caring—a change of heart and change in our ways of seeing."

Such changes may be met with considerable resistance. It is difficult for members of the middle class to recognize the nature of their privileged "standpoint" and to respect the backgrounds and needs of those who do not share it. There continues to be resistance on the part of educators to acknowledge "that the gender, ethnic, racial, linguistic and socioeconomic factors that create children's unique cultural makeup do not reduce the intellectual prowess of children but rather enhance it" (Fletcher & Cardena-Morales, 1990, p. 155).

My experiences as a member of my school district's Task Force on Diversity have shown me how difficult it is to gain acceptance for such a position and to shape educational practices that are congruent with it. For example, it took many years to bring the federal school breakfast program to my town. This federal entitlement program is free to schools, and my state reimburses schools for the modest administration costs that are incurred. All children in a school may participate and obtain breakfast free, at reduced cost, or at the full rate. Despite this, and despite the ample evidence supporting a relationship between breakfast and educational achievement, my school district continued to turn the program down until the spring of 1999, when a new School Committee was finally persuaded by careful arguments, data, and persistent lobbying. Fortunately, a school breakfast program is no longer an issue of voluntary participation in my state. After 8 years of lobbying by social activist groups and sometimes bitter struggles within communities, the Rhode Island legislature, in the spring of 2000, mandated that "[a]ll public schools shall make a breakfast program available to students attending the school" ("School breakfast," 2000). Through this legislation, Rhode Island joined 21 other states with a similar requirement for public schools.

As social scientists committed to social justice, we speak of respect for difference and of the necessity for inclusiveness because we know the consequences of "otherness" for gender, ethnicity, sexual preference, social class, and other social categories. We must continue to use this knowledge to examine and reexamine our theories, research, practice, and sociopolitical visions. And we must also put our knowledge to use in attempting to influence policies at local, regional, and national levels in the interest of equity and to assure positive outcomes for the greatest number.

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Key areas where low income under-performing students need help. They often are in the care of someone other than a parent as many of these parents work low income second and third shift jobs and have to rely on their older children or nonplussed family members. Low income families often lack good home study environments, outside noise and activity is often a factor. Low income students often have different family issues from their more affluent classmates. low income students are often made to feel ashamed of that status so do as little as possible to call attention to issues that it may cause. At present, the vast majority of public schools in the United States are funded by local property taxes, ensuring that wealthier school districts have more money than poorer districts. Lower-income, nonreligious most likely to have a child in public school. WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Eighty-five percent of U.S. parents of school-aged children have a child in public school, while 9% send their child to private school, 3% send theirs to parochial school and 3% home-school. Regular churchgoers, those with postgraduate education and upper-income adults are the least likely subgroups of parents to send their child to public school, while lower-income and nonreligious parents are the most likely. Parents' Decisions on Public School or Other School Type Related to Their Income, Education and Religion. Will your oldest child attend public, private, parochial or home school this year? Public school. Nearly half of responding parents in the study, which looked at the effect of COVID-19 disruptions and stressors on low-income families with young children, also said their kids have experienced emotional or behavioral problems since the pandemic began. 1,000 Low-Income Families. That study, directed by Johnson and Phillips, is in partnership with colleagues at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa and the Tulsa Public Schools, which has been lauded for its successful pre-K program. The study began in 2016 with low-income families with 3-year-old children, who were about to finish first grade when COVID-19 hit. Parent and Teacher Well-Being.