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Voices of poverty: Perspectives of one school's student, teachers. and parents

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VOICES OF POVERTY:

PERSPECTIVES OF ONE SCHOOL'S

STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND PARENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the challenges of poverty through the stories of students and their families in one Michigan elementary school. The goal was to explore the needs, challenges, and obstacles confronting children in poverty in a small Michigan town by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of low-income students and their parents/guardians. Two families and one teacher were interviewed in depth, using open-ended, semi-structured interview techniques. Two case studies were constructed from the content of the interviews, and key thematic findings that emerged revealed ongoing stress, fear, sadness, and frustration with which the children lived, as well as strong resilience and determination. These key themes are analyzed in relation to the effects of poverty on school children and their caregivers. The study concludes with recommendations for educators that could help low-income children succeed in school.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Background

Statement of Problem

As a teacher in an elementary school that serves a low income population in south-east Michigan, I work with children who spend every day facing the burdens of poverty. My colleagues and I often discuss among ourselves the students we see struggling with problems related to issues of poverty. We ask ourselves how we can best support these students, how we can provide a more level playing field that neither perpetuates nor heightens the challenges and disadvantages of poverty. We are, however, sometimes limited by our own middle-class backgrounds and perceptions, which necessarily skew our judgments. How does a school create and implement effective strategies and new programs to address poverty issues if educational leaders are not sensitized to the constraints and limitations children in poverty face? And, furthermore, how can teachers work to advocate for children in poverty?

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to better comprehend the challenges and supports present in one elementary school from the perspective of economically disadvantaged students and parents, and the educators with whom they work. I thought it important to explore feelings, perspectives, attitudes, and beliefs about support given and received in this school and this community. In order to do this, I interviewed a small sample of two students and two parents living in low-income families, and one teacher. These questions guided my study:

- What are the supports and opportunities that help poor and low-income students succeed in school?

- What factors do parents perceive helping or hindering the success of their children in school?

- To what degree, if any, are teachers prepared and/or willing to help economically disadvantaged children face challenges and realize success?

Background of Study

A report by Fass and Cauthen (2007), of the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), indicates that in 2006, a total of about 13 million of our nation's children, or 17%, lived below the poverty line, while 28 million, or 39%, were considered low-income. Taken together, these statistics show that nearly 40 million school-age children in this country live in income-stressed families (See Glossary). Lu and Koball (2003) point out that even living at double the poverty line is still a very difficult struggle.

Many researchers have looked at the ramifications of these social, emotional, and physical challenges that impacted the lives of children from all levels of poverty. When compared to children in more economically advantaged households, children whose families struggle economically face higher drop-out and retention rates, lower academic achievement, inferior physical and emotional health, higher rates of enrollment in special education, more contact with inexperienced and poorly trained teachers, and a higher rate of school absence and tardiness. Oftentimes, children of poverty must also deal with hunger, absence of heat and electricity in their homes, exposure to drugs and gun violence, and homelessness (Garbarino, 1995; Kozol, 1991; Polakow 1993, 2007).

As the previously mentioned research on poverty suggests, the challenges faced by our poor and low-income students can be devastating. Many theories have been put forth to explain the causes of unequal educational opportunities and successes. These will be discussed in the Literature Review. I hope my qualitative research will build on this previous research and also reveal the perspectives of those students and parents who are struggling in our community, as well as offer an in-depth understanding of their educational concerns. My research may provoke discussion, not only among my school's community but also among other communities facing these problems, as how best to encourage success for students in poverty.

Chapter Two: Literature Review and Critical Analysis

When we examine the lives of children, especially those living in poverty, it is helpful to look at how those lives are structured, what influences are brought to bear on them, making it inevitable that some will face daunting risk, while others will enjoy great opportunity. Garbarino (1992) does this by using an ecological perspective while Maeroff (1999), Putnam (2000), and Coleman (1988, 1990) cite the availability of social capital as a defining condition. Bourdieu (1977) and Lareau (2003) focus on the importance of cultural capital in determining how children are able to adjust to their culture's expectations. Bourdieu believes that institutions perpetuate inequities by imposing a state of inequality upon marginal students, whom they view as "different" from mainstream students. Anyon (2005) cites macroeconomic policy as a way to explain educational inequality. The ideas put forth by these researchers complement each other while emphasizing different basic principles.

The Ecological Perspective

In the Ecological Perspective, Garbarino provides a framework for analyzing the risks and opportunities that poor children encounter (Garbarino et al., 1992). He explains how differences in, and relationships between, children's contexts or social environments create unequal opportunities. Garbarino describes a human ecosystem framework that ranges from the smallest environments – *microsystems* - to the largest – *macrosystems* - and this framework also includes *mesosystems* and *exosystems*.

According to Garbarino (1992), the quality of these systems and the connections between them are capable of creating either risks or opportunities for children. Children exposed to high-risk environments, such as those whose families live near or below the poverty line, are most likely to face a future in which their physical, psychological, and cognitive growth is compromised (Garbarino et al., 1992). In order to assess the likelihood of either risk or opportunity in a child's life, Garbarino argues that children's development must always be understood as part of a complex ecosystem.

The *microsystem* is the most immediate setting for a child and would typically include the home, neighborhood, or school. A *microsystem's* participants might include teachers, family, neighbors, and friends. Also included are a myriad of objects, relationships, and experiences that exist or occur within these direct settings. The experiences and norms formed by the system become the cognitive map within which a child carries her perspectives of the world – for better or for worse (Garbarino et al., 1992). When a child's *microsystem* is too small (as in isolated, marginalized families), is imbalanced in terms of power (as in authoritarian and permissive households), or is negative (in the presence of abuse or neglect), her competence, self-esteem, and well-being suffer.

In this system's approach, the *mesosystem* includes the interactions or relationships between *microsystems*, such as those between home and school. Garbarino (1992) explained that these interactions have the most positive impact on children when settings are connected and have similar value systems. When children are able to easily transition from one *microsystem*, or setting, to the next and feel welcomed and appreciated by its members, a strong, supportive *mesosystem* is said to be in place. When there is strife or struggle between

system participants or an absence of connections altogether, the result is a breakdown in the *mesosystem* and in the development of child.

The *exosystem* refers to those factors over which children have no control, which often have a profound impact on their lives – either positively or negatively. Garbarino (1992) explained that *exosystem* risks usually stem from two basic areas: parent employment issues and structural/institutional policies. One example would be a case in which a child faces neglect or abuse as the result of a parent's stress over job loss. The parent may ignore or mistreat a child because of the pressures to find work and financially support his or her family. If the parent's employer decides to shut down one of its factories, the *exosystem* becomes a negative factor in the family's fate, decreasing opportunity and increasing risk in the child's life.

Policies, ideologies, programs, norms, and beliefs developed and held by the larger culture or subculture form a child's *macrosystem*. These are what Garbarino (1992) called "blueprints for the ecology of human development" (p. 27). A *macrosystem* that supports children and families and their positive interaction is considered to provide opportunity, while those that discourage successful family relationships and support are considered to increase risk. This larger, encompassing *macrosystem* filters through all the other systems in the ecological perspective of the human ecosystem and ultimately helps or hinders the *microsystem*.

Vorassi and Garbarino (2000) provided a framework for analyzing the risks and opportunities offered children, as well as providing insight as to how it is so important to offer less of the former and more of the latter. They argued that living in poverty creates socially toxic environments where an accumulation of risk factors occur.

Social Capital

Coleman began studying the inequalities in school systems in 1966 for the United States Office of Education (1990). He continues to study how inequalities in education arise from the institutions of school and family and the effects of social capital on student success. Coleman wrote that social capital (which he describes as relationships among people and networks) promotes the building of human capital, or knowledge and skills, needed to achieve academic success (1988).

Other researchers have also looked for reasons to explain and understand how economic inequality fosters missed opportunities and increased risk for failure in our schools. Some of this research cites a lack of social capital as a contributing factor. Many have suggested that social capital is an important educational concept. Coleman, Putnam, and Maeroff are three of the leading researchers in this area.

Social capital, as defined by Maeroff, is "the kind of support apparatus… that builds the networks and norms and engenders the trust that promotes academic success" (1999, p. ix). He suggests that an imbalance of social capital creates unequal educational opportunities for students, favoring economically advantaged children.

Maeroff (1999) further describes four main *senses* or characteristics of social capital. These are:

- A sense of connectedness
- A sense of well-being
- A sense of academic initiative
- A sense of knowledge

I used Maeroff's four senses as a guide in conducting the interviews in this study:

"A sense of connectedness" (p. 7) – refers to a feeling of belonging that comes from having relationships with family and community members who support academic goals.

"A sense of well-being" (p. 8) – suggests the degree to which one feels safe and cared for in a community that supports emotional and physical health.

"A sense of academic initiative" (p. 9) – shows that one has received the message that school is important – serious business – from adult role models who hold high academic expectations and provide opportunities for enrichment.

"A sense of knowing" (p. 9-10) – comes when a student discovers that having knowledge allows her to have more control over her future.

Maeroff suggestes that there is an imbalance in the amount of and access to social capital in this country. He believes this imbalance creates unequal educational opportunities for our students and favors economically advantaged children.

Maeroff definitely sees a need to intervene. He goes so far as to claim, "The effort – the struggle – to build social capital for poor children represents one of the most important endeavors in the country" (1999, p. 3). Like Coleman, Maeroff describes the power of relationships when he writes, "Of all the riches denied to disadvantaged children, perhaps the most important have to do with the absence of a network of support that would allow them to thrive in school" (p. 1).

In his book, *Bowling Alone,* (2000), Putnam describes social capital in terms similar to those used by Maeroff and Coleman. He writes that social capital shapes the lives of children and creates connections of trust and reciprocity within the child's social networks.

These connections provide opportunities that improve child development and chances for success.

These researchers describe some of the ways in which social capital provides a framework for looking at class and cultural differences in education. They believe social capital is an important measure for determining how middle and upper class students tend to succeed and poor and working class students tend to fail in American schools.

Cultural Capital

Bourdieu (1977) describe a concept he calls "cultural capital" (p. 490) or "cultural wealth" (p. 488), to help explain the relationship between human beings, institutions, and rules. The attainment of cultural capital gives one a sense of "place" in society, and sets expectations. This capital, once possessed, is passed from parent to child and thus maintained across generations. If a family has sufficient cultural capital, its children will succeed. The children of families lacking in cultural capital will inevitably fail. Educational institutions tend to maintain and reinforce this status quo (Bourdieu).

Cultural wealth, or capital, would include access to art, music, literature, and other attributes of enlightenment and privilege. Access to these attributes is usually necessarily limited in the lives of poor families, and this lack of cultural wealth is a primary factor that hinders children's ability to succeed. While children in poverty often resign themselves to academic failure, those with plentiful amounts of cultural capital rarely consider such a possibility. Anyon (2005) maintains that a lack of cultural capital becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: self-deprecation, low expectations, and cultural disconnection cause many poor children to assume that failure is inevitable.

Bourdieu (1977) sees a direct correlation between access to the artifacts of culture and academic success. He also maintains that, within the educational community, cultural capital is safeguarded by those who have it, including teachers and privileged students. Thus, unequal attention is given to students, based on a mismatch of values and social class as well as race.

Students whose cultural values and social class are in closest alignment to that of the teachers tend to be more likely to succeed. A status of initial inequality is forced upon students from poor or working class families (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu believes that the educational system conceals this fact: that it is perpetuating an inequality in cultural capital when poor children are treated differently.

Lareau (2003) narrowed in on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. In her study of middle and working class children, she found that children obtain capital differently and these differences limit or increase their attainment of acceptance and knowledge in society and, specifically, in school. The main difference is related to child and parent interactions. Middle-class interactions could be generalized by the term "concerted cultivation" (p. 2) : Parents have conversations with their children to engage thoughts, ideas, and opinions; parents organize numerous extracurricular activities where students interact with others, closely managing students' free time; children are encouraged to question adults and feel comfortable addressing them as equals (Lareau, 2003).

Because of these experiences and opportunities, middle class children tend to form a personal sense of entitlement (Lareau, 2003). They believe they deserve to succeed; in fact, they rarely question the possibility of failure. This causes them to gear activities toward their needs, ask for help, negotiate with teachers and others in power, and actively set and pursue

their goals. Their parents serve as good role models for these types of empowering actions, thus adding to their children's cultural capital. According to the study, students in middle-class families had opportunities to observe family members as they questioned, confronted, and held accountable those institutions and authority figures with whom they came in contact (Lareau, 2003). Lareau found that children of these parents were more likely to follow suit.

In contrast, Lareau (2003) found that working class and poor families' interactions could be described by "accomplishment of natural growth" (p. 3). Cultivating their offspring's talents and interests is not a top priority for these families. Their main concern is most often the everyday struggle to provide basic needs, like food, shelter, and clothing. These children are allowed to direct and control free time. Unlike middle class children, there is no negotiating between parent and child; working class and poor parents hold all the power and expect their children to do what they are told.

Lareau (2003) found that parents in many marginal families do not seek to engage, actively challenge, or support authority figures in schools. Their lack of empowerment means that their children are "unable to make the rules work in their favor nor did they obtain capital for adulthood" (2003, p. 7)

When poor and working class students interact with schools and other institutions, there is often a great disparity between their values and those of the teachers. The parents tend to be less aware of academic needs or problems and unlikely to support the schools' norms and values. Because of this value discrepancy, these students have a difficult time fitting in, and according to Lareau (2003), develop "a sense of constraint" (p. 6). For these students, access to cultural capital is limited, which, in turn, limits their academic success.

Economic Policy

Much like Garbarino's discussion of the impact of *macrosystems* on children, Anyon (2005) argued that inequality in schools grows out of the larger problem of macroeconomic policy. She stated that it is macroeconomic policy that creates disadvantages such as a lack of affordable housing, unemployment, low minimum wage, inequitable tax rates, and inadequate transportation. These, in turn, lead to increased hardships and burdens for families in poverty, who are disproportionately families of color. She suggested that no amount of school reform or support could ever make up for the damage done to poor families by the macroeconomy of the United States (Anyon). Polakow (1993) reinforced this emphasis on the role of economic policy in perpetuating poverty, arguing that children and mothers do not "fall into" poverty; they are instead "made poor by a state-constructed policy" (p. 44).

Anyon (2005) wrote that economic and social distress has the effect of preventing children from developing their full potential and compromising their physical and emotional well-being. When families are stressed and their children grow up poor, they are often disrespected by hospitals, schools, and other institutions. Not surprisingly, feelings of anger and shame are common. Physically (and emotionally) taxing are the absence of food, housing, and safe environments. All of these concerns can devastate poor families and make it hard, if not impossible, for them to show an interest in education and schools (Anyon, 2005).

Schools Connecting to Communities

Some school systems have sought alternatives to traditional schools when they saw that they were not meeting the changing needs of children in their community. Today, it is

not unusual for children to be homeless, arriving at school hungry, sleep-deprived, and inadequately dressed for the weather (Quint, 1994). Youth tend to face more physical and social challenges: unsafe neighborhoods, increasing homicide rates, inferior childcare, more profound poverty, access to drugs, limited access to medical care, and the heightening of stresses placed on families headed by a single parent (Kozol, 1991; Polakow, 1993, 2007; Vorrasi & Garbarino, 2000).

During past decades, schools have been looking for ways to better meet the needs of students from poor families – striving for flexibility, more choices, and new ideas. One such effort was the development of community and alternative schools. Some of these programs have been particularly innovative and successful, leading the way for other districts to evolve and improve.

During the 70s, educators were trying to create schools for children who were failing in traditional school settings. In East Harlem in 1974, educators knew they wanted to make a difference in the lives of their school families by initiating a plan for alternative schools. They hoped to improve the quality of a failing New York City school system (Fliegel, 1994). At the time, only 16 percent of "District Four's" children were reading at or above grade level, and ninth grade dropout rates were at 93 percent. In the new plan,

> Schools stressed safety and trust in their interactions between parents, teachers, and children. They successfully achieved this goal by creating an environment that could become an extension of the children's families, a place where both children and parents knew they would be accepted and nurtured, rather than judged. (Fliegel, 1994, p. 3)

Debbie Meier, the director of the four alternative elementary and secondary schools of Central Park East in New York City (Meier, 1995), and her staff stressed child-centered education – "education built around the abilities, interests, and needs of particular children, fortified by a loving environment" (Fliegel, 1994, p. 5). Parent involvement was also a focus of their school. Parents were informed of school events, educated in strategies to aid students in homework and projects, and encouraged to attend various parent-teacher meetings. The school believed it had to send out the message that Central Park East valued its parents' ideas and contributions. Teachers were given an important voice, encouraged to define their own missions instead of being dictated to from above, and allowed to make their classes their own without interruption from outside authorities (Fliegel; Meier, 1995). This policy of teacher ownership encouraged effort, input, and excitement. Teachers, parents, and students could all feel included in the mission of student success.

As a result, a small but growing number of school districts have emphasized the creation of community schools. The number of community schools has tripled in the last five years, totaling over a thousand (Dryfoos, 2002), as communities and educators have moved to support the direct link between a child's well-being and academic achievement (Pascopella, 2004). Supporters of this type of school believe that children's basic needs must be met before they can succeed academically. Placing all responsibility for a child's well-being and academic achievement solely on the school creates a heavy and often resented burden for the traditional school to bear (Dryfoos, 2002). The community school seeks to distribute responsibility and increase community involvement. According to Dryfoos (2002), "In these [community school] efforts, the primary responsibility for high-quality education

rests with school authorities, while the primary responsibility for *everything else* rests with the outside agencies" (p. 395).

In the Alliance Schools network in Texas, *everything else* appears in the form of on-site clinics to increase immunization rates and establish after-school programs to give the children a safe place to go at the end of the day (Hatch, 1998). Services delivered by agencies in the El Puente Community School in Santa Barbara, CA, include individual, group, crisis, and family counseling by the Council of Drug and Alcohol Fighting Back Program. In addition, each month the school honors "a student who has been able to turn his/her life around in a positive and productive way" with an award presented by the local Rotary Club (Molina, 2002, p. 19). All these efforts are being made in order to support the well-being of a child and to increase that child's chances of succeeding in school. Today, more and more schools are being built around this idea.

Recently, some schools have been redesigned to meet the needs of low-income and homeless families by creating solid connections between school, families, and the community. Maguire (2000) wrote about the Molly Stark School in Bennington, Vermont, where students living in poverty make up half of their K-6 population. Families at this school are offered access to a wide variety of free or low-cost services on the school site. Among them: before and after-school homework clubs and enrichment programs, dental visits, child care, parenting classes, mentoring, and an adult education center. This "full service school" demonstrates that the school community can offer an array of services and opportunities with the goal of strengthening families. Strong families are better able to support their children so that they become healthy, successful citizens. While school personnel recognize the importance of high standards and academic achievement, they also know that for many

children, good instruction alone is not enough. Poor school performance is often just a symptom of the larger problems that accompany poverty, such as poor health, hunger, inadequate child care, insufficient preschool programs, latchkey kids, and lack of homework support. The Molly Stark School demonstrates the belief that these problems must be addressed before school instruction will be truly effective.

Quint (1995) wrote about the Benjamin Franklin Day Elementary School (B. F. Day) in Seattle, in which Carole Williams, the school's principal, created a school environment that addressed the needs of all its children. She focused particularly on those homeless students who had gone virtually unnoticed, even by her, for many years. These were children without a sufficient amount of food and clothing living in cars, under bridges, and in garages. Williams encouraged teachers to look beyond their own realities and examine the world through the eyes of its students and parents by visiting students at "home" and in shelters. This created more personal connection to their students – a "special bond" – that fostered a true desire to eradicate social injustice and strive for academic excellence. By connecting itself with the community and tapping into its human and financial resources, the school offered opportunities to aid and empower its families. They created "a transition room" where homeless students could rest, eat, and talk after a night "on the streets," after-school tutoring, access to clothes and school supplies, and working with a building owner to fill vacant apartments with homeless families.

Dryfoos, Pascopella, Fliegel, Maguire, and Hatch are researchers whose perspectives provided a framework for looking at how schools can support economically and socially disadvantaged children who are struggling to succeed in American schools.

Summary

It is clear from the research that children in poverty are at great risk for educational failure. Several concepts including social and cultural capital, the ecological perspective, and macroeconomic policy are used to explain the complex social and economic interactions that form the structures of poor children's lives. By understanding and applying these concepts and action plans that have been developed by various community school and urban reform networks, educators can begin to advocate for and support students' rights to an education that improves their life chances and enhances their educational opportunities.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Critical Perspective

It is important for teachers to be able to understand the realities of their students' lives and, in these cases, the realities of the lives of their poor students. It is even more important for them to remember that when examining the lives of the poor, they may be very different than their own, usually middle-class, experiences and perspectives. Critical theorists emphasize a need for us to become more aware of how one's ideas are grounded in such things as race, gender, socioeconomic status, and spiritual beliefs, to name a few. Vorrasi and Garbarino refer to these and other characteristics as "a social map drawn by life" (2000, p. 23). The critical perspective, which Patricia Hinchey (2004) calls *critical consciousness*, describes the importance of looking at the realities of our poor families as different and worthy of value, not deficient. Hinchey writes:

> Most importantly, developing critical consciousness involves accepting that ideas about what is normal, or right, or good, are the products of life experience rather than universal laws. It is normal to value education if your life experience offers evidence that education is a route to success; however, it is equally normal, however much teachers may want to discount or bemoan the fact, to scorn education if your life experience offers evidence that for others like you, education has proven a dead end. (p. 25)

The benefit of applying the critical perspective is that it challenges teachers and administrators to move away from blaming student failure on family circumstances and to begin to examine their own social biases and shortcomings in their teaching methods that do

not consider and address the students' reality (Sleeter, 1995). Hinchey (2004) supports the complexity of this "repositioning of perspective" (Sleeter, p. 417) and warns that it can be a threatening process to challenge long-held beliefs and attitudes, "especially the beliefs that America provides everyone with equal opportunity and that people ultimately reap no more and no less than they have earned" (Hinchey, p. 25). People with a mainstream perspective, such as many teachers have, often believe they have succeeded on their own merits. For them, "accepting that success might depend on anything other than personal merit means they must at least consider the possibility that their own success is due not only to their own merit but also to cultural bias in their favor" (Hinchey, p. 25).

Both Sleeter and Hinchey were influenced by the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator who argued that educators should engage in a critical decoding of reality *with* their students, leading to a transformation of the educational process and, ultimately, to social transformation (Freire, 1970). Writing about any oppressed group, Freire said, "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for liberation, the oppressed must first perceive the reality of their oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit – but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (p. 49). It is the responsibility of educators to guide their students to an understanding of possible transformations. He wrote that it may be difficult for individuals to recognize themselves as oppressors, but once they do they may be inclined to make a "radical" change and form a solidarity with the oppressed, "fighting at their side," to liberate them from societal oppression.

Later, Freire (1992) wrote that a "progressive educator" must be willing to reach out to the student empathically with words and actions that are culturally appropriate; for "Unless educators expose themselves to the popular culture across the board, their discourse

will hardly be heard by anyone but themselves. Not only will it be lost, and inoperative, it may actually reinforce popular dependency…" (p. 107).

I employed this critical perspective as I listened to the narratives of the families and the educator in this study – to look at their realities and perspectives and question how a community or a school system or even just one teacher could help free them from their "limit situation" and enlarge and enrich their lives. If we simply look at a child and say "they don't come from a good environment," we "can destroy the very relationship with parents or caregivers that a teacher is trying to create" (Ametea & West-Olatunji, 2007, p. 84). Blaming of the victim still exists in schools today. Polakow argues that deficit perceptions are pervasive and that poor children are rarely seen as "children of promise"; instead, their "poverty is frequently condemned as the fault of their parents' immorality, irresponsibility, drug habits, or dependence on social services" (1993, p. 107). Polakow also addresses the need for educators to develop a critical analysis of the failure of the educational system to serve the needs of poor children, before labeling such children and their parents as dysfunctional families.

The point of the critical perspective is not to look at poor families as "victims, cases, or objects" (Greene, 1978, p. 97) but as individuals with strengths brought from their homes and communities that are different from middle-class norms. When we focus on these strengths we can create classroom instruction, activities, and opportunities that will be more meaningful to the students (Ametea & West-Olatunji, 2007).

Design and Type of Study

The focus of this inquiry is to explore the support for children in poverty as it pertains to one Michigan school, through the experiences of two families and one teacher, which makes qualitative research the appropriate approach for this work. Using a theoretical framework influenced by a critical perspective, I examined the participants' own words and stories in order to create a clearer and more authentic picture of the benefits and obstacles experienced in the school setting. "Qualitative research...examines people's words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants" (Maycut and Morehouse, 1994, p. 2).

More specifically, I used the in-depth interviewing process to explore the different perspectives of each participant. In-depth interviewing allows the qualitative researcher to "understand the meaning people make of their lives from their own experience. The in-depth interview takes seriously the notion that people are experts on their own experience and so best able to report how they experienced a particular event or phenomenon" (Darlington and Scott, 2002, p. 48). I believe this qualitative approach best supported my study and allowed it to be presented and understood through the voices and perspectives of the selected students, parents, and educators.

Conceptually, these voices matter because they reflect a larger body of work in a smaller, more personalized setting. Schram (2003) suggested that, "Making a case for how and why your idea matters relative to a specific body of knowledge is the essence of constructing a conceptual context" (p. 47). More importantly, the results are likely to be valuable to the school and its children as it adds to our knowledge base about educating our poor children.

This research was conducted in an elementary school in a southeast Michigan town over a 3-4 month period. The school is located in a small community with a population of about 5,500. The elementary school contains grades 3, 4, and 5 and has 511 students. Twenty-five percent of the student population receives free or reduced lunches. The demographics of the school are 86% white, 9% African American, 2.5% Hispanic, and 2.5% other.

I focused on the school in which I teach, in order to explore how effectively we are supporting the needs of our children living in low-income or poverty level families. Looking at issues from the perspectives of those most affected, I implemented "backyard research."

One of the benefits of backyard research is that I am familiar with the potential student participants, having had them in my classroom. In addition, one of the mothers in this study works for the school system and I often interact with her. There are other benefits as well. Access to participants was more readily available, and some rapport had already been established (Glesne, 2006). According to Fontana and Frey (1998), rapport is an important part of the in-depth interview and allows for a deeper understanding of the respondents as well as seeing their perspective. Fontana and Frey cautioned that this rapport may become problematic, "as the researcher may become a spokesperson for the group studied, losing his or her distance and objectivity" (p. 60).

However, Peshkin (1988) encouraged researchers not to ignore their subjectivity, but to recognize their feelings and be aware of how it shapes their "inquiry and its outcomes" (p. 17). In this way, researchers can manage bias and avoid interjecting their subjectivity into their work. As a teacher and researcher I had to be aware that I could find myself defensive about negative comments directed at my profession, which could deprive my study of

valuable information. Similar to one of Peshkin's related experiences (1988), at times I found myself overwhelmed with empathy and outrage about my respondents' situations, but I had to temper those feelings so that the their "voices" could be heard.

There are some additional disadvantages to backyard research. Participants, unable to discern between my role as teacher and that of researcher, may have been reluctant to answer honestly, or may have been trying unconsciously to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. In knowing some participants well, the interviewer runs the risk of losing neutrality. Therefore, it may be difficult to have a "balance rapport" somewhere between "casual and friendly" and "directive and impersonal" expected in some qualitative research (Fontana & Fray, 1998, p. 52). I tried to counteract this problem by being careful not to insert my opinion into the interview process and by asking questions that did not reflect judgment on my part, only the desire to hear their voices and opinions. I tried to move from the role of teacher to that of researcher, encouraging them to share experiences they might not share with me in a formal school setting. I asked questions that showed my respect for their lives and an interest in what they had to say.

Purposive sampling was used to identify students, parents, and teachers for participation in this study. All participation was voluntary. I chose my family participants for this study because I had some idea of their economic situation and felt they would fit its low income criteria. The participants included one fifth grade female and her mother, and another fifth grade female and her female guardian. I also included input from a special education teacher who had worked extensively with low income families. The ethnicity of the participants were as follows: the guardian was African American and her fifth grader had a

Caucasian mother and a African American father. The remaining participants were Caucasian.

During our interviews, I asked my subjects to discuss their experiences and perceptions, including their views on what helps or hinders a child's success in school. The small sample size has the benefit of providing the opportunity for an in-depth look at a small number of participants. While larger samples may offer a broader range of issues and understanding, they may only skim the surface, allowing for minimal depth of questioning and less rich response data.

Data Gathering Procedures and Implementation

I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews, allowing the participants to elaborate on areas and topics that were important to them. During these interviews, I addressed and raised questions about a number of issues, using the "Four Senses" as described by Maeroff (1999) as a general guideline:

- A sense of connectedness: Do you have a sense of belonging or of having ties to your community?

- A sense of well-being: Do you feel healthy physically and emotionally? Do you feel safe at home and/or in school? Do you feel picked on? When you don't feel well or safe, do you have someone or some place to go for help, and a way to get there?

- A sense of academic initiative: What expectations are placed on you or do you place on yourself in terms of academic achievement – present and future?

- A sense of social knowledge and depth of social experience: what opportunities have you had to travel, learn about other environments, or be intellectually stimulated; how would you use your knowledge in the future?

The time and place of the interviews occurred at the convenience of the participants. Kelly, a fifth-grade student who lives with her guardian, was interviewed in her classroom during two thirty-minute lunch periods. Kim, a fifth grade student whose mother works for the school district, was interviewed in her classroom for an hour after school. When I met Jan, Kelly's guardian, at her home, she came outside to greet me and asked if we could conduct the interview in my car. We drove to a private area where we spoke for two and one-half hours. Raquel, Kim's mother, and I met at a restaurant and her interview lasted for two hours. Marci, the special education teacher, spoke with me in my classroom for one and one-half hours.

The interviews were tape-recorded to ensure that participants' views and comments were retained in their entirety. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were used to analyze interview content and look for patterns and themes related to the educational supports and limitations found in this school. I took notes during and immediately after the interview.

Field notes were written after each interview to capture any immediate thoughts or observations that were important to review and consider. This was to ensure that observations were not forgotten or lost if too much time passed between the interviews and reflections of the interview. I kept a reflective research journal as I conducted interviews (Glesne, 2006). Reflective notes were written before and after interviews. This allowed me to recognize my

own perspectives on issues of children in poverty and to reflect on my experiences and thoughts as they surfaced.

Measures to Insure Safety and Confidentiality for Human Subjects

Confidentiality of the participants was taken seriously. I submitted and received approval for student research involving human subjects from The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (see Appendix A). Subjects were asked to read and sign consent forms, including the following information and protections:

- All participants will be given pseudonyms and any information that may lead to the identification of the participants will be altered to protect anonymity.

- Any information will be confidential and any taped interviews will be kept in a locked drawer in my office.

- If any participant would like to exit the study at any time, they may – no questions asked.

- Participants may choose not to answer any questions or comment on any topics with which they are uncomfortable. They may also choose to stop a particular interview at any time - no questions asked.

No interviews were conducted until consent forms (see Appendix B) were signed. Before a child was interviewed, the child and the parent or guardian of that child gave permission through a signed consent form. Separate interview questions and consent forms for children were in "child-friendly" language.

Data Analysis

I used a triangulation approach for my study – using multiple resources to reveal multiple perspectives. I conducted interviews with two children, their (two) parents and one teacher in the same school. According to Glesne (2006), the triangulation method will "counteract the threats to validity" and "increase confidence in research findings" (p. 36) in a qualitative study.

I reviewed field notes and read and reread transcriptions of the interviews to analyze and develop themes revealed in the research. First, I went through the transcript to color-code and highlight information by discrete attributes. I began grouping and regrouping the attributes across participants into broader themes, until I found five or six that described the families' differences and commonalities. These themes became the structure for both the family stories and thematic analysis sections.

This qualitative methodological approach provided the basis for my investigation into the adequacy of support structures for children in poverty and gave a voice to my participants. Families living in poverty deserve to have their voices heard – loudly and clearly – by their educators. I hope to use my research to begin discussions with administrators and teachers in my school district. I would like to increase their awareness of the perspectives of some of our students, parents, and teachers whose lives are touched by poverty, either directly or indirectly. This research will also highlight how important it is for teachers to remain alert to their own unconscious attitudes regarding at-risk students.

Chapter Four: Kelly and Jan – Struggling to Succeed

In this chapter I will focus on the experiences and perceptions of Kelly, a fifth-grade child who receives special education services, and her guardian, Jan. In addition, Jan's perceptions about her relationships with school personnel affecting both Kelly and Steve (her other foster child) are discussed. Marci, a special education teacher consultant, also shares her views regarding the needs of students.

Introducing the Family

Kelly is a fifth grader who receives special education services for a learning disability. Her birth father is African American; her birth mother is Caucasian. She is in a regular education classroom for about 75% of the day and is pulled out of the classroom the other 25% of the day to attend small group classes for reading and math. Kelly lives with her African American guardian, Jan. Jan is an energetic, upbeat woman in her sixties who does not hesitate to assist anyone who needs her help. She is a guardian both to ten-year-old Kelly and to a teenage boy, Steve. She also cares for elderly people (two at the time of the interview) who cannot afford nursing home care. Jan earns a modest income as a caregiver and she stays home to give all her charges her full attention. The home is in a fairly remote rural area, away from city amenities.

Jan began caring for Kelly when she was an infant – in fact, Kelly calls her guardian "Mommy." Kelly's birth mother was facing criminal charges for drug possession at that time. Kelly has never met her father. At the time of this interview, Kelly's birth mother, Susan, was trying to regain custody of her daughter. In the past, Jan has allowed Susan and Kelly to

spend time together, but within the past year that has changed. Susan has become increasingly antagonistic and disruptive. There have been several "incidents" during her visits, and Jan has had to ask Susan to leave. Conflicted, Jan wishes Susan and Kelly could have a relationship but believes Susan is again using drugs and should not be around Kelly.

Thwarted Hopes and Dreams for Kelly

> *"When I say, 'Mom (referring to her birth mother), I'm home,' then she always pushes me away…she only hugs me when she feels like it." (Kelly)*

Jan has good intentions for Kelly, wanting her to do well in school, feel cared for, and be spared the pitfalls she believes threaten many low income young women – drugs, teen pregnancy, violence, and dropping out of school. Kelly, herself, wants to do well in school and worries about her lack of success there. She also feels confused and distracted by the struggles between her mother and her guardian and longs for a normal family of her own, which would include a sober mother, as well as a father and siblings.

One of Jan's biggest concerns is that she is not always able to shelter Kelly from the false hopes her mother holds out. Susan tries to win Kelly over with promises of providing her with her "dream" family. Jan explains,

> We go through all of this all the time: Susan wants Kelly to have a daddy, she wants Kelly to have a brother and she'll come up with these stories, and now Kelly is bringing that to me. Now I gotta sit down and tell [Kelly] the truth and I don't like to do that…and it's hard…by then Kelly's confused again and [Kelly says to Jan], "Oh I've got a brother! [My mom] says I have a brother! His name is "such-in-such!" It's not true, you know. So, I just tell her, "Look, you have one brother and that's Steve,"

and they're close, and that's it – [Jan tells Kelly], "Stop letting your mom upset you with this kind of stuff." So then she'll be okay for a while. Then it's cool.

But even though Jan tries to set her straight, the "stories" of family definitely leave Kelly sad and distraught. During our interview there is an interaction between us that illustrates her strong desire to believe in and know her family:

Kelly: Can I show you something that I have?

Kristen: Sure.

Kelly removes from her backpack a small photo album she "made all by herself."

Kelly: *(Showing me the first picture)* This is my mom when she's happy 'cuz she

            wants to go see her sister and everything.

Kristen: Is she happy very often?

Kelly: No, not really, but this is on my birthday, on my ninth birthday, and my family

            came to visit, but my grandma and grandpa didn't, but the rest of my family

            came. *(Showing another picture)* That's my Aunt Candice, Uncle Danny, and

            that's my Uncle Louis.

Kristen: Do you see them very often?

Kelly: They don't come out in the country much.

            She continues through her album, never taking her eyes off the photos.

Kristen: Did you live with Jan at this time? But you got to go on a visit for your

            birthday?

Kelly: Yeah… *[She continues quickly, not wanting my questions to interrupt her*

            presentation] This sort of got ripped *(showing a badly torn picture of her*

mother) – there are pictures of her in our living room but this sort of got ripped in half and I couldn't find the other piece to it.

Kristen: Did you put this [photo album] together?

Kelly: Yeah, see that's [Susan's] sister…[Susan] looks sort of happy there…she got her hair cut…she used to have long beautiful hair and everything and she sorta just cut it a completely new hair cut…her sister [cut it]. But this is some family *(showing more pictures)* …see I never knew I had…it was Tammy, Denise, Dana…

Kristen: You didn't know they were part of your family?

Kelly: *(Excitedly)* No, and then my mom just showed 'em to me and said they were my family. See that's my _mother_! (She smiles and stresses the word mother as she points to her picture.)

As Kelly shows me the photos I am keenly aware of her pride and the animation in her voice, two qualities I seldom have a chance to witness. Her narration is focused on the details of her family pictures: how her mother is "happy" in some of them, the way her mother's hair is cut, Kelly excitedly naming each and every one of her family members as if to reaffirm to herself that they exist, that she does have a real family.

But Kelly is not naive. Although she dreams of the happy world the pictures create for her, she is uncomfortably aware of the way her mother makes her feel during her visits. She knows that, because her mother is seeking custody of her, she could have ulterior motives for telling these "stories." Also, she has had many experiences that tell her this may not be in her own best interest.

Immediately after showing off her photo album, Kelly begins to speak, imagining life with her mother. She says sadly,

But my mom's just tellin' me stuff like "you're gonna come live with me" and everything. But the thing is, now that they talked it over with me and thought about it, it just seems like she wants [me] to come live with her and at some point she gets tired and she invites her friends and she just pushes me away and says, "Was I supposed to feed somebody or somethin'?"

Kelly senses that her mother only says she wants them to live together for the moment, but that she will ultimately neglect and disappoint her. She acknowledges that if Susan somehow did gain custody, she would probably say, "Never mind," and leave Kelly feeling rejected once again. She sees "the long road" with her mother as a difficult one. She describes a past scenario, one she fears "will just happen all over again" if she lives with her mom:

"When I say, 'Mom, I'm home,' and she always pushes me away, like I say, 'Hi mom, I did a good job at school,' and then she just pushes me away and everything. But then when she wants to say, 'Oh you did such a good job at school,' and she'll have to hug me and stuff…but she only hugs me when she feels like it."

Kelly's Difficult Choices

Kelly thinks her mother's drug use is the main cause for all Kelly's disappointing experiences with rejection and erratic behavior. Susan "being high" is a possibility for which neither Jan nor Kelly have any tolerance.

Kelly is always conscious of her mother's ongoing struggles with drugs. She also shows an uncomfortably clear understanding of the direct impact Susan's drug use has had on her own health. Kelly ascribes her difficulties with learning in school to her mom's drug use. "My mom, she did drugs, she got high when, before I was born. It sorta gave me, like my brain just sorta got damaged and everything."

Jan explains that Susan was on drugs when Kelly was born and considers Kelly a "drug baby." Steve, she says, is also a "drug baby" from another mother and along with their learning disabilities, Jan has great concern about their susceptibility to drugs and other mental heath issues they may have inherited. For Kelly and Steve, she explains,

> It's gonna be hard, because it's in their system. You take Steve: it wouldn't take him
> but a minute to get started on drugs or alcohol. It's in the egg. From the egg it's there,
> you know. Same thing with Kelly.

Jan is wary of putting Kelly on too many medications for fear she might, "…come to like it and then it'll be something else. And her mom is schizophrenic and bi-polar and all that…"

Jan hopes that Kelly's knowledge of her mother's dependence on drugs and the way she acts under their influence will discourage Kelly from ever trying drugs. Jan hopes Kelly will make the right decision about which "path to follow" and whom to make her "role model," a decision Jan herself remembers making as a young adult:

> Knowing Susan and drugs and lookin' at her… if Kelly keeps all this in her mind and
> remembers what she went through with Susan, then maybe she'll never go that way.
> And I always said I had two lives because I lived with my aunt who raised me and we
> had city life…and I lived with my mother… (describes life in the rural area.) I'm the
> only child…my mother ran around with 'this man and that man' and my aunt and my

uncle were home and all they did was work, so, what do you do? You think about it: now do I want to be like my aunt and uncle or do I want to be like my mother…right? And I feel we all should be able…I always say, if you're satisfied with yourself, if you know yourself, if you know who you are, then you can make it through life. So, I wanted to be like my aunt and my uncle. It didn't matter what my mother did, you know?

Kelly has to face difficult choices every time Susan and Jan put her in the middle of their disputes. Kelly's loyalty to each woman is tested as she listens to each side. Jan calls Susan's stories "nonsense," explaining to Kelly that Susan's promises of a family are just empty words. According to Kelly, her mother degrades Jan, saying, 'You're gonna live with me'… 'we'll have a good time'…she makes all this talk about, like she makes Jan seem like she's a bad person and everything, cuz [Jan's] puttin' all that stuff in my head." Susan also tells Kelly that Jan steals her money. Kelly is caught between the words and worlds of two women and is often asked to take sides, which is difficult for the child who wants love and acceptance from both.

Interestingly, no matter how many mistakes Susan makes or how many times she hurts Jan and Kelly, it is clear that neither of them wants to give up on her. Jan claims sadly, "She's (Susan) livin' her life, whatever she does, she's the one that's gotta pay for it. Not me. All I can do, when she need me, be there for her and do the best I can. Cuz this is what the Bible says." And Kelly's wish for the near future? "I just want my mom to get better."

Jan's Efforts to Maximize Kelly's School Experiences

While Jan says she feels comfortable and welcomed in her children's school, she still struggles as she tries to work with the school for the benefit of her kids. Clearly, though, she is not shy about asking for what she needs, as she shows in this statement: "...I'm not ashamed to say… I need some help. I'm concerned about what you [teachers] do for me. And that's it – the important part - and for my two kids."

Jan knows she is lucky to have the time and ability to communicate with her children's teachers and realizes that this is not always the norm. In some areas, lines of communication between school and home are not always open. She refers to the stresses of poverty, and a downtrodden workforce/economy, as part of the problem. Jan questions,

> But how many working parents can talk like that 'cuz all they can think about is their job on the line and keepin' a roof over their kids head and this and that? Most of 'em you can't call at work. It doesn't mean they don't care, it's just the way life is today. I'm blessed I don't have to work, you know, for an income, it's my choice to take care of people, be a caregiver, and so this is what I work at, so this gives me a chance to be home with my children and in on everything.

When I ask Jan about her social and academic concerns for Kelly in school, her response is clear and focused on the academic. Above all, Jan wants Kelly to graduate from high school. She is convinced that if more attention is not paid to helping Kelly in the lower grades, she will never see graduation.

> Right now I'm not worried about the social part. If she get enough nicks and bumps, she'll learn that in life. I'm solely worried about her education. And, by the time Kelly get to be 16, because she's had a hard time back here [in lower grades] is she

gonna want to drop out? That's why so many drop out now – because if she can't learn in smaller grades, it's too late, by the time they get into junior high, you can't say they ever forgot because they never did know.

Jan believes we cannot blame children for not being able to do well in school if they were just passed from grade to grade without ever learning the content. She wants the school to focus on helping Kelly now, making sure she masters the basics – the building blocks she needs to be successful as she proceeds in school.

Kelly, too, reflects her guardian's goals and values about school. She wants to do well in school and believes it's important to graduate from high school. She says she likes school activities and her friends, and believes she is making good grades (even though she's falling behind in many subjects). Kelly thinks both her teacher and TA (teacher's assistant) are supportive and that her TA "makes reading fun."

In response to a question about whether she receives enough help from school, Kelly shares her feelings of being overwhelmed, saying: "Yes, but, like, I'm wondering, how can I keep my mind off of 'stuff?'" For Kelly, the 'stuff' she is referring to is her troubled family situation, indicating that she also needs help focusing on school work in order to succeed in school— help, one could argue, she should be getting without having to ask for it.

Jan discusses Kelly's inability to focus as well, believing Kelly exhibits many of those qualities common to children born to drug addicted mothers – the inability to take direction, the need for small specific steps and instructions, the inability to focus, being easily distracted – all of which inhibit her ability to perform in the regular classroom. One-on-one sessions and/or small group work in a resource room (e.g., a room separate from the

regular education classroom and specifically designated for special education instruction) are suggestions she feels would help with Kelly's education.

> I think a lot of time you have to get into…you have to try to get that kid to open up… you see? How many kids you [the teacher] got right now? 28? There's no way you can give Kelly that extra [time and help], you don't have the time when you got that many kids. Kelly needs the one-on-one for her math…that is her biggest thing. Her mind is on what she's doing, but the minute, let's see, [there is the slightest distraction] …she's gone. She's forgotten and it's hard to get her focus back on what she was doing. So I feel that if she had the one-on-one part…or like when Steve went [where] they had three or four kids in a room at one time (a Resource Room), and you know, maybe this is what she needs to open up because she might feel these fewer kids are in the same place where she's at having the same problems. Maybe she'd open up.

Jan suggests that Kelly might feel academically inferior to other students, which could be a cause for her low self-confidence, thus keeping her from succeeding in her classes. She believes that in a room with children on her same academic level, Kelly would feel more confident and "open up" academically, more willing and able to learn.

Helping with her homework is a source of tension for Jan and Kelly. Jan has enrolled Kelly in a Morning Help program sponsored by the district. In this program, high school students work with elementary students, helping them with their studies. The high school students receive academic credit for their work. Kelly must get up at about 5:30 AM to arrive at her tutoring program by 7:00 AM. This is very early and a difficult task for Kelly and Jan, but Jan will try anything that helps Kelly with her schoolwork. Unfortunately, Jan senses a

breakdown between herself, the regular education teacher, the high school tutor. She offers the following after-school scene as an example: "I sit down. [Kelly] tells me what the problem is. I tell her what the answer is. [But] she cannot remember what you had said in school. I get the answer for her, but she say, 'But Mommy, it's not right, but mommy, the teacher…,'– 'well what did the teacher tell you?' [Jan asks] – she [Kelly] can't tell me."

   Jan reports that she writes notes to Kelly's teachers explaining the difficulty of math assignments and the confusion faced at home. She finally concedes to Kelly, "'I cannot help you, you don't want to listen, so I'm gonna write your teacher, or you ask your tutor,' but she don't wanna ask her tutor - and that might be another reason why she's not getting [the help she needs] in the morning [program.]"

   According to Jan, Kelly has been taught so many different strategies, she seems to have become confused about how to complete her work accurately. There is no continuity in Kelly's instruction and she is unclear about expectations. If Kelly is uncomfortable asking her tutor for help, this tutoring program is not helping her accomplish her educational goals. Jan tells me that she believes a student's teachers can be great resources for each other. They should be using each other's experiences, talking among themselves to best deal with a "needy" student or a student with whom they are struggling.

   As part of the special education program, Kelly has a regular education teacher, a teaching assistant (working with her and three other students in the regular education classroom), and a special education teacher who works with her every day for about 25% of the day. She believes that her teachers are important because, "They make sure that I'm learning…not just saying, 'Oh, you didn't get this problem right, you'll get it sooner or later.' They make sure that I get the problem right and that I understand it." Kelly says that she is

"getting good grades," and doing well in school. Then she explains that she wants to do well in order to graduate one day, but she faces some obstacles.

> It's just sort of hard…I'd really like school to be easy, but I don't just know how to take my mind off of stuff. It seems like I'm doing well, but at sometimes I just think about it, and it just comes back cuz at anytime I get off the bus or I see people with their moms and dads and everything; it puts me in a bad mood.

The "it" that distracts and saddens Kelly is her longing for a mom, a dad, and the imaginary family her mother holds out for her. This emotional turmoil coupled with her struggle to learn often gets in the way of her ability to focus in school. Everywhere she turns, she is faced with the ways in which she is different and disadvantaged. And the background tape in her mind contains an unfortunate constant in her life: the conflict between her guardian and her birth mother. Her mother's unreliability, empty promises, and rejection combine to keep hope out of her reach.

Supports for the Future

When I ask Jan about goals for the future, Jan's responses are different for the two children. She replies that Steve is artistic and his teachers support his dreams of becoming a cartoonist or a chef. Jan offers advice about what is important for a successful future, saying, "If you could get into the comics like the Detroit News or Free Press and if they like your drawing, then they'll hire you for every week." However, while Steve's future dreams appear to be supported by both Jan and his teacher, the future for Kelly is unclear. Jan worries about this. "When I ask her she say, 'I don't know, I don't know.' She don't know what she wants."

When Kelly is questioned about her hopes for the future, she explains the reason for her uncertainty, "I just think about now because now the decisions aren't really good and everything. So, I just think about it now, like, what's going to happen tomorrow and if I'll ever see my mom." The decisions and struggles facing Kelly today and in the "now" are what Kelly believes she needs to focus on. The future will have to wait. An inability to set goals for a successful and happy future could be Kelly's downfall, according to Jan. Lack of self-confidence in school, the desire for a caring mother and a father figure, and the possibility of "drugs on every corner" are reasons for leaving school.

The upcoming summer months are also a concern for Kelly. She will be making the move from elementary school to middle school. "I don't want to leave [elementary school]. People say, 'I just want to let go of elementary school and leave [out] the doors!'" But Kelly does not share their feelings adding, "They might bring something up [in middle school] and then I can't remember…it's like *three months* of summer vacation!" To Kelly, those three months out of school may cause her to forget all that she has worked so hard to learn. Her anxiety is clear and yet it also demonstrates a strong desire to do well and succeed in school.

Kelly still has some contact with one of her mother's ex-boyfriends who, Kelly says, "Takes me shopping once in a while – he always calls to make sure I'm okay." She adds that this man who is like a "real dad" makes her feel "safe." She mentions wanting to live with this "dad" and wishes that he and her mom would get back together.

Jan explains her worries about Kelly's wish for a father: "You gotta take a look at the way life is today…drugs in the system, you know. You look at these girls everyday and by not havin' a daddy these girls grow up and [go with] the first guy come along that says nice things to 'em. Bad! They're in trouble. They're all lookin' for their daddy. Now, that's my

worry." Jan describes the "breakdown" of the family structure, temptation, and loneliness as threats to our students:

> You see that happenin' every day… a lot of these girls is out here on the street…a lot of time… I'll say young kids today…that I see the problem. Most parents is workin'…most of 'em is gone when the kids get up or gone shortly after – kids go to school by themselves, come home, there's nobody home. On Friday when parents get paid, throw 'em some money like "here take this and go." They'll start lookin' and learnin' things, 'cuz you can bet drugs is out there just waitin' on every corner – "here just try this…" – being their life like it is anyway, most of 'em tell you they're lonely. It's hard because it used to be the mother's place was at home – but that's no more. And if the kid didn't act right, "I'm gonna tell your dad." Most dads are not [like] that [anymore.] Most parents don't want to hear it or mother don't want to hear it she get home. It's somethin' else!

When I question the need to help this type of family and the children through the school system, she cautions, "You can [try], but the parents is not gonna let you." She continues, describing the importance of offering help that is not invasive or judgmental and that asks families to work together, with educators, to help students at risk. Jan believes that schools can succeed at this task if they make an effort to work with the parents so that both groups "really get to know each other." If the school system encourages parents to get closer to the educational community, they will all "really get to know each other." Only then will parents accept help.

She backs up her belief by describing the change in our relationship, which happened just by sitting down and talking – getting to know each other:

"You wouldn't know as much about me without 'hearsay,' but now you feel closer to me, that you know me…you can say that you know me, but you didn't yesterday… so you'd feel comfortable to come to me with a problem…or 'let's help this kid' or 'what do you think we could do?' When you deal with people you sit back and you can understand a little bit more even from the conversation, watchin' the way they do things, or, or, whatever…and whether you can even get in there or not [to help]. Like I said, a lot of people feel they've got so much to hide and they can't, they can't open up, so how's a kid gonna open up…they're not used to…they're not used to opening up. The only way you can really raise these is together…one way or the other…parents and parents…teachers and parents…"

Would Counseling Help Kelly?

Initially, Jan says that her only concern for Kelly is her education. But later, in describing her concern that Kelly needs more emotional support, she discusses the benefits and opportunities of counseling for kids.

Maybe [counseling] might be something that you might [do for] children like Kelly. They used to send [schoolchildren needing counseling] to church over there in X-town. If it were one day a month or one day of the week that they took a little bit of time and had time to talk to the kids and see what's goin' on. I think [years ago] they did have counseling more than they do now. Everybody's so busy…there's so much goin' on…where do [we] fit it in at…?

Jan realizes the overwhelming curricular expectation of schools these days and wonders how counseling could fit into the schedule. She continues to discuss the support that

"having someone to talk to" offers all ages. "If you feel that you have somebody that you can talk to, it means a lot. Being black, too, we didn't used to believe in counseling, but I say everybody has problems, we all need it. Young or old, we all need to talk to somebody."

Jan even considers the idea of "swapping" the academic tutoring program for a counseling session.

> I'm not one to say anything, [but] if there was counseling, that would be a good idea. Maybe for that hour counseling [instead of] the buddy. I'm sure there's plenty more like them [kids that need counseling.] Maybe if you just started with the few. Then if they [the kids] get to open up… then you help…give [teachers] a chance to ask, 'Can we help you with that?"

Kelly mentions that she has spoken to her school counselor about her feelings in the past. Jan acknowledges her awareness of Kelly's need to be heard. She says that she tries to provide opportunities at home for Kelly to talk. "I made her promise, if anything she wanna talk about, just let me know and we will talk…and we do plenty of that." Jan tells Kelly, "What you think is a big thing, it might be a little thing, so let's always talk about it." She says she tries to make Kelly understand that even if what she is feeling is a "big thing," in other words, overwhelming, Kelly can talk to her. Jan wants Kelly to know that she is there to help her deal with her issues – make them feel "small" and manageable.

Diplomacy and Difficult Teachers

During one part of our interview, Jan tells an interesting story about her dealings with a particularly troublesome teacher, Ms. Kay, and the social worker (the only one in the district) who came to her aid. Jan was trying to help Kelly with her schoolwork but did not understand the teacher's expectations. She came to the school for clarification. Ms. Kay made Jan feel that she was "supposed to know this, that, and the other – like I was supposed to have all the knowledge to help Kelly – and I didn't. I thought the teacher just seemed to act like she was more than everybody else."

Ever resourceful and feeling empowered, Jan enlisted the aid of the social worker to get the information she needed to help Kelly with her school homework. Jan explains, "[The social worker] would go to [Ms. Kay] and say, 'Let me see how you do it,' and then [the social worker] would show me."

Jan also believes that if you do not receive help from the first person you ask, you need to keep asking – especially in this district. She has faith that *someone* will eventually help her. "I never give it a second thought because I know I have other support at school. If one won't do, another one will. I wasn't really worried about, her, 'cuz I knew if I had a problem I could talk to [the social worker], which I did."

Now Jan is concerned about a "new teacher" who was too quick to judge her foster child, Steve, without looking into Steve's background and without speaking with the principal and other teachers who know him – all things she believes should be done. "You cannot come in after a week and know what Steve or any other [special needs] kid is like. I feel you as a teacher has got to take some time out, check the papers, see how they're writing, see how they doin' the math, and how this one's doin' from that one." Jan notes that some African American parents may have considered this a race issue, adding, "I could have

said, (in a low, make-believe voice), 'Here goes this white teacher now. He wants to start some trouble with Steve.' But we're not goin' there. Color ain't got nothin' to do with it."

But Jan has some strategies for people, including teachers, who make her feel uncomfortable or frustrated in this way. First, Jan relies on her belief that showing people respect is the way you get your needs met. "I don't care who you talkin' to, [you are] supposed to talk with respect…but people expect you to scream and yell, and whatever you need or you wanted, you're not gonna get cuz you're acting up."

Teacher-consultant for Special Education, Marci, provides another point of view, more in line with Jan's unhappy experience with an unwelcoming teacher.

I think in many cases, school is the place where [parents] always get bad news: their kids are in trouble, they're not doing well in school, so it's not a place they want to come because it's usually a negative experience. The other thing is that I think there are some parents who know they may not be as well educated as other parents or as financially well off, and they just don't feel comfortable here. I don't think it's always what [teachers] do, but a lot of it is just their perception that they don't feel like school is a place where they belong. It's sad, because it should be.

She strongly advocates, as Jan suggested, creating a school environment in which parents do not feel judged.

Marci continues,

I think it's hard because, here again, a lot of those people don't have telephones or work and aren't available during the day, but I think that a personal contact saying that we want them to come in and help us with 'this' would be less intimidating than saying 'we're having a meeting next Thursday night at seven [to have a discussion

about negative aspects of their child].' Inviting parents to participate would have a positive impact on the school and provide them with a more optimistic vision of their 'place' in the school. I think it would also encourage more constructive relationships between parents and school personnel.

Despite these negative experiences, Jan believes that it is important that the child only see and hear the parent and teacher "working together." Speaking about the experience, Jan explains,

I really don't like to feel that way; I don't want to feel that way…because like I said, before, in front of the kids, regardless, the teacher is right. I might get on the phone or I might come to school and you and I really go at it about what's goin' on or how I feel…but as long as the kids…as long as you don't let that child know, they can never get between you and I (parent and teacher). The only way you can really raise these [children] is together…one way or the other…parents and parents…teachers and parents…

Kelly's Complicated Young Life

As a young girl on the brink of womanhood, Kelly has many strikes against her, but she was given a strong and caring guardian early in life, who has stuck by her. Jan seems to be a dedicated advocate, determined to help her charges when they need intervention, yet always keeping in mind the need for them to become independent. It is clear that Jan loves Kelly. It also appears that Kelly loves Jan and feels that Jan cares for her and wants what is best for her. The other quandaries in Kelly's life - her drug-addicted mother, her learning disabilities, her longing for a "regular" family - are out of everyone's control. So Jan does the

best she can to nurture Kelly (despite the fact that she is caring for several others who need her attention), to make Kelly strong, and to keep Kelly safe from the toxic influence of her mother.

Kelly would be greatly helped and her worries and feelings of inadequacy diminished if the system – the schools, community and policy-makers – made a wide array of educational, social, and psychological services and supports available to her as rights she could expect and depend on, for as a low-income child she continues to struggle with multiple psychological and educational difficulties. What she needs is adequate tutoring, readily-available counseling, strong peer friendships, and caring family relationships. Sad and isolated, Kelly should instead be protected by a social safety net that is always there for her whenever she falls. Jan does the best she can as a guardian. She tries to work with the school to help her children, she encourages her children to be academically diligent and respectful of school personnel, and she shows impressive wisdom in many of her efforts. Still, we might ask why it is she has to work so hard to get the help she and her children need.

Chapter Five: Kim and Raquel - Determined to Make It

This chapter will focus on the life experiences of Kim, a low-income, Caucasian, fifth-grade student facing the release of her father from prison – an event weighing heavily on her mind. Kim also has a teen-age brother, Dale. The perceptions of Kim's mother, Raquel, a single mother, are also incorporated in this chapter as Raquel's determination to hide her family's financial struggles, keep the children from feeling the pinch of poverty, and enrich their lives have all shaped Kim's developing identity.

Raquel and Her Children

Raquel is a divorced mother in her early 40's. For our interview, she agreed to meet me at a restaurant near her home. She knows I want to talk to her about her feelings, struggles, and experiences living as a single parent in severe economic hardship. I have also asked her to discuss how the stress of the family's impoverishment affects her children. I worry that Raquel might be reluctant to discuss issues of poverty with me, but she doesn't show any hesitation in speaking frankly to me. When we discuss her willingness to talk about her experiences, she shares her hope that her insights might help others in her situation. She would also like her story to provide a better understanding to people in her community who have never been faced with her struggles. Last, she said she thought she would like to try to break down some prejudices held by community members who come in contact with poor families during the performance of their jobs.

Raquel has a 10-year-old daughter, Kim, and a son, Dale, who is an eighth-grader. Her children have attended school in the community since kindergarten. For this study, I

interviewed Raquel and Kim, focusing specifically on their experiences trying to get by on Raquel's income – an income range that puts them in the category of "low income." But monetary issues are not the only concern for this family. They are also trying to adapt to the return and reintroduction of Raquel's ex-husband (and the children's father) into their lives. He has just been released from prison, having served two and one-half years for driving under the influence.

The interviews reveal lives lived in fear, shame, and guilt; fear of not being able to make it in the world without a safety net, shame rooted in their reduced financial and family status, and guilt that they bear some responsibility for their dire straits. However, their stories also reveal feelings of pride and hope as they push forward to fulfill their dreams and those of the family as a whole. We learn how Raquel and Kim confront their struggles and experience subsequent results of sometimes failure and sometimes success. The context of these struggles focuses the spotlight on the community's schools and school staffs, their friends and families, and other state and local social systems. Their stories suggest to us what is working well and where we need to improve.

Setting Difficult Priorities

 "I want them to try things and make something of themselves." (Raquel)

Raquel grew up in a home where there was never enough money for her or her siblings to participate in school activities like "sports or band," and despite her own lack of money today, she does not want the same for her children. She explains the importance of these experiences:

I think a lot of it is because I didn't get to do it … I didn't get to experience anything

like that and I think it shelters your life somewhat…I think it shelters your life, they

don't get to try different things, and learn what's really valuable, so you're kinda

stuck in your own little world all the time. But I feel it's just important for them to not

do what I did.

Raquel is convinced that not experiencing these extracurricular activities puts young people

at a disadvantage and that it could lead to children "running the streets," something she

definitely does not want for her children. So, Raquel found a way to enroll Kim in dance

classes. She encouraged Dale to join Boy Scouts and swim on the school swim team. It is

clear that she is proud of her children and their achievements. She is especially pleased to see

them having opportunities and experiences that she wasn't able to have herself. She places a

high value on her children learning skills she could never have provided for them on her

own.

Dale has done a lot with scouting which has been great for him because he's

experienced a lot of things I never would have introduced him to…he swims and I'm

not a swimmer…I don't know how to swim…so for him to be able to swim and be on

the swim team – that's great. It's an individual thing for him that he likes to do rather

than a team sport and feel good about himself for doing it. Kim is in dance – I'm not a

dancer, you know, and she's great at it…she really likes it. It gets her around kids her

age, challenges herself … it's great.

In this explanation, Raquel shows how highly she values the confidence, sense of

ambition, and connections to peers that extracurricular activities offer her children. As she

continues on this theme, she describes how she pushes her children to get involved. "…I've

always told [my kids] that they need to do something. You know, they're not gonna just sit at home and be little hermits…But try *something*. They're involved in things with school, it draws them closer to school and that's important."

Raquel sees a direct link between involvement in sports and dance and peer group influence, which she believes enhances her children's connection to school in a positive way. Raquel admits that some of these opportunities come at a price. She often speaks of "sacrificing" her needs for the sake of her kids. "When I look at my kids today…I'll go without so they can do sports or band," she explains. Because of these priorities, Raquel says that she would rather "go without" than have her children "sheltered at home with me since I don't do a lot of those [activities]."

It is surprising that, considering their financial difficulties, Raquel has money to put towards dance classes and Scouting. When asked about this, she reveals that, as with most aspects of their lives, weighing spending priorities is a delicate balancing act, laced with difficult choices.

> It costs a lot to do those things but when they do them through the school, or whatever, they still get to experience it…I also don't have the money to put into [activities], you know, Scouting and dance are pretty expensive. But you can pick and choose what you want to do. We've done that, too. You don't have to do it all, all at one time.

Raquel then explains how she was able to provide her children with opportunities:

> 'My shoes are fine' you know, let 'em go – or we don't buy fancy things…I cut corners at grocery stores…you buy stuff on sale…I always shop the bargain rack. And also I would say I'm pretty good with budgeting my money and making sure it

goes in the right spots. But that's been hard, too…If you don't have (money), you've

gotta decide which bill to pay first, but you know, you just, I just put a little aside

each time. …so we're lookin' at what we *really* need. I save whatever [I can] and I

don't get fancy clothes, you know?

Decisions such as whether or not to pay a bill or buy shoes for herself or pay for a

"chance of a lifetime" opportunity for her son are commonplace for Raquel. She does not

believe everyone would agree with or follow her "go without" attitude, "People look at it

different though…I don't think everyone would do that." She says that people may think that

she works hard so she should buy some things for herself, too. But according to Raquel, she

cannot do that and as she says, "Kids come first. 'There will be a time for me,' is the way I

look at it." Raquel has clearly set her priorities and they are to keep doing the best she can to

help her children succeed in school and life. From that she does not waver.

Keeping up Appearances vs. Facing Reality

Raquel works hard and makes sacrifices to provide her children with positive

experiences outside of school that will help them make friendships and connections at school.

But she does not necessarily want her children to know about those sacrifices. Raquel would

rather not tell them that she sometimes pays bills late so they can go to a dance class or

Scouts. As she speaks of this, she admits to having feelings of guilt because she believes she

is responsible for their poverty; that, in some way, she has failed her family.

I don't think my kids will ever realize how much they either have had to do without

or what I had to do without to get them to that point. You know there's certain things

you just don't tell them. But, that's just…I feel like I've put them there [in poverty]

and it's my responsibility to help them, guide them…teaching them responsibility and

doing for themselves, too, I think is a big part of it…

Raquel worries that, as Kim and Dale get older, they are starting to notice what their

friends have that she cannot afford to buy. She sees this as an opportunity "to teach her

children responsibility and doing for themselves," including encouraging them to work for

things they wish to have. Raquel says,

I think they've had to grow up a little to learn the value of money. You know all your

friends have this and that and whatever…like a cell phone…cell phone's been a big

issue…Well, you know, it's an extra monthly payment…they look at the $9.99 you

can get [the phone for]…no, you have to make a payment and the plan is so many

minutes, so is it necessary? No. It's hard because I want them to have those things,

too, but does that make them a better person? I don't know. I've seen kids that have a

lot of things... they don't respect things, and I want my kids growing up knowing that

either I had to work for that or they have to work for that…do some chores…help me

out.

Raquel explains that she hopes her children's pride over being able to buy their own things

will outweigh their jealousy towards peers who have things their family cannot afford. Still,

you can hear her sense of guilt. She feels bad that her children have to buy things for

themselves and guilty that her kids have to face poverty and her divorce.

Raquel says she is more comfortable being honest with her children about their

financial situation as they get older, but she worries about Kim, who is still in elementary

school.

I think as a parent I try to hide those things from them…but if you talk to an

elementary student and say, 'Well, we can't afford it,' you know…what does that do

to their self-esteem? And [my kids] say, 'What do you mean we can't afford it? You

just go out and buy it. Use your credit card. Go to the bank. Get some money.' They

don't have a clue. So, once they get older, you can open that up a little bit.

Even though it is getting harder to hide her inadequate income from her own children,

she continues to try to conceal it from everyone else. When Raquel is asked whether she

thinks she and her children are ever treated differently because they are financially needy,

she replies that she is "good at covering things up," because she does not want to be treated

differently. Raquel has many strategies for "keeping up appearances" so that no one will

notice they are poor:

Well, you know, I don't always want people to know that I don't have money or that I

can't give my kids what they need or that we're struggling so bad...so you know, if

we can find things, like blue jeans for instance, I will find them on sale and buy ten

pairs at a time, or buy a similar shoe but maybe it's a little different, just so

that…'I'm dressed like everybody else is.' For me, being clean [is important]. Just

because you're poor doesn't mean you have to be dirty, so "not noticeable to" people

I guess.

Not being "noticeably" poor is something Raquel admits she thinks about "all the time."

I like my yard being clean and well cut and all that stuff – [neighbors] don't need to

know that maybe you don't fertilize but you cut it more often so it looks like there's

no weeds. You know what I mean? It's hard to explain. It's embarrassing, I guess, to

not have some things, and so to make it known to people? No. I'm pretty good at: 'I

can do this on my own and I'll do whatever it takes.'

But, the family's financial struggles are beginning to be noticed by others. Raquel has mixed emotions when other people offer help for her family. At one point, she admits to being too proud. But as their financial health situation worsens, she says she has learned to accept the help of others.

I've been given things anonymously before and, if anything, it makes me mad

because I can't, number one, thank that person. It doesn't give me the satisfaction of

being able to say 'thank you' or whatever, and at the same time I'm grateful. Don't

get me wrong, but it's like, 'Did I do something now that they know [I'm poor]?

This statement seems to reflect Raquel's feeling of guilt because she has not successfully "kept up appearances."

When asked if she sometimes does accept gifts (of money, etc.) from others, Raquel explains,

At one point I would have said, "No." At some point you're too proud, you know,

thinking, "I don't need it, I'll do without it," but I've gone through enough low points

where, yeah, [I will accept help]. Then maybe someday I can pay them back

somehow. Maybe it's not financially, maybe it's doing a favor, or visiting them

somewhere or something – maybe [when] they're having a low time or something.

It's the way I kinda look at it. I mean, sure, there are times when you say, "Oh my

God, I've got to pay this person back? And this person?" Somehow I feel like I have

to return the favor.

Asking for help can be even more difficult. Raquel cites situations where she sees others abuse charity, taking more than they deserve or need. In her eyes, that only makes it hard for her to look for support. She is worried that she will look greedy:

For some people, it's not an issue. If someone asked them if they needed somethin' they'll be, 'Yeah, I'll take this.' I've also seen the side where people are takin' and takin' and takin' and it's like you know, they don't even look grateful, you know, where does that end? People just continuously do that…that just aggravates me.

I ask Raquel if there is a way to make it more comfortable for those in poverty to ask for help or if there is a better way for others to offer help – perhaps through the school. Raquel initially replies that she hasn't ever considered it before. After some reflection, she comes up with some ideas. She suggests that a school staff/parent group might organize a place for people to have access to items that have been donated. She worries about designating such a place as being available for poor people only, saying that going there would embarrass her. In her reluctance to appear 'needy," Raquel thinks it would be much better if it could be a "broader" invitation issued to the entire school community which would then reach those in need, as well.

Not Such "Human" Services

One of Raquel's past experiences reveals the source of some of her shame, guilt, and frustration, especially around accepting or asking for help. It occurred at the state assistance office.

I know that I've tried [to get help]. Things were really bad for me and I tried to get assistance by the state and they always make you feel like you're the low man on the

totem pole. [They treat you like] you didn't do anything for yourself so that's why you're here and I mean it's like you make too much money to become eligible for certain things but yet if you look at where you are financially, you're at poverty level in our state…but you can't get financial help for it because you make too much.

Raquel is referring to the catch-22 that dogs the working poor. It is a no-win situation because she can't qualify for assistance from the state unless she is working. However, if her job offers no benefits and doesn't pay a living wage, yet exceeds a certain extremely low, pre-set amount for her family size, she still fails to qualify for assistance. This can happen to her, even though she falls at, below, or near the poverty level. As Raquel sums it up, "The law prevents people from trying harder because they're just going to say, 'okay, fine, if I quit my job and don't have that income, I can get some help from the state and be better off."

Raquel does not feel that information is readily available to her or others living in poverty and that the way she is treated when she goes to state assistance agencies discourages her from seeking help.

Even when help is available, Raquel has a difficult time accepting medical aid on the state's terms – following their rules and regulations. She explains, "You can get dental help, but you have to go to certain dentists and you know, it's a driving issue again, you gotta go wherever they pick for you to go. I'm comfortable with who I pick out and not who they pick out for me. So, I chose to pay, myself…get a payment plan and do what you can to pay…you know, extra if you can." Raquel would rather struggle financially to pay to go to a dentist she trusts whose office is near her home, than go to an unfamiliar dentist far away.

Raquel does not receive medical insurance from her secretarial job. Kim and Dale are covered through Medicaid; Raquel is only partially covered. "I mean, right now they're [Kim

and Dale] on Medicaid and so doctor's visits are pretty much free, prescriptions for them are free…but not for me…I mean I'm not on Medicaid for all my prescriptions. I have to pay for any preventative check-ups I do."

There is also the fear that if a medical emergency required care for Raquel it would financially devastate her family, "If medically something…now with them I'm okay… Medicaid would step in and pay for [her children]…but if something happened to me…that would set me back big time to pay for a hospital bill or something." Raquel keeps her life in a very fragile and delicate financial balance. One unexpected bill could send them into devastation. She describes the constant worries and decisions she faces as she tries to keep the balance stable:

> If something happens with the hot water heater, I don't know…how do I get a new water heater? Um, the car was a major decision because – how do I pay for it? Do I buy a clunker and hope it lasts or do I buy a better car and pay on it but then I don't have to worry about breaking down? You know, everyday…everyday issues. What do you spend your money on first? [You spend it on] what's necessary at the time and go from there.

After relating her problems with balancing her life decisions, Raquel makes it clear that she is not sure what help she is qualified to receive. She questions, almost to herself, "I don't know, can I get state help [for her bills]? I don't know." When I ask her if she feels informed about what she's entitled to in the way of aid, she answers, "Oh no, [and] if you don't know, they don't tell you. It's bad enough that when you go into [the state aid office] they make you feel bad just for asking for help."

Kim's "Not Whole" Family

While Kim's relationship with her mother and brother are strong, in her mind, her family is definitely not whole. Regarding her family, one problem takes precedence over all others in her mind. Her father was recently released from prison, having served a sentence for drunk driving charges. "He has 'drunkin' drive a few times," she explains. "The first time he promised he wouldn't do it again, but he did." Kim says that her mom advised her to "talk to a counselor and teacher about anything that I needed to tell" because "they usually know what to do about things like this."

Raquel explains, "[Kim's father] was gone for 2 ½ years, and [Kim's] only ten now. Really a year to a year-and-a-half before that he wasn't really in the picture much. So really, since she was probably about five is when she's been without him there." Kim has found it difficult to get used to her father's presence in her life after such a long absence. "At first I felt like I didn't know [my dad] and then I got to know him a little more. When he first got back I barely knew him. It felt like he was someone who'd been gone my whole life and I just now met him and knew that he was my dad." Raquel, anticipating Kim's feelings, said, "Now with Kim, when she first seen her dad again she thought things were gonna be just like they were and I think…it's like she's uncomfortable with a male role model 'cus she's not had one since she was little."

The Daddy/Daughter dance at school evokes a special sadness Kim. Once, because Kim was unable to attend when her father was in jail, she mentions the comment of one of her peers: "[One girl] said, 'Well I think it's really funny because most families have a whole family,' but I said, 'that's not true.'" Kim goes on to explain that her father's imprisonment makes her uncomfortable in certain social situations. She believes the subject might instigate

teasing and gossip. Kim describes her discomfort surrounding the "Daddy-Daughter Dance,"
a school-organized event where fathers take their daughters to a dance.

> When the Daddy-Daughter Dance comes around and the note goes home I usually
> keep it to myself. There are times I don't want other people laughing at me and stuff
> because they get to go and I don't. Well, 'cuz some people, they kind of make fun,
> like, when the Daddy-Daughter Dance comes around, they always get to go and they
> come back and say they had a fun time and I say "I didn't get to go," and they always
> laugh about it and they think it's funny I didn't get to go and they got to go.

She admits that when the note is passed out, "she keeps it to herself and then throws it away."
Kim says that this event is "hard" for her and makes her feel "bad."

Kim's apparent yearning to have a father to take her to the Daddy-Daughter Dance
does not necessarily mean she is enthusiastic about her dad re-entering her life. Kim
describes how her life and her ability to trust her father changed after his first and subsequent
drunk driving charges.

> …my mom got a divorce after the first time (he was arrested) because she knew it
> would just completely ruin our lives if he kept coming back and staying with us and
> he (was arrested) again and it kind of ruined most of our life because we (thought) he
> wouldn't do it again, 'cuz he promised…and he did it again. I keep telling my mom I
> don't even know if I can trust him again."

Kim admits she is "really worried" about her father's release from prison and the time she
will be expected to spend with him.

Although Kim reports that she is comfortable going to her mom to discuss her
feelings, she finds herself beginning to question Raquel's judgment.

Well, she had told us a few months ago that [my dad] had smoked and drank and he

drove a lot before but I don't think he ever got caught and she married him and stuff.

I asked her why she (married him) 'cuz she knew he was doing the things he was

doing. I'm just really confused because why would you get married with a guy that's

drinking and driving and smoking? And my brother might have a little case of asthma

because my dad has smoked all of his life and he was like 8 or 9 when my dad went

away.

Raquel's past decisions have also caused Kim to doubt and even fear any future

decisions Raquel may make concerning men.

I was hoping that when I got older I would still have a dad in the house, but after

what's happened, my mom's not really tried to go out and date again and I don't think

she should at this rate. I don't think she could really help herself if they had

something worse than what my dad did.

Raquel does fear her choices have negatively affected her daughter, noting, "If you

asked Kim right now if she was going to get married, [she'd say], 'Heck, no!' Is it because

she's seen what I went through?" Raquel recognizes her guidance and choices have made a

significant impact on her children. When asked who *she* turned to for emotional support, she

named her family, friends, and co-workers as her support network. She noted, however, that

even with those supports, the absence of her husband put important decisions regarding her

children entirely on her shoulders.

Well, a lot of families are two-parent families…I'm not and her father is in a situation

where I don't trust him enough to be able to really ask his opinion on things 'cuz he's

got a totally different opinion on things. So, you know it's, I have to take that chance

that I made the right decision, and I talk to my family and I talk to friends …I have a very good support group I think…there are people at school that are very supportive of me…my family's been there a lot…through thick and thin…they've helped me out even a lot so I don't have a problem asking them for their opinion… but still it's my decision in the end, no matter what…

Kim at School

Kim feels comfortable performing in the academic world of school. However, she is off-balance and untrusting in the social world because of her family secrets.

Raquel and Kim describe Kim's school experiences as they discuss their feelings about Kim's education. Raquel is happy with Kim's schooling "up to this point" (5th grade). She believes that Kim has had support and if [Kim] needed to ask a question… "she's felt comfortable enough to ask and get an answer." She's not so sure about middle school, as she adds, "though in the elementary schools, if they need help, they get help."

Kim agrees that she is comfortable getting help for herself and notices that other students receive help from the teacher, too. She is quite confident about her ability to learn new things. She reports that "I have a tendency to always learn a thing right after [it's taught]. But…other people have trouble, and it's really cool how [our teacher] helps them…instead of having other (kids) around them help them and [takes] time with the whole class and go over [the lesson]."

Kim has confidence in all school subjects and notes that if she has trouble learning something, her teachers have advised her to "study more, take her time, and read over [the material] a few times" when she is completing her schoolwork. With reading she says that,

"Sometimes with some words I need a little help" but again, reaffirming, "but most times I don't need much help because I get it right when [it's taught]." Kim claims that her academic confidence has increased over the years, claiming, "Well, in other grades and at the beginning of the year it was a little hard, but now that I've understood it, it's a lot easier. It's easier to learn."

Kim adds that she receives help with schoolwork from home, too. She seeks out assistance from her mother and brother at home explaining, "My mom usually helps me understand and my brother helps me figure it out – they both do something different." This support suggests a family who values a good education. Raquel says that she makes this value clear, "I stress education and doing well in school to them. [Getting an education] is something they need to do and they both do it well. We work hard at it at home. Homework is first."

While Kim does well academically in school and looks forward to her future, she spends a lot of time worrying about her family secret and she does not know to whom she can safely reveal her feelings about the secret. Raquel sees Kim's need for social supports and looks for solutions to help her daughter.

Raquel has searched, both in the school and community, for resources that might offer Kim positive experiences with male role models. Raquel reports that her requests for male teachers for Kim had been met in the past. When asked what she hopes a male role model might provide, she replies, "[he] would not always [show] that compassionate side, maybe…be a little firmer…just have a different viewpoint." Referring specifically to herself, she adds, "What *I* think might be the right way could be a more mothering type of thing, where the male might think, 'venture out a little more, do this, do that.'"

Kim's school offers a mentoring program in which elementary-aged children are paired up with a high school student. The intent is to help boost self-esteem and establish positive relationships with respected others. This program, however, is primarily reserved for children in the Special Education program, of which Kim is not a part. Raquel notes that perhaps students like her daughter, who are not educationally challenged, could still benefit greatly in this type of "friendship" program. She assumes that her daughter does not fit the "stereotype" of a child in need of a role model, so she is overlooked. Raquel admits that perhaps, she has not pursued or advocated this resource for Kim enough.

Both Kim and Raquel agree that Kim feels comfortable talking to one of the school's counselors and some of her teachers. However, Kim steers clear of discussions with her friends about her father. Taking her mother's advice, Kim is cautious when discussing her feelings about her father. She fears her peer group might consider her father's prison time a "really good secret" that needed to be told. She is understandably reluctant to trust her friends. Kim explains,

Well, my mom doesn't want me telling a bunch of people so I only tell two people. I figured out that one of my friends almost told somebody else and I told them a few times to don't tell anybody else 'cuz they might not listen and tell other people and then the whole school might know and I don't want that to happen.

Looking Toward the Future

Raquel has some concerns and suggestions to improve the quality of education. She believes that smaller class sizes would offer students more individual time with their teachers and ensure that they have a good rapport and feel safe asking for help. She also believes that

children should enjoy school. She says, "If you like school and learning is made enjoyable, you don't even realize you're working. I think it's great."

Raquel's concerns focus on her belief that when students arrive in the upper grades they do not receive as much support and are promoted from grade to grade whether they have learned the required curriculum or not. The stakes are high for her family in this situation because she sees success in the upper grades as an important gateway to scholarships for college. "I don't think I was driven in the right direction. Back then (when Raquel was in high school) you could make it without going to college. Today I don't think it's possible. I feel that if my kids have a good education up to the point where they go to college…they can get scholarships and if they really truly want to go, then we're gonna do it."

Kim tells me that she "thinks about becoming a teacher or a dance teacher." Her views on attending college are mixed. She explains, "Well, my mom got a good job and she didn't go to college. But I want to go to college and get a good education so I could always find a job that I want. I have been to dance a lot and I know how to teach and make up things. Being a teacher might take a little longer than being a dance teacher."

The probability that Kim and Dale may have to pay most of their own way through college is one that Raquel believes might deter her children from seeking post-secondary school education. Raquel was deterred from attending college because of a lack of resources. Still, she thinks she would have been successful. It is also an idea that leads to more choices and considerations.

> Paying for [college] on your own…that's a big scary thing [if] you have to pay for college on your own. You don't even know what you want to do, so you kinda fall into the work force scene. I'm trying to figure out how to pay for [my children's

college]. [The money] is always going to be a factor…and hopefully [the kids] would also take that responsibility and work part-time or something. At some point, I guess it's that peer pressure again. [Her kids might think] "All my friends are goin' to college – what if I can't afford it?"

Raquel hopes this way of thinking might lead to a sense of initiative for Kim and Dale to start saving money (for college). She adds, "That's hard. It's upsetting that my kids always have to struggle to do those things."

Resilience and Fighting Shame

Raquel is starting to open up to others and is becoming more comfortable asking her friends and extended family for help, which should ease her feelings of fighting an uphill battle. However, she describes going to great lengths to make her children "feel like everybody else" and wants desperately to give them more chances at success than she had. She also struggles mightily with the social stigma of neediness, trying to maintain an appearance that her family is middle class, which, of course, they are not. Her feelings reflect her acute awareness of the negative attitudes held by society toward the poor, which only adds more stress to her life. In addition, she feels responsible for her family's plight and trapped by her efforts to mask her poverty and make up to her children for her personal mistakes.

While Kim may not talk of her family's financial struggles (perhaps because her mother has been successful in hiding them), she does disclose her emotional struggles with a few people. As she faces disappointment, dishonesty, and cruelty from her father and friends, she is cautious with those around her, choosing carefully whom she will trust. And although

she is close to her mother – and proud of Raquel's position at the school – she does at times question Raquel's judgment and some of her life choices.

Through it all, Kim seems to enjoy being academically challenged at school and is a competent and successful student. Yet she struggles with complex social-emotional issues that shadow her daily life. Her resilience appears to be rooted in her mother's strong drive and push towards academic success. However, many aspects of Kim's life remain problematic. In order to foster all aspects of Kim's development and that of students like her, schools might directly provide free group or individual counseling and mentoring programs, as well as extracurricular activities that foster creativity. At the very least, schools could provide information about and access to free or affordable counseling for students' families.

Chapter Six: Thematic Analysis: Building Social Capital

Both girls are in need of emotional supports to help them in school, and both mothers look for ways to help them find that school support, academically and emotionally. For Kelly, the academic support is needed more, as she struggles to succeed to keep up with the rest of her classmates, while Kim thrives academically. Kim gets emotional support from her mother and brother but Kelly's home situation is more unstable. The occasional presence of a drug-addicted mother in her life constantly reminds Kelly of what she is missing and keeps her unsettled. The shame of having a father in jail adds stress to Kim's life and inhibits her ability to form supportive relationships with friends. Building social capital would have positive effects on the lives of these families.

Themes that emerged from the case studies of the two families include school connections, entitlement vs. shame, academic expectations, family connections, and evidence of the resilience in the two girls.

School Connections

All members of the families interviewed for this study had a relatively high comfort level with their school environment: administrators, teachers, and educational support staff. Still, Jan remarked that she sometimes had to fight battles with teaching staff in order to get help for Kelly. And Kelly, because of her learning difficulties and low self-confidence, could not avoid feeling depressed and isolated.

Kelly reports that she likes her teachers and sees them as supportive adults who want to help her learn. Jan, with her upbeat personality and the wisdom of age, is quite

comfortable contacting school personnel and asking for help when she thinks Kelly needs help with her studies. Overall, she speaks highly of a school principal, a social worker, and several teachers who have worked with her to help Kelly in with her school work. She says she has had a few negative encounters, one in particular that annoyed her, when a teacher implied that she was inadequately prepared to help Kelly with her homework. This, however, does not seem to diminish her belief in the public school system or deter her from seeking help wherever she can find it. Jan is sure that if she does not get the help she needs the first time she asks, she will get it the next time. When one door closes, she looks for another to open, and one usually does.

Kim and Raquel also speak positively about the school system. Kim does well in school and thinks her teachers are helpful. As with Jan, teachers and principals have made themselves available to Raquel and she believes her daughter is getting a strong elementary school education. The principals have been receptive to her requests for classroom placements. As a parent and a school employee, Raquel feels comfortable and respected in the school community. Still, Raquel is not comfortable asking for help when it comes to revealing her financial vulnerability; she finds it embarrassing. This suggests that it is important to make services available as an entitlement to low-income parents so that they do not have to ask for that help.

While Raquel struggles with the cost, she considers extra-curricular activities to be highly important in the lives of her children and does what she can to finance a few activities, even if it means giving up other "necessities." Swimming, Boy Scouts, and dance classes provide her children with ties to the community and school. In her view, when they make friends and feel proud of their accomplishments, they have a better overall sense of belonging – to a

team, to a group, to a school, to a community, and even to their place in the world. Raquel strongly believes that their involvement and success in these activities has made them more successful academically.

A study by Joseph Mahoney and Robert B. Cairns (1997) supports Raquel's beliefs. Extra-curricular activities in areas of academics, performance arts, and sports are shown to decrease drop-out rates and increase student-school connections, especially for marginalized students. Another study by Daley and Leahy (2003) suggests that extra-curricular activities increase positive perceptions of self and "physical activity outside of lessons has beneficial consequences for their mental health, which might ultimately lead to positive transfer to other aspects of their lives" (p. 16). In his interview with a freshman English and theater teacher, Kozol (1991) showed the impact of acting and theater on one student, who returned to classes after dropping out. The teacher recounted,

> He had no confidence in his ability. Then he began to act. He memorized the part of Pyramus. Then he played Sebastian in *The Tempest*. He had a photographic memory. Amazing! He will graduate, I hope, this June. Now, if we didn't have that theater program, you have got to ask if Carlos would have stayed in school. (p. 101-102)

Kelly does not participate in these types of activities. Instead, she says that she spends time with her brother, Steve, and has few friends. Jan worries about Kelly's lack of friends, but thinks this will pass and Kelly will be fine in the long run. The early morning tutoring program was designed to help students like Kelly improve academically, but due to lack of communication and clear expectations, this did not happen and the tutoring program was cancelled. Kelly and Jan were left with their needs unmet, frustrated and confused. In addition, summer is a troublesome time for Kelly. She worries that over the three long

months she will forget a lot of what she has learned over the course of the school year. Kelly is afraid she will enter the next school year far behind her peers. Unfortunately, past attempts to provide enriching summer school and before and after school programs have met with failure due to inadequate funding or poor implementation. Until funding is available, there needs to be a formal plan in place to organize more volunteer participation and fund-raising, as well as community outreach to help us support our students who struggle.

Entitlement vs. Shame

Determined to find the "other door" when one closes – forging on for help even when she is turned down the first time – reflects not only Jan's belief in the school system, but in entitlements for her and her children. She feels they are entitled to an education, as she seeks help from the school and even encourages her children to seek that help themselves. Jan also notes her children's entitlement to health care when she "gets loud" to ensure a doctor performs tests she deems necessary – care she is sure would not be questioned if she had higher quality health care instead of Medicaid. Jan says that while some people are embarrassed to take help from others, she is not. Likewise, she also believes in giving help back to others whenever she can.

As a mother, Raquel is not so comfortable accepting help when it is offered and is even more uncomfortable seeking it out. She tries to maintain a middle-class image even though she and her children are a low-income family. Her own negative perceptions of people who, in her own words, "take too much" and her desire to look "middle-class" cause Raquel to go to great lengths to hide her family's monetary struggles. She is almost insulted when people offer money or help because she feels she has failed in hiding her need for help.

She is uneasy going to social service agencies because they have made her feel inept, ashamed, and somehow undeserving of help. As her financial status worsens, her friends and family have grown closer to her family and their problems. She is more willing to accept help, as long as, like Jan, she is able someday to repay the generosity.

According to a study by JoDee Keller and Katherine McDade (2000), which addressed this issue of low-income parents seeking help, Raquel's feelings are not dissimilar from those of other parents in her position. The study even suggest that the societal perception that the poor need help exacerbates their reluctance to ask for or accept it. In contrast, because it is not assumed that middle class parents will need help, it is culturally acceptable for them to ask for it – and the help is deemed needed because of a deficient child, not a deficient parent. Middle class society seems to send the message that low-income parents are incompetent and lack quality parenting skills. Keller and McDade explain that this message is conveyed, "in the 'at-risk' literature, in healthy start programs that target low-income parents, and perhaps even in child welfare practices" (p. 304). As a result of such programs and practices, "low-income parents may assume, often correctly, that they are judged as being inadequate. Past experience with sources of assistance may not have been positive for these parents" (p. 304).

Polakow (1993) wrote that for almost a century, caring for marginalized children focused on fixing problem families and that poor families were viewed "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"

(p. 103). This negative perception was viewed as "individual and private" (p. 103), blamed on the family, and not on deficient social or educational policies.

An example of how cultural ideology of the *macrosystem* impacts children is found in the inevitable struggle between competition and cooperation. Garbarino (1992) maintains that over time, American culture has placed increasingly higher values on qualities such as independence, competitiveness, and individualism. As a result, more families lose the benefit of cooperation and interdependence needed to create the strong connections that help children grow and prosper. If a culture sees dependence as weak, that view will permeate its policies and customs. Families and children will continue to struggle and become more isolated, thus further inhibiting child development.

Raquel is acutely aware of the cultural inclination to see dependence as weak. Although she wants and needs to ask for help, she resists it for all of the reasons discussed. Fear of being perceived as "broken, dysfunctional, and judged as inadequate" keep her silent. Jan notices this resistance from other parents as well, noting that parents will accept help from the school only when parents and teachers "really get to know each other" and the school offers help in a way that is not invasive or judgmental. This is a right that should not be denied and one that should not have to be asked for.

Academic Expectations

Raquel feels that college is important and hopes her children will go to college. She believes a college education is the path, perhaps the only path in today's economy, to a good job. She questions how she will pay for college and worries that her children's middle and high school education may not prepare them for the expectations of college entrance

requirements or provide them access to scholarships and other financial aid. Raquel also worries about her children's interest in college and whether or not they realize its importance to their future.

Kim seems to share her mother's beliefs. A career in teaching is a possibility, and she does realize this requires a college education. However, Kim really believes her mother has a good job and knows she did not go to college; therefore, she's ambivalent about the importance of a college education. Following through with her love of dance, she thinks becoming a dance instructor is also a possibility as a future goal. Kim believes she has a choice and considers either profession a desirable future.

Jan makes it clear that she wants Kelly to do well academically. She knows how important it is for Kelly to succeed in the lower grades. Not to do so would mean that Kelly could get so far behind that academic success in the upper grades would be out of her reach. Jan lets Kelly and Kelly's teachers know that education is a family priority. While Jan never mentions college expectations for Kelly, she does hope the young girl will graduate from high school. Kelly's mother's life has been such a disaster, and Jan hopes Kelly will not imitate that model – drugs, teenage pregnancy, and incarceration.

Kelly's goals are not so-far reaching. She is unable to look to the future; rather, she focuses her mind on the here and now. Kelly tells of a troubled life filled with conflict, rejection, and academic struggle that consume all the thoughts in her young mind. She wants a happy, nurturing mom and not to have so much trouble learning – for her there is no room to think about things in the distant future like college and high school graduation.

The benefits of a post-secondary education are highlighted in a study (Jones-DeWeever and Gault, 2006) that explored the experiences of welfare mothers working

towards and completing post-secondary degrees. Women obtaining degrees reported that they experienced increased self-esteem, improvements in relationships with family and friends, increased job opportunities, greater community involvement, and a sense of contributing to society. Some women even believed that their education "helped them leave destructive habits and relationships behind and gave them a sense of their own personal power" (p. 27).

This indicates the importance of encouragement toward and access to post-secondary education for these girls. Teachers and school counselors must proactively encourage these young women to aim toward their highest abilities and emphasize the importance college will have on their future. These girls do not have the social capital – mentors, life experiences, family role models – that would lead them toward and allow them to see the advantages that a post-secondary education will create for them.

Family Connections – Wanting a Family

Coleman (1988) discusses social capital in terms of the strength of social ties that make trustworthiness possible. He suggests that social capital can be found both within the family and from the community, which includes schools, and he refers to strong families and strong communities as public goods. Coleman warns that children's social capital is declining over time and that some type of formal organization or other intervention may need to be implemented.

Sadly, as Kelly dreams of a "family" composed of a "happy" mom who she "just wants to get better" and a dad and other relatives to call her own, she faces rejection and disappointment from every angle. The extent of Kelly's rejection is enormous. Kelly speaks

of having a mother who shows love only when she "feels like it," and imagines that if her mother, Susan, ever did get custody of Kelly, she would immediately reject her with a "never mind." As James Gabarino (1995) explained,

> While children thrive on acceptance, rejection corrodes and damages their sense of self-worth in much the same way that cancer damages the body; it twists a child's outlook and makes every action painful. The rejected children and youth are in jeopardy. They are prone to antisocial and self-destructive behavior as well as negative self-concepts. (p. 155)

When Susan makes claims about the existence of this idealized family, Jan, feeling she is acting in Kelly's best interest, believes she must tell the girl that none of it is true. Kelly herself speaks of remembered love given her by her mom in one caring episode, but then taken away just as quickly in another, hurtful one. How can a child be expected to wade through the murky waters presented by those she loves and how can she understand what is true and what is not? This makes trust an almost impossible commodity.

Kim also has notions of a "whole" family. While her father has gone back on promises not to drink and breaks those promises even after getting out of jail, the sight of the "Daddy-Daughter Dance" posters still fill her with sadness. She is embarrassed by her father's absence and has to be very careful whom she trusts with this secret. Hopes of a "new" father cross her mind, but, acting much like a parent herself, she worries about her mother's choices. Seeing how poorly her own dad turned out, Kim doesn't trust her mother's judgment in men. She also worries that Raquel might be in such a fragile place that she would settle for someone inappropriate. In many ways, the child has become parent to her mother.

Kim's plight is recognized as not an uncommon one in children with incarcerated parents. Feelings of guilt, shame, and resentment are associated with children with incarcerated parents in Kiva Miller's (2006) study. Youth with a jailed parent are afraid to let others know for fear of rejection and as a result may be found "withdrawing from meaningful relationships" (p. 474) to avoid being hurt. These children may harbor anger and resentment toward their parent for putting them in a position of being caregiver, or may feel responsible for their parent's criminal behavior. According to Miller, "Children who take on this burden may have long-term psychological issues if their beliefs concerning their culpability persist and are undisputed" (p. 477).

Dallaire (2007) found that children with incarcerated parents also have increased risks, such as becoming incarcerated themselves in the future, being neglected because of parental drug abuse, and the disruption of attachment with parents. To counteract these risks, Dallaire suggested increasing the implementation of programs for children that seek to prevent future incarceration and drug use as well as helping to ensure that children establish positive attachments with another parent or caregiver.

Resilience

Amazingly, resilience can be found in both Kelly and Kim's young lives, even in their seemingly desperate situations. Despite Kelly's academic setbacks and frustrations, not to mention a number of other struggles, she still expresses a strong desire to do well in school. Jan models resilience for Kelly when she seeks out help for her children. She describes looking for another door to go through when one closes – a metaphor for resilience.

Seeing past the hardships of the present, Kim discusses a future of choices, where perhaps she will go to college and become a schoolteacher or a dancer.

Garbarino (1995) noted that this resilience and ability to cope positively are possible when children are offered programs that support: smaller schools, strengthening of community ties, opportunities to succeed, provision of mentors and positive role models, strategies for problem-solving, and academic and emotional support. He also stressed "the single most important resource you can have to promote resilience in childhood: having someone who is crazy about you," which he referred to as a "social anchor" (p. 158). For Kelly that someone would be Jan, and for Kim, it would be Raquel. For other children it could be a grandfather or grandmother, a mentor, a sibling, or a teacher.

Seccombe (2002) agreed that it is important to recognize opportunities that foster resilience because many families faced with extreme poverty and the stressors that accompany it do not fail – many are resilient. Like Kim, some children in low-income homes are academically successful, have strong friendships, and have access to extracurricular activities. Kim's dance classes provide her with social connections and feelings of self-worth.

Summary: Piling on Risk Factors

Children today may be faced with a variety of risks in their lives: racism, unstable care, economic deprivation, and poverty are some of them (Vorassi & Garbarino, 2000). Vorassi and Garbarino argue that when we discuss poverty as a risk, we are actually "talking about a whole host of risk and social toxins" and that "when children live in poverty, they also run an increased risk of being raised by a single parent, being abused, and participating in the illicit economy (p. 75). While facing one of these risks may not be overly damaging,

facing many of them at the same time can be catastrophic in the life of a child and possibly lead to youth violence.

Sameroff (1987) agreed and in his research shows that while one risk factor may not have a negative effect on young lives, it is the accumulation of these risk factors that debilitates their academic and emotional success. In addition, many layers of risk factors can result in lower academic achievement, poor self-esteem and coping skills, and an increase in succumbing to negative peer pressure (Garbarino, 1995). When Kelly explains that she has trouble concentrating on her studies or looking toward the future because "things right now are bad," we are seeing her inability to cope, a direct result of a "piling on" of risk factors.

As we see, while Kelly and Kim may live in poverty, those are not the only obstacles that add stress to their lives. When you add feelings of rejection, parental incarceration, the absence of a father, and their longing for a "family," these young women would certainly seem to have the deck stacked against them. In addition, Kelly struggles particularly to achieve academic success, has a disappointing relationship with a drug-addicted mother with a history of mental illness, and finds herself caught in the middle of tension between her parent and guardian. One or two of these "risk factors" might not overwhelm a child, but when you put them all together – when you "pile it on" – it is clear that these girls have quite a struggle ahead of them.

The effects of risk factors can be tempered by opportunity. Opportunity factors that may offset risk factors include supportive, involved families; safe, stable neighborhoods; small schools; job opportunities; positive role-models; and acceptance (Garbarino, 1995). Garbarino wrote that "children thrive on acceptance" and "accepted children…learn to see themselves as strong and surrounded by others whom they can trust – a social map that leads

to a much better adulthood than can be found following the map generated by rejection" (p. 155). Educators can help foster opportunities and provide acceptance to their students.

The stories of these families portray their realities. The next step in a critical perspective is to create educational and social opportunities that will be meaningful in their lives without the restrictive lens of educators' personal histories. According to Hinchey (2004), "To do otherwise is to choose professional blindness and to drift on a current of complacency at a time when children desperately need their teachers to be charting the future of education thoughtfully and ethically" (p. 26).

Chapter Seven: Discussion and Recommendations

Professional Development Opportunities

Altering the way we approach the diversity of our students is no easy task, and looking at our students "critically" does not happen overnight – it is an ongoing journey. Teacher workshops could be provided by individual schools or school districts to broaden teachers' knowledge of the critical perspective thought processes. Hinchey (2004) indicated that it is important to educate teachers to the needs of marginalized students and raise consciousness to teacher bias (conscious or unconscious) based on their own personal experiences. She wrote that this is often an uncomfortable experience; facing their own biases can raise "an unhappy new awareness of unacknowledged and unearned privilege of their own successes" (p. 26). Once they get past their inhibitions, teachers may be able to see "where their students are coming from" and tailor instruction to their needs more effectively.

In Quint's book (1994) she describes a teacher who admitted to the difficulty of facing the needs of her homeless students: "In many ways we refused to acknowledge our own prejudice and bias regarding the homeless population. We had little understanding of their plight. Sometimes it's easier to look away from a situation than to see it up close – real close" (p. 34-35). Encouraged by her principal to get to know the plights of these children, the teacher visited one of her students in a shelter. Witnessing the horrible situation in which the child was living allowed the teacher to make a connection that led to positive change for the both of them. "I love that child," she said. "She has come a long way since I began to look at life from her point of view" (p. 25).

Counseling

Both families mentioned the benefits of access to their school's counselors. But with such strong issues preying on their minds, such as whom to trust, concerns about family drug and alcohol use, parental incarceration, and their longing to be part of a family, how well are Kelly and Kim aided in dealing with these problems? Jan believes there may be a need for more counseling options. The issues facing these young women suggest that more intensive counseling and support group sessions may indeed be worth considering.

For example, in Kim's life, her father's incarceration generates feelings of shame and betrayal. Miller (2006) finds that children like Kim will benefit from an opportunity to talk to others facing similar situations, explaining that,

> Facilitators eventually encourage members to discuss coping with feeling [and] group members discuss how coping with the loss of a parent to incarceration affects their behavior. Children reported feeling as if they had an opportunity to discuss feelings that they had suppressed. They also report feeling comfortable talking about their incarcerated parent in a safe environment. (p. 481)

Offering students that chance to talk about their feelings, whatever the concern, in a safe, caring environment may empower them with coping skills to continue successfully through school and life.

Providing these opportunities would involve the need to make parents aware of their children's rights regarding medical and mental health care and to help them access that care. If this is not accessible through their health care, it may need to be offered through the schools.

Preschool Opportunities

According to Marci, the school's special education consultant, preschool opportunities for all children in the community should be offered as a way of ensuring that each student enrolled in the kindergarten program comes in on a level playing field. Marci explains that many marginalized children are already behind from the beginning of their academic careers,

> "Well, I think part of it is that they don't have that head start when it comes to school. They come to school without preschool and without a lot of experience so they're already behind when they get here. Then they don't have the support at home they need in order to catch up or maintain, and they fall further and further behind. Maybe our expectations aren't appropriate for those kids. Somebody, when we went to one of those meetings or in-services, said that children who have been read to – which generally translates into middle class – had heard I don't know how many more thousands of words [than those who have not]…again, those kids already have an advantage. We don't really have a [non-tuition] preschool program in our community."

Because access to and quality of early childhood education is profoundly unequal for families in the United States (Polakow, 2007), low-income children do not have equal access to develop the required educational skills that many kindergarten programs expect. Polakow points out that access to public child care is limited and the high costs of high-quality, private child care make it unaffordable for the majority of poor families so that they "must purchase child care on the free market, where the best goes to the highest bidder, and the worst is

doled out in the netherworld of informal, unregulated, custodial care. And so begins the educational stratification of unequal life chances" (p. 3).

Public policies that require poor and low-income single parents to work at minimum wage jobs, although they have no reliable child care, force many to make the painful and guilt-laden decision to leave their children in substandard childcare and unhealthy, unclean, even abusive, environments. Children face maltreatment and overcrowding in these unsafe facilities. Children are often left in the care of untrained teachers or childcare providers, or even with teenage children, for lack of other solutions (Helburn & Bergmann, 2002; Polakow, 2007).

If we are going to hold children to a certain academic and social expectation, starting with the beginning of kindergarten, then our society and community needs to provide adequate opportunities so that *all* children can meet our expectations, not just those who can afford it. Both Kelly and Kim would have benefited both socially and academically from high-quality early interventions during their preschool years.

Enrichment Programs for Children and Parents

> *"There were some kids last year who got themselves up and came to school early because it was a more pleasant place, a favorite place, better than at home. How great it would be if they had something else to do, rather than just sit in the cafeteria, that would be more productive." –Marci*

Marci believes that lengthening the school hours to provide activities before and after school would benefit students both socially and academically. Students could have access to teacher-directed tutoring in small groups, use computers to perform research and complete projects, and visit the library. Marci continues,

"Well, one of the things I think kids from lower economic homes don't have is access to the library, because they don't get there, and don't have computers at home. Those are things we've talked about: it would be nice if we could allow them to check out laptops and take them home. But, they would have to have an internet connection in order to be able to go online. Having resource materials at home is something a lot of those kids don't have. We can provide them with some of the materials at school, but when it's an independent activity or homework, that's something they don't have… it would be great if we could have a way to keep a learning lab open after school where kids could do their homework and projects at school, or ways that they could check out things they needed."

Another one of Marci's ideas is a library for the adults, too:

"One thing I've thought we should do (but I've never done anything about it) was to have a parent library with parenting books and books with ideas for what you could do with your children that parents could check out. Because they might be more willing to come here to check books out than to go to the local library…if they're picking up or dropping off their children, they could just go ahead and check something out. The other thing I thought would be nice would be to have some sort of "parent room" where people could wait – we have some people who come to pick up their kids (early). They sit down in the cafeteria and some of them visit with each other; after they've been doing it for a couple of months, they get to know each other. If they have a reason they can't go home between appointments and picking up their child or work, it'd be nice if they had some place to go, like a parent lounge."

Marci also notes that monthly organized morning or evening social events like "Coffee and Donuts" for parents – which has been done in this district in the past – could be brought back. Such gatherings could provide opportunities for families to meet "just to visit," broaden their circle of school acquaintances, and begin establishing a community of peers – possibly even a safety net should they ever need one. It could also be a way to keep well informed – getting information on upcoming events or special projects and other activities in the school or district.

After-school tutoring and open labs for students and libraries, lounges, and social information gathering events for parents are all ways to connect families to the school – to help them feel welcome and invested.

Raquel mentioned not always knowing what she was entitled to when it came to social services because the government offices were not always the most welcoming places. In the tradition of the full service school, we could invite community members to volunteer their time and expertise to aid parents in a friendly and empowering environment. Seminars on taxes, the heath care system, time and money management, welfare rights, housing rights, and other topics important to the community members could be provided.

Volunteers from the community could provide free and accessible services for families such as those provided to the B. F. Day School in Seattle: free haircuts, clothing, suitable clothing for job hunting, and physician check-ups and immunizations (Quint, 1994). In that community, church members also provided services such as rides to the grocery store and other destinations as well as offering "sincere concern, trust, and respect." In this way, Quint wrote, "a viable bridge had been built so that those who were in a secure position and

wished to give now were provided with easy access to those who were in desperate need of help" (p. 51).

Reflections on the Future

I hope my research suggests strengths that our school system can expand upon to better meet the needs of our vulnerable students in poverty and uncovers structural weaknesses we can try to overcome. If, for example, we determine that support for our marginal students is lacking, the voices heard here will help us to look for new ways to widen their safety nets. By exploring strategies and innovations used by other schools to help children in poverty, I hope to encourage educators in my district to find practical yet effective solutions for our children. The research can be a first step toward a discussion of needs and that, in turn, can lead to the formation and implementation of new or improved programming, staffing positions, or classroom and extracurricular activities. The focus for this work might be as broad as a district-wide effort or more narrowly focused, such as within a school or within a classroom.

Here, the stories and the literature surrounding poverty support the idea that poverty creates many risks for families but that the right opportunities can promote resiliency that leads to happier and healthier lives. Before this can happen, though, educators and society as a whole, through the use of a critical and reflective perspective and with kind and caring hearts, need to look at these citizens – up close – and see things from the "other's" perspective. Only then can we create the positive changes in policy and academic strategies that will truly effect a more profound change in poor and low-income families' educational opportunities. Both individual and school relationships matter.

Garbarino (1995) stated, for a child, help really starts with "one person that's crazy about them" (p. 158). But it doesn't end there. Change is a powerful force; change in the school is very difficult, but not impossible. Meier (2007) described the power behind people getting together to create good schools for children and encouraged us to take seriously "the vision of education and human possibility" (p. 4). She was especially concerned with the importance of the task of "creating environments where all kids can experience the power of their ideas." I believe it is time to stop blaming the families and take responsibility for our own short-sightedness. As Meier said, "It's a task for all of us, not just the school people, or policymakers, or even parents alone. The stakes are enormous and the answers within our reach." To succeed we must work together and "take public responsibility for the shared future of the next generation" (p. 4).

Final Thoughts for Future Action

While working on this research, I have given much thought to the issues revealed by the parents and children in this study. I hope to be able to act on these issues in the future, in any way possible, using imagination and creativity, yet bounded by the realistic limits of time and funding. I have compiled below a few ideas my school could implement to begin to improve the lives of our children in poverty:

- Research available grant funding and design proposals to help pay for the cost of new programming to help poor children.
- Discuss with staff members and administrators the findings and suggestions of my research and the body of research on poor and low-income children.

- Fund and create a new position for a student advocate coordinator. The position would serve as a bridge between students and services offered by the community, local, state, or federal government programs. The coordinator would oversee, manage, and evaluate student and staffing needs and available programs. Responsibilities may include:

  - Defining needs of low-income school children

  - Keeping abreast of community programs, projects, or people that would best support the needs of low-income children

  - Implementing and staffing programs, projects, and activities that specifically support children in poverty

- Develop an after- and/or before-school program that creates an emotionally supportive community for learning. The program needs to foster academic achievement (dependent on grant money). Professionals could train a combination of paid teachers and volunteers. Volunteers could include high school students fulfilling a community service requirement, college students or interns meeting educational or service requirements, and interested community members such as retirees.

- Offer opportunities for children to experience "the arts": music, theater, art, and so on. These experiences may coincide with an after-school program. They could be in the form of field trips or volunteer visits and lessons from the artists themselves – musicians, actors, painters, and sculptors. For example, students may be exposed to a unit on jazz musicians, classical artists, or musicals.

- Make counseling proactively available to children based on teacher recommendations.

I hope that these recommendations could form a starting point for dialogue and action that leads to changes in the lives of low-income children in my school and community.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Glossary of Terms

Poverty/Poor: In 2006, when these interviews were conducted, the U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services (2006) Federal Poverty Guidelines indicated that a family

of three with a yearly income of $16,600 or less was considered poor - for a family of

four: $20,000. In 2008, the guideline incomes rose slightly to $17,600 for a family of

three and $21,200 for a family of four (U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services, 2008).

Low-income: Low-income is calculated as 200% of the income at the poverty line. For

instance, for a family of three, during the year of these interviews, $33,200 was

considered low-income. Today, that number would be $35,200 (U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services, 2006, 2008)

Appendix B

Selected Sample Interview and Follow-up Questions for Parents

- How do you feel about the way the school works and the opportunities for your child? (Follow- up) Do you think all of that is a pretty good support for your child?

- Do you talk to your children about the future? (Follow- up) Do they have plans?

- Your daughter has church and school. Are those good supports?

- Do you think your daughter feels part of school or that she belongs? (Follow-up) Does she make connections?

- Do you think you can go and talk to schools about what you need?

- Do parents feel comfortable enough to ask teachers for help?

- Do you feel that your daughter knows that you value school? (Follow-up) What are your hopes for her?

- Is there anything else, or advice you would have for educators?

Appendix C

Selected Sample Interview and Follow-up Questions for Students

- Do you think it would help if you had someone to talk to?

- What do you want for yourself?

- Who do you feel comfortable talking to?

- When you think about your future what do you think about?
  (Follow-up) Do you want to have a job someday?

- Do you want to do well in school?
  (Follow-up) How do you feel about school, do you think you're doing well?

- Do you get the message from your mother that she wants you to do well?
  (Follow-up) What does she say, or what does she do?

- Who do you think should be your role model?

- What is something about school that you really like, that really helps you?

- What kind of experiences outside of school have been good for you?

- Do you feel like your teachers are supportive?
  (Follow-up) Are there any other ways they could help you?

Appendix D

Brief Letter of Information for Adults

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study about children's experiences with school and those things that help them succeed academically or the obstacles that prevent that success. This study involves interviews with me, Kristen Weatherwax, and answering questions about you and some of your child's experiences inside and outside of school. Participation in the study is completely voluntary and you will be assured of complete confidentiality if you choose to participate. While there are no direct benefits to you for this study, it may be of help to some researchers or educators and broaden understanding about the school support and children's academic success.

If you would like to participate please read and sign the consent form on the following page:

Appendix E

Adult Consent Form

I agree to participate in one or more interviews conducted by Kristen Weatherwax as part of a research study about children's experiences with school support and those things that help them succeed academically or the obstacles that prevent that success. I understand that the interview(s) will last approximately 30 minutes and that the interview(s) will focus on my perceptions and experiences with my child's or student's school support system. I will be asked questions about school support and any other issues that I would like to discuss about supports and/or obstacles involved in children's success in school.

I understand that my participation in the interview(s) is completely voluntary, that I may choose not to answer certain questions, and that I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time if I choose to do so. I further understand that my confidentiality will be protected at all times and that a fictitious name will be assigned to me after the interviews are completed, and that any identifying characteristics will be deleted. The transcripts of the tapes will be assigned a numerical code and kept in a locked filing cabinet in Miss Weatherwax's office. I further understand that if I decide at any point after the interview that I do not wish to participate, my tapes and transcripts will be destroyed and no material will be used from the interviews.

I agree to allow anonymous material from my interview(s) to be included in Kristen Weatherwax's Masters Thesis/publications or possible presentations by Kristen Weatherwax.

Signature of Interview Respondent: Date:

For further questions please contact:
Name: Kristen Weatherwax
Address:
Tel:
Email:

Or
Contact:
Dr. Michael Bretting, Administrative Co-Chair of the COE Human Subjects Committee
310 Porter, Eastern Michigan University Ypsilanti, MI 48197
Tel: (734) 487-0496
Email: michael.bretting@emich.edu

Appendix F

Brief Letter of Information for Parents of Potential Student Participants

I would like to invite your child to participate in a research study about his or her experiences with school and those things that your child feels will help them succeed academically or the obstacles that prevent that success. This study involves interviews with me, Kristen Weatherwax, and answering questions about your child's experiences inside and outside of school. Participation in the study is completely voluntary and I assure complete confidentiality for you and your child if you allow your child to participate. If I receive permission from you, I will then seek the permission of your child. While there are no direct benefits to you or your child for this study, it may be of help to some researchers or educators and broaden understanding about the importance of the kind of school support your child receives.

If you would like to participate please read and sign the consent form on the following page:

Appendix G

Parent Consent Form for Child Participation

I agree to allow my child to participate in one or more interviews with Miss Weatherwax as part of a research study about his or her experiences with school and what kinds of things help my child succeed and what kinds of things make it hard to succeed or upset him or her. I know that if my child does not wish to participate, he or she does not have to and Miss Weatherwax will not be upset with him or her. I understand that the interview(s) will last for about 30 minutes and that during the interview(s) my child will talk about how he or she feels about school support systems and some of his or her experiences related to that support. My child will be asked questions about the kind of support they receive and any other issues that he or she would like to discuss about that support.

I understand that Miss Weatherwax will be taping my child's interview(s) and that my child can choose to stop the interview whenever he or she wants – all my child has to do is ask. My child may also choose to stop taking part in the study altogether. If my child chooses to stop any or all interviews, I understand that Miss Weatherwax will not be upset with him or her and that this study does not affect my child's grade in any way. I understand that all audio tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in Miss Weatherwax's office and will be destroyed if my child chooses to stop taking part in the study.

I also understand that anything he or she tells Miss Weatherwax will be kept a secret and anything she uses for her study will use a made-up name instead of my child's real name. She will also use a made-up name for our school and district.

I agree to allow my child's interview(s) to be included in Kristen Weatherwax's study or in other Masters presentations. I know that if I have any questions I can ask Miss Weatherwax or get in contact with the people listed below.

_____

I understand the study as it ahs been described to me and I agree to allow my child to participate.

Name of Student:_____

Parent Signature of Participating Student: _____

Date: _____

For further questions please contact:
Name: Kristen Weatherwax
Address:
Tel:
Email:
Or
Contact:
Dr. Michael Bretting, Administrative Co-Chair of the COE Human Subjects Committee
310 Porter, Eastern Michigan University Ypsilanti, MI 48197
Tel: (734) 487-0496
Email: michael.bretting@emich.edu

Appendix H

Brief Letter of Information for Students

      I would like to invite you to participate in a research study about your experiences with school and things that you think help you to feel successful or are hard for you in school. This study includes interviews with me, Miss Weatherwax, and answering questions about you and some of your experiences inside and outside of school. I will only interview you if you agree that it is okay and all of our interviews will be kept secret. If I need to write about our talks, I will change your name so no one will know that it was you. The things that we talk about may be helpful to other adults and teachers and may help them to learn more about this and the kinds of things that help you do well in school or things that upset you or make school hard.

If you would like to participate please read and sign the consent form on the following page:

Appendix I

Student Consent Form

I agree to participate in one or more interviews with Miss Weatherwax as part of a research study about my experiences in school and the kinds of things that make me feel good and help me succeed and the kinds of things that upset me or make it hard to succeed. I know that if I do not wish to participate, I do not have to and Miss Weatherwax will not be upset with me. I understand that the interview(s) will last for about 30 minutes and that during the interview we will talk about how I feel about school help or support and some of my experiences related to that support. I will be asked questions about the kind of help I receive and any other issues that I would like to discuss about that support.

I understand that Miss Weatherwax will be taping our interview(s) and that I can choose to stop the interview whenever I want – all I have to do is ask. I may also choose to stop taking part in the study altogether. If I choose to stop any or all interviews, I understand that Miss Weatherwax will not be upset with me and that this study does not affect my grade in any way.

I also understand that anything I tell Miss Weatherwax will be kept a secret and anything she uses for her study will use a made-up name instead of my real name. She will also use a made-up name for our school and district.

I agree to allow my interview(s) to be included in Kristen Weatherwax's study or in other Masters presentations. I know that if I have any questions I can ask Miss Weatherwax or my parents or guardians may get in contact with the people listed below.

_____

I am at least 10 years old and I understand the study as it has been described to me and I agree to participate.

Student Signature:_____Date:_____

For further questions please contact:
Name: Kristen Weatherwax
Address:
Tel:
Email:
Or
Contact:

Dr. Michael Bretting, Administrative Co-Chair of the COE Human Subjects Committee
310 Porter, Eastern Michigan University Ypsilanti, MI 48197
Tel: (734) 487-0496
Email: michael.bretting@emich.edu

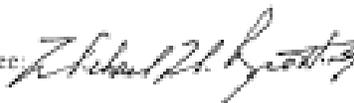Appendix J

Permission for Research Involving Human Subjects

Eastern Michigan University
College of Education
Review Committee on Student Research
Involving Human Subjects Committee Action

Project Title: Investigations in Social Capital
Principal Investigator (must be a faculty member): Valerie Polakow
Department: Teacher Ed
Co-PI / Student Investigator: Kristen Weatherwax

Approved [X]   Disapproved [ ]

Reasons, if disapproved:

Signature for the Committee: _____ Date: 2-20-06

Comments:
* Please note that all Human Subjects Proposals need to be submitted well in advance of scheduled solicitation of potential participants and that **no data involving Human Subjects should be collected prior to approval.**

NOTE

1. Investigators are obligated to advise the review committee of any change in protocol that might bring into question the involvement of human subjects in a manner at variance with the considerations on which the prior approval was based.

2. Every 12 months from the date of this approval or at shorter intervals where specified by the committee, the investigator must submit the proposal to the committee for re-review.

3. Investigators are required to immediately suspend an inquiry if they observe an unanticipated negative change in the health or behavior of a subject that may be attributable to the research, and shall report the circumstances promptly to the review committee for its further review and decision on continuation or termination of the project.