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## ALONE AT SCHOOL

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**H**ave you ever been poor?

I mean really poor; not poor like a college student living on ramen or struggling-artist poor. I mean poor as in working as hard as you can your whole life and still living week to week and check to check. Have you ever been that kind of poor? I have.

When I was a child, we lived in a tin single-wide trailer that my parents bought used when they dropped out of school and got married. The place was cold in the winter, hot in the summer, and I swear you could feel a strong gust of wind when sitting in the living room with all the doors and windows closed. We had no heat other than plug-in heaters and an old propane heater that stunk to high heaven.

No air conditioning.

No telephone.

Most of our family dinners consisted of boxed macaroni and cheap hot dogs.

Still, all in all, life was great. My parents loved me, and I got along with my younger brother. In fact, the biggest downside to being poor was that my mom and dad had to work really hard.

My parents worked at the local textile mill. My mom got a job there when I was a baby and worked at the mill until she was diagnosed with a terminal disease. My father, who retired a few months before he turned 50 because of chronic back pain, still managed to spend 30 years inside the mill. For him it was a family affair; his mother worked at the same mill for the better part of her working life, his aunt worked at the mill for 40 years, and his older brother served almost 40 years there. If you're counting, that's two generations, five people, and almost 150 years of manual labor in an uncaring, unforgiving environment. *That's* what being poor meant to me.

These are the images I conjure when I hear or read about parents from lower-earning families not supplying their children with the cultural capital that they need for early success in elementary school, capital that higher-earning families are more likely to provide. I think about parents who struggle to provide, to exist.

Now that I am a teacher, I often hear stories of how this or that student is struggling, and there always seems to be a student who has problems stemming from a “lack of parental support” at home. There is always evidence of this lack of support, reasons such as “the parents don’t seem to be involved academically—they never come to the school” or “academics are not being supported at home because the reading log has not been signed, even though the student claims to have read every night.” Some parents don’t come to school because of a hectic work or personal schedule that leaves little room for even small changes in routine. Other students may have trouble getting school items signed by a parent or guardian who works long hours or on a night shift. The point is, it can be a mistake for a teacher to make assumptions about a student’s circumstances or support system without knowing the situation.

When I started school, I soon learned that being poor might mean both the things I thought it did and also something much, much worse: It meant that I was inferior to those who were not poor; I was *less than*. It’s a terrible feeling to become aware at an early age that not having money somehow means that you are less deserving in the classroom than students who are more privileged, that you are less deserving of a teacher’s attention or praise, that you are less deserving of good grades, that your financial shortcomings indicate that your parents have failed in some way. I remember not being spoken to—being flat-out ignored—by kids in my class when we were at lunch or recess. I would sit and wonder what it was that I could have done to make them dislike me and not want to talk to me. It was much later that I began to understand that the kids didn’t have to talk to me in order to not like me. All they had to do was look at the clothes I was wearing to know that I was a poor kid, which meant that I was to be avoided.

My worn shirts and shabby jeans marked me as an outsider. Other students knew this, and I was supposed to know it. My teachers were definitely in on the deal; as long as I was quiet and didn’t cause trouble, they ignored me. I made good grades and always did well on basic skills tests, but because I didn’t speak up or act out very often, I was more or less disregarded in the classroom. The fact that my parents never came to school functions only exacerbated the situation.

When I think back on my time in elementary school, what stands out to me more than anything else is the feeling of being alone. Of being left alone. My younger brother and I have spoken in depth many times about this overwhelming feeling of alienation. One discussion that stands was about the time another boy in a second-grade class started a conversation with him over a sheet of stickers in one of his class folders. That conversation led to a friendship, and my brother still remembers all these long years later being happily stunned that someone outside of our immediate family showed interest in something he cared about. If a caring teacher had shown a similar interest in him, I believe he would be more self-confident as an adult.

I have a similar story that involves one of my classmates who was generally regarded as popular and “well-off.” He asked me one day to toss a football around at recess. That’s the first time I remember someone talking to me who wasn’t poor like I was. That kid became my best friend, and he still is almost 30 years later. He never cared about how much money my parents made or what I was wearing, and eventually I came to realize that no one else had the right to judge me by those attributes either. Though we have parents who are very supportive of us, confidence is something my brother and I have struggled with since we were kids. Our early interaction with teachers and classmates at school gave us reason to believe that we just didn’t matter very much.

I never had negative experiences with teachers in the early grades, but I can’t remember having a positive memory-forming experience with any of my teachers in elementary school either. I believe that at least some part of the lack of encouragement and interaction I experienced was directly related to the fact that I came from a poor family. This meant that my parents were never going to make an effort to communicate with my teachers and that they would never come to the school, and for the most part this ended up being true. My mom came to school with ice cream, cake, and cola on my birthday, but she worked too late to attend PTO meetings, and because I didn’t get into trouble, she was never asked to the school otherwise. No parent wants to be called to come in and talk about how his or her kid is underachieving or getting into trouble. However, I think that if a teacher had made some small attempt to communicate with my mother in a positive manner, perhaps a letter inviting her to come to the school or just an invitation for a letter in reply, it would have been a great step toward earning my mother’s respect and trust. My mother, like many other mothers out there, loves to talk about her children, so I feel that she would have been very receptive to the idea.

Communication with teachers and school representatives was never an easy fit for my parents. They both had negative experiences with schooling when they were kids, and the residual feelings from those experiences, what Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) called “generational echoes,” surely affected their views of interacting with school representatives.

My mother was the daughter of a sharecropper, and her family moved around often, following work where work was to be found. As a result, my mother attended nine different schools during an 8-year period, and she never felt that she was a true part of any school’s community. Her family was never in one place long enough for her parents to establish a relationship with teachers. Even if they had not moved around so much, such a relationship would probably not have occurred, because my grandfather was no fan of the institution of school, having dropped out of school himself as a 12-year-old third-grade student. My grandfather told me that he attended the third grade for parts of four different years. Each year, his father would remove him from school to help

work crops, and when he went back to school, he would again be placed in third grade, until he quit school completely rather than be faced with the prospect of being a teenaged elementary student.

The first time my dad came to a school function was for my eighth-grade graduation. My father cared fiercely about my schooling; along with my mother, he demanded that I be a respectful student and bring home good grades, but he wouldn't be dragged to the school unless he had to be. The son of a single parent, my father suffered an abusive home life that made him suspicious and untrusting of authority. He rarely speaks of his time in school, and when he does it is to recount the anger and embarrassment he felt about being treated by teachers and authority figures as though he was not good enough to warrant their attention.

I don't think that my teachers ever questioned *why* my parents never came to the school; they just knew that they didn't, and this led to my being allowed to fade quietly into the background in the classroom.

### **A Teacher's Impact**

It is well documented that quality instruction has a large impact on student achievement (Clayton, 2011). However, elementary teachers have an impact on the future of student achievement that reaches beyond the classroom. We spend a great deal of time telling teachers they need an intense grounding in teaching standards and meeting requirements, but I think a quality teacher must also be caring enough to instill self-confidence in students.

Look up the word *educator* in a dictionary and you will find definitions that include teacher, instructor, and mentor. I want to teach all my students that they are no less (and no more) important than the other kids in class and that everyone they come in contact with deserves their respect, just as they deserve to be shown respect. I aim to instruct them on standards—in writing and reading, math, science, and social studies—but also standards such as valuing diversity. I mentor students by caring for what's best for them and showing interest in their lives. I do this in an attempt to provide my students with the support that I longed for from teachers when I was in school.

In my first education course in college, a teacher who *did* have an influence on the future of my education taught me that even though it may not seem so, we all have a voice that matters, one that we can use as we see fit. Some of us may have to work harder or overcome more obstacles to find our voices, but if we persist and believe, we can make ourselves heard. It is what we have to say that matters, not how much money our parents make or where we come from. Students from poor families need to be told this, and more, they need to be made to believe it.

**References**

- Clayton, J. K. (2011). Changing diversity in U.S. schools: The impact on elementary student performance and achievement. *Education and Urban Society*, 43(6), 671-695.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (2003). *The essential conversation*. New York: Random House.