ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE

Beth Ann Pennington

The Graduate School
Morehead State University
April 11, 2013
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH POVERTY, HIGH PERFORMING RURAL K-8 SCHOOLS

Abstract of capstone

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the College of Education At Morehead State University

By

Beth Ann Pennington
Whitesburg, KY

Committee Chair: Dr. Carol Christian, Assistant Professor
Morehead, KY
April 11, 2013

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH POVERTY, HIGH PERFORMING RURAL K-8 SCHOOLS

Poverty is a longstanding, pervasive condition throughout the United States that creates tremendous obstacles for the children born into this plight to overcome. Poverty negatively affects student success in the classroom. Schools are still seeking interventions proven to work with the masses of the students in poverty. The purpose of this investigation is to give a face and voice to poverty and to identify the interventions used by successful K-8 schools to combat the negative effects of poverty on student success. Furthermore, strategies utilized by the successful K-8 schools have been compiled into a list of commonalities for use in other schools to help other students in poverty.

KEYWORDS: Poverty, Negative, Effects, Student, Success

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AN INVESTIGATION OF COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH POVERTY, HIGH PERFORMING RURAL K-8 SCHOOLS

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Dedication

The inspiration of this work comes from the children who have forever touched my heart and changed my life. The lessons they have taught me still endure.

It is with all the love in my heart that I thank my family, community and my God for the opportunity to complete this work. Without the support of those who I hold dear, it would not have been possible.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many sincere thanks to Mr. Scott Paul, Superintendent of Whitley County Schools. Your district is simply amazing. Your staff and students embraced my work and were open in sharing of their endeavors. After spending several days in your district, it is easy to see why your district is so exceptional. It is a model district and I applaud you and your staff for truly making a difference for children.

Mr. Stuart Colin, Principal of Whitley County Middle, is such a strong leader both in the building and as a person. I left Whitley County Middle School feeling inspired and encouraged. Simply stated, you are a blessing to the Whitley County School District and its students.

Mr. Jason Faulkner, Principal of Whitley East Elementary, for your willingness to share your students and staff with me. It is clear that you have a vision for the future that your staff embraces.

Mr. Bobby Blakely, Principal of Pleasant View Elementary School, your generosity of time and support was greatly appreciated. I felt welcomed and commend you on the school culture and climate of your school. It truly is a school family.

My sincere appreciation to Mr. Mike Howard, Superintendent of Harlan County Schools. Previous to this work, in the Harlan County school district, Mr. Howard was the assistant principal at the school where I taught. I had the utmost respect for him then and even more so now. You have a clear vision for the success
of the students in your district and your openness to my work was genuinely appreciated.

Mr. Bryan Howard, Principal of Rosspoint Elementary, many thanks to you for sharing your students and time with me.
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Executive Summary

What is the core of the capstone?

The core assumption of this capstone project is that teachers really can make a difference in the lives of students, regardless of their socio-economic status.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 established that children from low income homes required more education services than children from affluent homes. Several programs came out of this legislation to assist schools in educating children from low income families. Title I, which provided 1 billion dollars a year to schools with high concentration of low-income children, emerged. Head Start, originally an eight week summer program, targeting preschool children from disadvantaged families in an attempt to equalize equality of opportunity based on readiness for first grade, soon followed. To complement the gains made by children who participated in the Head Start Program, the Follow-Through program was created. Other programs developed included Bilingual Education and several guidance and counseling programs (Schugurensky, 2012). However, this piece of legislation would soon be challenged by the Coleman report.

Perhaps no single report has had more impact on the successful school discussion than this government study published in 1966 titled *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld, & York, 1966). This study, referred to here and generally in much of the educational research, is known as the *Coleman Report*. This report called into question the impact that schools had on students’ educational achievement.
reviewing data from more than 3,000 schools, Coleman and his colleagues concluded that family background and the background of other students in the schools had a much greater impact on the achievement of the students in the school than did the efforts of the educators who worked there (Coleman et al., 1966).

The report declared educators can do little to change the trajectory in a student’s life through formal education. His report, in conjunction with related literature, was the catalyst to the creation of compensatory education programs (Lezotte, 2001).

The Coleman report spurred theorists, such as Robert Edmonds, who believed that schools did in fact impact the lives of children in poverty, to begin conducting research on schools with high poverty rates and high test scores. Out of his research, Edmonds introduced the concept of effective schools and pioneered the belief that all students can learn despite of their disadvantaged background. (Miller, 2010).

Edmonds and others who shared the belief that schools can and do make difference (i.e. Brookover and Lezotte), conducted research in schools with a high poverty population who were successful. Although their research failed to provide a definitive reason why some schools where more effective than others (though they educated students with similar backgrounds and from similar neighborhoods), their research did provide three conclusions. One, public schools can and do make a difference. Secondly, children from high poverty backgrounds can learn at high levels. Finally, there are characteristics and processes common to schools where all
children are learning, regardless of their background, these would later be known as “correlates” (Miller, 2010).

This capstone documentary elects to explore how teachers can, and do, make a difference and provide data to support the powerful influence of teachers. Three bodies of research frame the work of this capstone that resulted in a documentary; Teaching Children in Poverty, Effective Schools, and High Performing/High Poverty Schools (HP2).

This project examined the commonalities of these three bodies of study compared to “findings in the field” as evidenced in the documentary and qualitative data gathered from teacher and student interviews. This capstone includes book chapters (in progress) for a companion book with the goal of further bridging the gap from theory to practice through these authentic stories of students in poverty, many of whom were lost, teachers can come to examine their own practices and work to make improvements that can break the cycle of poverty. Some stories demonstrate teachers who provided a ray of hope to the hopeless, teachers who did in fact, make a difference in the life of a child.

Teaching Children in Poverty, Effective Schools, and High Performing/High Poverty (HP2) research offers an understanding of what effective, high performing/high poverty schools and professionals do when called to examine if what they are doing is enough. The research and this documentary investigated the factors common to the three bodies that support what educators can do to make a positive impact in high poverty schools and with children of low socio-economic status.
The capstone examined the one research question of this investigation:

*What are the common influences from theory to practice in high performing/high poverty schools?*

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the foundational, research base for this study.

**Figure 1 – Research Base**

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**Teaching Students in Poverty.** Educators have to believe they can make a difference, that through effective leadership and quality instruction, schools can educate students in their charge to become self-sufficient, knowledgable, skilled, productive and employable citizens in our communities. Schools must be mindful of
students who live in poverty and work collaboratively, strategically, and intentionally to interrupt the cycle of both situational and generational poverty (Payne, 2005).

Educators pride themselves on being nurturing and caring. The vocation speaks to the sheer nature of the person within it (Sockett, 2006). Teachers grow, equip and encourage the most precious gift God has given them, our children. Professional educators often think of themselves as the go-between, the help meet, the secure footing on a rather slippery slope as children navigate the K-12 school system. Educators believe that each child presents a new opportunity, a new hope for humanity, that somehow one of these beautiful, bright faces holds the key to curing cancer or perhaps world peace. Teachers work tirelessly to ensure every child in their class receives the same quality of education and opportunity for learning, but for children of poverty, we must ask, is it enough?

To teach them, educators must know them first. Knowing students means that a teacher understands that each student has gifts and talents that need to be cultivated and all students are expected to succeed at high levels. Educators have to believe that having high standards and expectations will motivate each child to try their best, to believe they can succeed, and experience success which in turn will generate more success. If teachers know the students' backgrounds, then the teacher can incorporate into lessons and assignments The work of Robert Marzano (Rush, 2002). Poverty does not make someone incapable of learning; however, it is a condition that creates a disadvantage. To equal the playing field, educators must understand the deficiencies to be able to create intervention plans and design strategic school improvement plans.
No one is immune to the possibility of being thrust into poverty. In these challenging economic times, families in great numbers that have not been historically identified as living in poverty, are being forced to adjust to home foreclosures and unemployment as they find themselves in situation poverty. Situational poverty is temporary brought about by a sudden change in life’s circumstances such as unexpected health issues or loss of job. Generational poverty is inter-generational, defined as the extent to which an individual does without resources over time (Payne, 2005).

Ruby Payne (2005), identified seven types of poverty: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge. Financial poverty is lacking the money to purchase the necessary goods or services essential for life. Essentially those who live in poverty are lacking enough money to be able to move beyond a day to day existence. Saving money for any reason is nearly impossible. Most equate the financial poverty status as a hand to mouth existence (Payne, 2005).

Emotional poverty refers to a situation where an individual lacks the ability to choose and control their emotional responses. In particularly negative situations, a person suffering with emotional poverty often lacks the response control to abstain from self-destructive behavior. Since this is an internal resource and manifests itself through stamina, perseverance and choices, this type of poverty is very difficult to overcome. Emotional poverty is linked to the next form, which is mental poverty.
Mental poverty is lacking the mental abilities and acquired skills (i.e. reading, writing, and computing) to deal with daily life (Payne, 2005).

Lacking a belief in divine purpose and guidance is Payne’s definition of spiritual poverty (2005). The lack of having physical health and mobility is physical poverty and the absence of friends, family and back up resources available in times of need is support system poverty.

Children of poverty often suffer most from the dimension of relationship or role model poverty. Having frequent access to adult(s) who are appropriate, who are nurturing, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior is essential for positive development (Payne, 2005).

Finally, the dimension that often traps individuals in poverty is the lack of knowledge of the hidden rules. Not knowing or understanding the unspoken cues and habits of a group hinders a person’s ability to move out of their socioeconomic class because it is evident to those within the group to which they wish to move that he or she was not born into or raised in that class (Payne, 2005).

Students who are consumed with worry for food, safety and shelter are frequently detached from the educational process. Concerns and fears of what is happening at home while they are at school provide a recipe for distractibility, thus, a loss of learning, and occasionally, discipline problems.

In Maslow’s 1954 book, “Motivation and Personality”, human beings are identified as having seven levels of need. Each layer of need must be met before a person can effectively reach the next level. To apply this principal to children and
their ability to learn as part of the educational process, educators must start with the first level of the pyramid. If there is a deficiency or neglect in meeting the basic physiological needs of an individual in the form of food, thirst, clothing and shelter, the results are negative upon a child's performance and behavior in school. (Nesbitt, 2013).

**Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

![Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Diagram]

*Note: Created April 18, 2013 by the author of the capstone based on information found in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.*
Children in poverty frequently have lack of adequate food and shelter. Without a proper diet and a reasonable amount of sleep, children's concentration capabilities will decline and their minds will be focused on other things such as hunger (Nesbitt, 2013). Educators must be vigilant on their watch to identify students who sit among us, who daily come to school ravenous. Educators who are cognizant of students not having their basic needs met intentionally develop strategic plans and activities aimed at meeting the needs of each and every student. Educators must reach to the core of our students before the core content can be taught and mastered.

The second level of the pyramid, safety, is difficult for children of poverty to attain. Children of poverty frequently come from unstable homes. Many have fears about personal safety or the safety of loved ones. For these children, school may often be their only means of escape (Nesbitt, 2013). These same children often bring their difficulties at home into the school setting and replicate the unacceptable behaviors from home. Children may act out and become more troublesome in school, disrupting their own learning and the learning of others (Nesbitt, 2013).

Other levels included in Maslow's hierarchy of need address a sense of belonging that include love and being accepted by others (level 3); esteem needs or approval and recognition (level 4); cognitive or intellectual needs to be able to learn, understand and explore (level 5); aesthetic needs to understand order and beauty (level 6); and self-actualization or the ability to realize one's full potential (level 7), (Maslow, 1943). Although this research did not focus on the levels of the pyramid above level 2, one must understand the importance of the various levels and there
impact on student learning. A student lacking in love or acceptance by peers may be withdrawn from the educational process. Students lacking in approval and recognition may choose to become a non-participant altogether. Students who receive little positive feedback may never fully realize their potential.

Making the connection between the research of Dr. Payne and the first two levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs demonstrates why students in poverty are challenged for success in the classroom. Students who come from families that lack the financial resources to purchase food or provide adequate shelter in a safe environment lay an unstable foundation that increases the difficulties of students in being able to stay focused and learn in school.

Payne (2005) developed nine powerful practices to assist educators in working with students in poverty: 1) build relationships of respect providing a high-quality work and offer support for students, 2) insist on high quality of work, 3) make beginning learning relational, 4) assess student’s resources, 5) teach students the hidden rules of school, 6) monitor progress and plan interventions for students of poverty, 7) translate the abstract into the concrete, 8) teach students who to ask questions, and 9) forge relationships with parents.

Effective Schools

Effective schools are characterized by high overall student achievement with no significant gaps in achievement across the major subgroups in the student population. These schools are built on a foundation of high expectations, strong
leadership, unwavering commitment to learning for all, collaboration, differentiated instruction and frequent monitoring of student progress (Lezotte & Synder, 2011).

Edmonds (1982) published the first of several updates to what became known as the Correlates of Effective Schools. These correlates identified what effective schools have in common. These first generation of correlates included: 1) strong leadership of the principal, 2) a focus on instruction, 3) a safe and orderly climate, 4) high expectations for all students, and 5) the use of data measures of student achievement. Following years of additional research, leading to the growth in the knowledge base of what effective schools have common, a second generation of effective school correlates were published. Lezotte (1991), another effective schools researcher, emphasized that the second generation of correlates could not be implemented successfully unless the first generation correlate standards are present in the school. Therefore, struggling schools must first correct current practices before adding additional dimensions of growth.

The second generation correlates, or characteristics, included: 1) high expectations for success, 2) strong instructional leadership, 3) clear and focused mission, 4) opportunity to learn and student time on task, 5) frequent monitoring of student progress, 6) safe and orderly environment, and 7) positive home-school relations (Lezotte & Synder, 2011).

In other effective schools research, Kutash (2010) and his research colleagues in, The School Turnaround Field Guide, noted that measures of success in effective school have in common "lower rates of violence or suspension, increased student and
faculty attendance, lower dropout rates, and higher retention of effective staff” (p.17).
In addition, effective schools monitor student success in analyzing formative
assessments, improved standardized test results, and higher graduation rates” (p.17).
These same influences apply to creating a successful school with high poverty rates.

Researchers Jaap Scheerens and Roel Bosker, after reviewing a wide variety
of school reform initiatives, identified eight essential characteristics of successful
schools in their work, *The Foundations of Educational Effectiveness (1997)*. The
eight characteristic are: 1) monitoring of student progress; 2) focus on achievement;
3) parental involvement; 4) creating a safe and orderly climate; 5) focused
curriculum; 6) strong leadership; 7) cooperative working environment; and 8) time on
task.

The work of Robert Marzano is highly regarded in the field of effective
Actions (2003)*, Marzano listed five characteristics for highly successful schools
(summarized): 1) guaranteed and viable curriculum; 2) challenging goals and
effective feedback; 3) parent and community involvement; 4) safe and orderly
environment; and 5) collegiality and professionalism.

Effective schools research include both content focused and interpersonal
factors and processes for success. The identified content factors of effective schools
(summarized) are: 1) effective teacher characteristics and behavior, 2) strong
supportive school leadership, 3) academic emphasis, 4) effective instructional
strategies, 5) good home-school-community relations, 6) positive external
High Poverty, High Performing Rural School

relationships with board and board office personnel. Process factors (summarized) include: 1) clearly articulated goals, objectives, mission, 2) decentralized decision-making and collaboration, 3) high student expectations, and 4) strong school culture (Downer, 1991).

High Performing/High Poverty (HP2)

High performing/high poverty schools are distinguished “by their strength of leadership and their understanding of how children learn. HP2 schools stir the imagination because of the extent to which adults exercise influence over the quality of instruction, curriculum and the school’s learning environment” (Bell, 2002, p. 8). HP2 schools have fourteen common themes. These themes have been condensed and collapsed: high expectations, a focus on high quality rigorous instruction and time on task, strong leadership with a shared vision, regular assessments that inform practice, creation of a safe and orderly environment and strong parental involvement (Bell, 2002).

HP2 schools also have three overarching principles. First, strength of their site and district leadership. Secondly, their commitment to building a learning community. Finally, an understanding of research-based principles regarding how children learn (Bell, 2002).

Drs. Doris Quick and Custer Quick, authors of High Poverty-High Success: Schools That Defy The Odds (2000), examined practices and policies of five schools in which students were succeeding, reviewing the characteristics that each initiative found to be central to student success. The five common characteristics found are: 1)
commitment to rigorous and relevant curriculum for all students; 2) implementation of assessment strategies that examined students' understanding of the content and then their ability to apply that content knowledge; 3) focused and sustained staff development program; 4) commitment to addressing the issue of student behavior; and 5) willingness to make organizational changes for the benefit of students.

Also included in the high poverty/high performing schools category are the 90/90/90 schools. The phrase of, and original research for, 90/90/90 schools transpired between 1995-1998 at the Center for Performance Assessment by Douglas Reeves. Reeve's observed schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin who had 90% of the students eligible for free and reduced lunch, more than 90% of students are from ethnic minorities and more than 90% of the students met or achieve high academic standards (Reeves, 2005).

Reeves (2003) identified six strategies in his research of effective 90/90/90 schools: 1) hire and retain teachers who believe in their students; 2) focus on academic achievement; 3) give assessment a prominent role in the daily activities of students and teachers; 4) increase collaboration throughout the school; 5) creative scheduling; and 6) involved administrator's who spend money on things that worked.

These six areas draw attention to other aspects of instruction, such as, curriculum choices and written responses as part of performance assessment. Teachers in 90/90/90 schools focused on reading, mathematics and writing in order to improve student opportunities in a wide variety of other academic endeavors. Written pieces are analyzed to help teachers gain additional diagnostic information about their
students. This information enables teachers to create strategies necessary to improve student performance and make changes to their instructional practices (Reeves, 2005).

School culture and climate is also essential for students in poverty. Developing and maintaining a positive classroom environment where all children feel as though they belong is critical. Children in poverty frequently give up on school due to low self-esteem. Teachers, perceiving the student is unwilling to learn, give up on the student. Children in poverty need for the teacher to be the person who believes in them and provide a positive relationship (Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford, 2010).

**Characteristics of the Three Bodies of Research**

There are numerous shared factors identified within the research of poverty, effective schools and high poverty/high performing schools (Table 1).

**Table 1. Characteristics of the three bodies of research.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Children of Poverty</th>
<th>Effective Schools Research</th>
<th>High Poverty/High Performing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building relationships.</td>
<td>Strong leadership of principal.</td>
<td>Strong leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High expectations.</td>
<td>High expectations</td>
<td>High expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitor progress and plan interventions.</td>
<td>Focus on instruction/time on task/opportunity to learn.</td>
<td>Focus on quality instruction/time on task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with parents.</td>
<td>Positive home</td>
<td>Strong parently</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study elected to examine the characteristics found in the research and its application to practice to determine what, if any, of the research based characteristics were found in the high poverty/high performing schools involved in this documentary.

Poverty’s Impact on Education

Poverty is a pervasive condition throughout the United States that creates tremendous obstacles to overcome for the children born into this plight. Poverty involves a complex array of “risk factors that adversely affect the population in a multitude of ways. The four primary risk factors afflicting families living in poverty are: emotional and social challenges; acute and chronic stressors; cognitive lags; and
health and safety issues" (Jenson, 2009, p. 1). Due to these risk factors, poverty negatively affects student success in the classroom.

There is an undeniable relationship between poverty and academic achievement. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in a comparison study of 8th grade reading scores from 2011, students who were eligible for free and reduced lunches at school scored substantially lower than their peers who paid full price for their meals. On average, a student who received free lunch at school scored an average of 252 on NAEP Reading testing (National Assessment of Educational Progressing reporting) compared to 275 score by their peers not identified as eligible for the free meal services. Mathemetic scores did not fare any better. On average, a student who received free lunch at school scored a 269 on NAEP Mathematics testing (National Assessment of Educational Progressing reporting) compared to the 296 scored by their peers who not qualify as eligible for the free meal services. This is a difference of 27 points.

**Effective Strategies that Counter the Impact of Poverty on Learning**

Many times schools make things too complex that are really very simple. The following table charts researched strategies that are within the purview of teachers to implement in schools across the country in order to help students living in high poverty to become high performing. These simple strategies exemplify the individual and combined work of Payne (2005), Edmonds (1982), Scheerens and Bosker (1997), Marzano (2003), Bell (2002), Lezotte (2011), Quick and Quick (2000), and Reeves (2005).
Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Children of Poverty</th>
<th>Effective Schools</th>
<th>High Poverty/High Performing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connect with students. Build relationships.</td>
<td>Create a school culture putting students first.</td>
<td>Build relationships with students and parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create an environment of high expectations with supports in place for success.</td>
<td>Focus on instruction and time on task.</td>
<td>Focus on high quality rigorous instruction/time on task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meet the developmental needs of each student intellectually and socially.</td>
<td>Strong administrative leadership.</td>
<td>High academic expectations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach emotional intelligence so students can become more self aware.</td>
<td>High expectations for student success/feedback.</td>
<td>Emphasis on reading and math.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a safe and orderly environment.</td>
<td>Frequent monitoring of student performance/progress.</td>
<td>Strong leadership with a shared vision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide extra-support service with intervention processes.</td>
<td>Safe and orderly schools.</td>
<td>Frequent assessment of student progress/performace that drive practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear and focused mission.</td>
<td>Safe and orderly environment.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive home/community relations.</td>
<td>Rigours and relevant curriculum.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focused/viable curriculum.</td>
<td>Strong parental involvement.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative working environment.</td>
<td>Frequent and sustained staff development program.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hire and retain strong teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary

In summary, the research of: Edmonds (1982), Scheerens and Bosker (1997), Marzano (2003) on Effective Schools; Bell (2002), Lezotte (2007), Quick and Quick (2000), and Reeves (2005) on HP2; and Payne (2005) on poverty all get to the core of what it takes to help high poverty students reach high levels of performance. These strategies, when implemented in systemic and intentional ways, can make a difference. These strategies cannot happen without strong visionary leadership and supportive faculty members working collaboratively to address the high needs of these high poverty students.

Who is the capstone meant to impact?

This capstone can impact the way teachers and school leaders respond to students of poverty in schools with high levels of poverty. Through this documentary, teachers will more fully realize they are not helpless victims bound by the family backgrounds of the students they serve. Teachers will come to believe, or reaffirm their belief, that they can make a difference as schools across the Commonwealth, and across the nation, are making a difference in what they do in classrooms on a daily basis. This capstone can impact school administrators and teacher leaders as they develop policies and implement practices that govern the work in schools. This documentary can impact teacher and leader university preparation programs in training educators to better address gap populations that include students of poverty. Ultimately, a goal of this capstone is to inspire educators to look for the
roadways and not the roadblocks in finding successful solutions for children of poverty.

**How was the capstone project implemented?**

Following a review of data retrieved from the Kentucky Department of Education website and the Annie E. Casey Foundation website, ten school districts in Eastern Kentucky were targeted and invited to participate in this capstone project. The targeted districts had a minimum threshold of 65% free and reduced lunch population with reading and math scores placing the school into the 50th percentile or higher in Kentucky ranking. The districts included: Bell County, Breathitt County, Clay County, Floyd County, Harlan County, Knox County, Owsley County, Perry County, Whitley County and Wolfe County. Owsley County posted a 90% free and reduced lunch rate, the highest in the state.

Two of the ten targeted districts agreed to participate and are included in this documentary: Whitley County and Harlan County school districts. Four schools elected to participate: Whitley County Middle School (grades 7th-8th), Whitley County East Elementary (grades Pre-school through 6th), Pleasant View Elementary (Whitley County, grades Pre-school through 6th), and Rosspoint Elementary (grades Kindergarten-8th located in Harlan County). Demographics of the schools participating in the interviews and documentary are captured in Table 1. In search of high performing/high poverty schools to be involved in this project, finding a high poverty/high performing high school was a challenge. Therefore, a limitation of this capstone is that it captured a limited number of schools in grades K-8 in two rural
school districts in Kentucky. Schools were determined to be high poverty/ high performing in analyzing data over a two year period (2009-2010 and 2010-2011) in Table 2.

Informational packets containing copies of the capstone proposal, informed consent letter for participants, and copies of the questions administered to staff and students were mailed to district superintendents. Phone contact was made to district superintendents to establish an interview time schedule and date for taping of the documentary. Visits to individual schools were scheduled, along with, notification forwarded to the local school board informing them of the project timelines and purpose.

Prior to each visit, communication was made to each principal to further discuss the capstone, plan the visit and develop a process for randomly selecting students and teachers participating in the documentary. Principals were asked to notify the school based decision making council, parents and community members of this projects and its focus.

The process at each school included interviewing the principal first, followed by, a taped tour of the building. A script was developed and narrated by the author of this capstone with commentary provided during the tour. Each school received minimally two-six hours of video work. These hours involved the filming and gathering of additional data that supported reasons for high performance in these high poverty schools and effective strategies being implemented.
A draft of video footage was provided by the author of this study to a professional videographer for the editing and development of the final documentary.

**Table 1. Demographics of the schools participating in the interviews and documentary.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>% Free &amp; Reduced</th>
<th>Number of Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whitley County Middle School</td>
<td>7th and 8th</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitley County East P-6 Elementary School</td>
<td>P-6th</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasant View Elementary P-6</td>
<td>P-6th</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosspoint Elementary P-8th</td>
<td>P-8th</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2. Academic performance data collected to determine if the school was high performing included No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress (K-PREP) scores.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Math 2009-10</th>
<th>Math 2010-11</th>
<th>Reading 2009-10</th>
<th>Reading 2010-11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whitley County Middle School</td>
<td>64.31</td>
<td>68.38</td>
<td>78.14</td>
<td>79.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitley East Elementary School</td>
<td>65.75</td>
<td>85.71</td>
<td>71.92</td>
<td>84.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers and students were randomly selected to participate in this documentary that included a total of ten teachers, four administrators and fifty students (either in focus groups, informal conversation, or in formal video taped session) in grades P-8. Teachers and students exemplified little diversity, another limitation of this study. Teachers were also limited in diversity with 100% of caucasian descent Table 3.

Table 3. Demographic overview of the schools participating in the documentary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th># of Teachers</th>
<th># of Administrators</th>
<th># of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whitley County Middle School</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>604</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitley East Elementary School</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasant View Elementary School</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosspoint Elementary School</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>405</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Documentary interviews were conducted in the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semesters. Interviews were conducted both individually and in groups. Separate sets of student and teacher interview questions were administered to participants. Comments were captured in the documentary included over six (6) hours of recordings that were later spliced into a 50 minute documentary. The author of this capstone coded teacher and student responses to the interview questions that were designed to determine emerging themes and patterns aligned to the conceptual framework of the capstone. Interview responses provided qualitative data. Comments were coded to determine their alignment to the themes common to the research that included teaching children in poverty, effective schools and high performing/high poverty schools. This study examined more fully the participating school’s practice to the shared themes of effective schools and high poverty/high performing that were earlier defined as relationships, high expectations, data driven decisions, and the importance of serving as an emotional resource for students.

Six book chapters were developed to tap into the emotional intelligence of the reader. Many times theory alone does not turn advocacy into action. In all of the studies, little attention has been paid to the people behind the studies, the students, their teachers, and the adults who care for them. Certainly researchers like Ruby Payne (2001), have done extensive work on looking at poverty and helping explain traditions and customs. Payne and a few others have put faces on some of the numbers, but too few have told the story or brought to life the people behind the research.
In sharing true stories “from the field,” this author hopes to move educators to change their practice. It is the hope of this author that educators become more keenly aware of the stories of real students that sit amongst us daily in our classrooms, stories of students who live in poverty, who rest their hope of a better life on educators who might come to know them on a personal level, who understand their needs, who expect more of themselves to help them reach their highest potential, regardless of their family background. This researcher’s intent is to sharpen that vision, provide clarity to what is known, and share the story of some incredible individuals that some have called poor.

In theory and in practice, the research shared and the documentary showed what successful schools are doing to negate the effects of poverty are the same. The book details what happens to students if we do not work intentionally to become an effective school and the result of lost children who succumb to a lifetime of poverty.

**Why were this capstone and related strategies selected?**

Strategies that work were based on the research of Edmonds (1982), Scheerens and Bosker (1997), Marzano (2003) on Effective Schools; Bell (2002), Lezotte (2007), Quick and Quick (2000), and Reeves (2005) on HP2; and Payne (2005) on poverty. In these economically challenging times, most of the strategies schools and teachers can implement cost nothing but merely require of educators the strategic planning, implementation and follow-through of proven and effective strategies. Schools can no longer ignore students of poverty. With the pressures of high stakes accountability and increasing poverty levels across the nation, schools
must create a culture of high expectations, particularly targeting poverty populations, in order to meet the needs of these students as well as meeting state and national standards. Teachers must believe that they are the most influential person in a child’s learning and that teachers can impact student success.

When was the capstone implemented?

This capstone was initiated in January, 2011. Implementation of interviews and filming began in December, 2012 through February, 2013. Book chapters were developed over time beginning in the summer, 2011. Anticipated time of completion of the documentary and capstone is March, 2013.

Impact of the capstone

Findings from the capstone indicated the practices of participating schools mirrored the research that served as the conceptual framework of this study of teaching students of poverty, effective schools and high poverty/high performing schools and their commonalities. The four common themes and these three bodies of work shared were: importance of relationships, high expectations for students, data driven decisions, and the importance of serving as an emotional resource for students.

Theme 1: Importance of Relationships. Teacher comments were coded using (TC) followed by a number identifying different teachers. Student comments were coding using (SC) followed by a number identifying different students. Comments included:

TC1: I know with 100% surety that the teachers here are dedicated to the students.
TC2: These are my students and I will do everything I can to provide with them with what they need to learn. I will protect them, too.

TC3: We make it a priority to know each individual child’s struggles personally and in academics.

SC1: My teachers care if I learn.

SC2: The best thing about my school is my teachers.

SC3: My teachers are always there for me.

**Theme 2: Data Driven Decisions.** Teacher comments were coded using (TC) followed by a number identifying different teachers. Student comments were coding using (SC) followed by a number identifying different students. Comments included:

TC1: I assess daily. I leave myself notes of who is struggling and who gets it. Then we have have our team planning we discuss specific students. Who is struggling in one room may be excelling in another room. We then plan strategies how to help the children be successful in the other room.

TC2: If a child is struggling, we try to see if it is going across the board in all their subjects and teachers. Look at the data weekly gives us the ability to put strategies and interventions in places before they take their summative evaluations at the end of the unit. We then come back after the evaluation to see if and how the student is progressing. We can compare class to class to monitor progress.
TC3: We use corrective action teachers to provide pinpoint instruction to small
groups or one on one to meet specific needs of the children. We key in on
and target the needs of all the children scoring less than distinguished.
However, we provide intense intervention, through pin point instruction with
those students who are scoring under apprentice.

SC1: We test all the time. My teachers explain to us why the tests are so important.
If I don’t do well, then my teacher works one on one with me.

SC2: I want to out score my friends. We use daily exams, quizzes, and writing items
to see who is the best in the room. No one wants to lose.

SC3: A lot of times, my teacher will go over the results of our tests and then say that
she needs to go back and reteach something because there were a lot of us
who didn’t get it. By the time she is finished, we all get it.

Theme 3: High Expectations for Students. Teacher comments were coded
using (TC) followed by a number identifying different teachers. Student comments
were coding using (SC) followed by a number identifying different students.

Comments included:

TC1: I hold them to high standards. I accept no excuses. We make sure, as teachers,
to go above and beyond.

TC2: I have the same assignments, the same expectations for all students in my
classroom. No exceptions.

TC3: It doesn’t matter where they have come from in my classroom. All that matters
is, can I take the year that I have with these kids and can I do something
positive with their life so that when they leave my classroom, they feel positive, successful and better about themselves.

SC1: I used to not do my homework, but my teacher won't let me do that. If I don't get it finished at home, then I have to work on it at school with a tutor.

SC2: My teacher won’t accept anything less than a B.

SC3: My teacher won’t accept excuses. I have tried, but he won’t. If I do bad on a test, I see a tutor and then take the test over. We are not allowed to fail.

**Theme 4: Importance of Serving as an Emotional Resource for Students.**

Teacher comments were coded using (TC) followed by a number identifying different teachers. Student comments were coding using (SC) followed by a number identifying different students. Comments included:

TC1: If students are upset about anything at all and come to us, we are there for the students.

TC2: It's not about what we can do to make our jobs easier, it's what can we do to make the lives of the students better.

TC3: Students come back to us and invite us to their graduations, weddings, and other important events. They say, "I am graduating. You have to come and be there. You are the one who told me that I could do this and I did!"

SC1: I know that my teacher is always there for me. She even cares if I have a coat. We talk about what I want to be when I get out of school and she tells me how to get there. She tells me I can do anything.
SC2: My teacher comes to all of my ball games. He finds ways to tie my basketball stats into math class. Makes learning math more fun.

SC3: My teacher encourages me to be a teacher. She lets me teach mini lessons. Sometimes when I have had a rough night at home, we talk about what happened and she tells me that one day I will be the grown up and can live anywhere I want to. Knowing she cares makes me want to come to school each day.

Data collected from this study indicated the critical component of building relationships with students as a key factor in becoming a high performing/high poverty school. 100% of teachers interviewed and out of 100% students commented the importance of teacher/student relationships.

The second common characteristic shared with effective schools and high performing/high poverty schools, according to teacher and student interviews, was using data to drive decisions in instruction, assessment, and in planning of additional supports for students. 100% of all teachers and students stated the importance of using data to guide decisions within the school.

The third common characteristic shared with effective schools and high performing/high poverty schools, according to teacher and student interviews, was establishing and maintaining high expectations for all students. 100% of all teachers and students emphasized that establishing and communicating their high expectations for students was essential for student success.
Finally, the last most common characteristic shared with effective schools and high performing/high poverty schools, according to 100% of teachers interviewed and out of 95% students is having teachers and school staff serve as an emotional resource for students.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited to: (4) high poverty, high performing schools in rural, Eastern Kentucky.

The sample population was limited in number. 

This study did not include any high performing, high poverty high schools 

The student and teacher sample population was limited in diversity. 

Limited funding was available to implement this study on a broad scale. A grant for $25,000 was submitted, but was not accepted.

Delineation of Work

This capstone was individually developed and produced by the author of this capstone with the assistance of media production technicians.

Reflections

Implications of this study. On future practices as a result of this study, the author of this study could provide professional development on effective schools and high performing/high poverty schools. Professional develop could be provided as a result of this capstone on strategies that work bridging theory and practice.

Implications on future research. Suggestions for future studies include expanding this capstone work in schools with more diverse populations of students
and teachers in both rural and urban settings. A larger sample size would positively impact the validity of the research to practice. Seeking high performing high schools would lend credibility to this study and expand the scope of the study to include K-12 schools. Adding additional research questions could seek to find what themes students and teachers believed to be most important and why and compare similarities and differences to student to teacher responses.

**Capstone Project**

The capstone project was actually composed of three components: Research base as part of the executive summary, documentary, and stories from the field. The documentary may be found on the DVD which accompanies this executive summary.
Reference Lists

Executive Summary Reference List


Miller, A. (2010, November 26). *Lake Forest*. Retrieved from Donnelley and Lee Library Archives and Special Collections:


Rush, B. (2002). *To know them is to teach them*. Retrieved from Learn NC:


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Capstone Reference List


Whitley County Schools

Harlan County Schools

Joel Brashear, Editing and Production of the Documentary
Stories from the Heart of an Educator

"Roots and Wings"

Beth Pennington

Morehead State University

2013
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Roots and Wings

If I had two wishes, I know what they would be
I'd wish for Roots to cling to, and Wings to set me free;
Roots of inner values, like rings within a tree,
and Wings of independence to seek my destiny.

Roots to hold forever to keep me safe and strong,
To let me know you love me, when I've done something wrong;
To show me by example, and helps me learn to choose,
To take those actions every day to win instead of lose.

Just be there when I need you, to tell me it's all right,
To face my fear of falling when I test my wings in flight;
Don't make my life too easy, it's better if I try,
And fail and get back up myself, so I can learn to fly.

If I had two wishes, and two were all I had,
And they could just be granted, by my Mom and Dad;
I wouldn't ask for money or any store-bought things.
The greatest gifts I'd ask for are simply Roots and Wings.

By Denis Waitley
Gratitudes

With the exception of the children’s names, all content within this book is based on true experiences from the field. These children have forever touched my heart and changed my life. The lessons they taught me endure still.

It is with all the love in my heart that I thank my family, community, and my God for the opportunity to write this book. Without the support of those I hold dear, it would not have been possible.

Many, many thanks to Germaine Shaffer for the numerous hours of editing and emotional support she has provided. I truly could not have made the journey without her.
Preface

Poverty can be defined many ways, by different entities. In some instances, poverty can be situational (sometimes referred to as temporary) or generational (often referred to as inter-generational) and it also defined as the extent to which an individual does without resources (Payne, 2005). Regardless of the definition, poverty impacts a student's ability to be successful in the classroom (NCCP, 2010).

After viewing the documentary and hearing the success stories from our local schools, we all should be inspired. Not only is it possible to achieve, it is possible to excel!

Furthermore, the successful adult’s stories included in the documentary are living proof that we, as educators, do make a difference. The fruits of our labor in the classroom are being paid forward to future generations, not only by our own hands, but by those whose lives we have touched.

The stories you are about to read were included as a call to action. The stories of the children are shared to help us remember that not even one child can be lost.
Forethought

“If we understand children of poverty, we can better understand our starting points as educators of these children. We need not let our compassion for the dire situations in which they live cripple OUR quest to help raise them out of this state. In fact, our bar for them should be higher with the supports in place to help them reach it.”

Dr. Carol Christian, 2012
Overview

We as educators pride ourselves on being nurturing and caring. The vocation speaks to the sheer nature of the person within it. Educators embody compassion, listening, and nurturing. We grow, equip and encourage the most precious gift God has given us, the children. We often think of ourselves as being the go-between, the helpmeet, the secure footing on a rather slippery slope for all children as they navigate through the K-12 school system, regardless of the children's background.

We believe that each child presents a new opportunity, a new hope for humanity, that somehow one of these beautiful, bright faces holds the key to the cure cancer or perhaps for world peace. Educators work tirelessly to ensure that every child in their classes receives the same quality treatment and opportunity as the next...BUT for children in poverty, is it enough?
Cindy’s story

In the fall of 1980, at the ripe of old age of 10, I began to see the work my father did as the principal of a small school in a very different light. I had enjoyed my childhood wrapped in the innocence that all children should enjoy. I was blinded to how the world truly was; however, during this fourth grade year in elementary school, my rose colored glasses began to slide down my nose. Cold reality was coming into clarity with the dinnertime conversations my parents shared about a family at the school nestled deep in the country that frequently kept my hero (my Dad) late hours from his family. Of course they did not know I was listening, but being the curious child I was, the temptation not to listen in was too great to resist. Combine curiosity with the thrill of not getting caught, and it was absolutely irresistible.

I heard my dad divulge to my mom numerous stories of finding a brother and sister eating out of the garbage cans behind the school, of finding a young boy drinking from a toilet, of the same child being in second grade not speaking. Dad would often come home teary-eyed, explaining to my mother how he had been in the cafeteria during lunch and placed extra food on both Cindy and her little brother’s trays as they were always ravenously hungry. I simply could not understand how this was possible. I had no frame of reference to understand that other children simply did not enjoy the hot meals, clean clothes, and warm bed that I had. I had not yet realized how brutal life can be. That was, until one day in late April of that year...

The April air had a crisp bite as my brother and I played outside. The sun was shining brightly and the birds were singing. It was a fantastic day for the
game of catch we were playing in the side yard. After several rounds of catching... and well, not catching the throws, I began to wonder just were my dad was. It was way past five in the afternoon and, even though his position as a principal kept him late on numerous occasions, I was always anxious to see him. I kept peeking around the corner of the house “just to see” if he was there. Before long, I noticed that my father’s red Ford Ranger was rolling into the driveway. I took off at full gallop to greet him. Giggling and bouncing as most ten year old girls do, I rounded the corner of the house to get my usual hug from my dad only to come up short when I saw “her”.

In the passenger seat sat a very small, thin little girl. Her hair was blonde, or at least I thought it appeared to be blonde. It was extremely difficult to know for sure what color her hair really was, since it was dirty and matted to her head. She kept her head downward cast and never once raised her face to make eye contact. Dad jumped out of the truck and gave me my welcome home hug and then walked me over to the side of the truck to meet “Cindy”. He opened the door and said, “Cindy this is my daughter”. Her little head never raised, she very meekly shook her head in the affirmative. Dad looked down at me and told me to go get my mother. I ran in a dead spring to the front door, bounded in screaming for my mom to come to me. I am quite sure that I added at least ten grey hairs to her head that afternoon as my screams were blood curdling. My mother ran to the door, saw Cindy in the truck, her mouth dropped open, and then she....cried! Seeing my mother cry has always
been heart-wrenching and I didn’t understand the why of the tears. Dad helped Cindy out of the truck and walked her to the front door. Introductions completed, my dad then asked my mother to run a bath for the little girl. Five rounds of bath water later, a beautiful child emerged! I have never before nor since witnessed such a transformation (I truthfully did not know that much dirt could be on a human being’s body!). Before me stood a child with blonde hair so white it looked like cotton hanging from her little head. Her eyes were clear and the color of a summer sky. Her skin was pale white but her face was graced with full, ruby red lips. She was nothing less than stunning. Her tiny frame looked even more waif like since she was dressed in my clothing, which, of course, hung from her frail form since I outweighed her by at least twenty pounds.

Mouth agape, I struggled to clear my dry throat and asked her if she would like to come to my room to play. She simply nodded, “yes”, and down the hallway we went. She knew very little about playing games and I found myself teaching her how to even play with dolls. I remember being frustrated and saying, “Don’t you ever play?” The truth was no, she never played. She had no toys. With eleven children in the family, chores were all she did after school.

Soon my mother called us to come to the table for our evening meal. My rose-colored glasses finished falling from my face, crashing into pieces on the floor. With the invitation to eat, Cindy’s eyes widened as she baby stepped her
way to the kitchen where the steam from the meal was clearly visible from the hallway that led to my bedroom. We usually took our meals at the kitchen table, reserving the dining room and dining table for holidays and special occasions. It was the dining room table that Cindy ran screaming to hide under.

She dove underneath it, curled into a ball, hugging her knees and rocking in fear. Wide-eyed, I turned to my mother as she simply took me by the hand and seated me at the table. My brother followed suit and then my father. Once the three of us were seated, mom walked quietly to the table, kneeled down, reached out her hand, and asked Cindy to take it and join us at the table. Cindy refused to do so, not verbally, just by continuing to rock and cry. Without another word, mom returned to the table and prepared a plate for her. She made Cindy the first plate of food, piled the food on it very high (complete with dessert before she had even eaten anything and I was very jealous!), and sat it on the floor beside her without comment. Still, Cindy would not eat. The rest of us ate our meal in silence and shock. When the meal was finished, the dishes cleared, and my parents seated in another room watching the evening news, I watched from the kitchen table as Cindy devoured the food placed beside her. In desperate gulps she consumed the food so quickly that I was afraid she would choke! I tried to wrap my mind around how someone so tiny could so quickly eat so much! In fact she had
eaten so much so rapidly that she became ill. She ran to the bathroom and vomited, only to return and eat what had been left on her plate.

I would venture to say that no ten year old from a middle class family recognizes the signs of someone who had been starved and beaten for eating, but yet that was what I witnessed. Cindy stayed with us for two full weeks before her family even bothered to look for her! Only after her older sister had been drowned in a silt pond of a mining company to hide the crime of rape by her cousin did the father want Cindy to come home, so no one would ask where she was during the funeral. He told his neighbors he feared if the department of social service found out Cindy was living elsewhere, he would lose some of his welfare benefits. Oddly enough, he had known all along she was staying with our family. He told the social services worker to start looking for her at our home. It is truly a miracle my father did not go to jail, but for him it was worth the risk.

Why take the risk of losing your licensure as a principal, facing the possibility of incarceration for harboring someone’s child? My father is a man of strong moral convictions. Knowing that a child is going hungry was more than he could bear. It is at this juncture, he had to decide what was more important. Ensuring Cindy’s welfare or maintaining his licensure. The needs of the child always won out with my father.

When he went to school the next day he began searching for answers about her family. He discovered her family was a family of generational poverty.
Her father was an alcoholic and fifteen years older than Cindy’s mother. The father would use their food stamps to purchase enough food for one large meal each month, retaining a few food stamps to carry the family through until the next month. He would then sell the rest for alcohol. The mother would prepare the food and the adults would come eat. Once the meal was finished, the children fought for the scraps that were left. Scraps do not go very far when shared in eleven directions. On the few occasions when one of the children had been brave enough to dare to take food before the adults had eaten, he or she had been severely beaten with a belt. The home they lived in was just a two-bedroom shack, without running water or indoor plumbing.

Cindy slept on a mattress on the floor with her sisters and the blanket the girls used for warmth was so worn that it held no heat. I am confident she suffered other atrocities that my parents sheltered me from knowing.

I can still remember clearly the day she left...I am not sure who cried harder, Cindy, me or my dad. In an attempt to punish my father for bringing her home, her father moved the entire family to another county. Later we found out this was common practice for the family. They would remain in one county until someone found out how the children were being treated and then they would move somewhere no one knew who they were; it made it harder for social services to track the abuse. On a side note, her sister was fourteen when she was raped and murdered. No charges were brought against the cousin who allegedly perpetrated the crime, as he had been defined as
mentally delayed. The family did not have the means to dress Cindy’s sister’s body in proper burial attire, so she was buried in my Easter dress from 1980. Where is Cindy now? I have no idea... we never saw her again.
Carrie's story

Entering college in the Fall of 1988 on a basketball scholarship, I had no intentions of becoming a teacher. I entered college with intentions of becoming a lawyer. During my freshman year of college, I suffered a knee injury and opted to take a redshirt season (when an athlete is injured he or she may use a "redshirt" to be eligible to stay in college and play on additional year to make up for the year lost due to an injury or illness). A qualification for taking a redshirt is the individual must be continuing on in a plan of study. For me, I selected education. Truthfully, I was only taking education to be eligible. Little did I know, my life course was going to be fore altered as I fell in love with education. It was during my student teaching experience in 1992 that I met Carrie.

The alarm clock's shrill wail was not a very welcome sound at 6 a.m. that blustery March day in 1992. I was in the eighth week of my student teaching experience and already wishing that April would hurry up and arrive. Tired of the heavy weight of the long winter coat and the sweaters that I still wore to work, I was longing for the warmth of spring. After a couple of times hitting the snooze button, I dragged myself up and out of bed.

I stumbled through the perfunctory shower and regular make-up session before heading to the school. I must confess that my student teaching experience was less than stellar. A very over-bearing teacher, who did not wish for me to spread my wings and fly in "her" classroom, made for a very limited amount of knowledge
gained. So with a heavy sense of, "here we go again", I rolled into the parking lot just in time for bus duty.

The day played out as many other days had. Reviewing lesson plans, grading exams, followed by reviewing a couple of classes for an upcoming test, occupied the bulk of the morning session. Lunch was equally as uneventful, and less than tasteful, followed by a couple of hours of lecture to end my day. When the final bell sounded in the afternoon, I grabbed my long, very heavy, black wool coat and made my way down the corridor to the outside bus parking lot for bus duty.

This afternoon session of bus duty saw the wind whipping the children’s hair in every direction imaginable, reminding me of a static electricity ball at a carnival show whose current sends your hair in a thousand different directions. The bitter bite of the wind did nothing to quiet the sounds of children talking and laughing. The first run buses were awaiting their human cargo. Loading quickly and pulling away immediately once filled, the rest of the parking lot settled into the waiting game for the second run buses to arrive. It was then I noticed “Carrie”.

She was just a pitiful child. Long dark hair, stringy and unkempt, she stood with her arms wrapped around her body to capture warmth that was not to be found. She was dressed in a woman’s V-neck striped sweater and a pair of jeans that were at least two inches above her well-worn, pink tennis shoes that had holes in the sides of them. No other child spoke to Carrie as she mindlessly walked in a small circle. I gazed at her for a few moments, silently absorbing the picture and planning a way to
intrude into her circle. Something about this child compelled me to go to her; beckoning me to go to the little girl who seemed so alone.

Quietly I walked towards her, clutching my coat closed at the throat. It was already buttoned up to repel the cold air, but as I walked into Carrie’s life, the temperature seemed to drop 20 degrees. As if sensing my presence, she turned to face me when I was within ten feet of her. I stopped and simply said, “Hi”. Such a little, unpretentious word, but so powerful in that moment. The child who had no one to talk to turned and a bright smile spread across her tiny face. “Hi” she chirruped back.

“My name is Beth” I told her to which she simply said, “I am Carrie.”

“I like your sweater”, I told her.

“Thanks, its mommy’s. She is letting me wear it”, she replied.

“Do you have a jacket to match your pretty sweater?” I asked.

“Nah” she said, “mine gots a hole in it so daddy threw it away. He said it was no count.” Unbuttoning my coat as I spoke, “Well, I’ll tell you what. How about you step inside my coat and let me keep you warm until your bus comes?”

A simply affirmative nod of the head was the quick reply. She walked towards me, face downcast and turned her back to me when she drew near. I took one step forward and wrapped my arms around her. Since I am five feet ten inches tall, I tower over most grown individuals. Combine my height and Carrie’s small stature and I am quite confident our appearance was comical. Her tiny frame felt like an iceberg when my body came in contact with hers. It didn’t take long though for
my body heat and the warmth of the wool to seep into her chilled bones. Once her body started to thaw, so it seemed, her voice box and tongue did too!

Carrie began to talk about something and nothing all at the same time. She giggled and wiggled like most little girls do. I heard about her dog (Freckles), how her mother sewed most of her clothes, and how her dad liked to drink whiskey. She talked about her grandparents and prattled on about how they smelled funny but liked to give her hugs. I laughed out loud, and she joined me in a good belly laugh. She was such a lovely child. Long dark hair, eyes the color of warm honey and an infectious smile. Truly a little angel sent to brighten the world.

Within minutes, we were fast friends and time seemed to grow wings. Her bus appeared too quickly for either of us and it was time to part ways. Like a pair of emperor penguins, we waddled our way to the bus door. I slow unwrapped my arms from around Carrie and placed my hands on the open door to make a bridge onto the warmth of the bus. Once inside Carrie made her way to her assigned aisle seat. The game of twenty questions was then launched with the bus driver.

“Hey Tom,” I said.

“Hey there yourself,” he replied.

“What’s Carrie’ story?” I inquired.

“She lives up in the head of Grays Knob. Clapboard house at best. Its got holes in the walls and holes in the ceiling. Her old man won’t stay sober long enough to work at much and so nothin’ gets fixed,” he said.

“What about her mom?” I fired next.
"She’s sweet enough. I think he probably keeps her in line if you know what I mean. There’s a house full of those kids, but that Carrie is the baby," Tom told me.

“What about dinner, Tom? Will she have something to eat when she goes home?” I asked. “Nope, well probably not” he paused, “I hear rumors you know. We’ll talk later” he said, “gotta get the babies home.”

With that he closed the door and the bus rumbled away. As the bus left, Carrie and I exchanged waves. I then set about seeking out more information. I had plenty of time to worry but not a lot of time to find answers to questions, for it was Friday.

Making a beeline straight for the cafeteria and praying that someone would still be there, I hustled. Entering the door, I heard the warm tones of “Ms. Susan” the cafeteria manager.

“Oh, I am so glad you are still here,” I almost panted out since I had hurried to get there.

“Sure am,” she said, “but just leaving. What’s going on?” She inquired.

“Do you know Carrie H?” I said.

“Sure do. She lives up in the head of Grays Knob. Daddy aint’ much count and her poor mom can’t do anything with him. They got a house full of kids. Little Miss Carrie is the baby I reckon,” She informed me.

“Ms. Susan, does Carrie have food at home? Heard any rumors about her going hungry?” was the next question I asked.
With a very loud sigh, Susan simply replied, “We have all heard the rumors, but I know the truth. Come Monday morning, you be down here at breakfast time and watch. You will see.”

I thanked her for her time and she headed out the back door to begin enjoying the weekend. I, on the other hand, spun around on my heel and headed out for what I knew was going to be a long weekend full of worry.

Monday seemed to take forever to arrive. Always present in my mind was that sweet face with the warm honey eyes and her thin frame. I was hopeful Ms. Susan was wrong, that somehow, magically, Carrie would not come in ravenous on Monday; however, hope can be cruel. Hope leads you on and begs you to believe, only to drop the bottom out of your heart. Fate and hope teamed up this particular weekend and Monday was even more shocking than I had expected.

The first bus on the lot was not Carrie’s. Neither was the second nor the third. I kept watching and finally Carrie was on the seventh bus. In a split second, as soon the door opened, Carried bolted out of the bus in a dead sprint, heading for the cafeteria. Fortunately for me, Carrie did not see me. Truth was she was so very hungry that she saw no one. I silently trailed behind to the cafeteria. Actually stalking might be a better descriptor, as I stealthily navigated the hall and the staircase so I would not arouse suspicion from the students or staff. Ms. Susan was watching for me, though, and as I strode through the door, she came up behind me and pulled me over to a coat rack across from where Carrie usually sat.
Carrie was in line and I could see her asking for extra-large servings, which the staff willingly provided. The meal was oatmeal, toast, juice, and milk. Carrie took every morsel she could. Hurriedly, she sat down on the table and began to devour the food. She took bites so large that her cheeks looked like a chipmunk storing food for the winter. Within four or five bites, ALL of the food on her plate was gone. Her hunger was unrelenting and she began instantly to try to get other students at the table to share their food with her. She was unsuccessful. She then went to the cafeteria staff and asked for more, but since she received free breakfast and lunch, and she had no money for “extras”, Carrie was denied.

As fast as I could grasp that this child had surely spent all weekend with nothing to eat, I dug into my pocket and handed Susan the ten dollar bill I had. I asked her to create whatever account needed to be created and put the ten dollars in there for Carrie and for any other child in her condition. Susan nodded and headed over. Taking Carrie by the hand, they re-entered the food service line and Carrie emerged with another plate, with two more servings of oatmeal, three pieces of toast, and two milks. I knew her belly would be full and I quietly left.

I could not bear the thought of what I had just witnessed. I took it upon myself to actively recruit teachers, student teachers, staff, bus drivers, custodians, in essence, everyone to donate at least ten dollars for the fund Susan created for Carrie and other hungry children. Since I could not divulge the recipients of the monies, it took some work but after some explanations about the nature of the fund, I was able to set up the Jane/John Doe fund for hungry children.
The lesson I learned from Carrie has followed me and I maintained this practice as an administrator. The only change in the Jane Doe or John Doe account is that I did not ask the staff for monies. Instead, at the beginning of every school year, I placed $200 into the Jane Doe or John Doe fund. As children who received free or reduced lunch came through the line and asked for additional food, the staff was instructed to say nothing and to give the child whatever he or she wanted to eat, paying for it from the Jane Doe or John Doe account. I never told any of my staff about the fund. Children just realized that for once it did not matter if they had monies for "extras." They simply received enough food to fill their stomach.
Meghan's story

My first year as an assistant principal paid me with a huge reality check. As a teacher, I thought I knew what it would take to be an effective principal. I needed to provide strong instructional leadership, manage discipline of students, and work collaborative with teachers to have a welcoming school that was highly successful academically; after all, such conversation had been the fodder of much discussion among teachers when we grew frustrated with our administration. On the top of my short list for student success was attendance. We all agree that students cannot learn if they are not in school. When I was handed the responsibility for tracking attendance, completing home visits, and filing charges with the local court-designated worker for students who were chronically truant, I nearly collapsed from excitement. I was ready for the challenge! I immediately went to the courthouse and, in order to understand her expectations, I introduced myself to the judge who would hear the charges. I then headed downstairs to introduce myself to the court-designated worker. Following a long conversation, I felt like I had a working knowledge of the documentation needed to pursue parents who did not send their children to school.

What I wasn’t prepared for was the child who lived on Forgotten Lane.

The heat lingered well into late October the first year I began completing home visits. Since I was never to be alone for safety sake (and truthfully, the revolver on her hip calmed irate parents more quickly than I could), the
school's resource officer and I would head out in her cruiser to pay a visit to homes of children who were truant. A truant is defined as having three or more unexcused days from school. However, in all fairness, before I could carve time to make the visits, students frequently had seven or more days under their belt.

The school resource officer's cruiser was in dire need of having the air conditioner fixed so we always tried to go out early in the cool of the morning. This particular day it was already in the high 70's with a clear, blue sky and sun beating down on us at 9 a.m. I could feel the sticky begin to claim my skin and an eerie feeling began to claim my mind. I just somehow knew this was going to be a long day.

Our travel was nothing noteworthy and we conversed about who we would be visiting that day as we drove further and further away from the school. We left the main highway and began navigating a side rode, while enjoying a good belly laugh about her cruiser reminding us of Fred Flintstone's car. I pretended to put my feet through the floorboard for brakes and teased her about becoming a K-9 officer so that Dino could ride shotgun.

All laughter stopped and we became rather solemn when we came to the green road sign that read "Forgotten Lane." A chill immediately ran down my spine and gnawing sense of dread landed in the pit of my stomach. The pathway was narrow, winding, and absolutely in the middle of nowhere. Little gravel
road was not even listed on our 911 maps. Simply stated, it should have never existed.

As far as you I see, no homes were in view and the road provided nowhere to turn around. For a second, I feared we had somehow crossed out of society into a land that time had forgotten.

Fighting the feeling that we were trapped in a horror movie with a chainsaw wielding serial killer lurking in the shadows, we continued to make our way slowly along the gravel road. We drove past “Meghan’s” home, searching for a space large enough to turn the cruiser around. This proved to be no easy task. The pathway was so narrow the cruiser barely fit.

Finally, the school resource officer found (I should say created) a place wide enough and turned her cruiser around, pointing toward the main road in case we needed to make a hasty exit. We slowly drove back down the lane, pulled into an open area in front of “Meghan’s” home, and sat there. I am not sure why we simply sat there. I remember thinking the home and surroundings looked like as if it was found in a landfill.

I quickly began scripting what the outside of the home looked like on one of the three forms I designed for use with the court system. “Diapers on the ground, three car skeletons up on blocks, garbage and beer cans strewn on the lawn” went down on the paper. “Trailer looks like it survived the Vietnam War” soon followed the dialogue. The comment was actually kind. The trailer had plywood patches to the white and brown exterior. No
underpinning, only blocks were visible under the trailer. The windows were covered in plastic, some of which had huge holes in the outer layers so that the fragments waved like a flag when the wind blew. The roof was rusted over and the remnants of guttering clung to the roof with rusted screws. No flowers, no shrubs, and no adornment of any kind could be found around the trailer.

After exchanging looks, we stepped out of the cruiser.

The odor that assaulted my nose cannot be described. The air was pregnant with rotting meat, dirty diapers, human excrement, and basic filth. It was so breathtaking I had to cover my nose with the collar of my shirt and I struggled to suppress the gag reflex. I personally can attest to the rumors that some odors are so pungent and lasting that you can always recall them. If I close my eyes and concentrate on the memory, I can still smell the stench today. Never before and not since, have I ever smelled anything that so completely claimed your senses. Years later, I am still in awe.

No working vehicle was visible in the yard nor was there any sign of movement inside the trailer. Fear began to gnaw at me as I was afraid no one would be home and this visit would need to be repeated. The court system had a mandatory requirement that an interview with the responsible parent or guardian must be completed prior to any charges being filed. I was praying for someone to be home. With this prayer looping over and over in my mind, I cautiously began walking toward the front of the trailer.
Navigating the mine field of dirty diapers, beer cans, pieces of old motors, random clothing garments, and cigarette butts, I made my way through the front yard toward the porch. Since I have an overwhelming fear of dogs, I am always scanning my environment for any animal. This fear has provided me with more than one opportunity to see things that others would normally miss, and on this day, it was the reason why I noticed all of the obscure items strewn about the yard. This fear was a running joke between the officer and me. She teased me if she ever un-holstered her weapon on a home visit, it would be because of a Chihuahua.

Continuing my forward progression towards the porch, I finally reached the weatherworn stair landing. I began the climb. The stairs moaned and creaked under my body weight. I dared only to take baby steps up them. Up the first step I went; then the second step. Across from the porch on the lawn, near the end of the trailer, my eyes fell on a sight my mind just could not absorb. Bags and bags of garbage piled all over the yard at the end of the trailer. I just froze. It was a sea of black garbage bags, at least 75 to 100 of them! Some were intact while others had holes ripped in various places, still yet others lay in shreds...then I saw the unimaginable.

Rats! All shapes and sizes of rats! Rats racing around the bags, weaving in and out, carrying pieces of “stuff” with them. Over and over again, the rats would appear on one bag, run to another bag, and dive in disappearing from sight. Several larger rats were wrestling a knot at the top of one of the bags in
a frantic attempt to gain access to the contents. Smaller ones and baby rats
were busying themselves with eating the food remnants they had dragged to
the surface from within. Simultaneously, my stomach lurched and my heart
dropped! If the conditions were this bad on the outside of the old, dilapidated
trailer, what was I going to find on in the inside? It was clear why the child
wasn’t in school. Who could concentrate on learning anything when you have
to come home to this? Transported back to my foundations of education
classes, I could hear my teacher drilling Maslow’s hierarchy of needs into our
minds. If the first level of physiological needs (food, water, shelter, and
warmth) is not being met, then no other needs are going to be met.

Choking down the lump that rose to my throat at the sight of the rats racing to
and fro, I quickly ascended the other three stairs. Reaching to pull the
remnants of a screen door open, I was startled when the interior door jerked
open before I could knock. A fair haired, blue-eyed teenage girl stood on the
other side. She was disheveled and dirty. Gaunt in appearance with sunken
facial features, it very difficult to tell her age.

“What do you want?” she asked me.

With a questioning voice I said, “Are you Meghan?”

“Maybe, who wants to know?” she said.

“Hi Meghan, I am Beth Pennington, Assistant Principal at your high school.
May I come in?” I said.
She quickly tried to slam the door shut, but I was just quick enough to get my foot in-between the door and the jam. Grimacing as the door crushes my foot, I pleaded, "Please, I really need to speak with your mother". After what felt like five minutes, she relented and opened the door. The pain in my foot was short-lived as my stomach did a flip flop at what my eyes saw just beyond the door.

Meghan quickly raised her finger to pursed lips and said, "Sssh, mom is asleep and her boyfriend is in the bedroom passed out. If we wake him up, there will be hell to pay." Nodding my head in the affirmative, school resource officer and I eased our way into the trailer.

Just as Meghan had said, her mother was asleep. Passed out was a more accurate description. We nearly tripped over her as she was lying on her stomach with her arms and legs spread wide right in the middle of the living room floor. The smell of stale beer clung to the air, under the stench of body odor. I had to resist the temptation to bend down and search for a pulse. Carefully stepping over her, I walked towards the kitchen. Pausing to take it all in (the cat on the kitchen table eating a piece of bologna, the sink full of beer cans, the vomit in the corner that hadn't been cleaned up), I heard a small whimper. It sounded like a very young child in pain. Turning in a complete circle, I saw the source of the whimper.

A child, no more than four years of age, was lying on the couch with a halo implanted into his left leg. A halo is a medical brace that gets its name from
the metal rings that surround the injury, holding it in place through metal pins.
The pins are inserted into the bone to keep it immobile while it heals.

"Oh my Meghan, is this you're little brother? What happened?" I asked.

"His name is "Branson" she replied. "About a month ago, my mom's boyfriend left his 45 on the table over there loaded (she pointed to an end table). Branson tried to pick it up, said he wanted to play cowboys and Indians. It was too heavy for him to manage so he grabbed it with his other hand, accidentally pulling the trigger. Shot himself. He did, right there in the thigh (once again, she pointed towards the leg being supported with the Halo brace). About bled out, too. It was scary. We got him to the clinic and they airlifted him out." Pausing, Meghan then continued, "Spent 45 days in the hospital, that's why I haven't been in school. As you can see, I have more than one baby to take care off (pointing to her mother on the floor). Branson is doing better but I have one younger back there in the playpen asleep. I ain't got no time for school. They have to be watched, fed, changed and mom's not going to do it. If I don't stay home and look after them, who knows what may happen to them."

Swallowing hard on the disgust in my stomach, I asked if social services were involved. She said they were, but when they came around her mother cleaned up and cleaned the inside of the trailer. I did not know whether Meghan was being truthful about the social worker not being interested in the rats racing around the outside of house. What was clear to me was that we had a child
who was fifteen years old assuming the role of a parent to two younger
siblings (perhaps to all of her younger siblings as it was clear someone had
made sure they made it to school this day) and a parent who had serious
addiction issues. Unable to leave the situation as it was, the school resource
officer excused herself and stepped out to make a phone call. Meghan
instantly knew what the call was and she broke down in tears.
As I stood there cradling her head to my chest, I wondered about the source of
the tears. Relief? Regret for letting me in? Worry for what was to come? I
still do not know the motivator as I did not ask; I simply held her while she
sobbed for a solid ten minutes. When she was able to regain composure, she
just shared a smile. There was no need for words.
Meghan knew that this day would be a turning point in her life, I truly believe
that. She silently trusted me to do what was required to end her situation. I
brought court action against the mother for failing to provide an education for
Meghan, social services intervened with the younger children, and Meghan
moved in with her father.
What was the end result? I do not know.
Meghan moved away as her father lived out of state and I am no longer
employed in the school district.
First Intermission

“As long as you have a farm, you can grow yams as long as your arm,” Walter T. Hulett, Superintendent of Knox County Schools, recalling a conversation with a cafeteria employee from his days in elementary school. This lady inspired Mr. Hulett to continue on to strive to work hard and become the successful leader he is today.

“Here is where we are not who we are. I do not consciously think that a student is poor. I simply hold them to high standards and expect the best from them every day. I simply teach.”

Mrs. Stacy Bobrowski, Owsley County school teacher

“Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?”

Matthew 6:26 KJV

“Take what you have, build on it. Gather ideas from everywhere. Kids, teachers, parents and just everyone grow together.”

Stuart Conlin, Principal, Whitley County Middle School

“And all people, live, not by reason of any care they have for themselves, but by the love for them that is in other people.”

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910)
“I teach because it lets me touch the future. Our children are our hopes, dreams, and future. I teach for them.”

Mrs. Napier, Rossport Elementary

“We have our students for 8 hours a day, which is as much as their families have them. We can teach them and we will teach them.” Stuart Colin, Principal, Whitley County Middle School.

“[T]he soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting and trustworthy conditions....”

Parker J. Palmer, Let Your Life Speak, 2000

“Next to a child’s soul, its education is the most important thing you can ensure they have,”

Mrs. Wilson, 7th grade science teacher, Whitley County Middle School

“Think as little as possible about yourself and as much as possible about other people”

Eleanor Roosevelt

“What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?”

George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) (1819-1880)
Katie's story

As principal of a small elementary school, I found myself in the middle of one of the worst legal and ethical dilemmas I have ever faced. "Katie" was a child who lived in extreme poverty. Abandoned by her drug-addicted mother and not knowing who her father is, Katie was taken in by her maternal grandparents. Her grandmother, grandfather, uncle and his live in-girlfriend and their baby, her sister, and two other cousins under the age of twelve all lived in a mobile home with only two bedrooms and one bath. Space was cramped at best and food was often in short supply. Although food is a requirement for life, in Katie's case, food is what held her hostage.

The calendar on the wall said April, but the weather outside said June. Even early in the morning, as I made my way around the building (my daily ritual before school started to ensure the grounds were safe for students), the temperature was pleasant and the first few song birds of the season were warming up with a wonderful little melody. I entered the building, looking forward to the day ahead, especially afternoon recess. I frequently traveled out to the playground to spend some quality time in a relaxed setting with my students and their teachers. Truthfully, it always reminded me why I had chosen education as my life's work... A child is the living proof that God has not given up on mankind. I treasured those interactions.

A warm breeze was blowing when the classroom doors burst opened at recess, flood of bright faces racing for the playground. These little faces were
all aglow and the sun seemed to drench them in a mystical light that dissolved the differences in their abilities and backgrounds. Their laughter filled the air while they played. The swings cracked and popped under their efforts to climb higher and higher in their attempt to touch the sky. A game of tag was going on in the corner of the field while a game of dodge ball took up rest of the free yard. Although I am quite confident that none of the students really understood the rules of the games they played, a bystander would have thought them to be playing for a world championship, with the effort they were putting into the action.

The basketball court was hosting an elementary version of the state high school championship as the boys attempted to defeat the girls. I stifled a giggle as I heard the occasional, “you cheated” or “you fouled me” comment float across the air. Simply stated, it was just one of those days where you take a deep breath and smile, thankful to be alive.

From the corner of my eye, I saw “Katie” looking down at her left forearm from atop the landing to the slides. Her flaxen hair was being tossed about a bit by a warm breeze as it hung loose, down over her green eyes. Her pink, Disney Princess t-shirt was a size too small and her black jeans were a size too large, belted tightly at the waist. Her purple tennis shoes were new, a present from the youth service center. She seemed like every other child on the playground, but for some reason she seemed out of place. Not for the obvious reason of playing alone, but her quietness seemed out of the natural order. I
noticed her vision was transfixed on her left arm and she seemed to lackadaisically scratch a place there. Obviously from the distance between us, I had no way to determine the imperfection. At first I dismissed the scratching, assuming that perhaps a mosquito had decided to have a quick snack before flying off, but the longer she stood there absently picking at the place, the more I decided the situation needed my attention.

I began to very discreetly make my way in her direction. Handing out hugs to the children who came to seek one and calling others by name as I strolled closer to Katie, I noticed her classroom teacher had seen the scratching (which had now been going on for at least five minutes) and moved closer to the slide while performing supervisory duties.

"Hello, Ms. Johnson," I said. She returned the greeting. "What seems to be going on with Katie this morning?" I asked.

"I am not sure but when I walked past her desk during math, I saw a small, round burn on her left arm," she said. "It really looked to me like a cigarette burn." At that moment, I am fairly confident that my heart skipped a beat.

Nodding my head in recognition of what she said, I called out to Katie.

"Katie, let's see that slide." She was so focused on her arm she did not hear me.

"Katie," I yelled, "come on down. There are others who would like to slide" I said.
Looking up she nodded her head and slid down. Once she on the ground, I began walking towards her. As usual, Katie wanted a hug. She seemed so starved for affection that any morsel she was given was greedily accepted. Truthfully, I was always a little leery to hug too close, as Katie was known to have lice, but my heart would not let me off the hook. A hug she wanted, so a hug she received. I just always prayed that she would not share the lice if she had them.

“Hey there, how has schools been today?” I asked as she finished her hug.

“Fine” was the one word answer I received.

“Math going better for you, Katie? Are you starting to understand long division?” I asked.

“I guess so” she said. Katie again began to scratch the place on her arm.

“What do you have there?” I asked.

“Nothing!” she said way too quick, tucking the arm behind her back.

“Okay Katie, let me see,” I said. She instantly began to shake her head no.

“Katie?” I said again. Begrudgingly, she provided me her left arm for inspection and sure enough, a patch of dry, red skin looked somewhat infected. In the middle of the red patch was a perfect round burn. Trying to not alarm her, I asked what happened. “That’s a nasty looking red patch you have there Katie. What happened? It looks infected,” I said.
She wouldn’t answer. She turned those large, somewhat sunken in, green eyes up to lock with my brown ones. Almost silently pleading for me to let this go, she simply shrugged her shoulders.

"Katie, I think you need to see a doctor, honey," I said, "It looks infected. How about I call your grandmother and see if she can come take you to the doctor?"

"NO!" she all but screamed, "please don’t call her. She will be really mad at me for you seeing it." I could sense her tiny heart racing.

"Okay, okay sweetie. Let’s get you to the school nurse for some ointment at least" I told her. Now I knew there was a problem, beyond the difficulties the child had in learning, Katie was being physically abused.

I had heard the rumors of abuse before, but never saw anything that confirmed the rumors. I also had heard that food was withheld from Katie if she was "naughty" at school. This family was intentional in its effort to be lost in the sea of humanity within the community. Attention to the home was discouraged and, if a watchful eye turned their direction, the family instantly closed down. Thus, Katie was reserved, quiet, desperate to be seen a good child. She tried to “fly under the radar,” so careful was she to avoid attention to herself. All I could think of was this beautiful, innocent face was being abused.

I knew it was cigarette burn, unfortunately I have seen them on other children over the course of my time in education. The fresh wound is easy to identify
and the scar is its mirror image. As I walked Katie into the nurse’s office, she began to cry. The sense of fear and dread hung so heavy in the air, I was sure I could have reached out and grabbed it.

Susan, our nurse, came out very cheerful and greeted Katie while she sat down. The cheerful look on Susan’s face slowly disappeared as she began to feel the looming fear. I simply stood by Katie’s side and stroked her hair, explaining the place on her arm and asking for Susan to take a look. Susan simply smiled and said, “Let’s take a peek.” With this, I left the room and headed for the guidance counselor’s office.

Fortunately, it was close, as I had a full head of steam when I hit the door.

Bonnie saw the look on my face and said, “Sit down. What’s going on?” In a flurry of words, I explained what I knew and asked what she knew. Like me, Bonnie had heard the stories, but had no real proof. As I was still fairly new to the school (this was my second year), I needed her experience over the course of the twenty plus years she had been in the school to fill me in on the family’s history. I listened intently and tried to absorb it. Finally, Bonnie said, “You know, you have to call Social Services.”

I knew this. I really did, but how could I willingly bring even more negative attention to the family? I was confident Social Services would intervene on behalf of the child; however, with family reunification a primary goal, my concern was what would happen to Katie once she went home.
Enter my dilemma: legally I have to call. The grandparents should be held accountable, but ethically, I know, if I do call, Katie will receive far worse treatment that a cigarette burn when she goes home.

"I can't call" slid over my lips.

Bonnie shook her head and said, "You don't have a choice. It must be reported. That is the law."

"Bonnie, if I call the child will not be removed, she will probably just be taken over the weekend and God only knows what will happen to her when she comes back. I know the burn is bad, it is crime, but what they will do to Katie could be far worse if I call. How can I bring her more pain?" I said.

Very gently, like any good guidance counselor should do, Bonnie quietly slid around her desk, took my hand, looked me square in the eye and said, "Call."

No words formed in my brain to argue the point as I knew she was right. I shook my head, stood up, squared my shoulders, and headed for my office to make the call. I had to pass the nurses door on my way, so I poked my head in, hoping to see Katie one more time, but she was already gone. Susan had her head down and was rubbing her temples as I entered the room.

"Tell me I was wrong," I prodded. "Tell me that wasn't a cigarette burn on her arm? Please, tell me that," I asked of her.

Turning to face me with her large blue eyes swimming in tears, Susan said, "No, it was a cigarette burn. Katie told me what happened."
“Will you share?” I asked. Susan drew in a deep breath and began spinning the story of how Katie was home and got into an argument with one of the younger cousins over a toy. As a consequence for the disagreement, both children (according to Katie) had been sent to bed with no dinner and burned with the cigarette as a reminder to “be good”.

No further words were exchanged; I nodded my head and left Susan to her thoughts. Entering my office, I dropped into the chair and reached for the phone...

The call was placed on Thursday. I reported what I knew and provided directions to the home. Friday came and went, no Katie. I worried all weekend about her. I had to physically talk myself out of driving by the home, terrified that, if I was caught checking on her, her punishment would be worse. On Monday morning, I was at school early and waiting for the buses to roll in, looking for Katie.

Katie’s bus was number five on the parking lot that morning. As the doors began to open, Katie bolted off. She ran so fast she apparently did not hear me yelling for her to stop running. Making a beeline for the cafeteria, she dashed into the line and took one of everything. Turning the corner into the cafeteria, I saw her seated, shoveling oatmeal into her mouth at such a rate that she looked like a chipmunk storing nuts in her cheeks for the winter. Gulping and gulping the food, until nothing was left. She turned and went back for more. The same process of gulping food down and entering the line
for more food transpired two more times! The child ate so much so fast that she became physically ill and went into the restroom to vomit. She then returned to eat some more. This was the living proof of my fear. My phone call to Social Services had netted an investigation of the home, but no removal of Katie, and the end result was a weekend without any food.

How do I know this? Katie told her teacher that, because her principal had called the “people,” her grandmother was mad so she had to teach her to be good. Katie said, “My granny said an empty stomach is the best teacher in the world because it reminds us what being bad feels like.” I cried.

Of the whole experience, one positive came from it. Katie’s grandmother came to see me. She wanted to discuss my interest in her family and I was glad to do so. The conversation lasted for about two hours, but at the end, we knew where each other stood. Fortunately, to the best of my knowledge, Katie was never again without food. Unfortunately, Katie lost all trust in me. She blamed me for the hardship and never relented. I have not spoken to Katie since.
Bruce’s story

Frequently in education you hear a teacher say, “I am a ___ person” or “I could never teach ___ grade. That age group just drives me crazy.” We all have a comfort zone and limitations on our patience. Each grade presents its own set of challenges. At the core of who I am, I know I am a high school person. I taught middle school on one occasion; however, the bulk of my teaching tenure was with high school students. In my brief time in the middle school setting, I met Bruce. He is a child who was truly lost, and, as of yet, has never been found.

When I first received the call from the secretary of the school district in which I grew up in, that the current superintendent was attempting to recruit former students, who were now educators, to return home to teach, I was thrilled. Being able to return and give back to the children of my hometown had always been a desire of mine. An interview soon followed, with a job offer accompanying it. Small problem, it was a middle school position. Me? Teach middle school? After years in the high school setting, I was not sure this position would fit my personality. After all, middle school is time of huge hormonal changes and a lot of daily drama. One day the girls will come to school with their hair in pony tails carrying a baby doll, and the next day wearing a face full of make-up, speaking like an adult. This time in life is very challenging for me as a parent, so I knew it would be even more difficult as a teacher! One pre-teen at home is one thing, a room full is another.
Swallowing hard, I agreed to teach in a self-contained 6th grade classroom and prayed for mercy.

Additional stress was added to the situation due to my transferring at mid-point of the year. A teacher had decided to retire in December, leaving the vacancy. Deep in the pit of my stomach, I knew this was going to be a rocky transition. My “hunch” would be correct. I had not been privy to the full extent of the situation.

As I would soon learn, entering the classroom for the first time in January, I was greeted with 22 smiling faces. Boys outnumbered the girls in the class, but all of the students seemed happy to have a teacher. You see, I quickly learned that even though the teacher had filed paperwork to retire in December, she, in fact, had been using her sick leave days beginning in September! These students had been receiving instruction via substitute teachers now for months. Due to legal constraints, a school district may not post a vacancy until the first day AFTER the resignation or retirement occurs. Hence, the delay in posting and filling the position required the use of substitute teachers. The best possible scenario in this situation is to have one, consistent substitute until a permanent replacement can be hired.

Unfortunately, no person had been willing to stay with this group long-term. That was my first clue as to what the remainder of the year may be like!

“Look to the positive,” I told myself as I greeted the class with a standard introduction of my name and how thrilled I was to be with them. I asked them
to introduce themselves. Pretty, little girls with brightly colored bows in their hair smiled and provided their names eagerly. The boys were a little more reluctant and the smiles were fewer from them. In my mind I was thinking, “Ah, here goes the hormones” as the boys were all trying to be “cool.” When it was Bruce’s turn to introduce himself, I noticed he seemed to be a little further along the maturity path than the other boys in the room. He had a full goatee and was taller than anyone else in the room. Bruce reluctantly introduced himself, and as soon as the words left his mouth, another male student in the room blurted out, “Bruce is 14!” Trying to mask the shock that went through my mind, I simply said, “Well, that’s okay. I am just glad Bruce is part of my class.” Keep in mind, the average 6th grader is 11 years old at the start of the year and turns 12 during the year. Why was Bruce two years behind in school? Was he academically challenged? These questions would need to be answered later as it was time to get the class engaged in learning.

The first day of instruction consisted of evaluating the students’ progress. Much to my dismay, I found out they were substantially behind the other 6th grade classes. I am not sure why that was shocking to me (as the class had been through numerous substitutes), but, none-the-less, I was shocked. I expected some gaps in covering the curriculum, but not the huge omissions of content I found. After school, I stayed late planning and preparing lessons. I hoped that, with diligent instruction, I could catch the class up to the two other
6th grade classes by the state testing window. During this planning, I ventured to one of the other classrooms to speak with Mrs. Brown.

Mrs. Brown's room was neatly organized, with a rainbow collection of totes holding the fruits of her students' labors. Posters with various two dollar words upon them decorated the walls. A huge in-room library occupied the far corner of the room and student art work was proudly hanging from fishing line from the ceiling. It was obvious that learning was expected and celebrated within these four walls. Mrs. Brown herself was a petite woman, mid-30's, with green eyes and midnight-black hair cut into a jaw-line bob. She wore a plaid skirt of black, red and white. Her blouse was scarlet and had a large ruffle going down the front. Tall, black boots were upon her feet and silver jewelry completed her ensemble. Her black hair was offset by her pale skin and red lipstick. She was truly a lovely woman.

Knocking lightly on the door, I said, "Hello, Mrs. Brown."

"Hello there. How was your first day?" she inquired.

Smiling, with my eyes downcast, I simply said, "Interesting."

"Oh, how so?" she replied.

"Well, the class appears to be minimally two months behind on all content, so getting everyone caught up will be quite the challenge. Truthfully, I am not sure that will even be possible. I can get them within striking distance by test time in April, but with I can see I have quite a task before me."
Mrs. Brown nodded her head in agreement and said, “That class is an unusual bunch. They have been without a teacher so long, I think the kids believe they run the show. I would be mindful of classroom discipline. The poor substitutes have had very little control of the class. That’s why no one would stay with them long term. The kids have tried anything and everything to continue on without having to do any work. I am afraid you will have your hands full just getting them roped back in. I can give you a hint, though, if you want.” she offered.

“I would love anything advice you can give me,” I said.

“Try getting on Bruce’s good side. He is the real leader of the room. However Bruce goes, the rest of the room goes. Get him on board quick. It will make your job a whole lot easier.” Mrs. Brown enlightened me. After one day with the group, I knew she was correct. Bruce was the leader, instigator and rather quite the master manipulator. He seemed to have a distinct way of getting everyone to do exactly what he wanted without being directly involved in the action.

“Can we speak openly about Bruce?” I asked.

“Sure, what do you want to know?” she replied.

“Let’s start with some history. Why in the world is a child 14, nearly 15 years of age, in the 6th grade?” I inquired. She instantly stopped grading papers, laid down the magic red pen and locked her green eyes with my brown ones.
“You haven’t heard? Well, of course not or you would not have asked. Bruce is one of the children teachers sometimes describe as being “snake bit.” His mother has moved him, his brother, and sisters all over Kentucky. She works as a prostitute and sells drugs. She is in and out of prison and the kids are in and out of foster care. Right now, they are living just up the road in a rundown old shack. No running water and no electricity (keep in mind this is in January). It really is a shame how the kids live. Bruce has missed a lot of school. He has been held back a couple of times due to the absences. He is smart, but he can’t seem to stay in one place long enough to learn. Every time the law gets after the mother, she moves the family again. The part I don’t understand is, if she really is selling the drugs, why they don’t have money to stay in a better place? The kids come to school clean though, so she is getting clothes washed somewhere. I doubt there is much food in the home and, the Lord knows, no homework ever gets completed.” Mrs. Brown informed me.

I am pretty sure I had a blank look on my face. At this time, I was only 25 years old and still fairly naive when it came to such matters. In my small hometown, I can honestly say I didn’t know of anyone who was a prostitute. Well, at least not until now.

“What about his dad? Who is he? Why doesn’t he step in and take the kids?” I asked.

Mrs. Brown shook her head absently and replied, “Well, maybe he would if anyone knew who he was. Remember, his mother is a prostitute. All five
children are products of her work. She doesn’t know who the father of any of the children is.”

This time I knew my mouth dropped open. Mrs. Brown continued on “Before you ask, the grandmother and grandfather are both dead. The mother really is all on her own, as her siblings have disowned her. I am sure she receives welfare benefits, but with five kids, it doesn’t go far enough. I guess she supplements her income the best way she knows how. I have known the mother since she was in school here. She came from a poor family, a large family, she never finished high school. She took a job in a local restaurant waiting tables to help out, but ultimately, she gave up and moved off. When she came back, Bruce was a baby. That’s when it really snowballed. Drugs, men, sex, she was into it all. Pretty soon she figured out how to pay the bills. The kids came one after the other. She finally had her tubes tied so there would be no more children. I guess a doctor felt sorry for her and delivered the last baby C-section so he could tie them while he was in there and her medical card would pay for it.” Mrs. Brown looked at me and I assume felt the need to let the gravity of her words sink in as she then said, “Anyway, I am heading out for the evening. I think you have heard enough. You just get Bruce on your side and the rest will follow along.” At that point, she reached for her jacket and I headed for the door, thanking her for the information.

The drive home gave me ample time for thinking and Mrs. Brown certainly had provided a feast of information as food for thought. How was I going to
reach this child? With everything going on at home, how was going to make him care about his education? The answer to this question literally came out of nowhere. As I went into work the next day, a miracle landed in my lap. The basketball coach for the middle school boys’ team became ill and resigned in the middle of the season. Being a former high school all-state athlete in basketball, plus attending college on a full scholarship for basketball, provided me the foundation for assuming the coach’s job. Guess who was playing on the team? That’s right, Bruce. Now I had an avenue to earn his trust and, ultimately, a path to making a difference in his life. I knew being a female and coaching a group of young men would hold its own set of challenges, but I was willing to tackle them. This opportunity was just too good to pass up. Not only was Bruce on the team, most of the boys in the class were on the team as well.

The classroom posed the challenge I knew it would. The next couple of weeks were full of trials and tribulations as boundaries were tested by all. I would love to report that I was making progress with the class, but I was not. The discipline in the room was a constant test of wills. I even had one student say to me, “We have run off every sub we’ve had, we will run you off, too”. Needless to say, going into to teach every day in this environment was not a pleasant experience. To add to the stress, taking over as coach was about as difficult as I feared it would be. Fathers of the boys playing on the team had an issue with a “female” coaching their sons. One parent even went so far as
to say to me, “My son can’t play for you if you can’t beat me in a game of one-on-one. What does a girl really know about basketball anyway?” Smiling, I took him up on his challenge... his son was my starting point guard!

Day in and day out, the struggles continued. The constant challenge was starting to wear on me. However, after days of trying to be positive in the face of adversity, my redemption was drawing nigh. One month after I began coaching, the breakthrough I had been working so hard to find finally arrived.

It came in the one area where I had complete control... the basketball team.

We were gearing up for the county-wide middle school championship. Bruce really did not have a lot of true athletic ability, but he had a lot of heart. He was rather good at “scrapping for the ball” (an Eastern Kentucky term for hustling on the court) with an extra healthy dose of desire to be the best player on the team. However, Bruce was not part of the starting five. The one area in which Bruce had no control, the one area he could not influence or manipulate another to give him, was the one area, in which I had total control.

Eureka! Now that I knew what I could use for real motivation, the game changed!

Pulling Bruce to the side after practice, I decide we need to have a “chat.”

“I like the hustle I am seeing from you, Bruce. I can tell you are really working hard. You know, you are the real leader of this team. You know that right? These boys look to you for leadership.” I told him.

Smiling rather sheepishly, “Yeah, I know,” was the only comment I received.
“So” I said, “what are you going to do with that? Leadership runs two directions. One is positive and one is negative. Which do you choose?” I challenged him. I could tell I hit a nerve.

His face contorted and he almost spat at me, “I ain’t no leader. Who am I? I’m a nobody.”

What an about-face Bruce pulled. “Oh I beg to differ,” I countered. “When the game is close, who do the boys try to throw the ball to, to get a shot off? If there is a steal to be made in a crucial time, who do the boys yell to come and help them with the trap? That’s right, you.” I pointed out to him. “You, Bruce, are a leader. Doesn’t matter if you like it or not. You have worked these boys over to the point they turn to you for everything. Not just here on the court, but in the classroom as well. You have created your own situation, so what are you going to do with it? We are just three days away from the biggest game of the year. Don’t you want to be a starter? Don’t you want to be on the floor during the clutch moment?” I prodded him.

Without batting an eye at own his words, “hell, yeah!” came from his mouth. Realizing what he had just said, he looked down and grinned, awaiting my response.

I never acknowledge what he had just said and went on with, “then prove it!” Bruce jerked his eyes upward in a second and quickly asked, “How? How do I prove I want to be a starter? What do you want me to do?”
"I want to you start making good decisions. Listen in practice, work hard, and be on time. You have two days to prove to me you want to be a starter. Don't let me down, don't let your teammates down, but most importantly, don't let yourself down.

Turning to walk away as a huge smile spread over my face, I heard, "you got it coach," over my shoulder, I just kept walking.

The next day when I came to class, I could feel a change. The air in the room even seemed lighter and the attitudes from the students seemed brighter.

Bruce greeted me with "good morning, coach"

I replied, "Good morning, Bruce. Seems you are on the right path today. First good decision," I replied. We smiled at each other with no need for further words. The day was magnificent! Best day I had in the classroom since arriving. I anxiously awaited practice. If the day was any predictor of the afternoon, I knew it would be amazing. True to form, Bruce worked harder than he had since I began coaching. He dove for loose balls, worked hard on defense, blocked every shot within his reach, and captured more rebounds everyone on the team during the inter-team scrimmage. It was as if the chains holding Bruce in the negative state fell by the wayside. At the end of practice, I walked by Bruce and gave him a high five. He grinned. No words were needed; he knew I was impressed.

Day two was a carbon copy of the day before. At the end of school, Bruce came up to my desk and said, "Well?"
Looking up I said, “Bruce, a well is a deep subject. Please be more specific.”

He gave me the "smart aleck" comment while stifling a laugh and then said, “Coach, do I get to start tonight? Did I earn my spot?”

Grinning from ear to ear, I looked at him and said, “You tell me?” Bruce let out an “all right” and ran out of the room. At last, we had come to an understanding!

The game turned out to be the nail-biter that was predicted and Bruce was finally the starter he wanted to be. The score teetered back and forth, with neither team ever holding more than a four point lead, coming down to the wire in an old fashioned barn-burner, with just seconds to go, fate would have it no other way than to see Bruce with the ball in his hands. Quickly, I called a time out. Decision time! Who would take the final shot? Swallowing hard, I knew it had to be Bruce. As I said before, he was not the most athletic player on the team, but he was the leader. With only 10 seconds on the clock, the play was quickly drawn up: An inbound pass to the wing, Bruce on the opposite side waiting to cut off a pick to the basket on a back door cut, with our post player on standby for rebounding if need be.

Crossing my fingers (and my toes!), I sent them out on the floor. “Lord, please let this work” I prayed quickly. The referee handed the ball to my point guard, the clock started ticking, and the play went off exactly as it was designed.
Did Bruce make the last second shot? Yes! Pandemonium ensued. If an uninformed person was watching from the stands, it probably seemed as if we won the state tournament, not the first game of the county tournament. Players, fans, parents, and even me, we were all was jumping up and down. For the boys I coached, it was defining moment in their young careers. For Bruce, it was his moment in the sun. I received the one thing I never expected...a hug. Bruce actually came over, threw his arms around me, and gave me a hug.

We went on to finish third in the tournament. Although we were not county champions, the boys were still pleased. After all, we had won the game everyone said was impossible to win. The rest of the year went smoothly in the classroom and Bruce went to seventh grade. The following year, I went back to teaching high school, grateful to have survived my semester in middle school.

I would love to say the story had a happy ending. Unfortunately, I cannot. Bruce did not make the high school basketball team and dropped out of school at age 16. The last I had knowledge of Bruce; he had been in and out of jail for drugs and prostitution. The situation in which he was raised proved to be too great for him to overcome. Hence, Bruce was a lost child who has never been found. I take comfort in the fact that, for a short period of time, he achieved his dream and had his moment in the sun. I will always hold out
hope and continue to pray he turns his life around. Deep down, Bruce wanted better. I just do not believe he could ever convince himself he deserved better.
Irene's story

Individuals frequently assume that poverty is a new social evil. Let me assure you it is not; poverty is as old as time. For an example, the book of Deuteronomy in the King James Bible chapter 15 verse 11, states, “[F]or the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.” Further evidence of poverty that dates back over two thousand years can be found in the book of Matthew, chapter 26, verse 11, “For ye have the poor always with you; but me ye have not always.” Hence, poverty is not a new condition.

It is then natural to ask, when did Americans begin to see the face of poverty with fresh eyes? This is often attributed to President Lyndon Johnson’s inaugural address on January 8, 1964, when he declared a War on Poverty. In response to the national poverty rate at the time of nearly 19%, the War on Poverty became the unofficial name for legislation proposed by President Johnson.

Perhaps it dates back even further to the Great Depression and the recovery legislation of the era, (1933-1938). The New Deal legislation that was developed and implemented during President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first term, promised, “Relief, Recovery and Reform.” The expanded 3 R’s were: Relief for the poor and the unemployed; Recovery of the economy to levels prior to the beginning of the Great Depression; and Reform of the American financial system to prevent another depression from occurring. It is just after this time, that our story takes place, in the foothills of Southeastern Kentucky, in a small coal camp community.
The year was 1941, the second year of World War II. December 8, 1941, saw Pearl Harbor attacked, followed by America’s entrance into the war. This year also saw a coal mining family welcome a beautiful baby girl. The family already had two daughters. A son and another daughter would be added later. The family would also take in another child, a boy, to round out its size to eight members.

This green-eyed, fair-haired child grew like another other young girl. She was bright, inquisitive, determined and loving. Her pale, white-blonde hair quickly earned her the nickname of “Cotton” and she had an intense love of learning. For Irene, there was little hope of obtaining an education past eighth grade. Her family was in dire poverty and both parents were ill. Being able to graduate high school seemed nearly impossible and the dream of college was just that a dream, as financing a college was out of the question for Irene. The Federal Pell Grant program, which provides assistance for students from low income families as part of the Higher Education Act of 1965, had not yet come into existence.

What was a young girl, whose desire to learn was so overwhelming to do? Obstacles associated with going to school arose early in her life. The public school system did not provide transportation to and from school since her community was in a remote area of the county. Irene and her siblings had to rise very early and walk to school. The school was approximately two and half miles from the family’s home, so navigating the path in the winter posed
quite a problem. At this time, schools did not cancel due to inclement weather. Students either traveled on foot or were brought to school by their parents. Since the family had no means of transportation, the children all walked. They did not walk alone; however, none of the children in the area had any means of transportation.

One cold, icy winter’s morning, Irene and her siblings started the journey to school. Nothing seemed amiss as the group headed towards the school totally unaware of the danger before them. Part of their journey required the children to walk one-by-one across a fallen log to cross a stream along the path. Most days, this posed little difficulty; actually, the children made a game of crossing the log. Unfortunately for Irene, today was not a typical day.

Carefully, methodically, one at a time, the older children walked across the log while the younger children waited their turn. Irene’s turn arrived, and at the young age of six, she did not grasp the danger of the situation. The older children had walked heel to toe to cross the log, so following their lead, Irene did the same. Gingerly, she stepped onto the log. Heel to toe; she made her way half way across the log. In the middle of the log, her feet slipped on the ice. She fell into the frozen stream, broke through the ice into the frigid water! The other children began screaming for help and looking desperately for anything they could use to reach Irene and pull her from the frozen water. Miraculously, a neighbor heard their cries for help. Racing to the creek, she saw Irene under the freezing water and without hesitation, jumped into the
water, pulling her out. She took Irene, shivering and soaked, to her home where she immediately removed her wet, icy clothes and redressed with clothing from her daughter's closet. The neighbor sent word to the family, who immediately came and took Irene home.

As a result of the accident, Irene developed double pneumonia. In a time where medical assistance was both miles "down the road" and unaffordable for the family, her parents relied on old-fashioned remedies to save their little girl. Mountains and mountains of quilts were piled her tiny frame to combat the freezing and shivering she was experiencing. Fever already had begun to set it. According to old wives' tales, the quilts were used to make the patient sweat out the fever or "break the fever." Hot toddies and herbal remedies were made and administered to her. At one point, as the fever raged, Irene felt as if she was floating above her own body. Hopes of survival seemed bleak, but her parents would not quit. Many prayers were said, around the clock care continued, and Irene did pull through. Recovery took some time, but children are resilient. It was not long before the bright eyed young girl reappeared.

As a result of the accident, Irene had to repeat the "primer" (the vernacular of the day for Kindergarten) grade. She was now six years of age and a year behind in school. The challenges continued as she sought an education. Being weak and persistently ill from the accident, Irene was unsuccessful in completing school the next year. Now, she was two years behind. Irene
would be age seven and still in primmer. This situation somehow fueled her intrinsic motivation to continue in school and eventually graduate high school. The walks to school became longer as she moved through the grades, as she had changed schools. More frequently than not, Irene wore dresses made from feed sacks fashioned by her mother. Shoes were scarce. The children often wore shoes they were given. One pair Irene had been given by her 3rd grade teacher was a pair of rubber galoshes. These rubber boots were well worn, but she was grateful to receive them. She had been wearing a pair of shoes with holes in the soles. Irene had filled the soles with cardboard to keep the cold out during the winter so that she could continue walking to school. Receiving these boots made it possible to keep the warmth in and the water out.

In the 5th grade, Irene began working in the school cafeteria to pay for her lunch. Legislation providing free and reduced meals to help disadvantaged families had not yet been created, so, all students had to pay for their meals. Since the family had limited funds, Irene stood on a milk cartoon in the school cafeteria washing dishes to work out her lunch money (her younger brother and sister also were able to eat) for the school day. Although this seems unimaginable today, Irene was not alone. Another female student worked side-by-side with her to secure her lunch daily as well.

In the eighth grade, Irene got a job after school. She frequently would work at a little restaurant next to the elementary school waiting tables. Her aunt
owned the restaurant and allowed her to work. Irene also secured employment at a local department store, typically working on weekends and holidays. A good day at work at the local department store would provide her eight hours of work and two dollars in her pocket. Those two dollars went a long way as she began high school. She could take ten cents a day and purchase items for lunch; the remainder she used to help her family purchase necessary items, food and pay the electric bill. During this time, the state department did not provide funding for textbooks. School districts were so pitifully underfunded that they could not appropriate monies for the textbooks. This left the students' families to purchase the books. Irene saved her money from her jobs to purchase her books so that she could continue school.

In 1957, Irene begins her freshman year in high school. The family dynamics had changed. The oldest sibling stopped attending school in the fourth grade to stay at home and assist their physically ill parents. When she was eighteen years old, she married and moved away. The second oldest sibling had already completed the 8th grade but refused to continue in high school. She married shortly thereafter to a man in the United States Air Force and moved overseas to Germany.

In August 1958, Irene's world flipped upside down when her beloved father was murdered in the line of duty. He was serving as deputy sheriff when he was shot and killed by a murder suspect he was transporting. At age 17, Irene
was forced to say goodbye to the main pillar of support and encouragement in her life.

Earlier that summer and following the murder, Irene lived in Indiana with her eldest sister. She worked all summer babysitting and performing other odd jobs to save money to purchase her school textbooks for the upcoming fall. Returning to her home town and her high school, she continued her classes, including home economics, learning to sew her own clothing.

Although the next two years were full of struggles and few bright spots, Irene attended her Senior Prom in a dress that was made by her eldest sister. Keeping a promise to her father and herself, she persisted and graduated high school in 1961.

What happened to the family? Where is Irene now?

The oldest sibling, a sister, went back to school as an adult and earned her GED. She also has completed two years of college. The second sibling also went back to school as an adult and earned her GED. She has been employed for many years with a local public school system. Her brother also earned a GED and was employed with a major public university in the state. The youngest sibling, a sister, did not complete a formal high school education, but has been a loving mother and wife for many years. The boy the family raised suffers from a birth defect and has been unable to work throughout his life.
What about Irene? She was the only member of her immediate family to graduate high school. At the age of 38, she decided to begin course work at a local technical college. While raising two children, she earned an associate’s degree in Business and Office with an overall A grade. Throughout her life she worked at various positions, supported her husband emotionally and physically, raised two successful children and is a loving grandmother to four grandchildren. How do I know this?

She is my mother.

Reflecting back to the research findings from the successful schools included in the documentary, relationships were the most common theme identified. Relationships were also the most frequently identified reason for escaping poverty within the successful adults participating in the documentary.

Irene’s story validates the research. Intrinsic motivation is evident in her story; however, it is the relationships that made the difference in her life. An individual can have the drive to succeed, but without support from others to provide opportunity and support (in whatever form that takes), the internal drive lacks a place to develop. In Irene’s case, the teachers provided shoes for her journey to school, the cafeteria workers allowed her to wash dishes to earn lunch money, and her sister permitted her to live with her family to earn money. These interventions gave Irene the opportunity to escape poverty.
Never forgetting her humble roots, my mother, Irene, always instilled in my brother and me the drive to obtain a good education. As a child, I never remember a conversation about graduating high school. My brother and I knew we would graduate high school and we knew we were going to college; the question was where we would go. As of this date, I am proud to say that we both have stayed the course and earned our doctoral degrees. My brother is currently a physician specializing in family practice and I have earned my doctorate in educational leadership. Our success is not accidental; relationships both within the family and from outside source provided opportunities for success. Relationships are the key!
Second intermission

“Ninety-two percent (92%) of our students are poor. It’s our job to make sure that they don’t realize it. We treat all children the same and expect nothing less than their best...every day. No excuses.”

Bobby Blakely, Principal. Pleasant View Elementary, Whitley County

“The research is abundantly clear: Nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by schools and families/community working together in partnership. These forms of involvement do not happen by accident or even by invitation. They happen by explicit strategic intervention.”

-Michael Fullan (1997)

“Poverty is everyone’s problem. It cuts across any line you can name: age, race, social, geographic or religious. Whether you are black or white; rich, middle-class or poor, we are ALL touched by poverty.”

Kathleen Blanco

“Inspire students to develop hope and optimism about their futures and to identify and work towards specific goals.”

Nate Terrell and Anita Foeman

Strategies to Work Effectively with Students who have Experienced Poverty, 2010
“If we individually make the effort to ensure that each child is known in our system, our organization will be a caring, learning community that knows and lifts each child.”

Les Ometani, Community School District Superintendent
West Des Moines, Iowa (quoted in LaFee, 2003, p. 7)

“He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.”

Proverbs 14: 31

“Tell me, and I’ll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I’ll understand.”

Native American Saying

“Anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor.”

- James A. Baldwin

“A teacher effects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”

Henry B. Adams
Big Ticket Questions.

1. What would schools look like if every adult within the walls actively sought to build and cultivate genuine relationships with the students?

2. What would schools look like if staff was intentional in conversation and expectations with students?

3. What would schools look like if high goals were set and maintained? No excuses accepted.

4. What would schools look like if staff and administration were available as an emotional resource for students?

5. What would schools look like if families (parents, grandparents, or whoever is raising the child) were actively engaged in the learning process through ALL grades of their students?

6. What would schools look like if multiple modalities of learning were utilized...daily?

7. What would schools look like if reading had protected time daily at all grade levels?
References


VITA

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EDUCATION

1988-1993 Bachelor of Arts in History and Political Science with an Emphasis in Secondary Education

Middle Grades Endorsement

Pikeville College

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1993-1996 Master of Arts in Secondary Education and Leadership

Morehead State University

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2001-2005 Master of Arts/Rank I in School Administration for Principalship, K-12

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PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

2009- Present Director of Counseling and Director of the Title III Grant
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2008-2009
Director of Student Support Services
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2005-2008
Principal, Heritage Elementary
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2003-2005
Assistant Principal, East Carter High School
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HONORS

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