



## The Obsession of Hope, the Victimization by Poverty: Full-Service Community Schools and Urban Education

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### 1. Introduction

They walk past boarded up houses whose once-elegant facades are now adorned with spray-painted gang signs and whose yards are filled with weeds and no-longer useful rugs, cardboard boxes, and some else's mismatched shoes. But they come to school. They pick their way down streets that have no sidewalks, past piles of used automobile tires discarded by people from the suburbs who come to the city, because no one sees and if they do, what will they say? And yet, they make their way to school. The neighborhood school door hangs from one hinge; books are strewn in the empty, hushed hallways; old computers and children's files lay exposed in the fall rain. This school has been downsized, right sized, closed, a casualty of forces that are better understood in the layered environmental back alleys of a socio-political-economic system gone awry. But perhaps the people in these urban neighborhoods understand it best because they have seen this all before; this is part of the picture of poverty. But the children still come to school.

They come because in many ways it is a struggle for their own emancipation. They come because of an obsession of protected hope amidst the vulnerable, fragile neighborhood of disrepair that surrounds them. They come because they do not see themselves as victims of poverty, but as testaments to the strength of tenacity, young people who are not easily dismissed, denied or defeated by dominant discourse.

### 2. The Schools to Which They Come

There is a collective absence of mind concerning urban schools. Although their distress signals the unequal and inequitable class division between the city and the suburbs, the total abject neglect of these schools, attended by primarily low-income and poverty stricken Latino and African-American students, sends a clear message to students and their families that they matter less than their suburban counterparts who are primarily white and mostly middle- and high-income. When children in the suburbs receive twice as much funding for their education as children in urban schools, they "are given a direct measure of their social worth and future chances by the amount of money they see being spent on their education"[1]. Parents who did not want their children to be negatively influenced by the perceived learning disabilities and behavioral disruptions of the children of color to be integrated into the schools, students born of generations of poorer opportunities, of oppression, of abandonment and more honestly of racism, fled to the suburbs, leaving the inner city as alienated bogs of concentrated poverty.

In the 600 large urban school district across the United States, approximately 40% of the students never graduate. Of the nation's 100 largest school districts, only forty graduate fewer than sixty percent of the students they enrolled as high school ninth graders [2]. Urban students drop out of school, mentally as early as third grade, physically at age sixteen. They have less stability in their lives and less access to medical and dental care than suburban students. They struggle with reading, writing and speaking dominant culture English and they are too often assigned to lower track, special education classes by teachers who are untrained in culturally competent teaching strategies.

The teachers like the students are unwillingly transient, being moved from one building to the next as the central administration closes the neighborhood school due to funding. They are ill prepared to meet the complex, contextual and overlapping demands placed on them by the students and their families. The neighborhoods are often rundown, gang- and crime-infested with no recreation center, library or park anywhere close. The most difficult challenge for all of us who have taught and who teach in the urban setting? To wage the war against hopelessness, to believe that all that surrounds the school can change, one life at a time, to not give up.

### 3. Detroit: Birthplace of the Middle Class-Shadows of the Underclass

The legacy of race colors our understanding of Detroit while the legacy of poverty shapes our perspective of the treatment of its people. We use Detroit as an example of the challenges of urban reform for in Detroit the dropout rate is among the highest in the nation and "with each class of dropouts our nation loses more than three hundred billion dollars in taxes and revenue" [3].

Between 1965 and 1967 white people fled to the suburbs and by 1980 a city built for almost two million people had 911,00. In the past decade 185,393 black residents fled to the suburbs and according to the 2010 Census figures Detroit's population is down 25% to 713,777 residents. What had once been called the birthplace of the middle class was in trouble. The city had invested in structures, in a single dominant industry rather than in people and in education. With downsizing, rightsizing and outsourcing, central city car factories closed down and with them went all



the small shops and businesses that serviced their workers. Some of the oldest neighborhoods dating back to immigrant Germans, Poles and Slavic peoples, lost nearly ninety percent of their populations. Now nearly one-third of the city lies vacant. "Nowhere is public school reform needed as much as in Black and socio-economically disadvantaged communities" [4].

The challenge to educate urban students, young people who may well come from non-nurturing environments, is daunting if we consider urban reform efforts as a singular task; however, to be successful, schools must consider a collaborative grounding both in understanding and in operation of the life, experiences and daily needs that provoke poor academic achievement for urban students. Full-service community schools have effectively demonstrated one avenue of historical and contemporary success in urban schools.

#### **4. The Children's Aid Society (CAS) Comes to the School**

Community schools believe that if the nonacademic barriers that students and families may face could be mitigated, the student would be successful in school. CAS is the oldest child welfare organization in Michigan and one of the five national models of community schools. From its inception in 1862, founded during the Civil War, this non-profit community based agency located in the center of Detroit's most distressed neighborhoods, provides direct services to the most vulnerable children, youth and families.

##### **4.1 School Service Focus**

CAS goes to individual schools and provides services that not only improve the quality of life for youth and families, but which also target the root causes and barriers that predicate such services. Services address: reshaping the perception of community safety and support; decreasing child abuse and neglect; decreasing juvenile crime, delinquency and victimization; increasing academic achievement; and, parental involvement and protective factors in homes, schools and communities.

##### **4.2 Socio-emotional Services**

CAS services are also designed to help children and parents deal with difficult personal emotional and social issues. Healthy child development, early childhood literacy and school success are the targeted outcomes. Jensen notes that many low SES young people confront emotional and social instability [5]; therefore, for them, these are often elusive goals. Academic failure and mental health problems among today's children and youth continue to rise, for children who present behavioral challenges or signs of socio-emotional adjustments often struggle to fit in much less succeed in school. Further, increasing numbers of school-age children face expulsion from district schools' programs due to behavioral challenges, chronic and acute stressors and the lack of critical coping skills [6].

Young people with mental health issues experience lower levels of academic achievement and progressively higher incidences of involvement with the juvenile justice system. Risk factors that predispose many youths to gang membership are frequently linked to various adolescent problem behaviors, including serious violence and delinquency. The major risk factor domains that increase the chances of adverse outcomes are: individual characteristics, family conditions, school experiences, academic performances, peer group influences and the community and society culture [7].

##### **4.3 Protective Factors**

The social development model [8] which shapes the work of CAS maintains that the protective factors, or those which buffer the negative risks, such as academic achievement, effective parenting practices, bonding or attachment to family, opportunities for pro-social family involvement, relationships with positive peer group activities, the perception of social support from caring adults, self-efficacy, social competencies and problem solving skills will decrease the possibility that youth will engage in problem behaviors and in crime.

In the inner cities of helplessness, such as Detroit, when despair feels so palpable to young people and to their families, CAS not only provides the safe supports and the necessary services, but the challenge to dream big and to 'be the change you wish to see'. As CAS works collaboratively with other health and human service agencies, local government, and community organizations, they serve as models for youth. In such settings, the dominant culture's understandings and social construction of concepts such as hope and success must be contextually redefined [9].

It is in this construction process, in this redefinition of hope and success that CAS engages youth and families. Where schools were once safe, secure and steady places within the Detroit neighborhood, now CAS provides an authentically safe and consistently stable place where youth feel they belong. "Everything we do has to be for the young people and about them," says the CAS Director. "They have to know we care if they are all right and that we will do something if they are not. They don't care about our badges, titles, cars, home or degrees when they are hungry, in the streets or want to hear a caring voice" [10]. And by culturally grounding [11] their work with youth in positive activity such as goal charting which instills hope through vocalized dreams and the attainment of small successes, the sea of surrounding negative community risk factors does not seem as pernicious.



## 5. Conclusion

In many ways Detroit and other Rust Belt cities are harbingers of postindustrial dilemmas that will confront the 21<sup>st</sup> century universal panorama, challenging us to recreate both the historical and cultural world around us in an effort to reconstitute the unjustified socioeconomically impoverished among us. Full service community schools like Children's Aid Society recognize with Freire that, "Hope is a natural, possible, and necessary impetus in the context of our unfinishedness; without it, instead of history we would have pure determinism" [12]. But we recognize, it is not the program that works, but the commitment of the people who work the program, who responsively reinvent the services as measured against all the disparate challenges of and impediments to an imperiled population. It is a position in which a visionary leadership and dedicated personnel are critical to the perpetuate life of the program, personnel about whom McLaren writes, " While we often abandon hope, we are never abandoned by hope. This is because hope is forever engraved in the human heart and inspires us to reach beyond the carnal limits of our species being" [13].

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