

# WASHINGTON COMMENTARY

## A Columnist at Risk

BY ANNE C. LEWIS

**T**HOSE who say that schools cannot improve student learning on their own run the risk of being called disbelievers, or charged with overlooking the many schools that do make a difference, or, worst of all, accused of being racist. I'm willing to take that risk. Until school reformers acknowledge the importance of nonschool influences, they will keep on imposing policies that are unfair to teachers and principals and ignoring policies that could make a difference.

Many economists have been saying this for a long time, citing such obvious health barriers to learning as poor eyesight, infected teeth, and hunger. Others make broad statements about inadequate parenting or unsafe neighborhoods. A recent National Endowment for the Arts report documents continuing declines in reading for pleasure, especially among teenagers.

A compilation of statistical evidence about influences on learning that begin before a child even enters school recently made headlines for ETS. *The Family: America's Smallest School* notes that the United States ranks highest in the world in the number of single-parent households; Japan is lowest. It is not solely our curriculum or the uneven quality of our teachers that puts us low in the rankings. Then there is the issue of the number of families in which hunger is a problem: 11%, according to the ETS report. The bureaucrats call these families the "food insecure," a term that would be laughable if we weren't talking about a moral outrage in the richest country in the world.

Massachusetts and other northeastern states receive praise for their standards and performance on standardized tests. However, the median family income in these

states is \$70,000, while in Mississippi and the District of Columbia it is less than \$40,000.

These are not excuses. They are realities. The schools often cited for beating such odds surely deserve credit, but their success is fragile and often dependent on scarce leadership. Meanwhile, policy makers devise strategies to punish schools that fail to reach such levels as if the odds against them did not exist.

It would be good for children and their parents if everyone — teachers, principals, reformers, policy makers — took time to understand more fully what these realities mean for teaching and learning. As a start, they could study two sources that have recently gotten my attention because they go a long way toward explaining what is happening in our schools.

One is the research by Claude Steele, which he summarized for school board members in the 2007 Jacqueline P. Danzberger Memorial Lecture. Steele, the director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, is a social psychologist who has focused on the impact of social identity on learning. He believes that "belonging is necessary for learning." People's identities — race, gender, age, or other characteristics — can interfere with a sense of belonging "and thereby interfere with learning."

He tells the story of Anatole Broyard, a renowned book reviewer for the *New York Times*, who grew up as a black in the Bronx in a "high yellow" family and whose father "passed" during the day in order to get a job. Broyard married as a black, but after returning from World War II he became white, divorced, broke ties with all his family, and became a writer, a bookstore owner, and eventually a reviewer for the newspaper. He chose to live in a Connecticut suburb and did not tell his new family of his background until he was dying.

If Broyard had not "become white," he would have been forced to live with contingencies that limited him, Steele said. He would not have been able to get a loan for his bookstore. He would not have been able to live in the West Village or in suburban Connecticut, where his social network was very different from what it would have been in a black neighborhood.

Such contingencies make one's social identity important, according to Steele. If people are in situations where they can be denigrated because of their identities, he argues, they begin to see the world and their place in it as others do and to connect with those who share that perceived identity. Moreover, his studies show that negative stereotypes are especially detrimental to those who are "at the frontier of their skills," who are trying to move up and get better. The threat posed by stereotypes is lower for students who are so far behind by fifth grade

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that they are just biding time until they can leave. Identity threat is very real in classrooms that are diverse, Steele contends, and becomes the “default state of affairs unless something is done to reduce it.” (The speech is available at the Institute for Educational Leadership website, [www.iel.org](http://www.iel.org); search on the author’s name.)

The other piece of research I alluded to focuses on the effects of poverty on the language ability of children. This also is not a revelation, and family literacy initiatives have been addressing the issue for a long time. New evidence, however, reveals the deep connections between living in poverty neighborhoods and the verbal abilities that children bring to school. Collaborating on research on 2,000 children in Chicago over seven years, sociologists at several research universities focused their attention on black children because they live in the most disadvantaged communities for longer periods of time than Hispanic or white children.

Living in a poor neighborhood takes its toll on children’s cognitive abilities. Severe, concentrated poverty influences maternal parenting practices, affects school funding, and affects the speech community to which parents and children are exposed. The researchers found that the long-lasting consequence of living in concentrated poverty for a black child is equal to missing a full year of school, and the effect continues even if a child moves to a better neighborhood.

These are complex issues that educators and policy makers must not ignore. Steele believes that strong leadership that sets a norm for valuing diversity can help schools become places where all children feel comfortable and surrounded by positive relationships. The university sociologists believe that investments in children must extend beyond the individual and seek to improve the neighborhoods that help establish children’s cognitive abilities. Both research initiatives offer insights that are a lot more useful than closing schools, transferring teachers, or blaming parents. **K**

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