Family and Education

By
Amy Hollendoner

I saw Elijah run out of the room with tears in her eyes. I turned to see if the teacher I was picked to observe had noticed her exit. However, given that there were thirty other students in the room, she had been too busy to see what had happened. I decided to go and find Elijah and bring her back into the class before she got in trouble for leaving without permission. I did not realize at that point how far in over my head I really was.

The main reason I decided to become a teacher was because I wanted to make a difference in the lives of children, especially the children who had no other way out but through education. I was aware of the inequality of education in certain schools, but I was lucky enough to have never experienced it firsthand. I came from a middle-class neighborhood and had gone to private, Catholic schools my entire life. When it came to education, I had been blessed in having received such a great one. I took that education for granted, however, until I came to Marquette and began to do my observation hours in “at risk” schools. The most eye opening experience I had was at the Milwaukee Academy of Science Elementary School. I was placed in a seventh grade class, and the children, including Elijah, were all considered “at risk”, meaning they were living in poverty. I needed to let go of any preconceptions I may have had about “at risk” schools, and try to place myself in situations that put me outside of my comfort zone and into the lives of children who were growing up in what seemed like a completely different world than the one I had grown up in.

I left the room and found Elijah sitting in the hallway outside of the classroom with her head in her hands. I sat down on the floor and asked her to come back inside. I could tell she had been frustrated working on the class assignment, and when I tried to assist her, she told me to “back off”. I assumed that was the problem, and her frustration had just taken over her. When I asked her what was wrong, she shrugged her shoulders. Her eyes were puffy from crying, and she looked exhausted. I was aching for her to give me some indication of what was bothering her so that I could try to help. After sitting in silence for a few minutes she explained that “stuff” at home was not good. In fact, her mother was getting married again to a man that Elijah said “was not nice to her or her brothers and sisters”. She also told me that her mom works two jobs so she has to take care of her younger siblings at night while her mom is at work. When she finally explained all this, I saw the relief in her eyes of just sharing it with someone else. She leaned her head on my shoulder and continued to cry. My mind began to race as I started to comprehend what Elijah had just told me. Not only did she have all these adult responsibilities as a twelve year old, she also was falling behind on her homework because of these responsibilities. My sole responsibility as a twelve year old was my school work, with the exception of some minor household chores. Elijah, on the other hand, was a caretaker for her brothers and sisters. This was the exact moment that I became aware of the reasons why at-risk students struggle in school.

Many people have their opinions on why children coming from a low economic background do worse in school. There are reasons such as the schools do not have as much money because the property taxes are lower, and therefore they are unable to have as many resources from their students. Then there are people who blame the families. I have heard things such as “If their parents were involved they would be doing better” or “Maybe if their
parents sat down with them and helped with their school work this would not be an issue”. But what can a parent do when they have to work two jobs in order to make ends meet? The line on good and bad parenting gets blurred. Would you take the second job to feed your children, even though they will have to grow up quickly and probably will not get constant support when it comes to things such as homework or extra-curricular activities? Of course parents want to be involved in their children’s lives, but they need to provide for them as well. When it is put in those terms, I believe most of you would say you would take the second job so your kids could eat every night. School would become secondary. This is what happens to the children living in the lower class.

In today’s world, more and more children are growing up below the poverty line. Part of the reason that families tend to pass on their economic status from generation to generation is because of the lack of opportunities in education. While the ideals of education say that every school gives children equal opportunities to succeed, it is necessary to look at schools with a critical eye. How can schools give the same opportunity to students when they are given unequal amounts of money for funding and resources? How can they provide the same opportunities when the more experienced teachers head into the middle to upper class neighborhoods to teach leaving the lower class schools with the least experienced teachers and the largest class sizes? Add in the fact that students from a lower class already enter school behind middle-class students because their parents cannot provide academic resources at home. When you look at it that way, it hardly seems fair. And when you look at it as a student teacher, it is rather heartbreaking.

Elijah was not the only student who had trouble in class because of problems at home. In fact, there were very few students who did not at some point share an aspect of their lives that appalled me. There were students whose parents were no longer in the picture and an even greater number who, like Elijah, were responsible for younger siblings while their parents were at work. This responsibility not only forbade them to participate in extracurricular activities, but also cut into academic time. Not doing homework was not a choice that the students made, although for some it was, but it was just put as secondary to helping around the house and taking care of their family. School was actually one of the only areas of their life where they were actually just children. Their home lives forced them to grow up quickly and take responsibilities for things that even teenagers in middle to upper class home would not have to worry about.

School became their haven away from the trials of home. In an average day, there would be a great deal of “breakdowns”, consisting of yelling, running out of the room, and even crying. When the teacher really looked at why these outbursts would occur, it would rarely have to do with school, but it would be outside factors. In many situations, a student who had an abundance of adult responsibilities at home would be rambunctious in class because it was his/her chance to act like a child. Another situation I recall is when one boy began crying in class because the teacher had not called on him while he was raising his hand.

Derreck had been inattentive throughout the entire class period, and one could only guess what was on his mind. Derreck was the “tough guy” in school, and a lot of the other boys looked up to him. It was rare that he participated in class. When the teacher asked who wanted to read, however, Derreck’s hand shot up in the air, desperate to be picked to read the selected chapter. When the teacher called on someone else, Derreck got up violently from his seat and went to the back of the room. He put his head in his arms on the desk. When the teacher went up to him after the reading was complete, he would not lift his head and elbowed her so she would move away from him. Eventually, after she explained why she had not called on Derreck to do the
reading, he lifted his head of the desk and returned to his seat. His eyes were red, and he had a scowl on his face for the rest of the day.

Derreck grew up in a home where his emotional needs were put on a back-burner. To an outsider, a comment would be made about how his parents had never taught him to behave inside of a classroom, when really this young boy was just craving attention from an adult and doing everything necessary in order to receive this attention.

People are correct when they say that home life does affect a child’s schooling, but they are quick to judge these students and their parents. Yes, the students act out, but not because they are bad children or because they do not know how to behave. Yes, their parents are not as active as middle class parents, but it is because they are working in order to provide for their children. Yes, the students do worse on standardized tests, but that is because of a lack of resources since the school gets less money because they are in a low economic neighborhood. The reasons for doing poorly in school are, in most cases, beyond their control.

Elijah and the rest of the students in my observation class had one common denominator: they were all part of the low economic class hoping that the education system would not fail them. Their home lives interfered with their education negatively, and they were stereotyped negatively because of it. While there is no way to change the situation they were born into, it is important that educators understand what their families are like and how to help them work around the struggles that face them every day.

Not only was I emotionally affected by Elijah’s story she shared with me in the hallway, but it also lit a fire under me. No longer was my mission as a teacher simply to educate young students, but it was also to help them overcome the circumstances that life had thrown at them. Now that I am more aware of why my students perform poorer than their middle-class counterparts, I am focused on the how: how to give them a good education while they are struggling at home; how to help them overcome circumstances so they can become everything they want to be. My hope is that they will succeed, even though everyone expects them to fail. While I am still struggling with what this might entail, I am dedicated to helping my students to never settle for what life has thrown at them. Elijah, Derreck, and every at risk student deserves the best education, despite whatever is happening at home.