

A Family Case Study: How Money Might Matter for Academic Learning

Catherine Compton-Lilly
University of Wisconsin Madison

Abstract

Many children living in low-income communities do not face struggles in school. Many learn quickly and easily. But for some students, living in a high poverty communities and attending underfunded schools has consequences that can make learning difficult. In this paper, Compton-Lilly draws on the words of a parent living in a low-income community to explore how economic and social challenges affected the schooling of her daughter over a ten-year period. As the following accounts reveal, Ms. Rodriguez, an African American, low-income parent, was committed to her daughter's learning and school progress and brought a thoughtful and informed critique to her children's school experience that reveals the multiple ways that money affects academic learning.

Keywords

education; socioeconomic; African American; poverty

Introduction

When Alicia was in my first-grade class, her mother, Ms. Rodriguez, maintained that being poor did not affect Alicia's academic and literacy learning. She referenced the experiences of Alicia's four older brothers who did well in school saying, "I been poorer than poor. Ok? If that's the case, my kids should be the dumbest little ones on earth." Ms. Rodriguez argued that you can always make time to read, "like you can read at night, or like we used to do – [when] we lived in the city we'd read in the train on the bus, so you can, you can always make time." However, over the course of a ten-year longitudinal study, Ms. Rodriguez identified a range of challenges related to financial

hardships that affected literacy learning and school success.

Alicia was not a struggling reader. When she was in my first grade class, she was among the best readers in the class. Every morning, Alicia and her friends would gather in the book corner of the classroom and choose books that they would take back to their seats and read chorally. A few years before Alicia was in my class, I had taught her older brother Tyreek.

Corresponding Author:

Catherine Compton-Lilly
University of Wisconsin Madison
456B Teacher Education Building
225 N Mills St
Madison, WI 53706-1707
Email: comptonlilly@wisc.edu

Like his sister, Tyreek was bright and inquisitive. He was interested in everything school offered. Tyreek particularly loved books, science, and computers. While over a ten-year period Alicia became less-enamored of reading school texts, she remained an avid reader at home and wrote poetry.

Despite her lack of interest in school assigned texts, Alicia continued to demonstrate her abilities with reading as she moved through school. In eighth grade, her mother reported that she could “read her little tail off” and that the school had assessed her at the “tenth grade level.” However, it was also in middle school when Alicia’s grades began to drop. For the first time, Alicia was getting “D’s” in social studies, English, and gym. Despite her literacy achievements, Alicia described her teachers as uncaring, and complained about boring assigned texts.

Alicia’s story is not a story of not learning as much as it is a story of not finding the support that she needed to maintain success in school despite obvious talents, a supportive family, and an interest in reading. The challenges Alicia faced were exacerbated by negative assumptions that are often made about children and families of color from poor communities. As will be illustrated below, Ms. Rodriguez challenged these assumptions. She was a low-income parent who was very concerned about her children’s literacy and school progress. She cared deeply about her children and consistently supported them at school. In addition, she brought a thoughtful and informed critique to her children’s school experiences.

This paper is about one family and how the economic challenges they faced intersect with academic and literacy learning. In short, I argue that poverty matters and draw on the voices of family members to identify how and when being poor affects schooling. This analysis reveals larger societal inequities that affect families (e.g., financial challenges, the

assumptions made about students and their families, inequitable school resources, dangerous neighborhoods and schools, limited access to students’ dreams). Specifically, I draw on Bourdieu’s (1986) description of economic capital to explore and explain economic capital for one family. While the names of people and places reported in this paper are pseudonyms, their words and experiences are real.

Poverty, Assumptions and School Achievement

The relationship between poverty and school learning has been controversial. In 1946, Robinson, drawing on research available at the time, argued that there was a lack of “objective evidence” (p. 95) regarding the relationship between socioeconomic status and reading progress. Consternation over the relationship between poverty and academic achievement has led to accounts that blame children’s families for the challenges children face with learning at school. Fueled by popular media depictions including the 1965 Moynihan Report (originally titled the “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action”), the assumed pathology of poor African American families continues to infiltrate American thought and extend into discussions about achievement in schools. These assumptions were challenged by Auerbach (1989) who critiqued family literacy programs which were designed to remediate the parenting practices of low-income parents. She worried that family literacy was being reduced to “performing school-like literacy activities within the family setting” (p. 166) and that these attempts to reform families did not attend to the rich literacy practices that occur in low-income households.

In 1988, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines challenged correlations between poverty, reading achievement, and parenting by highlighting the cases of four children from a

high poverty urban community who were “perceived by their parents to be successfully learning to read and write” (p. xvii). While Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines highlighted the success of these children and the agential capacity of families to support their children with academics, they also stated that “the difficulties that confound their lives are shaped into personal configurations of poverty” including “inadequate housing, the lack of essential resources, poor schools, limited access to higher education and restricted job opportunities” (p. 195). Despite these challenges, their work revealed how some low-income inner city families were able to use literacy for a wide variety of purposes. They described family members who demonstrated high degrees of personal literacy but were either not successful in school or did not receive formal education. In short, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines and others (e.g., Cushman, 1998) highlighted the high degree of intelligence, creativity and resilience that family members displayed in supporting their children with literacy learning.

Similarly, Snow and her colleagues (1991) focused on low-income successful literacy learners. The initial study focused on 31 children in grades 2, 4, and 6 and revealed “quite bright prospects” for the children based on their reading progress in elementary school. However, data collected four years later was less promising: “Few of the students in the study had continued to make gains in literacy consonant with their abilities. Only a small a minority were taking courses that would qualify them for entry to college. Several were high school dropouts, and very few planned to go on to training of any sort after high school” (p. 213). Snow and her colleagues ultimately argued that American society must make choices that ensure that students’, parents’ and teachers’ goals can be fulfilled.

The case studies conducted by Robinson (1946), Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), and

Snow and her colleagues (1991) all highlight the potential of children from low-income families to thrive as learners. However, general patterns continue to indicate that schools’ success, and accompanying literacy learning are inequitably challenging for children from low-income families and communities (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Ravitch, 2013; Rist, 1978). In 1996, Berliner and Biddle recognized that nutritional needs, health care, the lack of safe neighborhoods, income maldistribution, and the lack of resources for purchasing books and other materials to support literacy and school learning created academic difficulties for poor families.

The challenges faced by students and families in Alicia’s school are not unique to the city where I taught. As others (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1991, 2012) have described, poor inner city schools across America lack instructional supplies, books, and equipment including technology. Instruction in these schools is often involves cognitively low-level rote learning with little connection to students’ lives outside of school (Kozol, 2012; Rist, 1978). Shannon (1998) argued that poverty and schooling were intricately intertwined as evidenced by historical policies and practices related to IQ testing, the content of textbooks, standardized tests, teacher and school expectations, the materials available to students, and the recent implementation of national standards. Shannon deconstructed official representations of poverty to focus on the historic and current political and economic interests operating behind ideological arguments. He connected the lack of economic resources in some communities to an accompanying lack of rich literate experiences, opportunities, and goals. Shannon argued for a re-reading of poverty that included equitable school funding, respect for students and their communities, and the provision of powerful opportunities for students to read and write their worlds. As he maintained, “reading cannot make us rich, it cannot guarantee power, but it

can help us to struggle for justice, equality, and freedom” (p. 17).

Taylor (1996) uncovered toxic alliances between low socioeconomic status and minimal literacy learning. She argued that analyzing the relationships between literacy and poverty could provide a tool to challenge representations of the poor and to envision possibilities for alternative educational practices. Taylor (1996) specifically documented cases in which texts were used to position people as drug pushers, drunks, welfare frauds, and deficit parents. Her descriptions invite readers to see what it’s like to be poor. As Shannon (1998) wrote, reading poverty becomes “a way of being with the poor and understanding their lives” as well as a means of understanding why institutions, laws and social practices operate as they do and why these practices and policies seem natural or expected in American society.

In their exploration of economic and public policies, Danzinger and Danzinger (2008) argue for a small set of changes that would significantly benefit women, like Ms. Rodriguez, who wanted to make the transition from welfare to work. They argue for increasing the minimum wage, subsidizing healthcare, reforming the unemployment insurance program, and providing transitional jobs that would be available to all who wanted to work.

In this discussion of poverty, it is essential to recognize the significant relationship between race and social class in America. As evidenced below, Ms. Rodriguez is clearly aware of this connection. While not the focus of the current article, race matters. In the words of Corcoran (2008), “even when African American children are raised in similar economic conditions as white children, they are less likely to be upwardly mobile and more likely to be downwardly mobile” (p. 48). Upward mobility is much more common for white people living in poverty than for African American people. Having myself grown up at the poverty line and

knowing that my white skin has afforded me opportunities and benefits, I recognize that this is not the case for many of my former students.

In 2004, I drew on data from my initial round of research with Ms. Rodriguez and other families to directly challenge the myths that portrayed poor urban families as generally unconcerned about school and literacy learning. In the current analysis, I draw on the construct of economic capital and the words of Ms. Rodriguez and her children to explore intersections between poverty and learning.

An Introduction to Economic Literacy Capital

Sociologists and educators (Bourdieu, 1986; Luke & Carrington, 1997) have used the construct of capital to reveal and examine the ways groups of people and individuals are favored within particular social and economic contexts. While early interpretations of Bourdieu described his work as reproduction theory in which disenfranchised populations tended to pass their social and economic status onto their children, later readings have presented Bourdieu as highlighting nuances of economic, social, and cultural capital that contribute in complex and interactive ways to future success which is always contingent on the field in which people act and interact (Bourdieu, 1990). As Bourdieu (1986) explained, the construct of capital makes it “possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes” (p. 243). Bourdieu identifies factors (e.g., ways of talking, acting, interacting; available social networks; access to resources) that extend beyond personal failure or inferiority as the reasons for success or failure within educational, social, and economic fields. In prior work (Compton-Lilly, 2007), I have applied an analysis of various forms of capital to reading to explore the literacy learning of kindergarten students in a high poverty

community. I drew on Bourdieu's (1986) description of forms of capital – economic, social, and cultural – to explore how children and their families were positioned relative to school success.

Although I agree that the acquisition of any form of capital will serve people assuming that the field in which they operate recognizes and values that capital, in this article, I focus specifically on economic capital and the role it plays on the academic learning in one family. I rely on the voices of Ms. Rodriguez and her children whose words I have collected over a ten-year period. This article is not intended to be the ultimate account of how poverty affects learning. Rather, it presents the voices of members in one family and in particular the words of Ms. Rodriguez who struggled to do what she believed was best for her children to ensure that they learned to read and graduated from high school despite challenges related to community and school resources.

I define economic academic capital as possessions and experiences that require economic investment and are convertible to academic success. In some cases, accessing these resources is contingent on being able to afford housing in economically healthy neighborhoods and thus attending well-funded schools. Examples of economic academic capital include computers, electronic educational toys, significant numbers of quality books, and private tutoring.

A Longitudinal Family Case Study

According to Saldaña (2003), longitudinal research enables educators to view the breadth and depth of people's life experiences and to document change. The case study presented in this article followed Alicia and her family (pseudonyms are used for all people and places) over a ten-year period. The family participated in the study when Alicia was 6, 10, 13, and 17

years old. Initially, I was interested in the concepts about reading held by Alicia and her family. While literacy remained the focus of the research, over time the scope of the research broadened in response to students' and parents' comments about school, teachers, and their goals for the future.

Alicia's full case included interviews, classroom observations, field notes, reading assessments, state test scores, and writing samples. In this paper, because I focus on the accounts of family members related to economic challenges, I draw specifically on interview data. All interviews with Alicia and her family were conducted in the Rodriguez's living room and were audiotaped and transcribed; field notes were typed following the interviews. I used data analysis programs to sort segments of interviews and field note data into code sets based on patterns suggested by multiple readings of the transcripts during each phase of the project (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once interviews were coded, I revised, condensed, and combined the codes into categories. I combined code sets that were similar and re-sorted data from particularly large code sets to identify sub-themes. Codes related to "challenges," "resources," "resilience," "community, and "suburban schools" were among the code sets that contributed significantly to the analysis presented in this article.

In addition to the themes identified through the coding of data from each phase of the project, I triangulated the data across research phases and across time by identifying recurring themes, stories, and even language. For example, stories of sharing books recurred during all four phases of the project. Likewise, describing teachers as not caring about students and teaching only for their "paychecks" also recurred. This longitudinal analysis allowed me to consider not only accounts offered at particular points in time, but also repeated accounts that recurred across time. Challenging

the assumptions often made about children from poor African American families, this account highlights economic challenges alongside Ms. Rodriguez's commitment to her children's education.

Ms. Rodriguez and her Children

I met Ms. Rodriguez and her children three years before Alicia was in my first grade class, when her older brother Tyreek was in my first grade class. Alicia and her family lived a few blocks from school, and I would often chat with Ms. Rodriguez and older sons when they walked Tyreek to school each day. Three years later, Alicia was randomly selected from my current class of first grade students to participate in my doctoral research study.

At the time of the study began, Rosa Parks School housed over 1,200 students, the vast majority were African American and Puerto Rican children. Ninety-seven percent of the children, including Alicia, qualified for free/reduced lunch. Alicia had four older brothers and a younger sister. The older brothers had attended elementary school in New York City prior to moving to a smaller city. Over the course of the interview, Ms. Rodriguez consistently expressed high expectations for her children. She believed that her actions had long-term effects on her children. Alicia's brothers did well in school and until the final phase of the study.

Ms. Rodriguez is not a professional educator. In fact, people who do not know her might classify her as the quintessential welfare mom. She is a single mother of six children residing in a low-income community. In the past, she has received welfare and has consistently struggled to provide her family with basic amenities including shelter and food. However, Ms. Rodriguez is much more than a welfare mom. As the accounts presented below attest, she is a savvy thinker and an insightful

critic of the ways she has been positioned and treated by schools and in the larger community.

Challenging the assumptions about low-income parents described above, Ms. Rodriguez created a rich literate environment for her children. On my first visit to Alicia's home, her mother showed me a large box of books that she had collected as Alicia's four older brothers progressed through elementary school. The cardboard box, which was large enough to have held a washing machine, was filled with a vast selection of books including discarded library books, old textbooks, Dr. Seuss books, and paperback trade books. Alicia, her younger sister, and her older brothers gathered around the box flipping through books and revisiting their favorites. One of Alicia's older brothers brought a pile of books out from his bedroom and exchanged them for books from the box. Collecting and valuing books was clearly a shared literacy practice.

Alicia's family was also involved in multiple networks of book circulation. As Ms. Rodriguez explained, "Everybody that I know loves to read." She described exchanging books with her friends and how that practice was taken-up by her children. When Alicia was in fifth grade, her mother described reading the book *Mama* (McMillan, 1987) that she had gotten from a friend. At a later interview she informed me that one of Alicia's older brothers had read the book "Leon snatched my book 'cause after I read it, He snatched it [and] tells me, I want to read it." In eighth grade, Alicia described reading *Mama* as well as other books that she acquired from her mother, "Yeah, my mom gets books and I always have books around." Ms. Rodriguez spoke about a book, *Rockin Robin* (Johnson, 2005) that had recently circulated through the neighborhood. When Ms. Rodriguez was reading this book, she mentioned to Alicia that the protagonist was a bit "crazy." Alicia then picked up the book and started reading it. Ms. Rodriguez described Alicia's

response, “She’s like ‘Mom! This lady is...’ I was like, wait ‘til you get to the other part.” Books routinely circulated through networks of friends and neighbors and were often read not only by Ms. Rodriguez but also by her sons and daughters. In eleventh grade, Alicia described getting books from her mother, taking them to school, and her friends reading them. In return, some of Alicia’s friends brought her books that she read and passed on.

Books were part of the social fabric of the family. Challenging discourses about the lack of books in poor urban families, Ms. Rodriguez demonstrated a commitment to literacy learning. Her acts of agency are significant as I turn to the challenges Ms. Rodriguez faced in supporting her children with literacy learning and schooling in her inner city community. In short, this is not a story of a low-income parent who does not care. In contrast, it is a remarkable tale of resilience and resourcefulness.

Economic Challenges that Affect Academic Learning

In these times of school budget austerity and discourses advocating for the privatization of services that have been traditionally funded through the public sector, conversations about school funding have been stymied, and critiques of schooling have focused on teacher quality and accountability rather than on shared societal obligations to children. In this article, I strive to deflect our attention away from stereotypes of ineffective parenting and place our focus on larger social issues. To do this, I draw on the words and experiences of Ms. Rodriguez. While popular discourses encourage the poor to lift themselves up, get a job, and alleviate their economic woes, the words of Ms. Rodriguez present a more complicated analysis revealing the intersections between community resources,

the lack of viable employment, underfunded schools, and race.

Throughout the study, Ms. Rodriguez worked low-wage jobs. During the early years, Ms. Rodriguez completed her child-care certificate and worked as a childcare provider at a local daycare. For a short period of time, Ms. Rodriguez managed to open her own daycare center, however, challenges with parents and liabilities related to operating the center resulted in Ms. Rodriguez leaving child care and taking a position as a certified nursing assistant and working in home health care settings.

Finances

Over the course of the ten-year project, Ms. Rodriguez rented two apartments; both were within a one-mile radius of Rosa Parks School where Alicia attended first grade. Both apartments had three bedrooms were located on the first floor of older homes that had been subdivided into rental units. The furnishings were sparse – a sofa, a small television, bare floors, and little decoration. I was often there during the dinner hour and the children were often in and out of the kitchen preparing simple meals of pasta, rice, or peanut butter sandwiches.

During the duration of the ten-year study, the Rodriguez family never depended solely on welfare. However, Ms. Rodriguez reported that they had in the past. She described their situation when Alicia was in first grade.

I’m like on CAP. . . it’s like assistance but it’s not um, like welfare. It’s better than welfare though because you can work and they help you still... they help me pay the rent. The food and everything else I pay. But I still get my benefit card [health insurance] which is my main reason.

Ms. Rodriguez was relieved to no longer have to rely on welfare. As she explained,

It's like that your life is an open book. Cause they ask you questions that you wouldn't believe. . . . One question was when was the last time you had sex? Yep, and if you answer yes it's like who with and I'm like why do you all need to know that? It's none of your business really.

She believed that receiving welfare had a negative affect on people saying it makes you "want to lie" and "feel degraded." While she believed that "a lot of people, they sit back and they sit on welfare and just keep collecting their checks," she adamantly distinguished herself from that kind of people, "I wanted to get off with every inch of my body. I cannot, I hated depending on those people for anything."

When Alicia was in first grade, Ms. Rodriguez identified money as the greatest obstacle to her children attending college. Three years later, Alicia's brother who was in high school was concerned about not being able to afford college. He explained, "If I don't get no scholarship, I don't know what I'm going to do after that." James' older brother P.T. had received a scholarship and attended the local community college. Three years after that, Tyreek was hoping to attend a private school in New York City, where his father lived, to study electronics and sound mixing. Unfortunately, the school was expensive and despite the commitment and efforts of both his parents Tyreek was not able to attend; Tyreek eventually got into trouble in the neighborhood and was incarcerated.

By the end of the project, three of Alicia's older brothers had graduated from high school and two had taken courses at the local community college. One brother was a manager at McDonalds. A second was doing maintenance work for apartment buildings. The third was

living in another state and employed as a bartender; he had landed a couple small acting jobs. All three faced ongoing financial challenges

Assumptions about Students and their Families

As described above, assumptions are often made about children from poor families (Auerbach, 1989; Compton-Lilly, 2003). Low wages, receiving benefits, and living in a high-poverty community affected the ways teachers and other professionals viewed families. Ms. Rodriguez clearly recognized the assumptions people made about her:

A lot of teachers in a lot of schools they figure you live in a low [income community], and they say this is the ghetto right? . . . they assume everybody is on welfare. And they'll say when your mother get her check tell her to buy you so and so. And that's embarrassing for the kid.

In response to this situation in which a teacher implied that Ms. Rodriguez should use her welfare check to purchase gloves for her daughter, Ms. Rodriguez confronted the teacher and explained the situation that involved Ms. Rodriguez sharing her own gloves with her daughter.

An additional set of assumptions revealed Ms. Rodriguez's awareness of assumptions related to race. When I asked Ms. Rodriguez whether being African American affected her children's school experiences, she turned to her son, who was in high school and sitting nearby. He immediately responded, "YES."

P.T.: You talking about school and race right? Oh yes, it affects a whole lot in my school.

Ms. Rodriguez: Yeah, because his school's mostly white anyway.

P.T.: Yes, it is and not to mention there is a lot of prejudice and I've seen all kinds of stuff with that principal.

Ms. Rodriguez: Oooh, yeah, your principal is like a real trip. In his school, his principal is...

P.T.: . . . a racist

Ms. Rodriguez describes visiting her son's school and encountering the school principal admonishing P.T. and his friend:

I've walked in the school and he was [saying] "All you ones act..." He was yelling at Jim [P.T.'s friend]. . . Then he went from Jim to say something about him (points to P.T.) and I stood behind him [P.T.] and I looked at him I said "What about P.T.?" He was like, "Oh nothing, I'm just." I was like "No, what about P.T.? You was about to say something about my child. What about him?"

Both P.T. and his mother believed that the white students at his school were treated better.

Years later when Alicia was in eleventh grade, her mother worried that being black affected the ways Alicia's teachers treated her, "Most teachers in her school, they just, like [they assume] her parents don't work. They stay at home, collecting welfare, doing nothing with their life, but sitting there." She adamantly explained that this was not the case for her family,

I'm not one of those parents that sit at home. Don't act like I don't care about my kids. And that's when they was like, 'Uh, well, we is just asking' [Ms. Rodriguez recreates her role in the conversation] 'No. You got a problem with my daughter you need to call me. You don't approach her. You don't put your hand in her face, and you don't, no. But you tell me. I'll handle it.'

Displays of racial prejudice were not limited to school personnel. Ms. Rodriguez

reported that she feared the "police more than anything." The police had recently stopped two of her sons because they had "looked suspicious with a book bag" walking down the street at night near her apartment. As she explained, "I think being young and black and they figured most young black people are either out there selling drugs or doing drugs and they think because you live in the ghetto, they figure you got to act like the ghetto. But that's not true." She reported that there have been similar incidents over the years with her teenage sons; thus, she worried about her children's safety both in school and on the streets.

Teachers Don't Care

Ms. Rodriguez and her children reported that too many teachers in the city schools did not care about their students. Leon, who was in high school at the time, reported "Teachers don't care. I know the teachers at [Johnson High School] don't." Ms. Rodriguez expressed similar concerns, "The teachers is like, they're not like when I was coming up. Teachers seem when I was coming up that they care. Now they seem like they just there for a paycheck." She worried that the teachers did not respect their students:

They want the respect from the kids but they don't want to give that respect. So they want to talk to you any kind of way and then expect you all to sit back and say okay and then you got to be, kids that are practically grown that is looking at you like my mamma don't talk to me like that.

In grade eight, Alicia's words reflected her mother's concerns. She reported that her school was "not really" a good place to learn "cause the teachers act like they don't like the kids or they scared of them." Alicia explained "when the kids fight in class, they don't try to break them up. They don't. They think that the kids will try to hurt them or something." Alicia believed that schools should "change the way the

teachers act” saying that teachers should “help the kids more and to do their job.” Like her mother, Alicia highlighted the importance of respect, “They should be respectful if they want the kids to be respectful to them. And they should let the kids be who they are instead of trying to change them.”

Inequitable School Resources

Across the longitudinal project, several parents, including Mrs. Rodriguez repeatedly spoke about the differences between suburban and urban schools. Ms. Rodriguez explicitly named race as being related to these differences:

I think school, it mostly leans over to the white people’s side because if you go out in the suburbs and you go to school, [if] you are [walking] across the street to the school, there’s a bus that picks you up and takes you across the street and you can walk right across the street to go to school. I know I have been out there and I watched it. I am like my daughter have to walk a [long city] block. Yeah, I think it is very bias. If you have more money, the more education you have [and] the better your education is.

When I asked her if she had ever considered sending her children to suburban schools, she said she had, “but it is just I can’t afford it.” Three years later, Ms. Rodriguez worried that many kids in the city schools were not reading as well as their peers in the suburbs. As she argued that the kids in the suburbs “have better teachers, better books, better surroundings.”

In grade 11, Ms. Rodriguez felt that the education Alicia got “could have been better.” She explained that there’s so many kids in the class so, every day they come home they’s like there was a fight today. And this one said this. You know it’s more social than ‘sit down’ and ‘do your work’ and ‘we’re not having this.’” She

thought that a suburban school might have been better:

I think she’d be more focused on school and than anything. It would be more important going to school to learn not going to school for social [things]. . . In those [suburban] schools they go “Work, work. I don’t care what went on in your neighborhood.”

For most of the ten-year project, I continued to teach in the same school district that Alicia attended. Illustrating the types of economic challenges school districts faced, during my final years in that district, I was allocated fifty dollars to purchase classroom supplies for the entire school year; this allocation was intended to cover copy paper and all other supplies. Needless to say, my colleagues and I spent a good portion of our salaries on classroom materials.

Dangerous Neighborhoods and Schools

Throughout the ten-year study, Mrs. Rodriguez worried about her children’s safety. As she reported, “My biggest fear is somebody actually killing one of them.” She explained, “Nowadays you have gangsters [who might say] ‘You looked at me wrong’ or ‘You done stepped on my shoes. . . they do[those things or] mistaking you for somebody else or you are with the wrong person.”

These concerns about safety became significant in middle school, when Alicia spoke regularly about fighting at school while assuring me that she was safe because she had “a lot of friends.” By the beginning of eleventh, Alicia’s mother was increasingly concerned. Ms. Rodriguez thought that a lot of the fighting was caused by jealousy. “One think this one got more than the other one or this one is talking about what this one is doing and something like that. Or they talking about this one looks [at], likes her old boyfriend and all that crap. Jealousy. Jealousy, envy, or what somebody else

got. I think it's stupid." She reported that she was thinking about having Alicia change schools. Alicia herself remained unshaken, "I'm safe. I can take care of myself. I know how to fight." Later when her mother was not present, Alicia spoke more about her friends:

I [am] in a club, you know, because I had to help my goons out. You know goons [are the] people that you fight with [alongside]. And friends, I fight with [alongside] my friends. . . We got colors. Our color is green.

While when asked directly, Alicia denied that she was involved with a gang, she later acknowledged that it was a "gang" but continued to maintain that the kids had been "friends since nursery school." While Ms. Rodriguez was notably concerned about the situation, she also acknowledged that the group had been friends for years, saying to me "You know most of the kids because they went to Rosa Parks Elementary School."

However, as the school year progressed, the fighting became worse, and Alicia and her friends were labeled by teachers and administrators as "gang members." A teacher at the school had seen Alicia and her friends' names listed on "MySpace" and reported this "gang affiliation" to the school administrator. Shortly after that Alicia was jumped in a school stairwell and a fight ensued. Alicia was suspended and placed in an in-school suspension program for the remainder of the school year – from December until June.

Alicia's mother was angry and felt that the school officials had made their decision without consulting her. She recreated her conversation with the school officials:

'You didn't really want to see [Alicia]. You didn't want to talk to her. . . But you're sitting up here telling her what she's gonna do and what she ain't gonna do and what you're not going to tolerate and I'm telling you that what

makes you think that she's going to tolerate it?' And I'm like 'She's never been suspended, she always got good grades, and then you gonna talk about that if she was 17 at this time you would kick her out of school?' . . . And I'm looking at him like 'How you gonna say that, and she never been in trouble. She got good grades.' But he didn't care.

As Ms. Rodriguez reported, this fight was an isolated incident - "She never been in no fight. She has got her grades up, she started getting A's and B's." Being placed in in-school suspension for the remainder of the school year affected not only Alicia's sense of self as a student, but it also prevented Alicia from graduating with her class as she could not take all the classes she needed for graduation.

Limited Access to Dreams

Despite the challenges Alicia faced in school, she had a clear dream for her future. Starting in eighth grade, Alicia was enthusiastic about becoming a photographer. Her uncle worked at a local factory that made and processed the film from disposable cameras. He would bring her disposable cameras and develop her pictures at work. Her family agreed that Alicia took good pictures. In eighth grade, Ms. Rodriguez was trying to get Alicia a camera. She made arrangements to buy a used camera from a friend, but when that strategy fell through she assured Alicia that she would find another way to buy her one. As Alicia reported, "I know my mom would get it. . . 'Cause she already told me she's gonna give me like one of them photography cameras."

In fall of eleventh grade, Alicia was finally able to take a photography class. Her mother reported that she loved the class. Alicia and her classmates made their own cameras and learned to develop film. "[We'd] get to go in the darkroom and all that. It's just so much fun. And he used to give us cameras just to go around

the school taking pictures of like patterns and stuff. And we developed them ourselves.” In Alicia’s high school, this photography class was her only option. There was no photography club and Alicia could not afford community photography classes despite the city she lived in being an international center for photographic arts.

That year, her mother got her a camera for Christmas. However on the first day she had the camera, Alicia dropped it and it broke. In addition, when Alicia was placed in the in-school suspension program, she was no longer able to take her photography course. When I asked her what other career goals she might have besides photography, she reported having no other dreams.

Access to possibilities extended beyond Alicia and her dream of becoming a photographer. As Ms. Rodriguez reported, recently implemented testing policies made it difficult for many students to graduate from high school. “You got all these kids dropping out because it’s becoming too hard to get out.” She argued that the tests were making some kids “feel like they’s stupid and they’re not stupid.” Alicia and other kids attending underfunded schools in poorly resourced communities need opportunities to grow, thrive, and dream; school should be a site of possibilities.

Living in a poor urban area, attending underfunded schools, and being African American are not separate issues. They are woven together in ways that make the effects of each of these dimensions invisible. Teachers and parents are blamed for the poor academic progress of children, obfuscating the real experiences of children and families living in poor communities. As Ms. Rodriguez’s words attest, poverty matters and takes many forms. Part of the invisibility of poverty lies in the accumulation of its multiple dimensions. Just living in a dangerous neighborhood, or having a low paying job, or attending an underfunded

school alone could be compensated for by a caring parent and a strong attitude. However, poverty has multiple effects that combine to work against even resilient and resourceful families like Alicia’s.

Hope and Possibilities: Highlighting Cultural Embodied Capital

While dominant discourses tend to blame families and teachers for the literate challenges faced by children in low-income communities, the voices of Ms. Rodriguez and her children highlight disadvantages related to economic academic capital and suggest that responsibility extends beyond teachers and families. Larger social issues related to racism: employment, school resources, safe communities, and support for students’ dreams are clearly raised. While economic disparity raises significant obstacles, in this discussion section, I return to Bourdieu’s theories to situate this lack of economic capital within Bourdieu’s larger discussion of capital which also describes the roles played by social and cultural capital. Social academic capital, involves the networks that families can access and use to support their children academically. In Alisa’s family, social academic capital was limited and generally bounded by family and friends as illustrated by their book sharing networks. Social interactions with school personnel, including administrators and teachers often led to problematic outcomes which could be attributed to assumptions made about families, frustrated teachers, insufficient resources, and the lack of services.

However, cultural academic capital was a strength of this family. Cultural academic capital refers to dispositions and ways of being, acting, talking, and valuing that align with school success. Examples of cultural academic capital were evident in Ms. Rodriguez’s belief and trust in both literacy learning and schooling.

She spoke consistently about the importance of literacy and schooling, modeled the importance of schooling by completing her GED and obtaining both her child care and certified nursing assistant certifications, intervening with school officials when she felt that her children were not being well-served, and emphasizing the importance of getting a diploma.

Despite the challenges faced by Alicia and her siblings, Ms. Rodriguez consistently demonstrated a remarkable degree of cultural academic capital as she advocated for her children:

Ms. Rodriguez: I'm on them constantly. To do work. (grade 1)

Ms. Rodriguez: See, I come from New York. So, with us it's [you keep on them]-- In New York a lot of times you slip through that system and you just skid. (grade 5)

Ms. Rodriguez: I am so happy that they know how to read cause I refuse to let them push them through school. (grade 8)

Ms. Rodriguez: I'm not one of those parents that sit at home. Don't act like I don't care about my kids. And that's when they was like, "Uh, well, we is just asking -" "No. You got a problem with my daughter you need to call me." (grade 11)

Her dedication to her children's academic pursuits included getting a high school diploma:

Oh, I stay on them and my son knows I don't care if he don't go to college that's one thing but he says he probably end up going to a trade school or something. I think that's fine. But one thing I've always told him. Regardless of what you do in life, you gonna have a diploma. I don't care what you do, you gonna bring home the diploma. And they all know that. And

they all like you know ma ain't going to let up until we get the diploma, so. Let's get it and get it over with.

Ms. Rodriguez described the various things she did to support the school success of her children; she would "write letters, show up at school meetings and talk to the teachers." As she explained, "You have to be that parent that actually cares and let them know that you care and let them know you're not going to, they're not going to push your child through school, just push them on through when they don't know anything." Alicia's three oldest brothers all graduated from high school. Tyreek was the first sibling not to graduate and his incarceration was a huge disappointment for Ms. Rodriguez.

Ms. Rodriguez's resilience was apparent again as she described her concerns for her children. She explained "My biggest fear is failure. Yeah, I don't like to fail." She continued "I don't like people to quit. I can't stand quitters and my biggest fear is that they are going to get up there and say 'I quit. I don't want to do it no more.' That's why I am always on [them] you see." Alicia's older brothers joined the conversation:

Ms. Rodriguez: I don't have a fear. I believe every last one of them are going to make something of themselves.

Leon: I know I am.

Tyreek: I'm going to be in charge of the country.

Ms. Rodriguez not only enacted agency of behalf of her children, but she also accessed cultural academic capital (e.g., advocating for literacy and schooling, completing various degrees and certifications, intervening with school officials, highlighting the importance of getting a diploma). While financial limits had real effects, Ms. Rodriguez was savvy and harnessed available resources.

Conclusions and Implications

Over the ten years that I worked with Alicia and her family, her mother repeatedly identified fiscal challenges while demonstrating a high degree of cultural academic capital. Three significant conclusions can be drawn. First, Ms. Rodriguez aptly named and critiqued the economic challenges she faced in helping her children to be successful in school. These challenges relate to both economic challenges within the family and challenges related to living in a high poverty community. Second, Ms. Rodriguez provided an account of the experience of raising children in a high poverty community. She identified challenges that are often invisible to outsiders, including teachers. Finally, her longitudinal account highlights the agency and resiliency that she brought to the challenges that she faced. She repeatedly demonstrated cultural academic capital through her commitment to schooling and literacy, high expectations for her children, and her continued faith in her children's abilities and potential.

The words of Ms. Rodriguez and her children invite us to look beyond parenting and teaching as the cause of disparities in academic achievement. As echoed in the writings of Kozol (2012), Neuman and Celano (2012), Ravitch (2013), socioeconomic status and the economic health of communities matter. Anyon (1997) argued for an "all-out attack on poverty and racial isolation" writing that "until the economic and political systems in which the cities are enmeshed are themselves transformed so they may be more democratic and productive for urban residents, educational reformers have little chance of effecting long-lasting educational changes in city schools" (p. 13). Thus the words of Ms. Rodriguez alert us to essential issues

beyond teacher competency and parental responsibility.

With these insights I offer two implications related to poverty and learning. I begin with a call to action that extends beyond teachers and schools. As a society we need to recognize that all children and families are entitled to jobs that pay a living wage, safe neighborhoods, well-resourced schools, and access to students' dreams. As educators, we must continually remind ourselves and others that poverty has real effects on people's lives. Change must include not only reforming schools, but also reforming neighborhoods and ultimately society. This is avowedly political but essential as we consider children's lives and futures.

A second set of implications is evident in the ways Ms. Rodriguez described teachers and schools. Foremost teachers must show students that they care. They need to listen to their students and be respectful of students' families and situations. In particular, educators must constantly re-examine their own attitudes and assumptions. Learning about the challenges that families face is a first step that can lead to helping families to locate resources, address issues in their communities and schools, and have a more powerful voice in their children's futures.

Note

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About the Author

Catherine Compton-Lilly, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin Madison. Dr. Compton-Lilly teaches courses in literacy studies and works with professional development schools in Madison. She has a passion for helping teachers to support children in learning to read and write. Her interests include examining how time operates as a contextual factor in children's lives as they progress through school and construct their identities as students and readers. Dr. Compton-Lilly is the author/editor of several books and has published widely in educational journals.