What does it take to teach poor and homeless students? Compassion, flexibility, and unflagging expectations.

Julie Landsman

Leah had her hair in braids with beads woven into them. Every time she turned her head, pink and yellow glinted in the winter sunlight. It was 7:00 a.m. at Powderhorn Community School, and Leah was there to help her 4th grade teacher get ready for the day. This bright room—with its papers tacked to the bulletin boards, collages of famous African Americans, and books with tattered covers falling out of bookshelves—was her home away from no home. Leah’s teacher had realized early in the year that Leah needed a calm place to start her day and asked her to be an assistant. They shared the silence before the buses came and the other students tumbled through the door, many of whom also lacked permanent homes.

I met Leah when I taught as a visiting writer in her school for three months, about as long as some of these kids had ever lived in one place. For a writing exercise asking students to fill in the phrase “I used to _____, but now _____,” Leah wrote a letter to her mother in prison. She wrote about how she used to come home to her mom in the kitchen, but now she wasn’t always sure who would be there for her or where she would be staying. She wanted her mother to know how she had grown, how well she was doing in school, and how well she could roller skate now (“I used to fall on my face at the rink, but now I twirl in a circle until I am dizzy”).

Not one student made fun of Leah’s letter when she read it aloud. Not one teacher judged her mother or her family. No one questioned Leah’s love, her sadness, or her wistful hope for the return of her mother. And with this lack of judgmental commentary came an acceptance of Leah’s reality coupled with an understanding of her potential. Leah’s teachers believed she could survive her situation and go on to complete many successful years of school, including college.

There is no time or place for pity or blame in Leah’s school, where up to 80 percent of students come from families whose incomes fall below the poverty level. The kids know they could be in Leah’s situation tomorrow, and the teachers know she had nothing to do with the circumstances that send her from auntie to grandma to neighbor to church deacon each week or each month. At the same time, teachers in
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Believing in Brilliance
The best teachers never lose sight of the potential of students like Leah. Such teachers hold all they know, all they worry about, all they see of kids in thin jackets or dirty clothes, kids who wolf down three breakfasts, and they continue to believe in the brilliance, creativity, and ability of all their students. There is no condescension or sentimentality in their work with these young people, but there is compassion for them, as well as anger at a country that would allow any young person to go hungry and cold in a Minnesota winter. There is no shrug of acceptance, nor is there a lowering of standards for what they expect from each child.

In my roles as consultant, visiting writer, and college instructor, I have talked with teachers, administrators, and professors of education about the qualities it takes to work successfully with students who live in poverty or who are homeless. Successful teachers take a hopeful approach to their job and their students, no matter what grade or subject they teach. When they teach students who come from shelters across town or who walk to school from a temporary living arrangement with a relative nearby, they do not lower their expectations in terms of class participation or work. But they do show compassion and flexibility in helping such students succeed.

These teachers possess something almost indefinable. They hold in their minds the stories of their students' lives while remaining aware of what they as individual teachers can do within their classrooms. While trying to find solutions for each student given his or her home situation, they strive to provide the most engaging, challenging, and relevant classroom experience they can.

Building Bridges and Cutting Deals
"Given help, students will leap mountains for you. If you have done your job, kids won't fail," says Jehanne Beaton, a social studies teacher at Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Beaton uses the metaphor of a bridge, appropriate to this city on the Mississippi River, to describe what teachers need to do:

You would never expect kids to traverse huge gaps of physical space without a bridge. It's the same with learning. You, the teacher, are the bridge to help students get from one level of skill and understanding to another.

To help youth living in poverty cross this bridge, teachers need a relevant curriculum; a pedagogy that puts students' voices at the center of learning; time to listen to and guide students; and a safe place where issues central to students' lives can be explored respectfully. This curriculum of exploration need not be watered down; it can be complex and advanced.

For example, Beaton helped her student Sylvia, who worried about her parents being deported, use her fears as a catalyst for learning. She suggested that Sylvia undertake a project on immigration and investigate the status of students who come to the United States very young but who will not be
legally eligible for financial help for college because of their undocumented status. Sylvia researched state and federal statutes, studied the political and historical context of immigration, examined current legislation, reviewed the process for attaining citizenship, and conducted numerous interviews. She used her findings to write a final research paper. This hard work was made possible by Sylvia's passion about the issue and Beaton's demanding guidance.

Beaton does what Kitty Green at St. Mary's University in Notre Dame, Indiana, calls "cutting deals" with students. Beaton maintains definite requirements for coursework but is flexible enough to create conditions that make it possible for all students to reach those requirements. As she teaches, Beaton keeps a "mental file cabinet" full of explanations for why her students behave as they do and why they might resist certain kinds of work. Knowing all this, she does not lower her expectations.

George Roberts, an English teacher at Minneapolis's North High School, where a large percentage of students come from poor families, took a similar approach. Roberts realized that many of his students had little control over their lives, so he created a classroom where students could experience being in control. Students could write assigned papers on any topic that connected their personal interests to themes from the literature they were reading, or they could fulfill course requirements through such diverse activities as writing a play, researching Caribbean music, or writing a short story. Robert's AP English class was as demanding as any AP course in the system.

When students feel that they have a say in their education and that education is not something "done to them," they become engaged. Homeless and highly mobile kids often feel even less in control over their lives than other children do. The more we can give them a voice and real choices, the more we can engage them in demanding schoolwork.

No Ifs, No Excuses
Pat Teske, arts coordinator for Minneapolis Public Schools, taught music in urban schools for 25 years. Her long experience has taught her that teachers who qualify the statement "All children can learn" with a list of if's—if they have books in the home and if they live in one place all year, for example—are not ready to teach kids living in poverty. Too often, teachers find excuses for not believing in the capabilities of all students and for not structuring a demanding class for them: "I can't expect these students to do a tough research project. They live in a shelter," or "They have no money, so I can't ask them to be part of the theater project."

We cannot follow the statement "All children can learn" with conditionals. No matter where we teach, we will rarely have a classroom in which every student is motivated, has a full stomach, lives in a safe neighborhood, and has a relationship with both of his or her parents. We must teach the students we have before us, understanding the complexities of their lives and helping each student deal with these complexities. Teachers must become bearers of hope in places where there are depression and despair. It is our job to believe in kids above everything else. And in city schools where 90 percent of the student body lives in poverty, this is a serious charge.

U.S. schools need committed and creative teachers who will find paths around the obstacles that prevent economically disadvantaged students from getting a rich, varied education. We need teachers who will go the extra mile—and these teachers need support.

Rethinking Our Roles as Teachers
Meeting Day-to-Day Needs
Every teacher with whom I talked said that working with students who live in poverty requires a practical awareness of the students' physical needs coupled with a passion for teaching. Doug Humes, a science teacher at Humboldt Middle School in St. Paul, Minnesota, keeps granola bars in his drawer for kids who are so hungry they fall asleep in class. He also escorts students to breakfast when he finds them in the halls in the morning, hungry but too embarrassed to go into the cafeteria.

George Roberts of North High recalls taking a student to the social worker to get shoes after finding out that this student was avoiding school because he was ashamed of his clothes. Roberts allowed students who were homeless or
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ways, providing a little of the consistency that is missing when students do not have a secure place to live. These teachers’ rooms are open before school, after school, and at lunch time for informal talks. Such teachers may have very different teaching styles and personalities. Yet they all convey to students—through their tone of voice, sense of humor, flexibility, acts of kindness, or all of the above—that they are people a student can come to.

Finding Out About Students’ Lives

Connecting to poor and homeless students often means doing some creative digging to find out what’s happening in their lives. Christi Carlson, a teacher at Humboldt, has learned to talk with kids who have been sleeping in her classroom before she penalizes them. She often discovers that these students have not had a stable address for months. A student who is sleeping on a living room couch may have to wait until midnight, when the adults leave the room, to go to bed. Carlson figures out ways to help young people living in such conditions meet the requirements of her class. She adjusts deadlines, is available before and after school, and keeps in touch with vulnerable students’ families.

Teachers at Minneapolis’s North Community High School have come up with strategies to find out about their students’ home lives and underlying needs. Some teachers devise a class survey centered on their subject area that includes respectful but revealing questions. For example, one physics teacher asked students to list the appliances in their homes as a way to begin talking about physics and discovered that many of her students had few electrical appliances at home.

One year, Ruth Hiland, a social worker at Minneapolis Southwest High School, discovered through conversations that many students who were behind and at risk of dropping out—such as those who had children or who had bounced from school to school—only needed to make up one or two courses to put them on track toward graduation. She had assumed that they were much further behind. She arranged for the school to offer an English class after school. This grew into a more complete after-school program that allowed students to make up classes in several subjects so that they could graduate.

Learning about students’ needs requires us to put ourselves in students’ shoes. At Humboldt Middle School, I recently heard guest speaker Paul Gorski from Hamline University ask the teachers how many of them had cars. All the teachers, assistants, and administrators raised their hands. The school social worker then told the teachers that 89 percent of the school’s parents had no car. It was powerful for teachers to see the disconnect between their reality as car owners—and their assumption that parents could easily get around the city—and the parents’ reality of needing to take time off work and negotiate bus routes to get to the school.

As a result, these teachers began to think of new ways to reach parents, such as phoning them or holding conferences in a location closer to students’ residences. They brainstormed ways to reach parents of...
homeless youth who were bused to school from all over the city, such as visiting each shelter once or twice a year.

Many teachers use staff release days before the beginning of the school year to go into the neighborhoods and the homeless shelters where their students live and talk to parents about what they want for their children. These teachers often say that these are the most useful days they spend preparing for the year. An administrator for Minneapolis Public Schools regularly takes the district's teachers on a bus tour of North Minneapolis, a neighborhood where many of the district's poorest students live. This tour is led by residents of the Northside and emphasizes the rich heritage of the neighborhood. Residents point out places where famous black musicians stayed before integration and talk about the writers, doctors, and other professionals from this section of the city.

Actions like these help educators shift their thinking. Teachers look at such a neighborhood differently, appreciating it more. They also understand at a visceral level what it means to live without a car, or to be unsure of where one will sleep that night. Such actions help us suspend judgment about students and families who live in difficult conditions. There is no place for pre-judgment in the classroom. If we look at a student whose head is on the desk each day or whose clothes are dirty and decide that that student is deficient in character, we will lose that student from the start.

In addition to withholding judgment, we must avoid being condescending or assuming a savior mentality toward students. It is essential to realistically recognize our own privileges and then to teach as best we can, accommodating our students' needs and expecting great things from them. If students feel hopeless about their future, it is vital that teachers not feed into that despair, no matter how difficult a student's situation. Rather, we should interject into conversations with students our expectation that they will graduate from high school and go on to more education.

We must also reframe our thinking from focusing on a homeless child's deficits to focusing on his or her resiliency and strength. If we recognize as assets our students' flexibility, strength, and persistence in getting to school no matter what, we can appreciate the strengths that kids living in poverty bring to us each day.

**Strategies for Teaching Economically Struggling Students**

- Assume that all students can learn complex and creative material.
- Create a classroom that gives students as much control as possible while maintaining safety and structure. Let students' interests drive the curriculum.
- Do not assume common behaviors or states of mind for all low-income students or parents.
- Focus on the assets that students bring to the classroom: resiliency, perseverance, flexibility, compassion, and hope.
- Understand that you cannot change the world, but that you can work within your classroom and community to effect change. Advocate for small class size.
- Build a network of colleagues who are finding ways to challenge low-income students. Meet in the media center on Fridays to talk about "what went right this week."
- Maintain your "other life" so that you can go into the classroom ready to meet kids wholeheartedly and without resentment.
- Find ways to provide the necessities, such as winter coats, art materials, and a place to wash clothes. Look in the community for resources—for example, a place for students to do homework.
- Find respectful ways to survey students about their home situations. Make yourself available for students to talk with you. Refer them for help when they share serious problems or speak of a lack of basic needs at home.
- Ask students to do jobs for you to help them feel important and in control of something in their lives.
- Do not single out kids or indicate in front of others that you know they are homeless or poor.
- "Cut deals" with students, helping them find realistic ways to meet work requirements.
- Convince students that "I believe you can learn and I will listen to you and give you meaningful work to do."

**Trends Toward Programmed Learning**

Lately, there has been a tendency in education to lump economically disadvantaged students into a group, prescribing certain ways to interact with "them" and structure "their" experiences in school. Many people seem to assume that all poor students live chaotic lives in violent neighborhoods. Some researchers tell teachers to use simple directives, rote learning, and rigidly programmed methods of instruction when working with poor students or students of color. In a recent article in Harper's Magazine, Jonathan Kozol describes this trend:
Relentless emphasis on raising test scores, rigid policies of nonpromotion and nongraduation, a new empiricism and the imposition of unusually detailed lists of named and numbered “outcomes” for each isolated parcel of instruction, an often times fanatical insistence upon conformity of teachers in their management of time, an openly conceded emulation of the rigorous approaches of the military and a frequent use of terminology that comes out of the world of industry and commerce—these are just a few of the familiar aspects of these new adaptive strategies. Although generically described as “school reform,” most of these practices and policies are targeted primarily at poor children of color.1

Both the trend to lump all low-income students together as a group and the trend toward programmed learning for such students worry me. Any system that addresses children as a group and defines their behavior as a result of one element of their lives takes away from the idea of getting to know students as individuals with complex personalities. And interacting with students in a programmed way denies them the challenging classrooms that the best teachers want to provide. Such rigid, programmed methods of instruction would never be accepted by many middle- and upper-income parents who want challenging curriculums and holistic approaches for their sons and daughters. These parents want courses like psychology and beginning physics in middle school because they expect their sons and daughters to be prepared for college and beyond. We must expect this future for the poorest students as well and strive for demanding, original instruction for every student. We must also insist on the small class size that teachers and parents in wealthier schools demand.

Don’t get me wrong: Structure and consistency help all young people, wealthy or poor. But to treat low-income students as though they need rote learning at the expense of critical thinking and creativity does a great disservice to those young minds.

Every teacher I have seen who works effectively with poor or homeless students teaches with anything but a rote approach to education. They call on the arts; they find creative ways to get to know kids; they make sure students’ interests and voices are central to the class; and they put control of projects, grades, and classroom work in the hands of students as much as possible, while still maintaining orderly classrooms.

We educators need to reframe our thinking to counteract the trend toward programmed learning for low-income students. We need to assume that students from poor families can do the complicated work and high-level thinking that we assume wealthier students can do. Granted, skills may differ for students from homes where there is no money for books or computers. Granted, English language learners may not speak, read, or write in English as well as native-born students do. But none of this means that these young people do not think, react, create, plan, or explore in complex ways. If we teach down to poor students, we condemn them to feeling hopeless. And make no mistake, kids pick up on such attitudes.

Compassionate Advocates

Teachers need to become advocates for students who, in some people’s minds, are limited to a future as low-wage, low-skilled workers in the service economy. Students who want to work as international bankers, lawyers, artists, doctors, or teachers must be encouraged to pursue their dreams, no matter what education policy tells them.

It is time for us to shift our thinking from resigned helplessness to activism, pressing for what our students need in classrooms and schools. Throughout his years as a high school teacher, George Roberts pushed his administration, his district, and state politicians to provide for his students in North Minneapolis. He also encouraged
students to be activists. His students wrote letters to those in power, protested negative portrayals of their school in the media, and created “no guns” signs for the windows in their neighborhoods. His students went on to college or good jobs—and came back to thank him and ask for his help in tackling activist causes in their neighborhoods.

Although we may not all be as active as Roberts, we can keep our hearts and minds open to the potential of our students. We can expand our concern beyond our own life situation to the broader concerns of equity in employment, education, and material resources in our communities.

The heart of being a teacher who makes a difference to students in poverty is compassion. I sometimes wonder if we can teach compassion or if it is at the core of who we are.

Clearly, compassion does not come only from having lived through the conditions that poor students experience: I have worked with college students from very privileged backgrounds who have become remarkable teachers in some of the toughest districts in the United States. I have seen quiet, shy young people who seem as though they might be overrun by students’ behavior turn out to be outstanding in the most overcrowded, challenging classrooms. On the other hand, dynamic, assertive, excited young teachers who seem as though they would be ideal sometimes lose their students because they lack the reflection, self-appraisal, and true empathy needed for times when classes are not going well.

We cannot afford to lose students who don’t meet the often-unconscious mental list of characteristics that many of us believe students must have to thrive academically. Teachers need to see assets and possibility where conventional eyes often see a dead end. And we can do so, first and foremost, by believing that all students can learn challenging material and gain complex skills. Period. No conditions. If we start from there and persist in thinking in this way, we cannot help but become bearers of hope for all students.  


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