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Children Living in Poverty: Their Perception of Career Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Growing up in poverty often diminishes a child's opportunity to pursue a rewarding career path. This qualitative study explored whether poor children are aware that their wealthier peers' chances for success may be greater than their own. Projective techniques employing photographs of two houses representing poor and middle-income families were used to interview twenty-four children between the ages of five and thirteen years, divided equally between white and African Americans. These respondents perceived that society provides better future job opportunities to nonpoor children while limiting those of the poor. Although respondents suggested that they and their friends could be exceptions to these limitations, indications of their beginning feelings of hopelessness were revealed. The author proposes strategies to assist in strengthening poor children's belief in themselves and their future.

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Before announcing that he would sign the welfare "reform" bill that was about to be passed in Congress, President Clinton stated "I concluded that the current welfare system undermines the basic values of work, responsibility, and family, trapping generation after generation in dependency" (*New York Times*, 1996). Clinton and the majority of both houses worry that too-generous benefits have destroyed the work ethic and individual responsibility of poor women and are corrupting future generations, but in reality, individual responsibility and the work ethic thrive only when one can take control over one's life. In fact, people who believe that their actions have the power to make an impact on their lives and work tend to exhibit *more* motivation and personal initiative (Kane, 1987; Pecukonis & Wenocur, 1994; Seligman, 1975; Zimmerman, 1993). The welfare problem may stem from a lessening of future opportunities for poor children, rather than a generational transmission of dependency or a depreciated work ethic.

This article reports on a qualitative study about how children of limited means perceive their own job potential compared with that of their more financially fortunate peers. The following research questions formed the basis of this study: What do poor children perceive as economic opportunities available to them in the future? How hopeful are they about their own chances for economic success? What are their dreams for the future? Do they experience their world as inclusive and supportive of their potential and aspirations or as arbitrarily exclusionary as a result of their socioeconomic class? Are younger children more hopeful or hopeless than older children? After reporting on the children's perceptions concerning future opportunities, I conclude with suggested intervention strategies to support poor children in maintaining and resuscitating their dreams as they confront the powerful realities of their lives.

Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services

Background

In an extensive review of the literature, Hill and Sandfort (1995) show that childhood poverty leads to substantially reduced adulthood earnings. One reason for this is that poverty infringes on the amount of schooling children complete (Duncan, Brooks, & Klebanov, 1994; Goldstein, 1991; Haveman, Wolfe, & Spaulding, 1991; Hill & Sandfort, 1995; Korenman, Miller, & Sjaastad, 1995; Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994). The extent of education is strongly positively correlated with adult wages (Ashenfelter & Krueger, 1992; Belcher & Diblasio, 1991; Danziger, 1991; Krueger & Bowen, 1993; Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994; William T. Grant Commission, 1988). The Children's Defense Fund (Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994) computed that for each year a child spends in poverty, approximately a half year is chipped away from the child's total educational attainment. This is critical, in that wages increase approximately 10% for every additional year of schooling (Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994).

However, Hill and Sandfort (1995) determined that factoring out the time in school hardly reduced the negative impact of poverty on future earnings. Additional elements other than the lack of formal education contribute to childhood poverty's stranglehold on adult economic productivity:

Childhood poverty also may lead to lower wages and productivity during adulthood by subtly lowering an individual's basic skills and ability to learn on the job, for example, by lowering the quality of education received, or by causing brain damage from sources such as lead poisoning. In addition, poverty can impair the development of interpersonal skills needed for team work, create lasting scars on outlook and motivation, or cause chronic poor health or mental health. (Sherman & Children's Defense Fund, 1994, p.103)

Furthermore, economic and social forces that entrap persons in poverty appear to be gaining power (Danziger & Gottschalk, 1992). Parental income continues to be strongly correlated with the child's future income (Corcoran, Gordon, Laren, & Solon, 1992; Hill & Duncan, 1987; Hill & Sandfort, 1995). Income inequality continues to grow, as noted by Sklar (1996), "Money isn't trickling down but flooding upwards" — so much so that the top 4% of Americans at the head of the pay scale earn more wages than the bottom *half*. Sklar (1995) reports that between 1973 and 1993, the weekly earnings of line workers plummeted by 16%, while the level of unemployment tolerated in the official "full employment" measure increased from 4.8% to 7.3%.

Busby and Busby (1996) argue that poverty destructively sets up a no-win situation. While opportunity is determined by social power, the poor are seduced by the cultural promise that "anyone can be anything they want to be." Their high expectations are invariably met with repeated work experiences of rejection and failure, resulting in anomie that makes them unable to utilize fully the limited opportunities available to them.

In fact, long before adults attempt to secure a position in the labor market, their lives as poor children may have already destroyed their belief that success is possible. Cognitive theory explains the role of cognition in shaping emotional and behavioral responses and can be helpful in understanding a possible connection between aspirations and job outcomes. Children's experiences are likely to shape how they regard themselves and their futures. Perhaps they observe that their parents and neighbors don't have well-paying, desirable jobs and conclude that better opportunities will not be available to them either. Keniston and Carnegie Council on Children (1977) contended that the chances of overcoming poverty are slimmer still when poor children see that significant adults have minimal opportunities to earn a decent living. How do these child respondents view this unequal playing field, and how does it affect their plans and expectations for success?

Research Design and Methodology

Respondents

The convenience sample for this study consisted of twenty-four children between the ages of five and thirteen years, with eight children in each of three age categories (five-seven, eight-ten, eleven-thirteen). The total sample, as well as each of the age groupings, was divided equally between whites and African Americans and between females and males. Half of the children lived in houses; the other half resided in apartments. Fifteen participants (63%) lived in single-parent households: twelve (50%) with

their mothers and three (13%) with their fathers. Eight youths (33%) lived in two-parent homes, and one child (4%) lived with relatives. All the children studied lived in a low-income neighborhood in a small midwestern city (population 125,000). The city has a public university with 26,000 students; a private, liberal arts college; one community college; and one major international corporation, which is the city's largest employer. The children attended an elementary school in which 90% of the student body qualified for free school lunches. A new federal program that provides health and mental health services to financially disadvantaged children was located at the school. Such programs are targeted to serve financially disadvantaged children, and almost all of the students (96%) were eligible to participate.

Sample

At the request of the researcher, personnel of the school-based health center asked parents of the children who were eligible to use their services (based on financial need) to allow them to participate. Because of the trust established between the health center staff and the parents, the first twenty-four parents approached granted this permission. The health center personnel chose students matched for age, race, and gender so that each age group comprised equal numbers of girls and boys and was racially balanced. To avoid bias toward inclusion of children with greater health or behavior problems, they not only selected children whose parents they encountered in the course of their work but also went to the homes of children who were not currently using their services.

Preceding all interviews, the researcher explained the process to each child, asked for her or his assent, and clarified her or his option to terminate the interview at any point. Only one child who identified himself as poor chose to stop the interview midway through the process, saying, "That's like me, this is too hard." Another child took his place. In all other cases, when the parent consented, the child subsequently gave verbal consent and completed the interview.

Interview Questionnaire

Each interview began by showing the child two 8" x 10" photographs. One depicted a run-down home comparable to houses in the neighborhood where the students live; the other showed a suburban-style ranch home with a manicured lawn. The children thought that the latter house would be occupied by "rich people." A realtor approached by the researcher estimated it to be in the $90,000 to $110,000 range, suitable for a middle-income buyer with a $40,000 to $50,000 annual salary. The realtor described the first house as a "fixer upper" that would list at less than $20,000. She said she would refer a likely customer to a program that subsidizes down-payments and offers restricted low-interest loans.

The questionnaire was piloted on a graduate student's two children, ages six and nine, to assure that the questions were clear and encouraged thoughtful responses. As a result of this pilot, the questionnaire was reduced in length so that it would not be tiring to the youngest respondents. The items reported in this article focus on respondents' perceptions of future job opportunities available to poor and nonpoor children. Each respondent was asked about career choices and future chances for obtaining that career in three different instances: (a) the imagined child living in the poor house and in the middle-class house, (b) the respondent's best friend, and (c) the respondent him- or herself. These questionnaire items are shown in Table 1.

Interview Process

The research subjects were accompanied to the room in the health center used for the interviews by a familiar staff member who introduced the child to the researcher. Each interview lasted approximately forty-five minutes. The children were encouraged to express themselves freely and were assured that there were no right or wrong answers. When questions pertained to an imagined child living in the houses, that child was given the same gender as the respondent's to allow identification with the questions. Using the house pictures allowed questions that could be posed concretely, enabling the children to project inner feelings more freely. This approach is particularly suitable for children because it tends to capture their uncensored responses. The researcher used neutral/nonjudgmental probes (e.g., if a respondent answered that a child who lived in this house "might and might not" achieve her or his chosen career, the researcher asked balanced questions:

- How come the child might get to be a _____?
- How come the child might not get to be a _____?
- What will help the child get to be a _____?

Table 1. *Imagined child, friend, respondent questionnaire.*

Imagined Child

The following two questions were asked about the imagined child growing up in each of the houses pictured:

1. What do you think a child who lives in this house wants to be when s/he grows up?
2. Do you really think that s/he will grow up to be a (career proposed by respondent)? How come?

Friend

3. Who is your best friend? What do you think your best friend wants to be when s/he grows up?
4. Do you really think that (friend's name) will grow up to be a (career proposed by respondent)? How come?

Respondent

5. What do you want to be when you grow up?
6. Do you really think that you will grow up to be a (career proposed by respondent)? How come?

■ What might get in the way of the child becoming a _____?)

and follow-up questions worded in language the children understood to help them articulate, clarify, and expand their responses (e.g., if a respondent said the child wanted to grow up to be nice or rich in reply to the question "What did the child want to be when he grows up?" the researcher asked "What kind of job does the child want when he grows up?").

Data Analysis

All interviews, consisting of open-ended questions, were tape-recorded and transcribed, and the researcher read every transcript several times. Responses to questions about career choices and chances for job acquisition were coded and quantified. Questions about why someone would or would not achieve their desired career position were analyzed across interviews for prominent themes. First, the answers of each respondent to the same question were cut out and pasted on separate index cards. Second, codes were developed based on the responses. The researcher recorded the definitions of the categories and the rules by which individual responses were listed under a given category to provide consistent assignment of responses. Finally, the cards were divided according to these conceptual themes. The children are quoted extensively throughout this article to illustrate these themes faithfully.

Findings

Imagined child: What do you want to be? Constricted career choices for the imagined poor child. The young respondents provided telling answers when asked what the child in each house wanted to be when she or he grew up. They markedly distinguished between the future opportunities available to a poor child compared with a nonpoor child. Seventy-five percent (n = 18) of the participants envisioned that the child living in the well-kept house would aim for a profession (n = 12, 50%) or business (n = 6, 25%) career track. In comparison, only eight respondents (33%) imagined that the child living in the dilapidated house would choose a profession, and only one respondent (4%) predicted she or he would make it. Only two (8%) conceived of this child choosing a business leadership position. Research subjects regarded jobs as a laborer, police officer, or fireman and jobs that "shoot for the moon," such as movie star or basketball player, as more suitable options for the financially-disadvantaged child than for the middle-income child. Of three other participants, one thought any job choice was out of the question for the poor child: "She just knows that she won't be anything." The second respondent couldn't come up with a realistic idea, and the third stretched his imagination to suggest that the poor child would transform into an imaginary superhero such as a "Power Ranger."

Apparently, participants do not believe that lucrative business ownership or management positions are open to a child growing up in poverty. Their opinion is that such a child can try to be a professional but is unlikely to succeed. It appears safer for them to choose jobs of lesser status and financial reward or to imagine more glamorous jobs depicted by famous role models (see Table 2).

Imagined child: What are his or her chances? The imagined poor child's future chances to secure chosen work were deemed abysmal in comparison with the economically advantaged child. Only five (21%) predicted that the child growing up in the substandard house would obtain his or her chosen career, whereas twenty (83%) fully expected the child in the middle-class house to do so. The worse odds for the latter child were a "maybe" (n = 3, 13%). However, eleven (46%) respondents answered an emphatic "no" to the poor child's probable career attainment (see Table 3).

Table 2. *Career predictions about children living in different economic level homes.*

What do you think a child who lives in this house wants to be when s/he grows up?

Imagined child:	PROFESSIONS, e.g., doctor/lawyer	BUSINESS, e.g., store owner, manager "Lots of money"	TALENT CAREERS, e.g., movie star, model, basketball player	POLICE/FIRE PERSON	LABORER	NO CHOSEN WORK, e.g., "She'll be nothing" "I don't know," make-believe character	NO PRESSING NEED TO WORK
Child living in low income house	8 33%	2 8%	3 12%	4 7%	4 17%	3 12%	0
Child living in middle income	12 50%	6 25%	2 8%	1 4%	2 8%	0 4%	1

The younger children were not more hopeful than the older children about the types of career paths likely to be pursued by the child of limited means. Only four respondents of sixteen in the two younger categories (younger than eleven years) predicted that the imagined child would aim for a professional or business position, and only one of these expected the child to make it. In the eldest category (eleven to thirteen year olds), though six respondents thought the poor child wanted to be a professional or business leader (five and one respectively), they estimated the odds of this happening as fifty-fifty.

Similarly, when participants' predictions about the poor child's chances of obtaining his or her chosen career were compared across the age categories, the youngest group was no more optimistic than the oldest group. Only 38% (n = 3 of 8) in both age groups expected the child living in the poor house to acquire a job in her or his chosen career (only two or 25%, in the middle-age group projected success). In contrast, in all three age groupings, at least six respondents of eight (75%) predicted that the child growing up in the ranch house would overwhelmingly be likely to realize his or her dreams. Thus it appears that children learn at a very early age that if you are poor, the probability of achieving middle-class success is very low.

Table 3. *Chances of reaching career goal: Children living in differeent economic level homes.*

Will the child grow up to reach her/his career goal?

Imagined child:	YES	NO	MAYBE	NO CHOSEN WORK CATEGORY "Don't know," (make-believe character)	NO PRESSING NEED TO WORK
Imagined child living in low-income house	5 21%	11 46%	6 25%	2 8%	0
Child living in middle-income house	20 83%	0	3 13%	0	1 4%

Classism: How respondents explain their perceptions of limited chances. The youthful participants linked discrimination and lack of money to the low expectancy of job procurement. The children associated having money with being able to get a job, even if developmentally they weren't yet able to understand this interconnection: "'Cuz you got to pay to get a job." However, other children proposed that a shortage of funds resulted in an unseemly appearance ("They don't look too good for the interview"), in a lack of a good education and sufficient money to go to college, or a deficiency of know-how ("He signed the application wrong" because he didn't have the benefit of the wealthier child who "has been watching his dad sign applications and stuff like that"). Some participants described the child's background as an intractable "scarlet letter" that would close the doors to job possibilities. One child suspected that the rich person who "might be the manager" and who had driven by her house when she was a child and "thought that she was messy and stuff" would now, years later, turn her down for a job. Another child

Table 4. *Career predictions about best friend.*

What do you think your best friend wants to be when he/she grows up?

	PROFESSIONS, e.g., doctor/lawyer	BUSINESS, e.g., store owner, manager "Lots of money"	TALENT CAREERS, e.g., movie star, model, basketball player	POLICE/FIRE PERSON	LABORER	NO CHOSEN WORK, e.g., "She'll be nothing," "I don't know," make -believe character
Best Friend	6 25%	1 4%	5 21%	4 17%	4 17%	4 17%

stated that even if a child somehow leaped the hurdles of not having enough money to go to college, he might be excluded from an entry position in a law firm. "They might look back into his background if they're lawyers and stuff, some people might not hire him to be something because he was poor." The child continued, "The judge or somebody in there tells him that they're full and stuff, and that they don't need another lawyer."

But hope dies reluctantly. It was this latter respondent who, amid his reading of society's prejudicial assaults, exclaimed, "but you can be anything you want that you put your mind to." Five of twenty-four children estimated that career success hinged either on the child's ability and determination in school, self-esteem, motivation, or wisdom in saving money throughout childhood. "She could be anything she wants just as long as she gets good grades in school." "If he gets pride, he can. He can try to be anything." Although responses indicate that children's aspirations are diminished by a society that they believe excludes them and devalues their potential, their attempts to hold on to a sense of power over their own destiny were evident.

Classism: Respondents perceive heightened chances for the middle-class child. The child respondents attributed increased chances of success to the wealthier child because this child had the means to enhance his or her physical appearance and to acquire a better education ("she has a good school to go to. I'm not criticizing them, but they do have a better chance because they got a better education.") Some respondents also predicted this child's attainment and affluence based on explanations of inherited wealth and position.

> *Cuz they're rich now, so they'll keep on having a lot of money.*

> *Be like his mom because they have like an office, they have a building named after them, and they work there because they'll pass it on to him, and he'll pass it on to his son. He's gonna just sit there and relax and let other people work hard, and he'll just sit there.*

A few children expressed perceptions different from societal views about AFDC recipients. For these children, the unmotivated person is likely to be the wealthy youngster who had it easy and could be lazy and dependent and who could choose "something that won't really overwork her because she knows she can live off her parents for so long."

Friends: What will your friend be? The young respondents foresaw their friends following similar career paths to the supposed poor child. Each participant was asked the name of her or his best friend in the school, followed by "What does this friend want to be when she or he grows up?" and "Will she or he really become that?" Six friends wanted to be professionals and one a business leader, for a total of seven (29%), in contrast with nearly twice as many (thirteen, 54%) who chose to be laborers, police/fire-fighters, or a star in sports or entertainment (see Table 4). While the perceived career choices of the respondents' friends are no more optimistic than those of the imagined poor child, these respondents do regard their friends as having a higher probability of landing their desired jobs. Slightly more than half of the friends were expected to reach their career goal, and only one was declared unlikely to be successful (see Table 5). The child respondents based their more favorable forecast on (a) the child's abilities, motivation, and character — "good at french braids," "gets good grades," "wants to be one real bad," "likes to help instead of being asked," "wants to help the community"; (b) monies available to the child — "'cuz she's like the only child so they might put money in a bank account for her," "He's got $225 so he can give them money (to get a job)"; and (c) instruction provided to the child on

Table 5. *Chances of reaching career goal: best friend.*

Will your best friend reach his/her career goal?				
	YES	NO	MAYBE	NO CHOSEN WORK CATEGORY "Don't know," make-believe character
Best friend	13 54%	1 4%	5 21%	5 21%

the needed skills and exposure to the wider world — "her mentor takes her places so she can practice when she's young and then she'll know what to do when she gets older," "his dad teaches him about car parts." It may be that when considering their friends, the respondents move away from their view of what they think is likely in the world as they understand it to being hopeful that their friend will be one of the exceptions. Perhaps it is too painful to be so realistic when it applies to one's best friend. In order to retain hope, they have to be optimistic.

Respondent: What will you be? Respondents think their future chances are good. The following findings point to the children's tenacity in holding on to some hope regarding their own future, despite their perception that the odds for job acquisition and for achievement of professional and managerial positions are weighted against children with limited financial means. When questioned about what they personally want to be when they grow up and the likelihood of realizing their ambitions, they estimated their expected success rate as comparable to their positive predictions for the imagined nonpoor child. Twenty-one (88%) thought they would, in fact, be able to achieve their career goals. Compared with only five (21%) who speculated that the imagined poor child would achieve his or her desired work goals, here four times as many participants anticipated that they would reach such achievement in their own lives. They attributed their success to factors such as trying hard, confidence, a helping attitude, success in school, talents, and attempts to save money. Almost all the children foresaw that their attributes and skills would enable them to exert control over their own destinies. The remaining three children (12%) either "didn't know," judged their chances as "fifty-fifty," or saw the odds as improbable "'Cuz maybe I probably won't make it" (see Table 6).

The findings suggest that the respondents maintained their reality orientation regarding the diminished chances for children who grow up in poverty when considering the *imagined* poor child. Because the child is not real to them, they can remain more distant from her or him. They described their futures and those of their friends more positively. Perhaps if they believed they had few choices, they would be more likely to become depressed or experience damage to their sense of self. Cloaking themselves in optimism allowed them to keep their dreams alive. Alternatively, some children may have both genuine resilience and belief in their abilities to be the exception or to change the world so it will be more fair.

Respondents lessened their career choices. When looking at the actual occupational choices, however, only seven (29%) of the respondents chose professions, none chose business leadership/ownership, eight others (33%) aspired to talent-based careers (i.e., singer, professional athlete), six (25%) wanted to be a police officer, and three (13%) chose labor occupations such as beautician or greenhouse worker. Although more participants chose professions and talent-based careers than blue collar occupations, in comparison with their expectations for the imagined wealthier child, they less frequently saw themselves as professionals or business owners and managers and more often as police officers or relying on the "long shot" of professional sports and show business. This finding indicates that they have devalued their potential and shaped their dreams to fit the reality of what they perceive is their destined place in the socioeconomic system (see Table 7).

Only two children predicted that the wealthy child would aim to be an athlete or performing artist. This contrast hints that the partici-

Table 6. *Chances of reaching career goal: respondents.*

Will you reach your career goal?				
	YES	NO "I probably won't make it"	MAYBE 50/50 chance	NO CHOSEN WORK CATEGORY "I don't know"
Respondent	21 88%	1 4%	1 4%	1 4%

Table 7. *Career projections: respondent*

What do you want to be when you grow up?

	PROFESSIONS	BUSINESS,e.g., owner/manager	TALENT CAREERS,e.g., singer, football player, bike racer	POLICE/FIRE PERSON	LABORER, e.g., beautician, greenhouse worker
Respondent	7 29%	0	8 33%	6 25%	3 12%

pants regard professional and business avenues as relatively secure routes to success for the nonpoor, but not for them. When it comes to themselves, some avoid reality by fantasizing about glamorous careers linked with fame and fortune. Although the latter kind of job may be equally out of their range, such a projection into the future may serve them immediately by "keeping hope alive." A third of the respondents aspire to careers in which only one out of thousands make it. (According to Chideya, 1995, the odds of an African American high school basketball player reaching the NBA is 7,600 to 1.) Eventually, such idealized, fanciful futures may set these children up for crushing disappointment.

Children's Perceptions Guide Professional Directions

Suggested Strategies

Almost all the children in this study saw their future professional opportunities as limited. Age did not matter much. Respondents in kindergarten and the primary grades perceived their career options as circumscribed, as did their schoolmates in the two older-age categories. How do we prevent or reverse this early erosion in poor children's belief in themselves and their future? The following tasks for social work roles and methods are extrapolated from the children's perceptions of their future possibilities, which they base on their self-perceptions, on their immediate context, and on the wider environment.

Social change activities: Promote job-creation. Social workers need to be politically active in order to advance government's legitimate role in assuring the creation of adequate numbers of jobs with decent salaries. We can develop grassroots political organizing efforts, hold public meetings, call into talk radio shows, submit editorials and letters to the editors of local newspapers, write personalized letters and meet with our governmental representatives, run voter registration drives, facilitate voting among those who are unemployed and underemployed, and encourage more social workers to run for political office. Such activities are intrinsic to our professional life, not adjunctive tasks.

Community organization: Build communities. Children need to witness adults in their communities securing jobs that provide a decent living so that they can believe that they, too, can enter and contribute to the mainstream work force. Several children thought that their parents' job status would influence the positions the children might achieve in the future. Some research subjects reasoned that children who learned work skills as a result of their parents' modeling and mentoring could envision themselves as performing and reaching a comparable position. Therefore, jobs for parents are critical.

In addition to political activism at the local, state, and national levels, we can help these disadvantaged citizens change the immediate environment and reframe expectations for themselves and their children by building communities. Through social integration, the community can create opportunities. For example, a community could decide to ensure that computers are available in the school, sponsor jobs fairs, utilize churches and schools for after-school day care and night recreation centers, or utilize community police as organizers of mural projects. Children who observe their parents and community elders being active and competent in making a difference may in turn feel that they have power to influence their own futures.

However, the number of jobs providing sufficient wages is decreasing (Sklar, 1996). Although Sklar lauds the current emphasis on building communities, she warns that communities cannot be built on "economic quicksand" and that political activism is needed to shore up the federal govern-

ment's role in the creation of adequate jobs for the poor.

Direct practice with youth groups: Expand familiarity beyond one's own neighborhood. Activities designed to acquaint children with the wider world and raise their comfort level outside their immediate neighborhood may help them to envision themselves functioning in the larger community in their future work. Experiential field trips can communicate to poor children that the lakes, forests, museums, and libraries belong to them as well as to others. Participation in (and possibly formation of) clubs that include children from various communities and that meet both in local chapters and through community-wide events, or perhaps through exchange programs between families and classrooms from different socioeconomic neighborhoods, may widen the boundaries of these children's lives. Also, activities between low-income neighborhoods may allow children to learn about the other's experiences and thus create new opportunities. When explaining how a poor child is going to get the job he wants, one respondent stated, "By not being scared. 'Cause like if he goes there (the place where he wants to get a job) and he don't see anybody he knows, he might run away because he don't know anybody there."

Program development in schools: Expose children to careers and roles. School social workers have a role to play in helping teachers and administrators recognize the crushing impact of poverty on children's aspirations and thus the importance of reinforcing positive beliefs about their futures. Social workers should be able to influence change in the school curriculum to insure that it includes instruction and experiential learning about the variety of career possibilities. Large organizations such as hospitals, airports, universities, or manufacturing plants can be used to illustrate all the jobs needed to run such an organization. In the case of hospitals, in addition to nurses and doctors, children would be taught about the contributions of physical therapists, occupational therapists, social workers, nutritionists, laboratory technicians, purchasing managers, computer programmers, electricians, infection control managers, accountants, and so forth. In-class instruction on various career possibilities could be supplemented by reading books on various careers as well as pertinent biographies. A career counselor, as a guest presenter in the classroom, might encourage children to identify with various opportunities by presenting on less-known career paths and matching these with the particular interests and skills involved. The children can begin to learn that their longings and attributes match with real positions.

Furthermore, the classroom itself can be used to afford experiences in performing various roles, including leader, planner, organizer, and follower in group tasks. These roles could be linked to responsibilities involved in various jobs. If students recognize that they can fill many different roles, they are more likely to believe that they have multiple career options.

Children can only dream about what they know. Of the children who wanted to be professionals, almost all independently said lawyer and doctor. This could be because these professions are perhaps the most prestigious and lucrative, but it could also be due to a lack of information about other careers. Children should be given the opportunity to become acquainted with numerous professions.

Besides the professional route, children need to know about other types of work that provide good earnings. Some respondents misunderstood the role of money in getting a job and thought one had to purchase a job. While affirming their understanding that money gives advantages in getting a job, such as buying a better education or having nice clothes for the interview, children could be helped to understand how people actually become middle class. They should be exposed to many job categories and proprietorships that afford comfortable lifestyles. For example, children could be taught that a middle-class person may own her or his own furniture-reconditioning business, lawn service, or carpet-cleaning service as well as what is involved in developing these small businesses.

It is important for these children to learn about many different jobs at an early age. If they see only a few possibilities, they may conclude that being ill-equipped for those few means that they do not have a viable chance of succeeding in life. They may dream of stardom rather than focusing on realistic career options, and their limited belief in their future possibilities may well become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Group work in youth groups, schools, residential and mental health settings: Instill pride. By sending messages of achievement, social workers can help inculcate the belief that poor children have what it takes to succeed. Children's imagery that they can't succeed needs to be redirected to help

them recognize and rely on their strengths. Team-building exercises, obstacle courses, and activity peer groups that focus on one another's' strengths and how each member's strengths contribute to the whole can help children become aware of their capabilities and how they utilize them. It appears that some children rely on their academic strengths to sustain their hopes for future opportunities. However, those who are not as strong academically can also be inculcated, for example by capitalizing on the healing power of a refrain in the same way that African Americans utilized the messages "Black is beautiful" and "I am somebody," to discover their intrinsic capability.

The children in this study exposed their vulnerabilities by projecting their understanding of generalized expectations about the poor onto the imagined child. However, they have not fully internalized these messages and appear to be struggling to maintain their sense of hope for the future. It is therefore important to emphasize the positive piece of the struggle by infusing children with belief in their own capacities. By learning how to practice acknowledging and reinforcing their own worthiness, these children may develop the skills needed to be proactive and persevering in their future career efforts.

Future research. By listening to children who grow up in poverty, we can learn how some hold on to their hopes for the future throughout their elementary school years. A few children offered affirming statements such as "She tries hard, is a good person because she actually cares for people," "Some of the poorest people turned out to be rich when they got older," and "Nobody's dumb, because God made you and God's not dumb either." These coping methods of focusing on the positive, conserving hope, and feeling validated by a higher power suggest capacities to deal with their conceptions of the disparaged place of the poor in society. Future research to determine the coping strategies they effectively use may enable us to reinforce these strengths, ward off possible future deflation of their dreams, and empower children who are less hopeful.

Children's communications may elucidate how parents successfully reinforce their children's coping mechanisms and how school personnel fortify their students. It appears that some children develop effective coping responses, and perhaps the adults in their lives encourage that adaptability. Research that identifies the ways these children cope and adapt effectively could enable us to empower them and their support systems by pointing out their competencies and contributions; it may also help other children and their support networks do the same.

Conclusion

The children in this study do not live in the most poor, segregated, and abandoned neighborhoods in America, yet they still heard the message early on that if you are poor, you "don't have what it takes." Although the nonrandom sample utilized makes it risky to generalize the findings, the results nevertheless suggest that children living in poverty, beginning even in their first years of elementary school, have restricted perceptions of their potential careers in the following ways. First, they perceive that society unfairly provides advantages to nonpoor children, providing them with better future job opportunities, and that this situation also creates disadvantages for poor children. Second, these young children have already accepted their perception of these realities, which affects their own career aspirations. They suspect that poor children face losing odds of obtaining even their scaled-down job choices. Third, they apparently are aware of relatively few career options. Their limited awareness about the variety of careers, in combination with the diminished opportunities they perceive for the poor, may contribute to their low aspirations. Finally, some worry that they won't have the worldly skills and know-how that they believe middle-class kids learn from their parents.

Although these seeds of disillusionment and threatened dreams appear to be generated at a young age, the respondents still hold onto hope that they will join the mainstream workforce. Despite the diminished opportunities and losing odds of securing chosen employment that they foresee for the imagined poor child, they rate highly their own chances for obtaining work. Perhaps some will become more hopeless, despairing, and angry when they are older and directly confront the lack of job options. But at their current ages, they tenaciously maintain hope to work in jobs that will allow them to contribute and to support themselves and their families. These

twenty-four children would not advise the president or Congress to be concerned about their lack of a work ethic or underdeveloped sense of responsibility, but rather would direct our government officials to ensure job opportunities so that their hopes and ambitions may survive. These children need to see a reality with jobs that afford decent wages and personal dignity for all.

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