Bradford Holt and How Money Matters in Learning to Read

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Bradford was a student in my first grade class when I taught in a high poverty, inner city community. At the end of a ten-year longitudinal study, his mother, Ms. Holt, blamed teachers and school policies for the difficulties her son faced in school and with literacy learning.

"I don't know. They said [that] they had his best interest at heart but I didn't believe that. Because he's been, been in that program No Kids Left Behind. They kept leaving him behind! . . I never did understand that. I still don't. That No Kid Left Behind. I have no concept of it whatsoever."

Sociologists and educators (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; Luke & Carrington, 1997) have used the construct of capital to understand the challenges children from some communities face in school. As Bourdieu (1986) explained, capital makes it “possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes” (p. 243). Capital identifies factors that extend beyond personal failure or inferiority as the reasons for a person’s success or failure within educational, social, and economic fields.

Drawing on Bourdieu, I define economic literacy capital as including possessions and experiences that require economic investment and are convertible to literacy success. In some cases, accessing these resources is contingent on being able to afford housing in economically healthy communities or attend well-funded schools. Examples of economic literacy capital include computers, electronic educational toys, significant numbers of quality
books, and private tutoring. Social capital, in contrast, provides opportunities for agency and advocacy. It is significant to note that a lack of economic capital did not prevent Ms. Holt from advocating for her children and that social capital, when available, was accessed and valued.

**Recommended Strategies and Practices: Rethinking the Classroom and Beyond**

While discussions of capital might explain the success of some children, it does not absolve teachers of their responsibilities. Below, I explore the responsibilities teachers have relative to students who bring different cultural and socio-economic experiences to classrooms. Specifically, I highlight strategies for learning about and responding to children from low-income communities.

**Recognizing mismatches between teacher and student experiences**

When Bradford entered middle school, his mother expressed concern about teachers whose experiences were different from those of their students:

*Some of these kids, they come from hard, hard, hard lives. And these teachers aren’t educated to deal with the hard life that this child is going through. . . Because a lot of teachers don’t live around the kids in the inner city so they don’t know, they don’t go through this every day. They don’t. They are there from what 8, 7:30 to 3:30? They [are] inside the school. They don’t come outside. (Ms. Holt laughs) . . . I’ve never seen a teacher walk to the corner store in the city out of schools in the neighborhood.*

Ms. Holt makes a compelling case that teachers need to know more about their students’ lives and experiences. Differences in economic capital result in teachers and their students living in different communities and contribute to a disjuncture between the experiences of children and their teachers.

**Find informants in the community**

Among the paraprofessionals who lived in the school community and worked in my school were a dancer, a singer, and several part-time college students. Some staff members also had amazing life stories. Our elderly school crossing guard survived World War II concentration camps, and our school custodian was a Freedom Rider during the Civil Rights Era. These informants brought rich experiences and challenged the assumptions that are often made about paraprofessionals in low-income schools. These individuals brought a wealth of knowledge about their passions and their experiences and about the community surrounding the school.

**Visit homes to learn about students**

Parents are also important resources. During home visits, Ms. Holt alerted me to Bradford’s love for baseball and current events. She helped me to understand some of the challenges Bradford faced with reading and notified me when I sent home materials that were either too difficult or too easy.

**Working with local organizations**

Families in high poverty communities face many challenges that are often beyond the experiences of middle class teachers. Local organizations not only provide opportunities for teachers to volunteer in communities, but they can also provide rich knowledge about communities and the challenges families
face. Working with organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity, can provide information related to housing while local health organizations can teach us about the health challenges faced by urban residents who are either un- or under-insured. Local cultural organizations are particularly rich resources that can help teachers to understand and appreciate the cultural ways of being that students bring to classrooms.

Engage students as ethnographers exploring their own communities

Finally, and perhaps most exciting, students can be taught basic ethnographic techniques and can enter their local communities to gather information. I had my first grade students interview parents about their reading practices, how they learned to read, their occupations, and the potential roles their family members played in civil rights history. On other occasions, I asked my students to work together to craft surveys related to issues we were studying in class. One particularly effective strategy involved providing students with disposable cameras that they could use to document their favorite things or places. These pictures provided insights into students’ lives that were often invisible to teachers.

The range of available texts

I tell you what would work with inner city kids, with Black children. Let them read about black people. If they read more about their own culture and things that they’re doing.

As Ms. Holt argues, teachers can strive to find books that are of interest to their students. Touchstones such as culture, pop culture, and sports can engage young readers who struggle with traditional school texts. These books can invite children to engage with literacy activities and to see themselves as readers. Teachers can acquire these books for their classroom libraries, work with librarians to identify texts for the school libraries, and work within their schools to include these texts in curricula.

Inequities in Economic Literacy Capital that Defy Teaching Strategies

While Ms. Holt clearly holds teachers accountable for fulfilling their obligations, there are other challenges she names that are beyond the control of individual teachers. In these current times of school budget austerity and discourse advocating for the privatization of public services, conversations about school funding have been stymied, while many focus on teacher quality and accountability rather than shared societal obligations to children. Ms. Holt’s voice highlights several economic challenges including equitable school resources, the lack of community resources such as local libraries, the technology gap, and a set of particularly challenging life experiences that are ultimately related to economic capital. 

Advocacy and Agency: Highlighting Social Capital

While dominant discourses tend to blame families and teachers for the literacy challenges faced by children in low-income communities, Ms. Holt identifies disadvantages related to a lack of economic literacy capital (e.g., closing libraries, underfunded schools, a technology gap) and suggests that there are responsibilities that extend beyond the control of teachers that affect the literacy learning of students in high poverty communities. This lack of economic capital resulted in Ms. Holt accessing social capital when needed to help her children. When Bradford was in fourth grade, his mother, with the support of his teacher, confronted the school board to attain special education services for Bradford. Just as Bradford’s teacher assisted Ms. Holt in getting around the “brick walls” at school, her son’s doctor helped her to access a specialist when Bradford’s older brother was injured. In these examples, Ms. Holt accessed social capital to achieve her goals. Although financial limits were very real and had real effects, Ms. Holt was savvy and harnessed social resources as needed to address the challenges her family faced.
Conclusions

Although No Child Left Behind made rhetorical promises to students, its accompanying policies and practices related to scientific instruction and test scores generally failed to address the real challenges faced by Bradford. Teachers who are knowledgeable and have a deep understanding of children are essential, but teachers alone will not address economic inequity. We must not forget that societal issues require societal changes in addition to changes within schools.

Over the ten years that I worked with Bradford and his family, his mother repeatedly identified money as a challenge related to schooling and literacy learning. I argue that some of her concerns require and deserve attention from the larger community and are related to the allocation of resources in urban areas, school funding, and social equity. Although teachers can and should play a role in these conversations and their roles can be powerful, solving these problems requires a social commitment from the larger community.

References
