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Rags to Riches: One Migrant Worker's Journey to Educational Triumph

Sarah E. Broman

Poverty at its broadest sense can be defined as a lack of necessary resources needed for daily living. Children who grow up in poverty lack the resources they need to thrive and experience frequent hardships because of these limitations. These dire circumstances directly impact their academic development, specifically in reading (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2016). Children from low socioeconomic homes often receive less cognitive stimulation than those from middle-income homes (Jensen, 2009). For instance, only 36 percent of low-income parents read to their children on a daily basis compared to 62 percent of upper-income parents (Coley, 2002). Children in poverty have fewer books in their homes compared to their upper-income peers (Phillips & Lonigan, 2009) which is directly related to reading achievement scores (Evans et al., 2004). Children growing up in poverty are less likely to receive help with homework and half as likely as their affluent peers to visit museums and other educational outings (Bradley, Corwyn, Burchinal et al., 2001). Those from low-SES homes also have fewer toys and play areas, and they lack access to the internet, another source of reading materials and information (Evans, 2004). Schwanenflugel and Knapp (2016) argued that children in poverty lack more than reading-related materials and experiences. They are often malnourished and lack adequate health insurance coverage, putting them at risk for frequent illness and long-term health issues (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2013).

The incessant difficulties experienced by those in poverty can cause stress for both parents and children. The constant concern of not having enough resources to support daily living necessities often magnifies problems for families in poverty. Parents who spend inordinate amounts of time and energy worrying about supporting their family financially are often at risk for stress-related illnesses and fatigue (Wadsworth & Rienks, 2012). Furthermore, stressed parents often have little time or energy to positively interact with their children on a regular basis (Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2016). As an unfortunate result, low-SES parents are less likely to read with their children (Phillips & Lonigan, 2009; Raikes et al., 2006).

These are unfortunate truths about the devastating effects poverty inflicts on the children and their families of which educators are keenly aware. Poverty runs so rampant through communities across the nation that it is almost easy to become complacent until one is forced to reckon with it in the classroom. Personal relationships with children and their families living below the poverty line touch the very core of an educator's being. While conducting research regarding pre-service teachers' belief systems and their theoretical orientations to reading, I had the opportunity to listen to one particular participant's account of her life living in abject poverty growing up as a migrant worker. It was through her stories that I began to develop a deeper understanding of what it is like to exist in a world much different than my own. She told of the effect her struggles had on her confidence as a young girl and how this eventually made her question her abilities to become anything more than a farm worker. Although she experienced many difficulties that I myself could never begin to understand, it was evident that the influences teachers had on her life truly changed her story from an unfortunate statistic to incredible

triumph. Her stories helped me view her struggles associated with poverty and I began to appreciate more the incredulous opportunities we have as educators to make a difference in those who struggle every day to survive. This essay gives a personal account of the devastating effects poverty has on literacy acquisition and education overall. I invite you to share with me my participant's incredible journey from rags to educational riches.

Selena (pseudonym), a 29-year old Hispanic female, grew up in an impoverished, troubled home. Growing up as one of eight siblings in a single parent household, life was difficult for Selena. The children were raised by their unemployed mother who supported the family on the meager social security income of Selena's deceased biological father. Selena described her mother as being uninterested and uninvolved in the lives of her children. Although their mother was never abusive herself, she turned a blind eye to the horrific abuse that was carried out by Selena's stepfather. Her emotional absenteeism and neglect created irreparable damage that will forever effect Selena. In addition to her troubled home life, Selena did not have many friends. Her extreme shyness and low self-esteem, coupled with feelings of unworthiness, kept her from developing friendships with the other children at school. Although she did not have many friends, the relationships that developed with her teachers transformed school into a safe haven for her as a child and essentially became her saving grace.

As early as she can remember, Selena had a dream of becoming a teacher. It was evident to me through our conversations that relationships with her teachers, along with the kindness they extended to her, were no doubt the driving force behind Selena's desire to eventually enter the teaching profession.

My dream to become a teacher spiked when I had some awesome teachers in my elementary years that did extraordinary acts of kindness towards me. They knew my situation of living in poverty and offered to pay for my ticket to a field trip to Six Flags Astro World in Houston, Texas when the whole class was going on a field trip (Selena, Interview One).

As she got older, her mother's absenteeism forced Selena into the role of primary caretaker of her siblings instead of a carefree child. While other children enjoyed playing after school, Selena had adult responsibilities of childcare and managing a household. Her dreams of becoming a teacher were overshadowed by the grown up realities forced upon her. However, not wanting to fully let go of the dream, the house full of brothers and sisters would often become impromptu "students" for her classroom. Her siblings would often take turns playing "teacher," but being the oldest, Selena seemed to be the best one for the job.

At fourteen, when she was old enough to take a job outside of the home, Selena began working on a farm. The job was strenuous and required long hours of physical labor. Attending college now seemed to be an unattainable dream, and all hopes of furthering her education were given up in exchange for the limitations of her real life. While working on the farm she met a kind-hearted man who quickly became a confidant and friend, something Selena never truly had. This bond developed into a romantic relationship and Selena soon found herself pregnant and married before her fifteenth birthday.

Now a young expectant mother and wife at the age of fourteen, Selena shared the financial responsibilities of her new household. She continued to work on farms and did so for several years in Texas and Kansas. Five children and several years of farm work later, Selena began wondering if this was all that life had to offer. She worked hard on the farms and always strived to attain a higher position. However, when the opportunity for a particular advancement presented itself, that position ended up being given to someone else. Although Selena was crushed and defeated at the time, this became a pivotal point in her life. Somewhere deep in her soul she knew she was better than this. Therefore, she made the decision to leave the security of a steady job on the farm and began taking classes at a local community college to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA).

Going to school with young children at home wasn't easy, and it quickly became problematic as Selena tried to juggle the demands of her family life with schoolwork. Her grades plummeted as she tried to keep up with housework and raising five children. She nearly lost her financial aid due to poor grades until her husband firmly told her to leave the housework to him and focus on her education. With the unfailing support of her husband, she raised her grades and graduated with an Associate's degree as a CNA. Becoming a CNA was more than just earning a degree to Selena. It was validation that she could do anything if she put her mind to it. Being the first family member to graduate from a community college, she began asking herself what else she could achieve. Maybe fulfilling the dream to become a teacher wasn't out of reach after all. Thus began her pursuit of an elementary education degree.

I first met Selena last fall at a student recognition program for those new to Sunflower University (pseudonym). The program took place in a small town located close to where Selena lived. I was amazed by her incredible story as she told me that her family, including her husband and five children, were all moving with her so she could take classes to become a teacher. She planned to enroll her children in new schools and her husband would look for a construction job to support the family while she pursued her elementary education degree. The dedication and support of her entire family profoundly touched my heart. Unbeknownst to me, she would later become a participant in my study.

Thanks to the support of her family, and her personal experiences, Selena valued education more than ever before. As most parents, she wanted more for her children than what she had as a child growing up. Because of her personal experiences she encouraged her children to learn more, read more, and do better than she did. By her own admission, Selena had not put forth much effort in her elementary and secondary school work primarily because she didn't have enough confidence in her ability to succeed. She had embraced a learned helplessness mentality believing she wasn't capable of learning new things. Furthermore, she accepted the reality that things were simply too difficult for her, and life would never change. This was no longer her reality when she began to gain more confidence stemming from her experiences that began at the community college.

Reflecting on these experiences, Selena is anxious to become an effective teacher like those she fondly remembers. The memories of her favorite classroom teachers impressed in her mind the importance of developing and nurturing relationships in the classroom. Selena hopes to share her love of learning with her students and create an environment where students feel safe, loved, and valued.

Recently, Selena finished her student teaching and accepted a position mid-year as a kindergarten teacher. She frequently wonders when she will wake up from her dream come true. In a recent interview she remarked, “I want to know more about how to teach reading. I want to get my Master’s degree as a Reading Specialist. Just like before I keep thinking, if I can do this, what else can I do?” She has learned it is not how “smart” you are that matters, but how much effort you are willing to put forth to make your dreams come true.

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