

A Tale of the Children: Challenges to Learning and Teaching in Idaho, and Why Some Children Will Be Left Behind



Cohort III

John Baillie • Kelly Gillie
Katholyn Howell • Ace Marcellus
Ann McLellan • Katherine Stalder
Jan Studer • La Donna Tuinstra



Terry Armstrong, Ed.D.
University of Idaho



Cohort IV

Linda Boyer • Jo Dodds
Catherine Howlett • Kandi Kuck
Randall Maves • Kari Merkley
Mark Murdock • Molly Pannkuk
Wendy Seley • Jan Wathen

Cohort Groups III and IV of the Thomas Wright Fellows

University of Idaho
Moscow, Idaho

ABSTRACT

Teachers are under many stressors from forces seeking to improve education. In Idaho, there are numerous factors beyond educators' control that threaten to undermine success for all children. This article, prepared by eighteen distinguished Idaho public school teachers, outlines variables attendant to school failure for many Idaho children. Teachers need to act as advocates for improving the social climate that impinges on learning.

Julie walks into her new classroom, shoulders slumped and eyes downcast. It has happened again, and this is one thing she still doesn't know how to fix. Each time Mom loses her job, there is a change in housing, schools, and people. Perhaps she could have been more diligent in making sure Mom got to work clean and on time, but there is only so much a ten-year-old girl can do. Mental deficiencies prevent Mom from being a competent employee, and unfortunately these same characteristics greatly inhibit her ability to care for her family. Julie loves her mom anyway and tries to help when she can. She has been doing the cooking, cleaning, and babysitting for years. More recently, she has taken on the task of shopping for groceries. "If only I could get a job myself," Julie thinks. In-

stead, she is starting over in a strange, new school.

Anxiety builds as she turns to meet Ms. Marvel, her new teacher. Today, the gnawing in her stomach is due to nerves more than to hunger. What will this day bring? In the past, she has been teased, bullied, and put down for a number of reasons. She is overweight and can't afford the latest styles. Through no fault of her own, she wears dirty, stained, and ill-fitted clothes. Report cards and test scores have branded her a failure. Sporadic attendance has created such gaps in her learning that she has fallen far behind her peers in achievement. Homework has been ignored because there were more important concerns to worry about.

Will Ms. Marvel recognize the personal challenges Julie faces on a daily basis? Will she see that Julie's struggles to grasp basic concepts are not due to laziness or stupidity?

Julie raises her eyes to meet the welcoming gaze of Ms. Marvel. "Come on in. I promise not to bite," her new teacher coaxes. A hesitant smile creeps across Julie's face; perhaps things will be different this time.

Disturbing as it may seem, such conditions exist in the lives of many children in Idaho's schools today. Many are victims of circumstances beyond their control. Children struggle with social pressures, medical conditions, personal conflicts, and cultural and family issues. In addition, the school climate may be problematic due to facility conditions and political pressure.

SOCIAL PRESSURES

Twenty-one percent of Idaho's children are similar to Julie (Idaho State Department of Education, 2003). They come to school from disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds. This impacts school performance both academically and socially. When they come through the school doors, children do not leave their personal problems at home. No matter where children come from, their histories follow them. They

are expected to wipe their feet before entering school, but they can't leave behind what is inside of them.

In 2000, the percentage of Idaho's children in poverty ranked 31st among the 50 states according to the Annie Casey Foundation (2003). One in eight Idaho school children – 49,570 students – go to bed hungry every night. 23% of Idaho's children live in families where neither parent has a full-time, year-round job. Nationally, low-income children depend on the School Lunch Program for one-third to one-half of their daily nutrition, but funding for this program has been reduced. In Idaho, although the number of welfare recipients has decreased, the number receiving food stamps has not declined as quickly. This suggests that although the number of families receiving welfare has declined, their condition of poverty has not (The Idaho Food Bank).

Today, children's home experiences range from the idyllic model with strong familial relationships with sound nutrition and safe, secure surroundings to having an environment filled with chaos and deprivation. Some family relationships echo that of Ward and June Cleavers'; others include children doing whatever is necessary to survive. A high percentage of Idaho's children become one of *Idaho's Crimes Against Persons* reported statistics, as indicated in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Idaho's crimes against children

Age	Murder	Forced Rape	Forced Sodomy	Sex Assault W/ Object	Force Fondle	Kidnap	Agg. Assault	Simple Assault	Intimidation	Incest	Stat. Rape	TOTAL
10 & Under												
Male	5	0	35	4	144	23	92	563	28	2	0	896
Female	1	19	21	8	359	35	55	319	25	0	0	842
11/12												
Male	0	0	4	0	22	5	48	297	19	0	0	395
Female	0	13	2	2	107	15	20	190	31	2	1	383
13/14												
Male	0	2	3	2	23	2	70	404	21	1	0	528
Female	1	70	4	3	153	18	25	300	47	4	46	671
15												
Male	0	1	3	0	14	0	45	212	13	0	1	289
Female	0	43	1	3	78	5	20	233	17	2	47	449
16												
Male	0	1	2	0	6	3	64	236	14	0	0	326
Female	0	53	3	1	56	2	21	206	33	1	54	430
17												
Male	0	2	1	0	9	2	72	215	12	0	1	314
Female	0	39	2	2	43	2	21	208	25	1	36	379
18												
Male	3	0	2	0	4	5	168	369	44	0	0	595
Female	0	60	2	2	22	11	75	562	83	2	0	819
TOTAL	10	303	85	27	1040	128	796	4314	412	15	186	7316

Crime In Idaho, 2002

In the early years of child development, the home environment is the primary influence. As children move through school, they begin to self-select a peer group that reflects past experiences. Some children withdraw and become depressed or develop eating disorders and other self-abusive behaviors. Some children turn to violence, sex, drugs, and other activities which may cause them to pull away from the academic environment. Students involved in these kinds of behaviors are not worrying first and foremost about "tomorrow's algebra quiz." In fact, consequences of one or more of the following behaviors may be preoccupying their minds:

- By the time students are in high school, 16.7% seriously considered suicide and 10.1% attempted it.
- 40.6% consumed alcohol during the previous month, with 27.2% drinking five or more alcoholic beverages in a row.
- 17.5% used marijuana in the month prior to the survey.
- 14.3% "huffed" to get high.
- Roughly 25% of high school students were offered, sold, or given an illegal drug on school property during the previous month.
- 36.2% had sexual intercourse; 23.9% by the time they were in the ninth grade.
- 10.3% carried a weapon to school during the previous month.
- 28.7% were in a physical fight in the month prior to the survey. (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion)

MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Too few individuals developing educational policy speak knowledgeably about cognitive neuroscience. The brain begins its marvellous development soon after conception. After six weeks, most of the one hundred billion neurons have migrated to specific sites in the cerebrum. The circuits integrating the four major brain elements have developed and instructions are in

place to begin participating in the synthesis and firing of all the chemicals needed in the functional brain. As Norman Geschwind and A.S. Galaburda have written (1987), a first trimester insult in the form of stress, abuse, drugs, alcohol, or trauma can seriously jeopardize normal development, thus impinging on learning and behavior. Asymmetry in the frontal cortex results in uneven distribution of tissues necessary for well-rounded adults. The regions of the frontal cortex are responsible for specific cognitive functions such as mathematics. If the connections and subsequent experiences are missing, deficits in learning occur. Thus, biology is as important as rich experiences in building the adult brain.

Physical activity and proper nutrition help build and maintain healthy brains, bones, and muscles. In addition, they help control weight, reduce body fat, and promote psychological well-being by reducing feelings of depression and anxiety. Yet 89% of Idaho's youth do not participate in any vigorous or moderate physical activity in any given week. Television viewing has replaced outdoor activities and has become the principal leisure time behavior for children and adolescents. Boys were more likely than girls to watch two or more hours of television on an average school day. Television viewing in young people contributes to obesity and violent and/or aggressive behavior (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion).

Nutritional factors affecting Idaho's children are troubling. Thirty-nine percent qualify for free and reduced lunch service, although the majority, 78 out of 114 Idaho school districts, are above the free and reduced program's national average (Idaho Department of Education, 2003, *School Report Card*). Thirty-four percent of Idaho's youth drank soda pop one or more times a day in a given week. Twenty-five percent of students bought their lunches out of vending machines at least one day a week. Among female students in Idaho trying to lose weight, 10% went without eating for a 24-hour period, 10% took diet drugs, and 8% vomited or took laxatives. In their lifetimes, an estimated 3.7 %

of females will suffer from anorexia and 4.2% will suffer from bulimia (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion).

Aside from nutritional concerns, there are numerous complexities relating to Idaho's special education population. Out of the 246,405 school-age children enrolled in Idaho's public schools, 29,107 children, or 12%, have been identified as special education students (Idaho Department of Education, January 2003).

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most prevalent mental disorders in children and adolescents. This condition becomes most evident in preschool or elementary-aged children and persists into adolescence or into adulthood. This disorder affects 4.1% of America's youth (National Institute of Mental Health).

Autism is another significant diagnosable mental disorder in school age children. An estimated two per 1,000 people have been diagnosed with this condition. Autism develops in early childhood and is usually evident by age three, or in the early elementary school years. Autism is four times more common in boys than girls. Girls diagnosed with this disorder tend to have more severe symptoms and greater cognitive impairments (National Institute of Mental Health). Three hundred ninety-three school children in Idaho were identified with this disorder in the 2001-2002 school year. This figure reflects an increase of more than 200 identified children from the 1997-1998 school year. (Idaho Department of Education, January 2003).

PERSONAL CONFLICTS

Another important aspect in comprehending challenges of learning atmospheres is the diverse behavioral/emotional investments of students.

First, consider factors involved in self-concept. Low self-concept leads students to become more susceptible to peer pressure (12 Steps to Healthy Self-Esteem 2003). Steinberg (1999) found twenty percent of students report that peers mock success in school. If Idaho follows this

national trend, 49,281 students out of 246,405 enrolled in Idaho schools would have peers who do not support their learning endeavors. School is a social place, and – in student perceptions – learning is often secondary. In Boundary County School District, for example, a survey of 247 freshmen and sophomore students indicated that relationships with friends were their number one priority in school (Bonners Ferry High School, 2002). Other impacts on student self-concept include labeling, sexual identity, bullying, and social status.

Additionally, students are distracted from full engagement in classes by after-school interests. According to a Nielson Media Research study, the average American child watches twenty hours of television each week (cited in *Television Statistics and Sources*, 1998). This does not include time spent engaged in video games or other forms of media entertainment. By the time an average American child finishes elementary school, he has witnessed 8,000 television murders and countless acts of violence.

Another distracter is after school employment, which Steinberg (1999) found contributes to lower grades, less time spent on homework, increased frequency of cutting class, and cheating. While other student interests such as extracurricular pursuits, church affiliations, family events, and community involvements may indeed be quite beneficial for students' interpersonal development and satisfaction, they nevertheless create undue stress.

Academic and social stress inhibits success in the classroom. The Council for Exceptional Children found that "stress clouds thinking, reduces concentration, and impairs decision making. It leads to forgetfulness and a loss of ability to focus keenly on a task, and it makes students overly sensitive to criticism. Under these conditions, they perform less well and are more upset by their failures" (Kaplan 1990). In the Boundary County survey, 10% of teenagers reported feeling "extreme stress" including social anxiety, bullying, and test anxiety (Bonners Ferry High School, 2002). NWREL (2001) reports that fear of attack or intimidation by a bully causes 160,000 American students to skip school

every day. Stress inhibits education by interfering with the learning process or by causing fear-driven absences.

CULTURAL AND FAMILY ISSUES

Differing cultures, values, and ethnic heritages often present challenges to children, parents, and teachers. Idaho statistics relevant to these issues show that of the 246,405 students enrolled:

- Ethnic diversity
 - 1.3% Native American
 - 1.3% Asian
 - 0.8% Black
 - 11.2% Hispanic
- Limited English Proficiency 7.4%
- Free & reduced lunches 36%
- Special Education 11.7%
- Gifted and Talented 4.4%
- Migrants 3.8% (Child Welfare Research Institute, 2003)

Even within the English-speaking majority, there are significant differences in how English is spoken and understood among the stratified socioeconomic groups. Lower socioeconomic populations use a casual form of the language that some non-linguists would refer to as “vernacular.” Students from this background come to the classroom using language differently than the expected, more-formal standardized English common to middle class schools. The everyday communications of these children focuses on survival, relationships and entertainment, while the communications of school focuses on work, negotiating and achievement (Payne, 1999).

In the U.S., nearly 90% of the teachers are members of the white, monolingual, English-speaking majority (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995). Quite often, the circumstances, values, and languages of children from minority groups are misunderstood (Payne, 1999). This may create barriers to learning and assessment as the children and teachers struggle to find a common means of communication.

SCHOOL CLIMATE: FACILITY CONDITIONS

The State of Idaho’s school funding schedule is based upon taxes paid to both federal and state governments. Students are thrust into the school systems that are closest to their homes. This solitary factor, which is beyond students’ control, has an enormous effect on their educations.

Based on Average Daily Attendance (ADA) and property valuation, the State of Idaho spends, on average, \$7,636 per student (Idaho Department of Education, State/District Profiles 2003). Of course, this average fails to point out the inequity of the extremities. The disparity in “bonding capacity” between districts contributes to the inequality of school spending. Students who happen to live in the more affluent Meridian School District enjoy the advantages of a 5 billion dollar property valuation that affords them a much better opportunity when money is needed to build new schools. In comparison, a student in the Dietrich School District with a property valuation of 25 million dollars can only afford general repairs, many times at the expense of other educational resources such as textbooks and technology (Idaho Department of Education, State/District Profiles 2003). Where is the equality in education when one student goes to school every day in a building that has large hallways, classrooms that are designed for the courses being taught, and modern technology integrated into the structure, while another student is in a building that cannot even turn on all the of the available computers because the breakers that control the ovens in the kitchen would be tripped? Students are responsible for their own learning, but some are severely handicapped by the physical barriers that are completely out of their control.

Facilities are not the only barrier in the equation; children’s geographic locations – including the weather, topography, and enrichment opportunities – affect the quality of their educational experiences. Students in Roseworth, Idaho who live on a family farm may have small

chores they are responsible for, but then must walk up to a half-mile to a bus stop where they will begin the one-hour trip to school. Unique challenges students of a rural community must withstand only compound as the school day evolves. Students discovering they need help with a concept may find that the soonest the teacher is available for private tutoring is 3:15 p.m. Some students, however, must be back on the bus at 3:20 p.m. to get home and contribute again to the family business.

How does this scenario compare to the suburban students who live in Boise just minutes from their schools? Suburban students may be home by 4:00 p.m. ready to begin their homework, while the rural, bus-riding students are not able to sit down until 7:00 p.m. – after their chores and dinner – to an assignment they are not sure how to accomplish. The suburban students have the added advantage of accessing the school and public libraries and participating in after-school enrichment activities, sports, or clubs. These examples are fictitious and oversimplified, but nonetheless representative of the inequalities between school districts.

In reality, here are some statistics from the State Department of Education that exemplify the disparities among Idaho's districts:

- Range of spending: Clark County School District \$25,300.00 per student to Preston School District \$5265.00 per student
- Condition of schools: 32% of all Idaho schools are older than 42 years. 52% of all rural and small-town schools nationally, report at least one structural problem (i.e., roofing, foundations, plumbing, etc.) (Idaho State Department of Education)

SCHOOL CLIMATE: POLITICAL PRESSURES

The political atmosphere of Idaho's Legislature is broad in scope and its impact is personalized in every student's academic life. The school day is regulated from the time the child

boards the bus in the morning until that child is delivered safely at home. Legislators in Boise make decisions governing funding, school schedules, assessment, and accountability which regulate the lives of children throughout the State.

School funding in Idaho ranks 42nd in the nation for per-pupil public education expenditures (Children's Defense Fund, 2003). Legislative efforts at improving Idaho's standing have not been successful in bringing Idaho to the forefront as an educational leader in the 21st century. Since school necessities cost the same in all schools, inequities of the funding formula have created educational disparities between affluent and disadvantaged districts throughout Idaho.

At present, the legislature mandates the minutiae of a child's school schedule, including several important factors: minutes-per-day for each grade level, minutes spent on each subject, and number of student/teacher contact days. These scheduling decisions are based on past practices, and may require reevaluation to meet the needs of today's children. Often, both parents work outside the home, and their hours extend past the school's scheduled times. Most employment does not grant summers off to attend to children. Both of these scheduling conflicts can leave children unattended for extended periods during the day. In addition, extended summer breaks often result in learning regression due to a lack of stimulation (Lawther, 2003).

A third area of legislative influence concerns assessment and accountability. The educational community embraces the standards movement to inform instruction for our students. However, as this movement gains momentum, there is room for caution in these areas. It is the responsibility of legislators to ensure the laws are well-crafted by knowledgeable people who have examined multiple issues of validity, reliability and fairness. The vital responsibility of guarding the integrity of the assessment data and ensuring the appropriate use of the accountability component rests squarely on the shoulders of the legislators. There must be safeguards to block these

reform measures from becoming a political tool used to the detriment of our students.

CONCLUSION

The hot spring sun brightened the room. Friday, finally; one more week of school. Mrs. Shelby, the principal, had just announced that the yearly test scores were available for review. Ms. Marvel was always apprehensive about seeing the results. This year she knew would be problematic. Test day had coincided with the year's first big snowstorm. The children had been too excited to concentrate. This, along with children missing school for a variety of health concerns, didn't bode well for test results.

Returning to her room, she thought of her class. Four children were new to the school. Julie was one of these. Ms. Marvel had been told that Julie was moving again. Her mother was unable to pay her last two months' rent and they had been evicted. Julie had missed too much school and make-up work was also missing. Carl's dog had been killed the morning tests were given – Ms. Marvel knew this would impact her scores.

A review of the class summary wasn't a surprise. Eight of her 24 youngsters were well above grade level. Eight were at grade level and eight were seriously below. The overall results were average. Sadly, the average said nothing about individual children, nor did it note the excellence of Ms. Marvel's work. Only two people knew that she had provided snow boots for Alison and had arranged to get Mark glasses and clothes for three others. She had spent over \$350.00 of her own money on this group to help the slow ones achieve. The low eight had so many obstacles to overcome.

The slogan "no child left behind" was a good one, she thought. Too bad those voting for the legislation don't understand how many ways children can be left behind. Ms. Marvel knew the right recipes; unfortunately, the school couldn't provide all the ingredients. The home, too, was so important.

A recent article (2001), "All Children Can Learn," by Thomas and Bainbridge summarized many of these thoughts succinctly. For starters, school effectiveness is critical in promoting student growth and achievement. Such schools have strong leadership, clear learning goals, a positive environment, ongoing evaluation of student progress, and high expectations for all students and staff. However, the effort to reform schools is based largely on the erroneous philosophy that if schools are effective, then all children will learn. It is this premise that drives public and political arguments that school systems are failing. But, upon closer examination, the flaws in logic become apparent.

There is little doubt that all children *can* learn, especially when provided with sufficient resources. However, there is a distinct difference in the belief that all children can learn, and the notion that all children can learn the same curriculum, at the same level, and in the same amount of time. Students such as Julie suffer from a variety of afflictions and enter school at a clear disadvantage. Research in cognitive brain development demonstrates the importance of the early childhood years. Without proper nutrition and stimulation it is possible that neural pathways will close and brain connections will be lost (Bruer, 1999). Despite this evidence, there is a widespread expectation that an effective school and a highly qualified teacher will be able to compensate for and overcome any physical, mental, cultural, and/or social deficiencies. If educators are unable to surmount these obstacles, they are labeled as failures. It is unreasonable to imagine that all students achieve at the same high level simply due to noble efforts of teachers. The time has come to be more realistic about what students and educators can accomplish.

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Dr. Terry Armstrong is a professor emeritus of education in the Dept. of Teaching, Learning and Leadership, University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho 83844-3082. Email: terarm@uidaho.edu

This article was prepared as a class project during the Summer 2003 Thomas Wright Fellows project under the direction of Dr. Armstrong. The Fellows are listed in two cohorts, III and IV. Cohort III members from L-R are: Ann McLellan, La Donna Tuinstra, Katholyn Howell, Kelly Gillie, Katherine Stalder, Ace Marcellus, Jan Studer and John Baillie. Cohort IV members from L-R are: Linda Boyer, Mark Murdock, Wendy Seley, Kandi Kuck, Molly Pannkuk, JoEllen Dodds, Jan Wathen, Randy Maves, Catherine Howlett and Kari Merkley.