

Why Did Kath, Mary and Kim Get So Little Education (and Is There Hope for Their Children)?¹

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 1, Issue 1, 52-63, 2004

LIZ GORDON

Network Research Associates

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to understand the reasons why there is such a strong relationship between poverty and poor child educational outcomes. It reports preliminary findings of in-depth interviews with three women who have spent most of the past five years on the DPB and live in the poorest part of Christchurch. The focus of this paper is on these women's own education and the education of their children. All three left school before or at the minimum leaving age with no qualifications. With a range of unresolved familial issues, these young women were clearly at risk of negative life outcomes, but they reported no intervention to keep them in education. All had children at a comparatively young age. All have aspirations for their children beyond their own achievements, and see education as the key to this. However, they have few family resources to assist in the achievement of these goals. In particular, the women have quite low self-esteem which is a barrier to their aspirations. The conclusion raises some possibilities about how practitioners might intervene to prevent the children suffering the same fate as their parents.

This paper reports the partial findings of in-depth life history interviews undertaken with three women who have received the Domestic Purposes Benefit (a benefit for single parents and their children) for most of the past five years, who live in poor-quality double-storied state units in Aranui, the poorest part of Christchurch. The research presented here is part of a larger study that seeks to understand and explain why these women, these families are 'at the bottom of the heap'. Part of the rationale for choosing the particular housing structures in this area are that they are universally hated. My theory was that the families living in these units do so by default, because others have been able to negotiate their ways out of these units. Those left are thus the choiceless, the powerless. Now part of the way through my interviews I am not sure that this is the case, although certainly these families have limited choices.

This paper has been structured into three parts. The first part provides an overview of the literature which demonstrates the relationship between low income and poor health, educational and social outcomes. The second part recounts what Kath, Mary and Kim (not their real names) said about their own educational experiences. The final section considers the education of the

¹ This paper reports the findings of research undertaken with three families living in the poorest section of Christchurch, New Zealand. It is part of a bigger study funded by a Claude McCarthy Fellowship.

children of these families in terms of aspirations, support and poverty issues. The conclusion looks at the implications for practitioners.

WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS ABOUT POVERTY AND EDUCATION

There has been quite a lot of research undertaken recently that seeks to understand the precise relationship between income levels and a range of social indicators. Morris and Gennetian (2003, p.717) outline what recent research says about the effects of poverty on social, educational and health status in families:

Poverty has been found to have small but consistently negative effects on children's cognitive functioning, academic achievement, social behaviour, health and later educational attainment. These effects are especially strong for children who persistently live in poverty, who experience poverty during the early childhood years, and who live in the deepest poverty. Moreover the negative influences of poverty may be more concentrated in children's achievement and academic functioning, rather than their social behaviour and health outcomes.

While the relationship between poverty and poor outcomes is now reasonably well documented, these authors suggest the causes are not:

Why does low income negatively effect children? Economic theory emphasizes that income can affect the resources that families can provide for their children, which in turn can influence children's development. In this theoretical framework, children benefit from parents' increased income as it is used to invest in material goods, such as books and toys, and nonmaterial goods, such as social and cultural capital and more leisure time or time to spend with children. Based on findings from experimental studies of welfare reform policies, more recent work has suggested that income may also affect parents' behaviour as gatekeepers – affecting how parents choose to invest in children's activities. Psychologists have emphasized instead the role of parents' mental health and parenting practices that affect children's well-being. (p.717)

Morris and Gennetian's recent (2003) study reviews experimental data on the relationship between income and child outcomes and comes up with some robust and interesting findings:

These findings show some suggestive evidence that increasing income may improve children's engagement in school and positive social behaviour for long-term welfare recipients. Furthermore, these findings provide some evidence that income does have a causal and reversible effect on some aspects of functioning for children of long-term welfare recipients ... They are also consistent with the

conclusions drawn from co-relational research that generally shows a positive effect of moving out of poverty for the development of low-income children. (p.726)

These authors go even further, being prepared to put a (US) dollar value on the relationship between income and key behaviours in children:

An increase in income of \$1,000 results in a one quarter to one third of a standard deviation increase in a scale measuring school engagement and positive behaviour ... These effects are larger than one might expect given the extant literature on the effects of income on children. (p.727)

Korenman, Miller and Sjaastad (1995) found that differential ability between poor and non-poor children is not due to maternal education levels, family size or structure, maternal smoking and drinking during pregnancy, infant health or mother's age at first child's birth. The key determinant of ability is the emotional and cognitive environment in a child's home, which accounts for between a third and a half of the developmental disadvantage of chronically poor children. The extent to which that relationship is linked to low income and poverty levels is not investigated, although it must be assumed from other studies that it is strong.

Secombe (2002) argues that, despite 'good economic news' on rising incomes in the United States, "poverty, economic hardship and inequality continue unabated" (p.385). In particular, widening gaps between high and low income earners threaten the spending power of the poor, and low wages fail to deliver on things like proper health care or even an adequate supply of food.

This paper is useful for describing the links between low income, family problems and health issues:

The negative consequences of poverty for children have also been documented and appear to intensify the longer a child is impoverished. Perhaps foremost, compared to other children, those reared in poverty have poorer physical health and more chronic health problems. The higher incidence of health problems begins within the first year of life, as many poor mothers receive inadequate prenatal care resulting in higher than expected rates of babies with low birth weight or birth defects. Poor children continue to suffer from a variety of ailments at higher rates than do other children because of environmental hazards, inadequate diets and lack of access to health care.

Poor children, compared to other children also have more socio-emotional and behavioural problems and are more likely to lag behind other students and have problems academically.

Poverty also affects how parents interact with their children. The quality of the home life has been found to differ. Poor parents use a

less nurturing and more authoritarian approach to parenting and administer more inconsistent and harsher physical discipline. (p.387)

Some recent New Zealand research has attempted to document issues around child poverty. Ball and Wilson (2002) show that more than half of children born in 1993 have had contact with benefits “and, by implication, some experience of low income” (p.92) by the age of 7. In particular:

...we can infer that at least one-fifth of children in the cohort spent at least five of their first seven years of life in families with low income. More than one in twenty appear to have spent all of their first seven years on low income. These are likely to be conservative estimates as they exclude periods of low income that occurred without contact with the benefit system. (p.104)

Following on from the overseas literature, Ball and Wilson (2002) argue that family income does matter, especially when children are young. There is a small positive relationship between increases in income on the one hand and cognitive development and attainment at school. They also warn that “it appears likely that the level of parental income has a stronger effect on a child’s outcome when income is low, and that the effects are even stronger when income is low for long periods” (p.93).

These findings are particularly relevant to New Zealand today because, for all low income groups, there has now been more than 20 years of falling or stagnant wages in New Zealand (Child Poverty Action Group, 2003). Ball and Wilson (2002) note that “biology and economic structures conspire to lead to most children being born when parents’ wages are typically at their lowest” (p.100).

In summary, there is strong agreement in the literature about the nature of the relationship between low income or poverty, emotional and behavioural problems and poor academic outcomes, although authors differ over the size and causes of the relationship. In what has become the classic study on working class school failure, Willis (1977) described a class culture that embedded resistance to school, aping the ‘shop floor’ culture of their parents and leading, inevitably, to school failure and class reproduction. Such an explanation makes no sense in the New Zealand of 2004, where the poor tend to be women-headed families receiving a domestic purposes benefit. However, what Willis’ work still demonstrates is that simple theories of cognitive deficit do not explain school failure for most children; we need to look to complex cultural practices in order to understand the relationship between poverty and school failure. In the remainder of this paper, the first three cases from my broader study are analysed for their positioning around three educational situations: their own education, their children’s schooling and the possibility that they may gain educational qualifications in the future.

THE WOMEN'S STORIES: EDUCATION

Kath, Kim and Mary range between 25 and 37 years of age. They were all brought up in low income households, and sometimes experienced real hardship and economic instability. In this section the stories are told of their own educational journeys. In all three cases the women left school very early with no qualifications.

Kath

Kath grew up in Riccarton, Christchurch, in a low income two parent household. She said the family was 'just ordinary', but her mother had a range of problems and was violent to the children. The family was isolated, because the marriage of the (pakeha) mother to the (Maori) father appears to have alienated the extended family, especially on the mother's side. However, Kath reports that her mother was keen for her to get a good education.

By the time Kath started High School, she was involved in drugs and alcohol:

By the time I got to Hagley I was already really turned off school. I was into drinking and drugs. I wasn't stoned all the time but I didn't like the teachers and I didn't think they should be able to tell me what to do. I don't know – I didn't like school at all. It was all right when I was younger and when I went to intermediate. It was just when I got to high school that I didn't like it.

In fact, up to High School level Kath did well at school. She is articulate and highly literate, with above average (and possibly superior) literacy skills. Despite the fact that she essentially left school at 13, no attempt was made to get her back that she can remember:

No-one seemed keen to get me back to school. That's what I was amazed about. I mean, nowadays they have truancy officers but there was nothing then.

The year Kath was talking about was 1991, only two years after regional Department of Education offices were disestablished, leaving no truancy officers or other forms of support in place to ensure that young people like Kath were attending school. Kath is correct in stating that there were no structures in place to bring her back to school. Although some individual schools appointed teachers to deal with truancy (usually over and above their normal workload), it was nearly a decade before a national truancy strategy was re-introduced, in the form of the District Truancy Services which have Attendance Officers.

Seen in retrospect, Kath's problems were fairly minor; she 'dabbled' in alcohol and drugs, but never in a major way. She appears as an unlikely candidate to leave school so early. When pressed about this, she revealed that a single incident directly caused her decision to leave school:

There was no respect for me. I must admit that it was my fault. I got drunk at school and they took me to the nurse's office. And I explained to them that my bike was outside and it was not locked up and my mum and dad they couldn't afford much but they'd actually bought me a brand new bike and it was a lovely bike and I was so stoked. And of course they wouldn't let me go and lock up my bike and of course it was stolen. I cried when they let me out of school at 3 o'clock. I cried and I mean they didn't bother to offer me a ride home or anything and I lived in Riccarton at the time and I walked all the way from school ... and that started making me angry with them. So it was the one thing, and I'd only been in the school a few weeks, that made me hate them.

And they didn't care. They didn't ring the Police or enquire about whether my bike had been found. All they said was you were drunk, it's your own fault. And I learned from it, and I didn't do it again, but I didn't go back to school much either.

Despite quite a lot of probing, Kath was quite unclear about how she spent the rest of her teenage years. At 16 she started going to a range of vocational courses, including an introduction to cooking and hairdressing, but these never translated into jobs or even apprenticeships. She states that she was not heavily involved in drink or drugs, did not have sex until she was 18 and her first child was not born until she was 20. There is a paradox here. Certainly compared to Kim and Mary (see below), Kath was far from being a teenage rebel. Yet she left school at 13, never had a job and ended up as a single mother at 20. The key reason appears to be that when she left school at such a young age no other support systems kicked in to assist her.

Kim

Kim's early educational experience was very different, marked by continual sexual abuse. She recalls that her stepfather first raped her when she was six years of age, and threatened that, if she told her mother, she would not be believed and would be sent away. After one early failed attempt to disclose what was happening, she said nothing for years. Even before the sexual abuse started she lacked self-confidence. On her first day of school she was dropped off by a family member at the school gate, and immediately ran back home, was taken back and ran away again, only staying on the third occasion when someone took her to her classroom and introduced her to the teacher.

Her childhood was spent in what she now perceives as a haze of nightmares, terrors, habitual bedwetting and being, in her words, "a wild kid". By the time Kim reached intermediate school, she had a range of learning and speech deficits which, she remembers, required her to attend a primary school for remedial education. She experienced this as a demotion, a humiliation and a punishment rather than an effective remedial intervention, and her literacy and numeracy skills are still very limited.

Kim went to a girls' high school, but her memory is that she did not get much of a secondary education there:

I didn't really like much at school. At high school I didn't do much. I wasn't there much and when I was I didn't do much school work. I did jobs for the teachers. Just run around doing jobs for them. They had a kindergarten thing, and I used to spend mornings there, with the little kids. I wasn't very good at school, but at that time it was about my past. That's when everything came out about what had happened and I didn't want to be in class.

At the age of 14, her stepfather raped Kim's cousin, who was considered 'a habitual liar', and, when she told her mother, she was not believed. Only Kim believed her. To support her cousin, she went to her Aunt and explained that she herself had been subject to years of sexual abuse by the stepfather, and that is why she believed her cousin. Kim was taken to the Doctor who confirmed after examining her that there was evidence of abuse. According to Kim, her mother went to the stepfather's work place, confronted him with it, put him in the car and drove him to the police station. The stepfather eventually spent three years in jail. Inevitably, word got around the school that Kim was the victim of sexual abuse, and she was taunted by the other children. Kim and her mother moved to Dunedin:

Then we shifted to Dunedin and I went to the school in Dunedin ... I had a ball – I just loved it. I done work, I wasn't a bright kid at school and somehow and in some way – I still don't know – I got straight As. Yeah, social studies I done and I just got straight As on everything – I was shocked.

About a year later they moved back to Christchurch and Kim went to a local high school, but she never settled there:

Came back to Christchurch, fifth form, left school, I just didn't want to go. I didn't enjoy it, come home at lunchtime, and did all the housework. And mum would come home and the housework would be done. So I said to her I'll do the housework so I don't have to go to school. I was 15.

That was the end of Kim's education. Within a year she was pregnant. There are a range of issues worthy of analysis in her story. The first is that she appears to have got little help or intervention with her learning difficulties at primary school, despite the fact that she had some obvious speech and language disabilities. The second is that the intervention that occurred at intermediate school was clearly an attempt to deal with major learning problems but was perceived as a demotion. The third is that any opportunity for a good secondary education was ruined when the sexual abuse story became so widely known (which was inevitable when the man went to trial, despite suppression of Kim's name). The subsequent removal to Dunedin was

surprisingly successful. Kim's face still lights up at the memory of her A grades in social studies. But back in Christchurch she was unable to capitalise on that success and soon dropped out of school. Kim sees the sexual abuse as the direct cause of her school failure, behavioural problems (these are beyond the scope of this paper but essentially she took part in or led many petty vandalisms and fights in her area) and early pregnancy.

Mary

Mary was taken away from her mother, a prostitute, at the age of two and sent to live with a CYFs family in a small Southland town. She was Maori and the family were Pakeha and she reports that she was one of the few Maori in the town. The father of the foster family started having sex with Mary at about the age of six, and continued until Mary was moved to another family at 12 or 13, not because of the abuse but due to the foster mother having cancer. The new foster family lived in the country, and Mary was put into a sleepout at the back of the house. Fairly soon after she moved in, the new foster father started visiting her for sex. Like Kim, she suffered a childhood of nightmares and bedwetting up to adolescence. Unlike Kim, she did quite well at primary school, this being a good excuse to be away from the home she hated:

Regimented – leave home at 8.45, back by 3.15 or we would get a hiding. I joined the Brownies to get away from home, and went to church every Sunday for the same reason. I did do well at primary school, but when I went to secondary school, no. I couldn't grasp anything there.

By adolescence she had become very rebellious. When her foster mother got cancer, and Mary had to move from the only home she had really known, her circumstances did not improve:

We went to the local primary, and then we were the first ones to go to the new college after it opened. We used to get the strap every day, and often more than once. I was rebelling against everything, and I used to keep doing everything. I didn't understand that until now.

Mary eventually (she thinks at 16) ran away from the home and ended up in Gore, where she went to live in a home for adolescents. She soon ran away from that home, and led a rather itinerant life until she had her first child.

SCHOOLING THE CHILDREN

The literature tends to suggest the reasons that the children of poor families do less well at school is because of a range of social deficits, the most obvious being lack of support in the home. The suggestion is that the middle classes invest more in education because they care more about the children's outcomes or know more about how to foster educational abilities. While relatively speaking that might be the case, there was evidence that at least two

of the families interviewed here had thought about how to ensure their children got a good education, and certainly all three families cared very deeply about this question. The first evidence of this is that school choice, namely the active process of choosing a school beyond the nearest one (or, alternatively, positively affirming that the nearest school is the best for one's child), was exercised by two of the women, Kath and Kim. The local community where this research was undertaken is bounded at each end by a decile one primary school, two of only four decile one schools in the city. Kath explains the reasons behind her decision to send her children to a decile 3 school, which means she is committed to driving them around 5 kilometres each way to school and back each day:

They both (foster daughter aged 9, son aged 5) go to City (name changed to protect children) School. I think that school's brilliant. I don't like the schools around here or the kids around here. My brothers, before they went to City School used to go to (local) Primary and got beaten up lots and it was really hard for them. And when I moved back over here my brother went back to (local school) and he got picked on and got into lots of trouble. I think with City it's a great school for people of all cultures and they just teach and take everybody just as they are.

The rejected school was seen as having a lot of violent and bullying children. The chosen 'brilliant' school is perceived by Kath to have a caring, inclusive environment and to prioritise learning for all. Whatever the reality of the schools (and her chosen school had a city-wide reputation for its literacy learning programmes), Kath has made her choices on clear educational and behavioural grounds. When she was asked how her children were doing at school, however, she said that her children were 'really sick' with asthma and related problems, the implication being that their sickness was holding back their learning.

When her first child was born, Kim had taken quite strong action to move away from the environment in which she grew up, moving to Dunedin, which had been the source of her earlier positive educational experience:

I didn't want the kids brought up in the environment I was in. So we went to Dunedin and started a new life. But I couldn't cope. I was a cook, a cleaner and a nurse (because he wasn't well). I was only 18. Then my Nan passed away and I was pretty close to her and it took me downhill and I couldn't cope no more. I felt like I was on my own.

Back in Christchurch Kim eventually moved into her current house and had to consider schools for her daughter. She did not actively reject the local schools, but has chosen to send her child to the same school she went to as a young child, ironically the one she ran away from twice and which failed to recognise her own learning disabilities. When asked about why she sent her child to the very school that had failed her, she replied that the school was much better now. Her child, she said, also had learning difficulties and the

school was working actively to help her (the school is a decile 3 school and third closest to where Kim lives).

Mary's children go to the local primary school. She had very little to say about their education at all, and, unlike the others, did not appear to be strongly engaged in it.

There was one notable feature of all the women, and that was their desire to ensure that their children had a different (and better) life than themselves. This was stated most strongly by Kath:

I don't want my kids to be like me. I don't think it'll be hard to avoid it. I mean I say to my son now, you stay at school even when you're big and he's got the idea. I mean when he's older things may be different but I'll try and steer him in the right way and hope that something happens with him.

The women do lack specific educational aspirations for their children, and this may matter in the longer term. Currently, the main barrier in these families to their children's education appears to be that the children are not very healthy. Asthma and glue ear seem almost universal among the children. All the women note that the cost of primary health care is a barrier to proper treatment. Kim's children, in particular, are demonstrating special needs in education, although she has been very impressed with the school's work with her daughter. Mary's main fear for her children is that they will be subject to sexual abuse, about which she warns them frequently.

This study focusses on the women's lives as seen through their own eyes. It is therefore not possible to provide evidence of the educational progress of the children. In general, Kath and Kim pronounced themselves happy with their children's progress and Mary did not state a view. Mary's oldest child, who is now a young adolescent, was said to be having both behavioural and learning problems. Whether Kath's stated desire that her son should "stay at school even when you're big" acts as an influence when her son is big remains to be seen.

THE WOMEN NOW

Kath is the only one of these three women currently on the DPB. She has gone back to school, and it is the same school she left over a decade ago. Her aspirations are to be either a Chef or a Hairdresser. As part of our interview, I challenged her about her aspirations, asking why she did not, for example, aim to be a lawyer or a professor. I was aware that this question moved the interview well beyond the life history analysis, to a broader analysis of work, social class and aspirations, and it is not something I attempted with the other interviewees. But it did not, to me, seem outrageous that Kath, at age 25, could eventually take up a professional career if she chose to do so and worked for it.

The discussion that we had around aspirations was very interesting (it will be fully written up in a subsequent article) but ultimately fruitless. Kath believes quite deeply that she is "not brainy enough" to take up a professional position. Kim and Mary have both recently gone off the DPB and entered long-term

relationships. Neither have any plans or aspirations to undertake education, training or employment. Kim has never held down a full-time job, except for a few days casual work in Dunedin. Mary has worked but, at 37, is now concentrating on bringing up her family.

CONCLUSION: POSSIBLE ISSUES FOR SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS

The women interviewed for this project were chosen because they lived in the very poorest part of the city, in the kind of housing often rejected even by those keen to enter state housing. Although they reject the epithet 'poor', because of its connotations, they are or have been poor in a range of senses: a lack of physical resources, a low self-concept and few aspirations or opportunities and, as we have seen, comparatively under-educated.

Significantly, the things that caused the women to leave school at such a young age had little to do with a lack of educational achievement (except possibly in the case of Kim) and much to do with good quality pastoral care. If, on the day that Kath arrived at school drunk and lost her bike, someone had accompanied Kath to lock up her bike, talked with her about the drug and alcohol issues (and her abusive family) and taken an interest in her, another young, bright Maori girl may not have dropped out of school.

The women's accounts of their time at school raise questions that cannot be answered by a life history study. How is it that the teachers of Kim and Mary had not known or suspected of child abuse throughout primary school? Kim got no intervention for her significant speech language disabilities until intermediate school and is largely illiterate to this day. Mary says that she was always considered, as one of the few Maori children in a conservative Southland town, to be a dumb Maori. But she, in fact, did well at primary school. Was it because she went to a brand new secondary school that she slipped through the cracks? Did no teacher ever suspect what these two young women were going through? If they did suspect, was there a basis on which they could act?

The main issue for teachers now is that the children of these families need significant assistance and face specific barriers to getting a good education. Barriers are not, at this stage, the attitudes of the children or parents. The younger children love school and the parents want them to do well. But the evidence is, as outlined at the beginning of this paper, that the odds are against them doing well at school. The children have poor health and the parents have hope but low family resources.

This research confirms that improved pastoral care through initiatives such as social workers in schools, the RTLB teachers and a focus on early literacy and numeracy are the kind of interventions that might make a difference for Kath, Kim and Mary's children. When they reach high school, these children will find a much wider range of options than did their parents. The biggest contribution schools can make is to raise achievement and esteem at a very early age, to deal with pastoral issues as they arise and to support their children and families in their aspirations. Except for Kim's fourth form social studies teacher, none of the women in this study recall a single teacher who took a particular interest in them. For Kath, it was a tragedy that no-one appeared to even notice she was gone from school.

The women I have interviewed in this project would have had dramatically different lives so far had they stayed at school, passed their examinations and gone on to further education or a good job. Instead of being stuck in the poorest part of the poorest suburb, with low or no aspirations and an extremely low self-concept, they could have been empowered. At best, education holds within it the power to transform individual lives as well as societies. But more often it is implicated in the reproduction of poor outcomes. A famous quote from Basil Bernstein in the 1960s was that schools cannot compensate for society, but schools can make a difference to individuals by offering them self-esteem, skills and opportunities. That is all that these women and their children need to change their lives.

REFERENCES

- Ball, D., & Wilson, M. (2002). The prevalence and persistence of low income among New Zealand children: Indicative measures from benefit dynamics data. *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 18, 92-117.
- Child Poverty Action Group. (2003). *Our children: The priority for policy* (2nd ed.). Auckland: CPAG.
- Korenman, S., Miller, J., & Sjaastad, J. (1995). Long term poverty and child development in the United States: Results from the NLSY Children and Youth Services. *Review*, 17, 1-2, 127-155.
- Morris, P., & Gennetian, L. (2003). Identifying the effects of income on children's development using experimental data. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 65, 3, 716-729.
- Secombe, K. (2002). 'Beating the odds' versus 'changing the odds': Poverty, resilience and family policy. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64, 2, 384-394.
- Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: Why working class kids get working class jobs*. Farnborough: Saxon House.

Submitted for publication May 25, 2004
Final revision received June 25, 2004
Accepted June 25, 2004



About the Author(s)

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 1, Issue 1, 2004

LIZ GORDON

Network Research Associates



Liz Gordon is an independent social researcher, working within a Christchurch company, Network Research Associates. She was an Alliance MP for six years between 1996 and 2002, and chaired the Education and Science Select Committee for one term. Prior to that, she was a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Canterbury. Liz was elected in 2002 to the Massey University Council. She earned her PhD in 1989 and has published widely in the areas of the 'new right' reform of education systems, managerialism, youth training and inequality. She can be emailed on lizgordon@paradise.net.nz.