

This book was written based on America, it is also slightly dated, having been written in 2004. However many of the author's comments are relevant today and could be applicable to England. Some of these issues are particularly pertinent as in the last year I have gone from working in a school in a relatively affluent suburb to an inner city school.



The book begins by discussing what factors comprise poverty is:

“For practically every family, then, the ingredients of poverty are part financial and part psychological, part personal and part societal, part past and part present. Every problem magnifies the impact of others, and are all so tightly interlocked that one reversal can produce a change reaction with results distant from the original cause.”

The book then goes on and discusses one of the key problems that faces people in poverty or in low income situations, the lack of resilience. People don't have the funds or access to mainstream credit to deal with every day problems such as car repairs. Relatively minor problems can cause a cycle of decline as people just above the official poverty line are often barely keeping afloat.

One of the woman interviewed for the book states “we feel poor when we can't go to the doctor or fix the car”.

One of the statistics that shocked me as a teacher was the relative high levels of the population that lacked functional literacy and numeracy, and although these figures are specific to the United States I imagine the statistics from the United Kingdom would be similar.

“Some 37 percent of American adults cannot figure a 10 percent discount on a price, even using a calculator. The same percentage cannot read a bus schedule or write a letter about a credit card error. According to the National Adult Literacy Survey, last taken in 1992 by the

Department of Education, 14 percent cannot total a deposit slip, locate an intersection on a map, understand an appliance warranty or determine the correct dosage of a medicine. Therefore, they cannot compete on a global playing field.”

The book also discussed the relationships between home and school and how this can perpetuate the cycle of poverty, as poverty is intrinsically linked with low educational attainment. “Some parents with little education or busy work schedules cannot help with homework, cannot take the time for meetings with teachers, and do not know how to be constructive advocates for their children. Some had such bad experiences as students – sometimes in the very same building – that now, as mothers and fathers, they perceive school as a hostile place to be avoided. When they hear from teachers the news is rarely good, most teachers call with problems not praise, so the conversation may be humiliating and adversarial”. This reinforces for me the importance of making positive contact with parents as frequently, if not more than negative contact.

The thing that made this book unique to me was that it did not blame either the poor or the employers instead: “Working poverty is a constellation of difficulties that magnify one another; not just low wages but also low education, not just dead-end jobs but also limited abilities, not just insufficient savings but also unwise spending, not just poor housing but also poor parenting, not just the lack of health insurance but also the lack of healthy households.”

“The villains are not just exploitative employers but also incapable employees, not just overworked teachers but also defeated and unruly pupils, not just bureaucrats who cheat the poor but also the poor who cheat themselves.”

I found the following survey results astounding. “Time magazine found in a 2000 survey that 19 percent of Americans thought they were in the top 1 percent of wage-earners, and another 20 percent expected to be in the future. This may go some way towards explaining why policies that benefit the top minority are approved by the majority, I imagine though slightly different numbers similar figures could be applied to the United Kingdom.

The book closed with the following two sentences:

“Workers at the edge of poverty are essential to America’s prosperity, but their well being is not treated as an integral part of the whole. Instead, the forgotten wage a daily struggle to keep themselves from falling over the cliff. It is time to be ashamed.”

The author of the book David Shipler has a blog [here](#).