



**Uncertain Lives: Children of Promise, Teachers of Hope.** Robert V. Bullough Jr.  
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**LEA HUBBARD** *University of California, San Diego*

[lhubbard@ucsd.edu](mailto:lhubbard@ucsd.edu)

Over the past decade, with perhaps more fervor than ever before, our nation's educators have sought explanations for the poor academic achievement that persists among many of our children, particularly those who are most "at-risk." Yet the reasons for failure have remained elusive, because what has been missing from the dialogue has been a careful understanding on the part of educators and lay people alike as to how students' personal lives impact learning. Bullough attempts to rectify this gap by providing a carefully crafted series of biographies, constructed from the voices of 34 elementary schoolchildren. Through these stories we learn about children's lives that are burdened by poverty, sexual and psychological abuse, missing parents, parental drug usage, injury, death, and family instability. We learn how children struggle to obtain an education and take some control over their lives, even as they struggle to survive. Faced with "uncertain lives" children come to the schoolhouse door with optimism, expectations, and "promise" but all too often, physical and emotional needs interrupt their readiness to learn.

Bullough suggests that the solution lies in part with the educators who teach children. The children whom Bullough came to know and help needed caring teachers, people who understood how students' personal lives impede or challenge attempts to learn. Children need teachers who will provide support, both personally and academically. Bullough suggests that some of the teachers at "Lafayette Elementary" succeeded in providing this kind of learning environment. Children thrived under their tutelage. Bullough recognizes, however, that the task of educating all children successfully is daunting, given that the needs of our children are so great. He questions whether teachers have the knowledge and resources to do their job effectively and concludes that we must all share a role in constructing the policies and practices that will help children learn. He suggests that we all have been suffering from an "ideological hardening of the arteries" (p.114) and we need to take actions that will save the children.

One significant impediment to the success of these children has been the assignment of blame to them, and the adults in their lives, for their failure. Bullough cautions us to avoid cynicism. When poor academic achievement is couched in a rhetoric that conceptually supports "blaming the victim," and public disdain perpetuates the same stereotype, educators in effect remove themselves from responsibility, and teaching and learning fail. Bullough attempts to break down some public misconceptions. He



points out that although many of these children's mothers were on welfare, they were often engaged in their children's education. Although many parents were too sick or troubled to care for their children, other family members stepped in and provided amazing support. And, although the children lived in horrible circumstances, they were not full of hatred and vengeance--instead, they dreamed of a just world where they were able to serve others. Rather than being vindictive, they were loving and hopeful.

A major factor contributing to the problem of low academic achievement has been that schools and classrooms are not arranged in ways that foster the kinds of relationships and the kind of teaching that must exist if children are to succeed. Instead, we find a "pedagogy of poverty" (p.105), instruction that promotes monitored seatwork and memorization of facts. Conversely, good pedagogy occurs when teachers privilege critical thinking, make meaning from texts, and embed reflection, equity, and justice in teaching and learning. The children portrayed in this book, and arguably children throughout the country, benefit when there is a change in the "grammar of schooling" (p.105). It is imperative that schools improve personalization and become places where "depth is more important than breadth, depth in study of academic content and in human relationships" (p.111).

Bullough makes it abundantly clear that just as it is inappropriate to blame teachers, it also is inappropriate to think teachers alone can meet the needs of all children. Poor academic achievement must be understood as the result of the actions and inactions of the wider community that is responsible for the welfare of our children. The federal, state, and local governments, health and social service agencies, and the community as a whole must support the work of our educators. In order to provide the kind of resources that children need, solutions must center on prevention and early intervention instead of the more commonly employed tactic of "remediation." This requires structural changes at all levels of the system. Children need affordable housing, immunizations, counseling, food, and they need people who will mentor. They need schools and classrooms that are structured around the needs of children. Although clearly an important contribution to the field of education, I was left somewhat disappointed that Bullough did not allow us to learn enough about the strategies employed by the teachers in his study. I was left wondering about their practice and how they negotiated the needs of the children given the constraints of the school setting. Why were some of these teachers successful and others not? A more careful examination of teacher-student interaction would have better served those who continue to search for ways to help children.

That said, Bullough has contributed in an important way to our understanding of the struggles that children face and the challenges they present to educators. By exposing the important ways that social problems influence academic achievement, Bullough moves the discussion away from simplistic and misplaced interpretations toward a



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realization of a complex reality. If we pay attention to the lessons learned here, we can fight against the insidiousness of poverty that threatens to destroy the hope we have for all of our children.

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