

Illegitimacy and Education

Illegitimacy is a national crisis. As Charles Murray pointed out, the illegitimacy rate is approximately 30% of all births. Forty-eight percent of these babies were born to mothers with less than a high school education (27). That statistic means almost half of the illegitimate births, or 15% of all births, were born to women who did not have a high school education. The child's illegitimacy is not the real problem, but only a symptom of the greater social disease that exists when so many women are required to, but cannot, support their children alone. In essays written by Katha Pollitt, Barbara Defoe Whitehead, and Elijah Anderson, education is suggested as a solution to this problem.

Education about birth control needs to be a prime goal. Pollitt states, "we would rather preach about teenage (promiscuity) than teach young people - especially young women - how to negotiate sexual issues responsibly" (677). A program that included birth control could help both sexes deal with sexual issues. This program should include discussions on what it's like to have children, problems encountered with them, and how they grow and develop. Males need to understand that they have an equal stake in the raising of their child with the mother. They need to understand that having a father around is important to the child growing up healthy, as well as being secure financially. Some fathers aren't paying child support because nobody makes them pay. Children grow up seeing this irresponsibility and learn by example. Government needs to step up processes to make sure these fathers are held financially responsible. If they cannot pay, they need to do community service. This obligation would show all that choices do have consequences. It would teach the lesson that children do matter. They are not just possessions that can be pushed aside whenever the whim strikes. Parental

selflessness is essential in the raising of a child, and that requirement should be stressed to the adolescents. Whitehead states it "involves a diminished investment in self, a willing deference to the needs and claims of the dependent child" (707). With education of this type, adolescents will see that raising a child is a great deal of work.

Adolescents must learn that planning for their future is important. Many young girls fail to plan. "In 1982, about 60% of single white mothers and 80% of single black mothers received no child support from their children's fathers" (Whitehead 693). The reality of the issue is that these mothers will most likely be responsible for the raising of the child by themselves, a long and grueling job with little resources. This is, unfortunately, a most common occurrence in today's society. Young girls need to prepare themselves to raise a child and strive for financial responsibility.

The family is where independence, self-restraint, responsibility and moral conduct are learned, but many families are failing in this area. "Children of long-term welfare-dependent single parents are far more likely than others to be dependent themselves." These values are necessary to a democratic society (Whitehead 707). Schools and community will have to pick up the slack. By providing better education, our society can assist the young adolescent with learning responsibility and independence.

Education is already available virtually free to anyone. Yet the drop out rate is constantly increasing. Education through schools hasn't seemed to work. Much money is being poured into schools to improve education for the poor. Yet many respond by being truant or choosing to exercise their right to drop out.

Various forms of birth control are available to the needy. Medicaid will pay for any type of birth control wanted. Birth control in pill form or injectable is available for women. Condoms are given away free, literally by the gross, at any free clinic or publicly funded health service. People are more knowledgeable about birth control than ever. Yet, the rate of illegitimate births continues to increase. The problem is compliance, not availability.

Adolescents normally want to be on their own, to be away from their parents' dictates. They should want to learn how to be independent. In fact, one could argue that the desire for independence is actually shown in the teenage girl who becomes pregnant to get away from her home situation. Now that she is pregnant without any way to pay for her care, she turns to the state for support. It is willing to pay for her prenatal care, labor and delivery, and even a small amount for spending money. It will exercise its power to attempt to force the father to be responsible. She may now think that she is an independent person, but she is now dependent on the state. According to Whitehead, "almost 40% [of welfare recipients] remain on the rolls for ten years or longer" (693). She has begun the welfare cycle, dependent on the system, dissuaded by the system from bettering herself.

Many women lose custody of their children on a daily basis to the state. The children are the victims of neglect, usually as a result of drug use by their mothers. These women are forced to make a choice: drugs or their children. They are being forced to learn a new way of life if they want their children back. Dependence on the state is just as "addictive" as drug use.

I know a woman who was heavily involved with drug use and the welfare cycle. She dropped out of high school when she became pregnant with her first child at age 16. She had other children, and her drug use increased to the point that she was neglecting her children.

She was in her late twenties then. She was mandated into drug treatment if she wanted her children back. She entered a long-term treatment program and worked hard. She was able to obtain her GED while in treatment. After graduating from the treatment program, she was able to get a job as a drug abuse counselor. She was not dependent on welfare for the first time in her life.

She was able to work and remain clean so she could get her children back. She continues to remain clean, working on college classes to receive a college degree in counseling. Sadly, she has had to see her daughter follow in her path of drug use. Fortunately, the daughter started into treatment at an age younger than she did. If asked, neither woman would say the choice was one they wanted to make at the time. They felt hurt, resentment, anger, and denial. Without the mandate, they would probably not have changed their behavior. This mandate is what may need to happen to the welfare system. Education may need to be mandated. More pressure may need to be exerted to get compliance.

The cold, hard facts are what society has been unable to teach the poor. Women have access to the means to achieve independence, if only they would choose to do so. Many decide that they prefer to be dependent and irresponsible. The public has put them on notice that the government will not support their addiction any longer.

Welfare cannot continue indefinitely. Responsibility must be taught. If a man fathers a child, he will bear the financial responsibility. Currently, those caught in the welfare cycle must eventually make a choice: school, work, or no welfare support. The state will no longer pay for inactivity of those on welfare. The state has chosen to force independence upon welfare recipients.

By increasing the level of education achieved by all children, we better their chances of getting a job. Many employers will not hire anyone who does not have a high school education. If adolescents are able to get a job after finishing high school, they have a way to be independent of their family's financial support and do not need to rely on the government. Without an education parents lack the skills and finances to raise the child without support from someone other than themselves. If people were taught that they have to make it on their own, they might be more likely to get an education before they choose to have children they may not be able to support, financially or otherwise.

Works Cited

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