When Alicia was in my first-grade class, her mother, Ms. Rodriguez, maintained that being poor did not affect her learning to read. She referenced the experiences of Alicia's four older brothers who did well in school saying “I been poorer than poor. Ok? If that's the case, my kids should be the dumbest little ones on earth.” Ms. Rodriguez argued that you can always make time to read, “like you can read at night, or like we used to do – [when] we lived in the city we'd read in the train on the bus, so you can, you can always make time. However, over the course of a ten-year longitudinal study, Ms. Rodriguez often described financial challenges that affected Alicia's literacy and school experiences.

Alicia was not a struggling reader. When she was in my first grade class, she was among the best readers in the class. Every morning, Alicia and her friends would gather in the book corner of the classroom and choose books that they would take back to their seats and read chorally. While over time Alicia became less-enchanted with reading school texts, she remained an avid reader at home and wrote poetry. In eighth grade, her mother reported that she could “read her little tail off” and that the school had assessed her at the “tenth grade level.” However, Alicia was ultimately unsuccessful in school.

While current discourses about teacher effectiveness simplistically tie student achievement to teacher quality, I argue that many of the complexities that affect learning for students in high poverty communities are ultimately related to economic resources. In particular, I draw on the words of Ms. Rodriguez to identify some of the challenges that she faced as I examine how money affects children’s academic learning. Ms. Rodriguez is very clear that the family has faced economic hardships. Some are directly related to income; others involve the complexities that accompany living in high poverty communities and attending under-funded schools.

**A Literate Home Environment**

First, I explore the rich literate environment that Ms. Rodriguez created for her children. While Ms. Rodriguez did many things to support her children as readers and as learners, I provide one notable example: the circulation of books in this family.

As Ms. Rodriguez explained, “Everybody that I know loves to read.” She described exchanging books with her friends and how that practice was eventually taken-up by her children. When Alicia was in fifth grade, her mother described reading the book *Mama* (McMillan, 1987) that she had gotten from a friend. At a later interview she informed me that one of Alicia’s older brothers had read the book “Leon snatched my book cause after I read it, He snatched it [and] tells me, I want to read it.” In eighth grade, Alicia described reading *Mama* as
well as other books that she acquired from her mother, “Yeah, my mom gets books and I always have books around.” Ms. Rodriguez spoke about a book, *Rockin Robin* (Johnson, 2005) that had recently been circulating around the neighborhood. While Ms. Rodriguez was reading this book, she mentioned to Alicia that the protagonist was a bit “crazy.” Alicia then picked up the book and started reading it. As Ms. Rodriguez described Alicia’s response, “She’s like ‘Mom! This lady is…’ I was like, wait 'til you get the other part.” Books routinely circulated through networks of friends and neighbors and were often read not only by Ms. Rodriguez but also by her sons and daughters. In eleventh grade, Alicia described getting books from her mother, taking them to school and then her friends would read the books. In return, some of Alicia’s friends brought her books that she read and passed them on.

Books were a common feature in this low-income African American home. They were available, read, and valued. They were part of the social fabric of this family and shared across their social networks. Challenging discourse about poor urban families, Ms. Rodriguez demonstrated a commitment to literacy learning.

**Economic Challenges that Affect Academic Learning**

In these times of school budget austerity and discourses advocating for the privatization of services that have been traditionally funded through the public sector, conversations about school funding have been stymied, and critiques of schooling have focused on teacher quality and accountability rather than shared societal obligations to children. During the first years of the ten-year study, Ms. Rodriguez completed her child-care certificate and worked as a childcare provider at a local daycare. For a short period of time, Ms. Rodriguez managed to open her own daycare center, however, challenges with parents and liabilities related to operating the center resulted in Ms. Rodriguez leaving child care and taking a position as a certified nursing assistant working in home health care settings. Her salary in both these positions was low.

**Life Challenges**

Ms. Rodriguez’s mother passed away when she was 12-years-old and Ms. Rodriguez moved in with her Aunt. She describes being “real, real upset” after her mother died and going through a period of rebellion that included hanging out with friends, drinking, and smoking marijuana. Despite these distractions, she reported, “I still went to school. I couldn’t understand that. . . . I always went. I was there everyday.”

At 17, Ms. Rodriguez had her first child. She explained that despite the challenges she was determined to finish high school saying “I took my older son to school with me.”

I tried. I was like ‘I ain’t dropping out. I’m going back [to school].’ And I went back. I took him with me for all my tests, my midterms and it was funny cause I’m writing with one hand and feeding the baby at the same time.

However, the demands of being a mother and a student became overwhelming and Ms. Rodriguez did not graduate completing her GED years later when her third son, Tyreek, was in my first grade class. During the ensuing years, Ms. Rodriguez faced other major set-backs including the father of three sons leaving her with only “the clothes on my back and my kids.”

**Finance**

Financial challenges plagued this family over time and these were ultimately connected to Ms. Rodriguez’s limited employment options. During the duration of the ten-year study, the Rodriguez family never depended solely on welfare. However, Ms. Rodriguez reported that they had in the past. Ms. Rodriguez was relieved to no longer have to rely on welfare. She believed that receiving welfare had a negative affect on people saying it makes “you want to lie” and “feel degraded.”

By the end of the project, two of Alicia’s
eldest brothers had taken courses at the local community college, but neither had graduated. One son was a manager at McDonalds. The second was doing maintenance work for apartment buildings. The third was living in another state; he was employed as a bartender and had landed a couple small acting jobs - a commercial and a walk-on role on a cable television series.

Assumptions about Students and their Families
Low wages, receiving benefits, and living in a high-poverty community not only affected the living situation of the family, they also affected the ways teachers and other professionals viewed the family. Ms. Rodriguez explained:

A lot of teachers they, a lot of teachers in a lot of schools they figure you live in a low [income community], and they say this is the ghetto right? and they . . . they assume everybody is on welfare. And they'll say when your mother get her check tell her to buy you so and so. And that's embarrassing for the kid.

While Ms. Rodriguez was consistently critical of the assumptions made about her and her children, there were several times during the interviews when she imposed similar assumptions on others in her community. She reported that in some cases people receiving welfare get caught up in “that lazy system. [They say things like] ‘I get my money from welfare. And they pay my electric bill. And they do this. And all I have to do is just go shopping and then I can sit home and watch stories and talk shows and all that stuff.” Throughout the study, Ms. Rodriguez expressed her frustration with people who were satisfied with receiving welfare.

Race and Schooling
When I asked Ms. Rodriguez whether being African American affected her children’s school experiences, she turned to her son, who was in high school and sitting nearby. He immediately responded, “YES.” Ms. Rodriguez and her son described his school principal as being “racist.” She recounted visiting her son’s school and encountering the school principal who was admonishing P.T. and one of his friends

[I] walked in the school and he was [saying] "All you ones act..." He was yelling at Jim [P.T.’s friend]. . . Then he went from Jim to say something about [P.T.] and I stood behind him [P.T.] and I looked at him I said “What about P.T.?” He was like, “Oh nothing, I’m just.” I was like “No, what about P.T.? You was about to say something about my child. What about him?

Years later when Alicia was in eleventh grade, her mother worried that being Black affected how Alicia’s teachers treated her, “Most teachers in her school, they just, like [they assume] her parents don’t work. They stay at home, collecting welfare, doing nothing with their life, but sitting there.” As she explained, “I think being young and Black and they figured most young Black people are either out there selling drugs or doing drugs and they think because you live in the ghetto, they figure you got to act like the ghetto. But that's not true.” She worried about her children’s safety both in school and on the streets.

Inequitable School Resources
Across the longitudinal project, several parents, including Ms. Rodriguez, spoke about differences between suburban and urban schools. When I asked her if she had ever considered sending her children to suburban schools, she said she had, “but it is just I can’t afford it.” Three years later, Ms. Rodriguez worried that many kids in the city schools were not reading as well as their peers in the suburbs. As she argued that the kids in the suburbs “have better teachers, better books, better surroundings.”

In grade 11, Ms. Rodriguez felt that the education Alicia got “could have been better.” She explained that there’s so many kids in the class so, everyday they come home they’s like
there was a fight today. And this one said this. You know it's more social than 'sit down' and 'do your work' and 'we're not having this.” She thought that a suburban school might have been better:

I think she’d be more focused on school and than anything. It would be more important going to school to learn not going to school for social [things]. . . . Because the school she's in now, the kids they know everybody. They live in the same neighborhood and so it's like a social event. They go to school to socialize. . . . So I think if she went to a suburban school that would never happen. In those schools they go “Work, work - I don’t care what went on in your neighborhood.”

For most of the ten-year project, I continued to teach in the same school district that Alicia attended. Illustrating the types of economic challenges school districts faced, during my final years in that district, I was allocated fifty dollars to purchase classroom supplies for the entire school year; this allocation was intended to cover copy paper and all other supplies. Needless to say, my colleagues and I spent a good portion of our salaries on classroom materials. Underfunded schools in this district often faced structural problems (e.g., leaky ceilings, inefficient heating, peeling paint) that took a toll on both teachers and their students.

Dangerous Neighborhoods and Schools
Throughout the ten-year study, Ms. Rodriguez worried about her children’s safety. As she reported, “My biggest fear is somebody actually killing one of them.” She explained, “Nowadays you have gangsters [who might say] ‘You looked at me wrong’ or ‘You done stepped on my shoes.”

These concerns about safety became significant in middle school, when Alicia spoke regularly about fighting at her school. She assured me that she was safe because she had “a lot of friends.” By the beginning of eleventh grade, Alicia’s mother was becoming increasingly concerned. She noted, “Everyday there’s a fight in that school.” While Alicia reported that the kids had to defend themselves, Ms. Rodriguez thought that a lot of the fighting was caused by jealousy. “One think [that] this one got more than the other one or this one is talking about what this one is doing and something like that.” She reported that she was thinking about having Alicia change schools. Alicia herself remained unshaken, “I'm safe. I can take care of myself. I know how to fight.”

However, as the school year progressed, the fighting became worse, and Alicia and her friends were identified by teachers and administrators as being a “gang.” A teacher at the school had seen Alicia and her friends’ names listed on “MySpace” and reported what she considered gang affiliation to the school administrator. Shortly after that Alicia was jumped in a school stairwell and a fight ensued. Alicia was suspended and placed in a special in-school suspension program for the remainder of the school year – from December until June.

Alicia’s mother was angry and felt that the school officials had made their decision prior to talking with Alicia. As she reported, this fight was an isolated incident, “she never been in no fight. She has got her grades up, she started getting A’s and B’s.” Being placed in in-school suspension for the remainder of the school year affected not only Alicia’s sense of self as a student, but it also prevented Alicia for graduating with her class as she could not take some of the classes she needed for graduation.

Conclusions about Learning and Money
While dominant discourses blame families and teachers for the literate challenges faced by children in low-income communities, the preceding accounts highlight disadvantages related to a lack of money and suggest that there are responsibilities that extend beyond the
control of teachers and families that affect academic learning for students in high-poverty communities. Certainly teachers can and do help many students, but larger communities have responsibilities as well for the economic sustenance of children and families.

Over the ten years that I worked with Alicia and her family, her mother repeatedly identified fiscal challenges. At times these challenges involved family finances and the difficulties Ms. Rodriguez faced in providing for her children. I argue that some of her concerns require and deserve attention from the larger community and are related to the allocation of resources in urban areas, school funding, and social equity. While teachers can and should play a role in these conversations and their roles both with individual families and within communities can be powerful, contrary to popular discourses, solving these problems is not solely within their control.

References

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