

Assignment #3 – *There are No Children Here*

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In the book, *There are No Children Here*, and in the video, *Boys of Baraka*, it is apparent that the United States does not provide for all children equally (Kotlowitz, 1991) (Ewing & Grady, 2005). The boys featured in these works are unprotected and uncared for by the greater society. This leaves them to develop and grow in unsuitable conditions. While the experiences of these children in Chicago and Baltimore are inevitably different, they are also strikingly similar. In many inner cities, minority populations are subjected to poverty, violence, and a low chance of financial improvement. There are several common risk and protective factors that affect the development of children in this environment.

*There are No Children Here* highlights the experiences of children in a Chicago housing project during the late 1980's (Kotlowitz, 1991). The story of Lafayette and Pharoh, two brothers, is a difficult one to fully comprehend. The boys are constantly running from gunfire, are unable to play freely outside of their apartment complex, and have witnessed several traumatic life events. Their building was run down to an extreme. There were no libraries or other community gathering places for them to meet up with friends. Constant drug transactions and gang violence kept them inside of their apartments when they weren't at school. To illustrate their mindset, the Lafayette would say "if I grow up" to talk about future career goals, instead of the tradition children's saying "when I grow up" (1991, preface). The children are even skeptical as if they will live until high school.

Of the two brothers it is apparent that Pharoh had many more challenges functioning in the dangerous and unpredictable neighborhood. As Pharoh got older he began to stutter and was very nervous. Because he was inherently shy, inflexible, and rigid he had a more difficult time dealing with traumatic life events in his neighborhood (Schreier, 2008, March 24). Familial factors also played a role in his development. Pharoh was raised by a single mother, LaJoe, for

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the most part. His mother had to constantly struggle to meet economic means with a welfare check, and to fight for that check when it was challenged and taken away. To make things worse, Pharoh never had many friends, only a cousin in his younger years and the school bully a few years later. The community itself was unable to support each other most of the time because of the violent living situation. Pharoh's personality, family, and community all put him at greater risk for a less-than-average childhood.

Even though Pharoh had to deal with many negative factors, he also had protective factors that helped him to survive in these conditions. One such factor was his success in school (Kotlowitz, 1991, p. 113). When he was young, he was chosen as one of three students in his classroom to compete in the spelling bee. Pharoh thought of school as a safe space to grow and learn, and allowed himself to relax a bit more at school. Another coping mechanism Pharoh used was denial, and his mother helped him to deny reality at times. When LaJoe's welfare check was taken away she decided not to tell Pharoh. Around that time Pharoh had been responding to every episode of family difficulty or traumatic event by saying he was too little to understand. Suppressing and denying negative events may have helped Pharoh to deal with them more effectively.

In a similar narrative, *The Boys of Baraka* is a documentary of inner-city boys (Ewing & Grady, 2005). Twenty African American at-risk boys were selected from the Maryland public school system, all 11- to 13-years old, to attend a private school in Kenya for two years. Although the first year went well, the school was closed during the boys' second year due to rising threats in Kenya. The boys in this video also lived in harsh conditions in Baltimore. Many of them were subjected to gang recruitment and drug dependent family members. Most of them were at-risk for poor school performance, which would most likely lead to dropping out of

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school and joining a gang. The Baraka school was an opportunity for them to focus on school without the constant reminders of violence and poverty around them.

The boy that struggled the most in the Baraka school was Richard. Richard had a younger brother, Romesh, who was much smarter. Richard struggled with all subjects; he was at the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade proficiency for most subjects even though he was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Because Richard grew up in a neighborhood infested with drug and gang activity, he had seen his fair share of violence. Living in a poverty stricken area caused Richard to fall behind in school several grade levels (Schreier, 2008, March 31). Richard was more likely to have experienced separation, instability, and a chaotic household all putting him at risk. Richard too was a child of a single mother, and had probably encountered economic shifts in his lifetime. Both of these variables put him at risk for a more negative response to traumatic life events, such as a close friend being shot in his neighborhood.

Although he was at risk, he also had some protective factors. These factors not only helped him to survive in Baltimore, but also assisted him in persevering through school year in Kenya. Having his younger brother with him in Africa for social support most likely impacted his work ethic. Richard continually worked hard at school even though he was behind. Also, his mother was very supportive and caring of both Richard and Romesh. The brothers were able to take risks and learn because they knew their mother would always be there for them as long as they tried to succeed. Another factor that helped Richard to deal with the traumatic event he had experienced was using artistic expression to talk about what was bothering him. Richard wrote a poem about shootings happening in his neighborhood and read it out loud at the Christmas celebration. Investing himself in this activity allowed him to better adapt to the trauma in his life (Schreier, 2008, March 24).

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Overall, the situation for the Baraka boys is similar to that in *There Are No Children Here*. The main difference is that the Baraka boys were given a unique opportunity to get out of Baltimore for one year. Even though it is not enough to make a substantial impact on the community, some of the Baraka boys did go on to graduate from high school. Pharoh may not have been so lucky. Both of these stories tell of the unthinkable conditions that some inner-city youth live in. As mentioned above, there are many factors that contribute to coping successfully. There are also several variables that make adapting to trauma and poverty more difficult. As Alex Kotlowitz says, improvements need to be made in the education system, community building needs to occur, and public health should improve to make a positive and lasting impact on inner-city populations. No child deserves to be deprived of their childhood, as the children in these stories were.

### References

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