

Case Study - Education

The Story:

Kamal was a student in Ms. K.'s Economics class whom she has known since he was seven. His mother was incarcerated at FCI Dublin and was the roommate of a friend of Ms. K's, so Ms. K would sometimes give Kamal and his older sisters rides to the prison to visit her. Before Kamal was in her class, Ms. K. had called his grandmother's home pretending to be Child Protective Services to get his older sister to stop punishing him for getting into fights at school by making him stand in the corner for hours with his hands up over his head. By the time he came to Berkeley High his grandmother had lost her house because she took out a second mortgage to pay bail on one of his older sisters, who had been arrested for dealing, and she skipped bail, then the grandmother couldn't make the mortgage payments. Her heart started giving her problems and she had to move in with family in Sacramento. Kamal and two of his sisters came to live with an older white hippy couple in Berkeley.

Kamal was the youngest child in his family. As a young Black boy he had few good role models. His father was also incarcerated in another state, and they had no contact. He was able to hold onto a strong relationship with his mother, because he visited her as often as he could, and this was very important to him. He also had been able to spend much of every summer at a sleep-away camp run by the elderly couple he lived with, and that camp gave him a lot of support, positive energy, and sense of community. As he became a teenager he got increasing responsibility at the summer camp, becoming a teen counselor. One of his main jobs eventually became taking care of the kids who came to camp on scholarships, who did not have enough

underwear and never got boxes from home. He would make sure they had what they needed to be able to fit in and enjoy camp.

By Kamal's senior year, he had already gotten into big trouble twice. Once he had put a ski mask over his head and walked into a white English teacher's classroom and sat down in the back without saying anything just to watch her react. Once he got in a conflict with someone who had taken chewed gum out of their mouth and thrown it at him. He got so mad he picked up a chair and threw it back at the person. The final situation became his first strike conviction. He was hanging out with a girl he liked, whom he thought liked him, and ended up making out with her, although he admitted that "took some convincing." The girl was from a very religious family. He thought that maybe she felt guilty about having succumbed. It is also possible that she gave mixed messages and he chose not to respond to the "No" messages. Or maybe he misread the signals and thought that "No" meant "Yes." Or maybe he ignored her "No" responses and pushed himself on her anyway. At any rate, after talking with her mom, she brought charges of sexual assault against him. He was arrested and spent most of a week in juvenile hall. Then he was suspended pending an expulsion hearing, three months before the end of his senior year.

The Issues, and The Essential Question:

Kamal was physically abused while in second grade by his older sister. Just as he entered adolescence, he was uprooted and relocated to a family with a significantly different set of cultural norms. But perhaps the biggest issue Kamal faced was that he was separated from his parents due to their incarceration throughout his coming of age. This must have affected him deeply. For instance, he had few role models, which limited the people he could get advice from

on how to develop relationships with girls. How does growing up separated from ones parents because of their incarceration affect young people?

The Research:

“Adolescent children of incarcerated parents are,” according to J. Mark Eddy and John B. Reid (2003), “from one-half to three times as likely to be arrested as their peers.” Because they are traumatized by the loss of their parents, and often they are uprooted and shifted from caregiver to caregiver, the children of incarcerated parents often get in more trouble than their peers, especially if their mother is the incarcerated parent. Teenaged children of incarcerated parents are far more likely to be depressed, to have troubles with their guardians, to have bad grades, drop out of school, run away, get involved with drugs, or get become or get someone pregnant (Eddy and Reid, 2001).

There are many factors that contribute to this increased risk, including the fact that their parents may have been poor role models in the first place, or may have used drugs and/or alcohol to excess, which increases the problems they would face growing up. But the fact that their parents aren’t around to monitor their peer groups has an especially big effect on their children because, according to Eddy and Reid (2001), when adolescents fall in with friends who are delinquent, they are far more likely to get into trouble, as youth crimes are usually social events. But incarcerated parents can have little impact on who their children hang out with, since it is so hard for them to stay in contact. Only about one in five incarcerated parents get even once a month visits from their kids (Eddy and Reid, 2001).

These problems affect one in ten of the nations children, as that is how many have a parent incarcerated, on probation or parole. The percentages are much higher in the African American community, however, because the criminal justice system has expanded so much in

the last two decades, and incarcerated far more African Americans. Seven per cent of all Black children in the United States have a parent who is currently incarcerated, compared with fewer than one percent of white children (Favro, Tony, 3/17/2007). African American children are nine times more likely than white children to have an incarcerated parent and Latino children are three times more likely than white children to have an incarcerated parent (Mumola, 2000).

Analyzing the Case Using the Research to Identify Options:

Kamal experienced the loss of both his parents to prison, of his grandmother when he was in middle school, and of a home rooted in his culture. Like many youth with that experience, he got in more trouble than most, and from an early age. On the positive side, he maintained a lot of contact with his mother, and he developed strong friendships at the summer camp. The elderly couple who took him in acted as mentors and advocates, as did Ms. K. So while he got in a lot of trouble, he also had help getting through it.

Eddy and Reid assert that getting help from peers, siblings, teachers, or others, can make a big difference in whether a teenager is able to get through these problems and get a positive direction for her or his life. The main intervention suggested by the literature is mentoring, which provides a consistent adult presence in a child's life, an advocate who can help represent a young person's interests in court or with social services, and support for the young person's relationship with their incarcerated parent (LEARNS). Ms. K. was acting as a mentor for Kamal, as she helped him maintain his relationship with his mother, made sure he was in her classes and acted as an advocate for him with the administration.

Kamal pled guilty to a lowered charge (assault instead of sexual assault) and accepted a suspended sentence from the court, because he didn't think he would get anything better out of a trial that would take forever and cost a lot of money for lawyers and he really wanted to just get

the incident behind him. But then he had a first strike on his record, and the school board was required to hear his case and choose between these options:

1. Kamal could be expelled from BHS.
2. Kamal could be given a suspended expulsion, and complete his senior year independently from home so he could graduate.
3. Kamal could be allowed to return to the classroom to finish the school year.

The Dilemma for Class Discussion:

Ms. K. no longer had Kamal as a student, so what could she do? What were her options? I will give out the above story to my classmates, and I will ask them to discuss whether she should ignore this situation (since he was not longer “her” student), or provide some level of support. If the latter, I will ask them to discuss what kinds of support she should provide. I will also ask them how involved they think a teacher should get in the lives and problems of their students.

Conclusion:

Ms. K. wrote a letter to the board to support Kamal, met with other teachers and the vice principal involved to explain why they should believe in Kamal, talked to his mother about the situation so that his mother could provide better support for him, and visited Kamal, bringing him work and making sure he understood that she did not give up on him. While she did not have to do all those things, they made a big difference. Without the support of the teacher and Ms. Russ he would have been expelled. Kamal was able to finish the school year at home and to graduate. He is now a counselor who works with troubled youth.

Work Cited

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