

The Effects of Poverty on Teaching and Learning

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What's All the Hype?

Poverty is an issue that more and more of our nation's children are coming face to face with. The price that children of poverty must pay is unbelievably high. Each year, increasing numbers of children are entering schools with needs from circumstances, such as poverty, that schools are not prepared to meet. This paper will examine the effects of poverty on teaching and learning. Poverty as a risk factor will be discussed as will a number of the many challenges that arise in teaching children of poverty. Implications of brain-based research for curriculum reform and adaptation will be presented.

The Concept of Being At-Risk

The term *at-risk* refers to children who are likely to fail in school or in life because of their life's social circumstances. It does not appear that any one single factor places a child at-risk. Rather, when more than one factor is present, there is a compounding effect and the likelihood for failure increases significantly. Poverty is considered a major at-risk factor (Leroy & Symes, 2001). Some of the factors related to poverty that may place a child at-risk for academic failure are: very young, single or low educational level parents; unemployment; abuse and neglect; substance abuse; dangerous neighborhoods; homelessness; mobility; and exposure to inadequate or inappropriate educational experiences.

Being able to identify and understand children who are at-risk is critical if we are to support their growth and development. In order to do this, warm and caring relationships need to be developed between teachers and children. This will enable teachers to detect any warning signs that may place children at-risk for failure, interfering with their chances for success in school and life (Leroy & Symes, 2001). Academic and behavioral problems can be indicators of impending failure. Among such behaviors are: delay in language development, delay in reading development, aggression, violence, social withdrawal, substance abuse, irregular attendance, and depression. Teachers may have difficulty reaching a student's parent or guardian. They may also find the student does not complete assignments, does not study for tests, or does not come to school prepared to learn because of poverty related circumstances in the home environment. These children may be unable to concentrate or focus. They may be unwilling or unable to interact with peers and/or adults in school in an effective manner. These issues not only have an impact on the learning of the child of poverty but can also impact the learning of other children.

Challenge: Student Motivation to Learn

One of the social issues facing children of poverty is emotional trauma. The emotional climate can often be very stressful and emotionally depriving. The lack of emotional nurturing can lead to feelings of alienation, inadequacy, depression and anxiety. Aggressive or impulsive behavior and social withdrawal can also result. Emotional security and self-esteem are often lacking. There is a craving for attention and a need to belong (Ciaccio, 2000; Brophy, 2000). The characteristics that are lacking in the poverty environment are those that help foster effective learning and academic success. Emotional draining and negative self-status can literally zap the motivation to learn out of children.

We need to place an emphasis on sparking that desire to learn or (motivation) by not only helping to restore the child's self-image but also by encouraging students to see the demands and rewards of schooling. Children will work hard, for intrinsic rewards, only if they have a very good reason (Ciaccio, 2000). We need to make them feel that they are lovable, important and acceptable human beings by making them feel secure and good about themselves and by building trusting respectful relationships with them (Bassey, 1996). The teacher may be the dependable and caring adult, often the only adult of this kind, who is a consistent and reliable figure in their lives of unpredictability and change (Bowman, 1994). Positive and respectful relationships of this nature are essential for at-risk students (Hixson and Tinsmann, 1990; Ciaccio, 2000).

Educators also need to work to foster resilience in children, focusing on the traits, coping skills, and supports that help children survive in a challenging environment. Children need our help if they are to adapt successfully despite adversity; alter or reverse expected negative outcomes; and thrive in spite of negative circumstances. We need to set high expectations for all that communicate guidance, structure, challenge, and, most importantly, a belief in the innate resilience of children. We need a curriculum that supports resilience (Benard, 1995).

Ciaccio (2000) also discusses the technique of total positive response to student misbehavior as a method of developing relationships with students and a method of effective classroom management. Every incidence of student misbehavior is dealt with in a positive versus negative manner in an effort to disarm students that may exhibit some of the most challenging behaviors. Total positive response involves the use of positive strategies to meet student needs, combined with caring and total acceptance. The challenge is to find the positive in the negative. Because at-risk students have egos that are often severely damaged, criticism can cause them to tune teachers and authority out. Additionally, emotionally damaged students cannot effectively deal with criticism and channel it to improvement. We must make it our responsibility to find ways to generate and maintain student interest and involvement on a consistent basis by making our classrooms safe, accepting, interesting and engaging places (Haberman, 1995). By creating lessons that have meaning to these children, teachers are responding actively and constructively to the background or prior knowledge and experience of their students.

The concepts of agency and conation, which encompasses self-efficacy and self-regulation, are key to understanding motivation as it relates to children of poverty. The living environments and the culture of poverty often leave poor

children with low levels of motivation to learn. Besides the fact that all of their energies may be directed elsewhere in their struggle to survive, they may have poor experiences with schooling or may perceive that they don't really need school to be successful. They may translate money or belonging into success, and perceive careers in criminal activity that permeate poorer neighborhoods (such as drug dealing, prostitution, gambling, theft and gang involvement) as lucrative careers and as the only ones possible for them.

Children from low SES live in environments with social conditions over which they have little control. It is not their choice where they live. It is not their choice that their parent may be unemployed or disabled. It was not their choice to be born into poverty. They often have the feeling they want or need to escape this environment and do better; but they feel they have no control over the nature and quality of their lives. The concept of agency is that an individual can intentionally make things happen through their actions. This is an underlying concept in social learning or social cognitive theory. If we can show children that they can be agents, we can enable them to play a part in their self-development and take responsibility for their learning, personal development and achievement (Brophy, 1998; Bandura, 2001).

As agents, children do not simply undergo experiences. They become actively engaged participants by using sensory, motor and cognitive processes to accomplish tasks and goals that give their lives meaning and direction. They explore, manipulate and influence the environment. We need to get children to act mindfully to make desired things happen rather than let themselves be acted on by their environments.

When many children from low SES run into difficult challenges they engage in negative self-talk and may perceive their failures as challenges they cannot overcome. They may not increase their efforts and may become despondent if they interpret failure to mean they are personally deficient. Because of the culture they live in, they may also feel exploited or disrespected and respond hostilely or apathetically. Goal setting is a critical aspect of agency because it allows individuals to construct outcome expectations. This provides direction, coherence and meaning to life, elements often lacking in low SES students, and can also enable these students to transcend the dictates of their environment.

Conation refers to the connection between knowledge, affect and behavior. It is the intentional, goal-oriented component of motivation that explains how knowledge and emotion are translated into behavior. Conation is a proactive aspect of behavior that is closely related to volition (the use of will or freedom to make choices about what to do). It is necessary in order for an individual to become self-directed and self-regulated. Conation is especially important when addressing issues in learning. It is something that is often lacking in low achieving students, particularly those from low SES backgrounds (Huit, 1999). A critical task facing teachers is to help students develop conative attitudes, skills for self-regulation (goals, plans, and perseverance), and self-efficacy (the belief that something can be done).

SES affects behavior through its impact on an individual's aspirations, sense of efficacy, personal standards and emotional states. A strong sense of efficacy can help strengthen resiliency to adversity often found in the environment of the low SES student. Low SES students often live in chaotic and unstructured environments. They live day to day. They may be unable to manage their emotions, have poor role models, and feel they have no choice or control over their destiny.

Students with low SES may also be depressed, have a fear of failure due to past experiences or have acquired failure expectations from their parents. They may be truly capable children who, as a result of previous demoralizing experiences or self-imposed mind-sets, have come to believe that they cannot learn. If they doubt their academic ability, chances are they envision low grades before they even complete an assignment or take a test. This has an effect on goal setting in that these individuals also tend to set lower goals for themselves. They may have no real personal goals or vision, but only fantasies of what they hope for. If they do have goals, these children need to learn how they can achieve the goals and develop awareness of the possible self. Goals need to be difficult but attainable in order for significant achievement to be recognized. We need to assign challenging tasks and meaningful activities that can be mastered (Huitt, 1999; Pajares, 1996).

Through exercises designed to help these children identify what is important to them, we can begin to help them develop conation. Personal reflection, through the use of a journal, can be a very effective tool for this purpose. Periodic journal reflection on what they think their lives would be like if money and time were not limiting factors and what they think they would do in the future can also be helpful to students. Inquiry learning can help to foster the development of conation, focusing on skills such as problem solving, fact finding, probing, organizing, reforming, adapting, improvising, revising, constructing and envisioning.

If a student can become self-regulated, they can mediate the negative environmental influences they may encounter. Unless they believe they can produce desired results, students have little incentive to persevere in the face of difficulty. Efficacy beliefs influence whether people think pessimistically or optimistically and in ways that are self-enhancing or self-hindering. Teaching the use of self-talk techniques through role playing and group activity can be helpful in identifying thoughts that are often inaccurate and negative. This can also help students to persist longer at challenging tasks as opposed to simply giving up, resulting in higher levels of achievement (Huitt, 1999; Pajares, 1996).

The social environment has an impact on goal-oriented motivation. We need to work towards developing conative components that enhance self-direction, self-determination and self-regulation. Low SES children need to realize the possibilities in their lives, set goals that they can attain and experience success directly, through mastery experiences, and vicariously, through the success of others. Teachers should focus on the learning process, effort and striving, not solely on the ability of the child or results. Personal standards should be stressed as opposed to normative standards. Because success helps to raise self-efficacy, we should do whatever possible to help our students succeed and work to strengthen confidence through our words and actions.

Student self-beliefs have great influence on whether they fail or succeed in school. We need to provide intellectual challenge and create classroom climates of emotional support and encouragement to help students meet the challenge. We need to nurture the self-beliefs of our students and provide them with successful models that transmit knowledge, skills and inspiration. Improving self-efficacy can lead to increased use of cognitive strategies and, in turn, higher achievement. A high sense of efficacy also promotes pro-social behaviors such as cooperativeness, helpfulness, sharing, and mutual concern for welfare. Many of the difficulties students encounter are closely connected to beliefs they hold about themselves and their place in the world they live in. Academic failure is a consequence of the beliefs that students hold about themselves and about their ability to have control over their environments.
