

The Correlation between Poverty and Learning: What Can Be Done To Help Children with Limited Resources Learn.

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Abstract

Poverty is a phrase that has been constantly linked to failures in American schools. The beginning of every year sees an increasing number of children enrolling in schools. Most of these children come from poor socio economic backgrounds with needs that schools, even well funded ones, are unprepared to meet. Most people tend not to understand what poverty is and its devastating effects on families. When a family is embedded in poverty, the child's education becomes the least on their scale of preference. For the family without resources, survival takes the front seat. It can be wrong, however, for anyone to embrace the belief that parents from poor families overlook their children's education. The reality is that for them, keeping the children alive is of the utmost importance. In this paper, I will look into the effect of poverty on learning in American schools. Additionally, the difficulties faced by those teaching children of poverty will also be highlighted.

A Case Study

Akintayo could not sleep the night before out of excitement. Having completed sixty credit hours in college, he applied for a substitute position at a local school district, and got hired. On this first day to work, he arrived at the school where he got his first assignment. After

completing the formalities in the principal's office, he was sent to his room. No sooner than he had settled down, that the bell rang for the start of the school day. Akintayo stood by the door as he had been directed, and greeted the students as they came in. He loved every bit of it. This was a second grade class, and he believed that the day ahead was going to be fantastic. After the children had settled, Akin shuffled through the substitute folder on the teacher's desk, and brought out the memo containing the day's activities. The first part of the class was mathematics which was Akintayo's favorite. Everything went on pretty well. The children answered to his questions with excitement. Ten minutes into the class, a little girl walked in, sat down, and laid her head on the desk. Akintayo tried to find out what the problem was. To his surprise, the little girl was sobbing. Akintayo stood back perplexed when the little girl burst out sobbing even louder saying "I am hungry, I want to eat, I did not eat yesterday after school, and this morning too." The teacher next door heard the sobbing, and-being aware that Akintayo was a substitute-she came out wanting to know what the matter was. After finding out that the girl was hungry, she led her to the office. When later the girl returned to class, she was all smiles. Asked if she was ok, she answered "Yes I am fine, I just ate some waffles, and my stomach is full. I love Ms. Jackson, because she is nice to me. She gives me food everyday when she knows that I am hungry." The girl in question remained very active for the rest of the day, and participated fully in all classroom activities. It happened that the little girl's mother had dropped her off late to school on that day as she had done a better part of the time. With an empty stomach, the girl just couldn't function. Such is just one of the effects that poverty has on learning.

Considering the above case, it will not be accurate for one to jump to conclusion as to what led the girl's mother to drop her off to school with an empty stomach. Worst still, the little girl confessed that she had not eaten anything since the previous evening. There might be two reasons responsible for this: lack of funds to buy food, or negligence. Nevertheless, the later must be ruled out, as no parent can be mean enough to their child as to let them go hungry. The question as to whether the mother should have sought help with social welfare depends on her personality. It could have been that she, like so many others, had too much pride to do so. One thing remained certain, and that was that the little one in question was at-risk.

At-risk children are those children that stand the likelihood of failing in school because of their socioeconomic conditions. It can be wrong to single out any one factor as being paramount in making a child a failure in school. The likelihood for risk is prominent when a bunch of factors come together. According to Leroy & Symes (2001), poverty is considered a major risk factor. Known factors that are related to poverty, and likely to make a child fail academically include: unemployment, homelessness, mobility, exposure to inadequate educational experiences, substance abuse, dangerous neighborhoods, malnutrition, poor health, exposure to environmental toxins, inadequate child care, lead poisoning, television watching, and birth weight.

The children deemed at-risk need help in their developmental stages. Teachers especially need to watch out for signs that will help them pinpoint children at-risk. It is only by knowing who are at-risk that they can be helped. In order to help children deemed at-risk, teachers must develop cordial and caring relationships between them, and the students. 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 and Symes, 2001). When children portray behavioral and academic problems, the likelihood for future failure exists. Common symptoms for future academic failure can be not being able to read on-time, aggressiveness, increased absenteeism, drug addiction, signs of depression, lateness in language development, and violence. Such students could also be seen neither completing assignments, studying for tests, or coming to school prepared to learn, all because of situations related to poverty in their homes. Additionally, these at-risk students are either unwilling, unable, or do not possess the know how to relate to adults in the school, or their class, or other school mates in a manner deemed appropriate. Ultimately these issues go on to affect not only their own learning, but of other children who otherwise are geared towards academia.

A Case Study

Akintayo was sent to an area high school for observation, and teaching practice as part of the fulfillment for his teacher certification. His school based teacher was a middle aged, seasoned educator who has been in the classroom for thirty six years. His classroom looked very well organized, and it seemed he came to school every day well prepared to teach, and to help students learn, at least those who wanted to. His school based teacher, Mr. Mathai made sure that students went home every day with assignments. After collecting the assignments, Mr. Mathai went over the answers with students as a warm-up exercise. As Akintayo noticed, despite Mr. Mathai's diligence, organization, and desire to reach all his students, there were still quite a few that presented some problems that never seemed to go away. Among these

few were those who always came to class without their assignments. While the teacher went over the answers with the class these students sat unconcerned, listening to music by using their ear phones. Akintayo realized that sometimes, the music was so loud that it didn't go unnoticed and was sure disturbing those students who were there to learn. When the students complained, the answers were "oh shut up." When Mr. Mathai interfered as he always did, the answer was always "Why do you pick on us? Go on, man, and teach the nerds." On some occasions, he wrote the students up, but nothing came out of writing them up. One administrator even told him to learn to take care of his classroom. When he tried to call the parents, most of their phones were not in working order. He left messages for those who had working numbers, but never heard from them. He was left to take care of the problem on his own, and he did just that by continuing to help those who wanted to learn.

In the above case, Mr. Mathai had a few at-risk children in his classroom. He identified them, tried to help them, but got support from neither the administrators, nor the parents. One thing was certain in this situation; the students who wanted to learn did have their learning impacted by those who did not want to learn. This example is a clear indication that for teachers to be successful in the classroom, administrators, and parents must be supportive. Unfortunately, this is not the case in most circumstances.

Cultural sensitivity plays a great role in helping children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. With the increase in the population of children in poverty, the works of teachers remain ever challenging. One way to ease this problem is for teachers to know the many needs of their poor students. Social context remains vital in the development of children. It IS

therefore of colossal importance to understand the world poor children live in. Teachers should do all they can to bridge school values, and students cultural values. Considering that so many different cultures are represented in our society, we often encounter students who belong to more than one cultural group. They may be poor in addition to being non-English speaking or of an ethnic/racial/religious minority group (Bowman, 1994; Marlowe and Page, 1999).

A popular trait of children of poverty is their tendency to move from one place to the other in a short time period. They may move from one city to the other as the parents look for employment-from one part of a city to the other in search of cheap rental properties. They may live in shelters reserved for the poor, or, worst, on the streets. It goes without saying that the conditions they live in can tremendously impact their education, and level of achievement. Children are usually emotionally impacted by moving from one place to the other. When they do move, they leave behind friends and familiar environments which sadden them. This is made worst by their knowledge of the reasons that causes the mobility. Consequently, this overwhelmingly impacts their cognitive and social development.

A Case Study

After two weeks, Akintayo noticed that the same students that refuse to complete homework, listen to music in class, and come in late when they do appear in class all have a pattern of being mostly absent from class. Worst still, they never come up with good excuses for being absent. The common excuses are either that they overslept, got late for their buses, or that they just felt tired and decided to sleep some more. They never bothered to bring with

them any written excuses from their parents for their absences. So doing, they accumulated enough absences, and therefore were not eligible for any credits should they manage to pass any of their classes. On returning to school from an absence or absences, the students never bothered to ask for missed assignments. They paid no attention even when the teacher told them that they had to.

The above case is a testimonial that school attendance for poor children is very irregular. Attending school for them is far from being a priority. They find it very hard to make friends which should be one reason that entices children to go to school. They remain lonely. This type of loneliness is known as situational loneliness. Usually, they become hostile and withdrawn. Because they move around a lot, they pay less attention to school believing that they will have to move again.

When teachers plan and prepare their lessons, they should take into consideration the needs of the diverse student population in their classrooms, taking into cognizance the cultural values of the students they teach. There should be a connection between what students are taught, and the real world they live in. By providing emotional support, modeling, and other forms of scaffolding, teachers can help students use their strengths, skills and knowledge to develop and learn (Marlowe and Page, 1999). Learning experiences and problem solving based on real-life problems can help deal with some of the issues they may be faced with in their lives. Learning by doing gives students the opportunity to be active and imaginative problem solvers (Bassegy, 1996).

It is a well established belief that children of higher and middle classes achieve at higher levels than children of poverty. While the reasons for this can be many, they have to do with the environment these poor children grow in, and the type of education they get in school. The environment that the students live in, their past educational experiences, and the way the teachers perceive these students can go a long way to influence their achievement. According to Slavin (1998), schools can play an important role on the success and academic achievement of children by considering them as capable of achieving, instead of failures and setting them up to achieve to the utmost.

To take children away from poverty, they must receive a good education. Educators must make the curriculum challenging so as to increase the opportunity for higher education. This in turn leads into more future opportunities for them. Cultural relevance and superior content quality is of great importance. Knowledge of the students' culture can help teachers prepare lessons that are effective and challenging. Additionally, instructional and classroom management techniques that work well with some students don't necessarily work well with poor children. The perspective and experiences of the children need to be considered (Goodwin, 2000).

It is difficult to develop positive relationships with parents of poor families, and entice them to get involved in their children's education. This is possible however, by first understanding what is involved in parenting in low socioeconomic conditions. Parent ability is weakened by living in poverty conditions and by the emotional and psychological stress associated with living in poverty (Kaiser and Delaney, 1996). A child's first exposure to the

world is facilitated by parents. Therefore, children model what they get from their parents behaviorally, cognitively, and socially so that any negative effects that parents encounter due to factors related to poverty, will have a spill over and negatively affect the child's development. Children rely on their parents to mediate their environment, respond to their needs and provide emotional stimulation and support. If, because of poverty related stresses, the parent does not do this, the child's development could be delayed or otherwise negatively affected (Kaiser and Delaney, 1996).

Poor environments usually lack those conditions that foster growth and success. These include: a strong shared belief system, security, stability, access to basic needs, and a positive time together. Thus family relationships suffer when individuals live in poverty. Parents' exhibit less capacity to be supportive and consistent in their parenting, provide less vocal and emotional stimulation, are less responsive to their children's needs and model less sophisticated language. Parenting style is more punitive and coercive and less consistent (Kaiser and Delaney, 1996). Overall, parental support and involvement in school activities is lower among poor parents. This does not necessarily indicate a lack of interest. It reflects issues related to poverty such as time, availability and affordability of child care and transportation, as well as possible negative personal experiences between the parent and his or her own school when growing up (Kaiser and Delaney, 1996)

A Case Study

On one occasion Akintayo was privileged to witness a conference between Mr. Mathai and a parent. The school semester was half way gone. Mr. Mathai had tried hard to reach the parent before, but with no success. He left several messages, but the parent never called back. She came in for this conference because the son was involved in a fight, and was suspended. The parent in question claimed not to have received any progress report since the beginning of the school year, although they were sent home through the student. Worst still, she confessed that she did not receive even the report cards that were sent home by mail. Asked why she didn't call the school to enquire about her child's progress, she answered "I don't have any time; I go to work early every day, and come in late."

The above showcases a typical example of how poverty makes it impossible for parents to render support and be involved in their children's academic activities. In this case, it will be wrong to assume that the student's mother lacked interest in her son's school welfare. Simply, she had to choose survival over academia. She had to work for food and shelter, or otherwise go hungry and homeless.

It is of the utmost importance to strengthen and support parents and families. Families have to be exposed to programs that help build their lives. Preventive programs can also help families of poverty. Any of the programs can build on the children's strengths while simultaneously providing needed services to families (Schmitz, Wagner and Menke, 2001). Research shows that most parents, regardless of their socio-economic status love their children

and want them to succeed. Many of these parents need to learn strategies that can help them cope and help their children get a chance at breaking the cycle of poverty (McGee, 1996).

Schools must make it a priority to open a line of communication between them and parents. Though it is a fact that this sometimes becomes extremely difficult because the parent might either be without a phone, reluctant to respond, or is limitedly proficient in English. Even when parents remain uncooperative, teachers and school authorities must be persistent in their efforts, and coerce parents to understand that it is for the good of their children. Besides, school authorities can help educate parents on ways that they can help their children at home.

When scheduling conferences, school authorities must do all they can to make the schedules parent friendly. When possible, daily grade level conferences can be held in school auditoriums in the presence of parents. During these meetings, school authorities must emphasize the importance of being in class every day, completing assignments, and abiding by the rules.

Principals will do very well by providing food for parents during the meetings. According to one author, it is of great importance to provide food at all meetings and activities involving homeless families. Moreover, this sounds like a good idea when any families of poverty are involved (McGee, 1996).

Teachers must keep their classroom doors open to parents. This way, they can come in when they so desire and observe what goes on in the classroom. Parents must also be invited to render their help during school activities. Teachers must also be in the habit of sending home to the parents a weekly calendar of classroom activities, and ask parents to encourage their children to read.

Conclusion

Poverty undoubtedly impacts learning in a negative way. Nevertheless, it should be known that, it will be a colossal error to give up on children from low socio-economic backgrounds. One thing is certain; they are not to blame for what they are. Infact, helping them overcome their poverty is doing justice not only to the child in poverty, but to society in general. It should be known that one good man is one less bad man. To succeed in helping children from poor background climb that academic echelon, teachers should be aware of the following:

- (A) Address the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social learning of students. It is vital knowing that children of poverty live in constant fear which undoubtedly has a very negative effect on learning. When children are in fear, their ability to think is greatly affected. Not being able to think makes one incapable of learning. This explains why children of poverty are often lagging behind in development emotionally and physically.
- (B) Make classroom environments safe and trusting. A safe and trusting environment can boost learning. Teachers have to make sure that while the classrooms remain challenging, the threat level must be low. A relaxed environment enhances learning. One thing is certain, and that is that the environments where poor children live are full of stress, so that keeping the stress level low in the classroom must be a priority. With low stress, the students will be able to stay focused thus facilitating learning.

(C) Build a classroom environment that encourages cooperative learning. Cooperative learning fosters teacher- student, and student-student relationships. This can help students of poverty to develop a sense of belonging and a sense of connectedness to their school (Kovalik and Olson, 1998). When students learn to deal with emotions effectively, they will be able to learn. Children who are lacking in emotional development are also lacking in language development which prevents them from developing higher order thinking skills thus making it difficult for them to learn.

(D) When introducing new information, teachers should vary their presentations, and do so in a new and exciting way. At the same time, learning should be made equally challenging and enjoyable. Children must be made to have meaningful interactions. New information should be introduced and examined in context in order to create a link for the student to help recall the learning experience and the information learned. Retrieval is better in contextual, episodic, event-oriented situations (Jensen, 1998).

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