

Supporting Students Living in Poverty

Tyler Sloan

Abstract

Students living in poverty struggle to achieve academic success and pursue careers that require post-secondary training. Students coming from families with low socio-economic status enter kindergarten with lower literacy levels than their peers. Educators can initiate a change by increasing opportunities for students to build strong literacy skills. As educators, we can assist students to build skills that can help to overcome difficult situations and navigate effectively through times of negative thoughts and feelings.

The greatest determining factor in students' academic success and pursuit of post-secondary education is poverty or low socio-economic status (SES). There will never be a complete balance between people living with large amounts of wealth and those struggling to keep food on their table. The population that sits in wealth has often looked down on people in poverty, not understanding why they are not taking advantage of gaining an education to better their lives (Raz, 2018). As educators, we can initiate a change by finding ways to better support our learners who are struggling in poverty. As opposed to judging behaviours and actions of students who are struggling, we can find alternative strategies to support the students (Jensen, 2009). Studies have shown students who have deficient reading and literacy skills in early education are at a greater risk of not graduating (Hernandez & Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). With a lack in funding and support from government and schools, little support from family, and children entering school with low literacy levels, students in poverty struggle to find balance between life and the books. The school system is created to reach large portions of the population. When a positive school environment is created, there is an increase in interventions for cognitive growth, and situations to develop positive social behaviours for students living in poverty (Berger, Benatov, Cuadros, VanNattan, & Gelkopf, 2018). Educators can be an effective vehicle for change with regards to the impact that poverty has on academic success.

Poverty Holding Back Success

Students living in poverty will continue to struggle academically because of a lack of funding to low income communities, low support from families, and low literacy levels. The widening gap between the rich and the poor is mirrored in the educational system as well. Parents living in poverty are struggling to provide essential food and housing, and this stress at home is having a negative effect on students' potential graduation. In order to battle this crisis, different levels of government have taken steps to grant additional funding to schools and communities, in order to address the concern of students living in poverty and their struggles in education (Jones, Wilson, Clark, & Dunham, 2018). There have been monetary incentives for some teachers to move to schools that have high rates of poverty and failure among the student population. Although there has not been an immediate increase in students' academic success, it is difficult to measure the positive relationships that are being created between these students and the teachers (Cowan & Goldhaber, 2018). Having qualified teachers in these communities is a step in the right direction and shows that educational institutions recognize the effect that poverty has on educational success. If there were an increase in funding toward affordable housing and healthier food options for families, families struggling in poverty could focus more on educational goals (Raz, 2018). The continued lack of funding from governments and schools for initiatives to combat poverty will decrease the opportunities for students living in poverty to close the educational gap.

Increasing government funding for families in poverty would be ideal, although the likelihood of that happening immediately is low. The lack of financial support for families in poverty has a trickle-down effect on how families are able to support their learners. Students who use programs for affordable lunches are the greatest predictor of poverty in schools (Jones et al., 2018). When families are struggling to provide food for children, they are often not able to provide the educational support needed for students to be successful. The ongoing stress of living in a state of poverty creates a toxic home environment, and the students' success at school is hindered (Jensen, 2009). Students in poverty live in an environment that is unpredictable, which makes it difficult for them to make positive connections at school. The students often have no input into when and where they move, and likely the parents are not making these choices voluntarily (Jensen, 2009). With parents struggling to provide food and housing, extra educational opportunities such as trips, camps, or additional educational programs are not available because of financial restraints (Hernandez & Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001). With a break in learning occurring every year, it is difficult for students in poverty to keep up with the class. When students in poverty start school, there is a small gap in achievement with their classmates, but without interventions this gap increases as they enter high school (Kuhfeld, Gershoff, & Paschall, 2018). The financial stress placed on families in poverty inhibits the supports that a family can provide to students.

Families living in poverty seldom create sufficient opportunities for students to build literacy skills. Literacy levels at an early age are an accurate indicator of later academic success. Children's literacy development starts early in life, but students living in poverty will not be introduced to the same vocabulary as their peers who are not living in poverty (Kuhfeld et al., 2018). This is a substantial setback in their development, and one that is difficult for the students to overcome. When students do not come from environments that promote language development, they often lack the basic building blocks that language and literacy are built on (Raz, 2018). Students in poverty are coming into schools with a literacy deficiency, and the gap is difficult to close with no interventions.

If initiatives focused on literacy are not put in place for students in poverty, families and students will continue to struggle to be successful academically. Funding to communities and families in poverty is the key to address academic shortcomings (Jones et al., 2018). With low funding from governments and schools, low levels of support from families, and low levels of literacy entering kindergarten, students in poverty will have limited academic success.

Throwing the Book at Poverty

Educators hold the key to unlock the chains that poverty has on education: by creating positive school environments, providing opportunities for academic growth, and teaching positive social behaviours, educators can help students in poverty find academic success. Developing a positive school environment for students in poverty creates a safe place for students to feel comfortable to take risks and find academic success (Davis & Warner, 2018). In my experience teaching students living in poverty, their home environment is not a place that prioritizes academic growth. While there may be chaos and instability in homes of children living in poverty, a positive school environment has been found to have a lasting positive effect on the academic success and future for students living in poverty (Berman et al., 2018). Having an adult in the school who a student feels is an ally helps to create a safe environment. The positive relationship is built on trust and a belief that the student holds the potential for academic success (Davis & Warner, 2018). When educators show a belief in a student's academic ability, a student begins to believe in his/her own self-worth. Educators need to show a student they care before a student will care to learn. When students feel valued and safe in an educational environment, they will find greater academic success.

Students living in poverty will not have the same academic opportunities as students living with wealth. Opportunities to increase reading and literacy skills, and an introduction to

technology, will increase the probability of academic success. Schools have the resources and facilities available to create opportunities for growth for students coming from families with a low SES. After-school programs are widely used in areas with high poverty rates, and they provide instruction and activities that would not be available to these families regularly (Bayless et al., 2018). Some of the programs used in the school I work at include an after-school math tutoring program and a drop-in basketball shoot around. After-school programs involving literacy interventions are especially important in early years education. Students who participate in programs early in their schooling gain more advanced language skills than their peers who do not take part in these programs (Bayless et al., 2018). The increase in vocabulary and literacy has a direct effect on academic success. A successful strategy to increase literacy is to provide students with books that can be taken home to read (Bayless et al., 2018). My school division addressed this issue by creating several little free libraries around our city. The opportunity for free literature gives anyone, and especially people living in poverty, an opportunity to take a book home at no charge. Providing an opportunity to build literacy skills by participating in after-school programs and with free libraries will increase the academic success of students from low SES.

Reading is a very important skill, and so is the ability to use technology. Technology is expensive. Students living in poverty struggle to access computers and are not confident to use technology or pursue a career involving it (Ball, Huang, Rikard & Cotten, 2017). Introducing students to technology will help to create feelings of comfort using it, and open up career possibilities for students who would not have had that chance. By becoming more familiar with technology such as computers and tablets, students open up opportunities for careers in the science, technology, electronics, and mathematics (STEM) field. This is the fastest growing field for employment after high school, and students will keep more doors open to possible careers, and extended educational opportunities, by increasing their comfort with technology. Creating opportunities for academic growth in after-school programs involving literacy and technology will give students living in poverty an opportunity to find academic success.

Students living in poverty need to build stronger social behaviours to support their academic success. Students can build these skills at school with the help of educators, and at home with guidance from their families. Educators are not available to students struggling in poverty all of the time, and they therefore need to help students develop positive social behaviours that will help them during difficult times. It is important for educators to model the behaviours for students, and to educate themselves and learn effective strategies. Students living in low SES struggle to afford proper mental health care and outside opportunities for skill building. Students will seek guidance and support from their classroom teachers. Schools can work to provide teachers with proper training and professional development opportunities, in order to ensure that teachers can provide students with the supports they require to be successful (Isik-Ecran, Demir-Dagdas, Cakmakci, Cava-Tadik, & Intepe-Tingir, 2017). With adequate training, educators can provide proper examples and opportunities for students in poverty to build positive social behaviours.

Along with positive teacher support, it is important to involve parents to help students build social skills. A positive parental influence will assist in the child's ability to use self-regulation during times of difficulty (Liew, Carlo, Streit, & Ispa, 2018). Building strong social skills such as resiliency should be introduced to children at a young age, in order to help them function independently as they move into adolescence (Berger et al., 2018). Students who develop these skills at a young age are more likely to use them in the future. It is important for students to build resiliency and the ability to overcome feelings of anxiety, and to learn interventions that involve stress reduction, in order to build positive social behaviours (Berger et al., 2018). Increasing opportunities for students, educating teachers, and involving parents are the most effective strategies to help students develop positive behaviours. Educators can diminish the effect that poverty has on academic achievement by building safe school environments, making educational opportunities available, and building a student's resiliency.

Conclusion

Students raised in low income families are likely to experience times of financial strain and tension in the home, which negatively affects achievement and their ability to interact with classmates (Jensen, 2009). Without proper funding to support families and programs in communities with high levels of poverty, there will continue to be a gap in academic achievement grounded in lowered opportunities for literacy development. Educators can confront the problem by ensuring that learning spaces are inviting for students, increasing the number of after school programs offered, making literature available for students to take at no cost, and helping students to build individual skills that will help them to self-regulate during stressful times (Bayless et al., 2018). Poverty is an obstacle on the path to academic success, but with support and guidance it can be overcome.

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About the Author

Tyler Sloan is enrolled in the Faculty of Education's graduate studies program at Brandon University. He is in his third year of working as a guidance counsellor at Morden Collegiate. He grew up in Morden and now is raising his family there. He enjoys coaching and the outdoors.