

## *Poverty and Learning: The Effects of Poverty in the Classroom*

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### *Abstract*

*“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”*  
Nelson Mandela (Strauss, 2013)

Nelson Mandela’s statement provides the basis for this article. Education provides a means of escaping the consequences of poverty. Children who live at or below the poverty level must overcome the detrimental effects of poverty before education can begin. The causes of poverty in America is as varied as the number of students affected. The one theme that evolved from the research is the number of children affected by poverty continues to grow (Flores, 2014; Ehrenfreund, 2016; Staff, 2017). With more than 19% of public school children affected by poverty in the United States, researchers are delving into the repercussions related to the long term effects of children living below the poverty level. This article reviews the prevalence of poverty and growth of “extreme” poverty. Through research, the author presents the expanse of poverty in the United States. The author also examines the educational effects of living at or below the poverty level for young children. The author examines several long-term and short-term studies relating to the physical evidence of developmental effects of poverty on childhood learning and the long term effects. Finally, this article offers several interventions that can help meet the needs of the most needy students.

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The great “War on Poverty” began in 1964 and was addressed again by President Clinton in 1996, as well as by every president since that time (Flores 2014; Ehrenfreund 2016). Even so, the U.S. Census reports an increase in the U.S. poverty levels from 14.3 percent to 15.1 percent (Staff, 2017). According to the current U. S. Government poverty rate, a family of four lives on between \$22, 314 -\$24,000 a year (Edin 2014; Staff 2017). Current figures equate to 46.2 million men women and children living at or below the poverty rate as of 2010 (Staff 2017; a CCHD Initiative 2015; Ehrenfreund 2016). The figures are even greater if one considers only the percentage of children living at or below the poverty level. While poverty rates differ from source to source, they are reported to be between 19.7 to 22 percent of all children in the U.S. live in poverty (Poverty USA; a CCHD Initiative 2015). Considering these figures, approximately 14.5 to 16 million children presently live in poverty or about 1 in every three children nationwide (Ingraham 2014; Bidwell 2013; Flores 2014). Childhood poverty rates surge even more so with children and parents who are living with a disability; to approximately 29 percent (Poverty USA; a CCHD Initiative, 2015). Over the last two decades, the poverty rates in the United States have become one of the highest of any of the wealthiest nations. An article by Shaefer and Edin, 2014, showed that a new, more perilous level of poverty has emerged in the years since 1996 (Edin, 2014). Another article confirms the existence of “extreme poor” living on either no income or less than \$2 per person per day (Ehrenfreund, 2016). The “extreme poor” arose after the welfare reform of 1996 and continued to grow with great prevalence and places

newer and more vulnerable generations of children at even greater risk (Edin 2014; Ehrenfreund 2016).

Just as there are cultural differences within every aspect of our country, so are there regional differences in the poverty levels across America. According to the United States Department of Agriculture, areas of poverty concentration within certain areas bound by religion, ethnic groups, counties, and neighborhoods (Farringan, 2017). The census reports allow that the differences in poverty clusters matters regarding the number of students identified, number of services available to students, and the changing economic status' in the given areas. However, areas historically affected by prevalent poverty distinguished as No metro appear mostly in the Southwest and Southern states (Farringan, 2017). This expanse notably inundated with deindustrialization and the influx of Hispanic populations in agricultural areas over the last two decades (Farringan, 2017). Historically, the south has been a concentrated area of childhood poverty. However, the current trends seem to indicate that "hot pocket" areas of childhood poverty are emerging in the Northern Midwest and Southwest (Luhby, 2015). Many of these "hot pocket" areas are showing rates as high as 23 percent (Poverty USA; a CCHD Initiative, 2015). The effects of poverty on the ability of students to learn are not regional, cultural, or biased in any other facet.

Many studies have shown that children living in poverty face many issues that remain with them throughout their lives (Bidwell, 2013). Reports link a number of adverse situations shown to impact children living in poverty from an early age to their ability to develop psychologically and emotionally at the rate comparable to their peers (Hart 2017; Slade 2015). Children living in poverty are assessed at a much greater risk for poor overall educational outcomes (Flores, 2014).

Constructs of educational learning in childhood are varied and complex. However, repeatedly voiced throughout research are several key risk factors that overwhelming connect learning deficits among children living in poverty and lower educational outcomes. Numerous studies document the effects of poverty on families and indirectly on children, and are now beginning to acknowledge the associated effects of poverty on the cognitive development and associated lower academic performance (Hair, Hanson, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2015). This review of the literature will identify the areas of concern for the educational community as well as provide strategies that will assist in meeting the needs of millions of students now living in poverty.

Factors associated with childhood poverty and lower educational outcomes for the child negatively affect the development of their social and emotional competence that lasts well into adulthood (Thompson, 2013). As children develop and grow from infancy into school age, there are specific milestones essential to motor, neural and emotional development (Joan Lubby et al. 2013; Hair et al. 2015; Hart 2017; Chang 2017). These psychological and emotional advances enable children to develop characteristics that enhance or delay their ability to learn and retain information relative to successful learning (Kwon 2015; Chang 2017).

In their article, *The Impact of Poverty on Educational Outcomes for Children* (2007), Ferguson, Bovaird, and Mueller indicated that poverty arrested children's readiness for school in the areas of health, home life, schooling, and neighborhoods (Ferguson, 2007). These interrelated areas create an inconsistency associated with literacy and language development that further impedes

school readiness (Budge, 2016). The risk factors associated with delayed readiness for school caused by exposure to poverty are shown to have a lasting effect on the student's ability to respond to the copious requirements needed to be successful in the learning environment (Chang, 2017). Recent research indicates that children living within the constraints of constant stress are associated with smaller than average brain volumes in developmental areas of memory and emotion (Bidwell 2013; Stromberg 2013; Joan Lubby et al. 2013). A Policy Brief sent out by the University of California, Davis shared thoughts of key risk factors clearly associated with the delay in cognitive development of children in poverty (Thompson 2013; Hart 2017; Hair et al. 2015). Another study shows that there is physical evidence showing the effects beyond the environmental factors that plague children living in poverty (Bidwell, 2013). Further, other researchers found that families living in poverty are more likely to have children with a lower interest in school and due to depression related to their lower socioeconomic status, are often associated with poor behavior in school (Hart, 2017). Children who are unable to assess their physical and emotional health are more likely to be truant, absent and to become dropouts (Hart, 2017). These findings are substantiated by others in that the extent of deferment is directly related to the incidence, depth, duration, and timing of the deprivation (Ferguson 2007; LSU Online 2017; Jensen 2013). Another study indicated that factors affecting deficits in learning associated with poverty are transmitted across generations creating a generational risk of poverty (Thompson, 2013). This study also specified that reversal of the compounding effects of poverty is possible by breaking the "generational poverty" cycle through forms of economic assistance as well as services addressing the emotional consequences (Thompson, 2013).

Knowledge is the key to curative measures regarding preventing educational and continued failure for children of poverty. Through recent studies, schools have learned that children residing in poverty are more likely to lag behind their grade level peers in literacy, math, the sciences, and indeed in social inadequacies, presenting poor educational outcomes (Flores 2014; Budge 2016; Birdsong 2016). Research also indicated that physical changes within the brain show persistent poverty influences not only the educational outcome but can duly impact the life outcomes of children living in long-term poverty (Ferguson 2007; Stromberg 2013; Slade 2015; Kwon 2015; Hart 2017). Many studies reviewed showed that poverty is a national problem and that it is a "generational" issue. They also indicated that interventions aimed at introducing the means of breaking this chain of poverty could, in fact, transmute the link between poverty and lower educational outcomes (Lubby et al. 2013; Edin 2014; Flores 2014; Ehrenfreund 2016). In this time of welfare reform, how can the communities and school districts venture to intervene in the lives of children living in poverty and make a lasting effect? Below is a short list of interventions that were found to be successful in some areas and may very well be used in others to assist in lessening the effects of poverty on educational communities.

### **Interventions**

- Better fund programs aimed at intervening in early childhood opportunities for at-risk students (LSU Online, 2017).
- Funding programs that encourage parents of preschoolers to send their children to approved preschools to increase their language learning, motor, and neural development.

- Increasing the availability of breakfast and lunch programs and assistance with food subsidies for weekends and holidays.
- Provide funding for neighborhood library programs that help parents increase vocabulary and literacy learning.
- Providing before and after school tutoring is one way of assisting older students who lag academically.
- Providing funding for parent centers to present not only learning materials but offer parent and caregiver training sessions.
- Offer more professional development for teachers and school officials to develop strategies that help diversify teaching methods.
- Training for Counselors and administrators in identifying resources available for parents and caregivers to help with rent, clothing, and other necessities.

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