

Impact of Poverty on Teaching and Learning

EDT 422 Capstone Erica Holman and Whitney Conrad

Research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to children's well-being (NCCP, 2014). Among wealthy nations, the United States has the highest rate of child poverty at 22 percent (Garris, 2014).

Does living in poverty pose greater challenges for children, especially in regards to schooling? This is becoming a more prevalent question within the realm of education as schools continue to become more and more diverse. Therefore, the content below represents extensive research regarding the impact that poverty has on both teaching and learning.

I. Understanding the Implications of Poverty on Children

With schools becoming more diverse every year, it is especially important for teachers and future educators to be aware of the implications that poverty poses for children who may be living in poverty. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, poverty is defined as "having a total income that is less than the persons/ families threshold"; if this is a family, then every member of the family is considered to be living in poverty.

- The term at-risk refers to children who are likely to fail in school or in life because of their life's social circumstances; 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 (Garris, 2014).

- The most significant risk factors affecting children raised in poverty, (the word EACH is a handy mnemonic)(Jensen, 2009):

1. Emotional and Social Challenges
2. Acute and Chronic Stressors
3. Cognitive Lags
4. Health and Safety Issues

- Children coming from low-SES families face emotional and social instability (Jensen, 2009).

- Not only does economic background contribute to academic success or failure, but teachers' reduced expectations can also diminish student learning (Garris, 2014). -Children of poverty generally achieve at lower levels than children of middle and upper classes. The causes are numerous and are related to both the social environment in which poor children live and the education they receive in school (Garris, 2014).

II. Impact of Poverty on Teaching

Children living in poverty face greater, and more, challenges than other children. Therefore, since children living in poverty may not have access to resources that can further their learning, it is crucial that teachers modify/ adapt their teaching instructions/ methods in order to accommodate for children living in poverty.

- Do NOT conform to the deficit theory.

- Teachers are responsible for getting children living in poverty motivated and eager to learn.

- Schools, and teachers, can have a powerful impact on the academic achievement and success of all children by viewing them as 'at-promise' rather than 'at-risk' and preparing them to reach their full potential (Garris, 2014).

-A good education is often the only means of breaking the cycle of poverty for poor children (Garris, 2014):

- Create an education that is founded in high standards and high expectations.
- Use a rigorous curriculum as well as assessments that are aligned with the standards.

-What occurs in OUR classrooms has a significant impact on student achievement (Garris, 2014):

- Content should be of high quality and be culturally relevant.

-Understanding 'EACH' (mentioned above) and taking action in order to help the less-advantaged students succeed (Jensen, 2009).

III. Impact of Poverty on Learning

Poverty poses a number of challenges and daily struggles for children that ultimately impact their ability to learn. For example, children who are raised in poverty do not always access to resources that are necessary for daily survival; shelter, clothing, and food are not always available and children living in poverty often times go to, and leave, school hungry. Therefore, not having access to necessities for survival impact a child's ability to learn in a negative way.

-Poverty can impede children's ability to learn and contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Poverty also can contribute to poor health and mental health. Risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young and/or experience deep and persistent poverty (NCCP, 2014).

-The stresses of poverty — such as crowded conditions, financial worry, and lack of adequate child care — lead to impaired learning ability in children from impoverished backgrounds (National Institutes of Health).

-Deficit theory, or the tendency to define a student by his weaknesses instead of his strengths, can be destructive within a classroom (Garris, 2014).

-Not only does economic background contribute to academic success or failure, but teachers' reduced expectations can also diminish student learning (Garris, 2014).

-Children of poverty are automatically at a disadvantage when they enter school because of the lack of resources, which results in frequent absences, inattention, and a flimsy educational foundation (Garris, 2014).

- Children raised in poverty are more likely to display (Jensen, 2009):

- "Acting-out" behaviors
- -Impatience and impulsivity
- Gaps in politeness and social graces
- A more limited range of behavioral responses
- Inappropriate emotional responses
- Less empathy for others' misfortunes

-Most common risk-factors of children who are raised in poverty which present extraordinary challenges to academic and social success (Jensen, 2009):

- Emotional and social challenges

- Acute and chronic stressors
- Cognitive Delays
- Health issues

-Strong, secure relationships help stabilize children's behavior and provide the core guidance needed to build lifelong social skills. However, children raised in poor households often fail to learn these responses, to the detriment of their school performance (Jensen, 2009).

IV. What This Means as A Teacher

As a teacher and future educator, you will be exposed to children living in poverty and these children will be your students. However, in order to break the stereotype of poverty within schools, it is your responsibility to go against the norms and to accommodate for the children living in poverty; have high expectations, don't label the students, and be there for these students both socially and emotionally.

Testimony from Jamiee Harbin; Teach for America candidate in inner-city Chicago:

"Jaylen is a twin, and he and his brother take on very different personalities in the classroom. Jaylen is Mr. Charming, Mr. Breakdancer, and Mr. Jokes. He comes in each and every day with a big grin and a pickup line. He tells me that he loves me every morning and every afternoon, and he is constantly getting out of his seat to give me a hug. He has the best sense of humor, and he insists on everyone calling him "J4". Last week, he came up to me and said, "Ms. Harbin, last night I had a dream that I beat you up and went to jail." At the time, I laughed it off; until the next day when I had found out that his dad had gone to jail that weekend for beating up his mom. Before I found out about his father, his dream had been funny. Now it crushes me to be reminded of his five-year old reality, as compared to what mine had been. I love Jaylen with every inch of my heart and soul. I would say the exact same thing about all 26 of my kindergarteners. I am their supporter, their biggest fan, their disciplinarian, their advocate, and their role model. I am their teacher, but this title does not give our profession justice. To them, I am so much more than a teacher. To me, they are so much more than my students."