

# The Effects of Poverty on Teaching and Learning

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: Diversity

The rise in the number of children in poverty has contributed to making our nation's classrooms more diverse than ever before. This, indeed, makes both teaching and learning more challenging. This issue can remain a challenge for teachers, as opposed to becoming a problem, if focus is placed on student learning as opposed to teaching.

Teachers need to be tuned in to the culture of poverty and be sensitive to the vast array of needs that children of poverty bring to the classroom. Social contexts have a significant impact on the development of children. The social world of school operates by

different rules or norms than the social world these children live in. Focus should be placed on finding a harmonious relationship between the cultural values of students and values emphasized in school. 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).

High-mobility is a symptom of poverty and its surrounding social factors. Children of poverty may live in places that rent by the week or even day. They may move from town to town as their parent searches for work or runs from problems (such as an abusive spouse, criminal record, financial responsibilities). They may live in homeless shelters or battered women's shelters that only allow brief stays. They may live on the streets. The conditions they live in and their day-to-day life experiences can have a significant effect on their education and achievement. Moving is a very emotional event for children. Combine this issue with the multitude of other issues faced by mobile and homeless children and the impact on their emotional, social and cognitive development can be overwhelming.

School attendance is often irregular. Transfer to a new school becomes the norm. Aside from the differences from the general school population due to other aspects of their poverty, mobility compounds the difficulty these children have making friends. They may behave hostilely or be totally withdrawn due to past attempts to make friends. With regard to both the academic and social aspects of school, they may figure, "Why bother? I'm just going to move again." They also often come to school with no records from their previous schools; and it may be difficult for schools to track the records down. Teachers have no idea what these students have learned. It is challenging for schools to place these children in classrooms and get them additional services they may need. Even if placement is successful, these children will likely move again within the school year. It is also challenging to help these students to learn at least something of value while they remain in our classrooms.

Children become aware of social and economic status differences at a very young age. They also grow increasingly aware of both their own social status and that of their peers, developing class-related attitudes during their years in elementary school. Teachers can help children to develop caring and sensitivity toward different cultures including social classes. Activities and lessons should be based on how children perceive themselves and the world at the various stages of development. For example, children who are in the age range of 7-12 years are less egocentric. They focus on internal characteristics or traits of people as opposed to external, observable social class differences. They also recognize similarities and differences among groups. At around age 11, children can consider causes and solutions to poverty.

Taking into account a spiral curriculum, at earlier ages children can become acquainted with social class and other cultural differences. During the latter years, the topic can be revisited for deeper

understanding. This is a great opportunity to include community service-learning projects in the curriculum, such as volunteering as a class in a soup kitchen. It is important that these activities be followed with both group discussion and individual reflection to help children think critically about their experiences (Chafel, 1997; Gomez, 2000).

As teachers, these aspects of poverty make planning and preparation absolutely critical. Content needs to be related in varying ways to meet the needs of the diverse students in the

classroom. We have to consider the cultural values of these children as we arrange their learning. Constructivism is a key concept in that it respects student differences and allows students to use their own prior knowledge and experiences to make connections and learn. It affords students the opportunity to become active learners by questioning, hypothesizing and drawing conclusions based on their individual learning experiences. If there is limited foundation for children to draw upon, we need to help them develop a base of knowledge and experiences so they have somewhere to start.

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 them 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). Thus, diversity actually presents us with a chance to enhance the quality of education for all our students and provide them with a variety of opportunities to develop into productive citizens. As our schools and nation become more diverse, the need for understanding and acceptance of differences becomes more important. Our challenge is to provide children with an effective multicultural education that will foster awareness, respect, and acceptance.

### **Challenge: The Achievement Gap**

The difference in academic performance among children from different classes or groups (ethnic, racial, income) is referred to as the achievement gap. 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. Factors such as the quality of student learning behaviors, home environment, past experiences with education, and teacher attitudes are among the many influences on student achievement. Slavin (1998) proposes that schools 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.

A good education is often the only means of breaking the cycle of poverty for poor children. These children need an education that is founded in high standards and high expectations for all. Curriculum alignment must exist to ensure that a rigorous curriculum and assessment accompany and are aligned with the standards. What occurs in our classrooms has a significant impact on student achievement. The curriculum should be challenging to prevent decreased opportunity for higher education, which translates into less opportunity in life for them.

Content should be of high quality and be culturally relevant. A watered-down curriculum is unacceptable. Teachers should be knowledgeable of the cultures in which their students live so they can plan effective and engaging lessons. 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). Other aspects that can help close the achievement gap are discussed in the following sections: motivation, readiness and parent/family involvement.

An article by Haycock (2001) addresses issues related to poverty and the achievement gap through research conducted by The Education Trust in the late 1990's. They questioned both children and adults on what they suspect are causes of this achievement gap. One comment among those made by the children was, "What hurts us more is that you teach us less." Haycock (2001) concludes: "...we take the students who have less to begin with and then systematically give them less in school." What schools do obviously matters. What also matters is effective teaching.