

Important Work: Teaching Children of Poverty

When I completed a voluntary year at an elementary school in Germany, I worked as a special needs assistant for a handicapped boy. The class got a new student, her name was Pauline, and the teacher tried to integrate her and help her make new friends. After a while, we recognized that Pauline was having issues with lice. In one year, she had lice three times. It did not take long until her classmates found out about her situation, and started to take distance from her. Pauline also wore the same unfitting clothes over and over again, had poor oral hygiene, and made a disheveled appearance. Her grades were bad and she became very solitary. The fact that she came from a poor socioeconomic background did not only influence her social life, but also her school performance. Unfortunately, the teacher did not have much knowledge about how to teach children of poverty and was not able to help her. As 43% of students' academic performance can be traced to the quality of the teacher, an intense knowledge about this field as well as using appropriate strategies is vital (Marzano and Kendall).

In order to clarify under what circumstances a child is considered of living in poverty, The Center of Excellence to Prepare Teachers of Children in Poverty provides the following definition: "Young persons who currently live (or who have lived a significant period of life) in an environment in which one or more of the resources identified as important for one to develop potential and function effectively in society has been unavailable". According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 18% of children under the age of eighteen lived in poverty in 2016, which is approximately 13.3 million children in the whole country (Semega et al.). In the state of South Carolina, 22.7% of children lived below the poverty line in 2017 (Center for American Progress). To name just a few, the

consequences and struggles which affected children face due to their socioeconomic status are “delayed language development, lower literacy rates, poor numeracy skills, and higher rates of behavioral and emotional disorders” (Manning and Gaudelli 237).

It is the teacher who can cause a change in children’s lives, and when they “are sensitive and supportive, school can be a place where students in homeless situations receive much-needed structure, reliable relationships, physical and emotional nurture, and motivation” (Manning and Gaudelli 46). The problem is that many educators are not aware of who and how many of their students might be affected by poverty. This may be due to the fact that students do not want to talk about their situation, because they feel embarrassed, or they do not want to be stigmatized. A way to identify them is to pay attention to the following symptom categories: depression; poor health, hygiene, and nutrition; as well as the demonstration of chronic stress. Whenever a student is identified as living in poverty and/or as being homeless, the teacher should contact the homeless liaison, who will provide help for the learner (Manning and Gaudelli 47).

Another problem is that educators have received little, if any, training to work with children living in poverty. A research based model that has been developed by the Francis Marion University Center of Excellence to Prepare Teachers of Children of Poverty provides knowledge and support for pre-service teacher candidates, graduate education students, and current teachers. To gain more knowledge about this topic during college/university as well as throughout the teacher preparation program will hopefully be provided in the future in the whole country.

Probably one of the most desired goals throughout school for children is to fit in, and to have a reputable status among their peers. If these conditions are not fulfilled, their

sense of belonging and self-concept will decrease, which will have a negative influence on their performance in school. On the contrary, the feeling of being valued and respected will positively affect their development (Devlin et al. 7). Teachers need to know and understand their students first before they can teach them, and realize that disciplinary issues or bad performances might be due to deeper problems. Knowing the circumstances and “challenges they are facing while studying improves retention rates and the overall success of students” (Devlin et al. 7). Consequently, an important advice for educators is to have a good relationship with their students, and to help them regain status by identifying them, talking to them, being available, making them feel valued and important, as well as by utilizing their skills. A way to do so is to include learners’ opinions, as it will let them know that their views matter and will make them feel welcome to participate in class. Additionally, a safe atmosphere within the classroom is vital for children to perform well. In order to achieve this goal, “an atmosphere of community [...] in which all students’ feelings and situations are accepted and stigmatization is out of the question” must be provided (Manning and Gaudelli 47).

The teacher also needs to make sure that all students have access to the needed material before homework are assigned, and ask the homeless liaison for help when families are not able to provide school material on their own (Manning and Gaudelli 47). In reference to this, children living in poverty oftentimes struggle with reading as their family cannot afford books. If book read-alouds have never been experienced throughout childhood, this may have consequences for the child’s brain development. Consequently, their brain might be different from that of other children who were exposed to literature during early childhood and therefore have pre-reading skills. Neuroscientist Martha Burns

points out that “brain differences play a crucial role” and that teachers can help students at a neurological level. A human’s brain is highly plastic, which means it can physically, functionally, and chemically change over time. If circumstances around a student do not change, the brain does not change either. It is important that the teacher uses this plasticity and provides support for learners to alter the conditions of their brain. To make change happen, schools are advised to use the thirty hour school week, because it is a suitable amount of time to give students the education they need without overtaxing them.

What should also be taken into account by the educator is to work on vocabulary with students as soon as they enter school. Children living in poverty typically have a smaller repertoire of words than middle and upper-class children, “this language difference is not subtle; it’s a mind-boggling, jaw-dropping cognitive chasm” (Jensen 26). Exposing young learners to a high number of words as soon as they enter school will decrease the risk for future academic failure. Teachers can include vocabulary building by having the students write a new word on one side of a card and a sentence that involves the new word on the other side. Jensen also suggests a “class mixer” in which the cards are put into and a student or the teacher draw a card from the bowl and ask the class to incorporate the word in a sentence (26).

As children living in poverty are more likely to have poor health and nutrition, schools can provide help by offering free or reduced-price meals for those in need. Suffering from hunger has a huge impact on one’s productivity and ability to focus and concentrate. Skipping breakfast is common among families living underneath the poverty line and “negatively affects students’ academic achievement by adversely affecting cognition and raising absenteeism” (Jensen 24). As families oftentimes cannot afford their

children to have three meals per day, teachers and schools can make a big change in a child's life by providing a healthy breakfast and/or lunch, which will lead to a higher state of concentration in class. Physical education also benefits a child's health by reducing some of the consequences associated with unhealthy nutrition and by increasing oxygen intake due to movement, which contributes to better learning. Thus, the teacher should never withhold recess as a means of disciplining a student (Jensen 25). Additionally, children living in poverty might struggle with subjects like mathematics or language arts, while they may demonstrate good performances in physical education. To exclude them from a subject they might perform well in will result in demotivating them and to not let them experience success.

To conclude this essay, I would like to point out that, nowadays, classrooms are more diverse than they were in the past, which does not only refer to a student's learning or developmental level, but also to his/her socioeconomic background. In comparison to middle and upper class students, the conditions under which children of poverty complete school are highly unequal. Nevertheless, all students are supposed to gain the same degree whether it is from high school or college. This essay exemplified different ways of supporting students to overcome this abuse and to help them perform successfully in school. Among others, increasing their status, building relationships, providing needed material, changing their brains, working on vocabulary, and providing free or price-reduced meals as well as time for physical education will contribute to teach children of poverty effectively.

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