Empowering Impoverished Youth Through Autonomous Community Outreach Strategies to Improve Learning and Academic Success

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Abstract

Millions of students in the U.S. continue to live in varying degrees of poverty and the impact it has on learning and academic achievement cannot be understated. These students have specific learning needs as well as emotional and social challenges, and these must be accounted for by educators. Bridging the school system with the surrounding community through outreach strategies for students living in poverty has the potential to not only improve academic success, but the community in which they reside. The aim of this article was to examine the literature to ascertain specific needs of students living in poverty, identify community outreach programs and strategies that demonstrate positive results, and provide suggestions on how to effectively utilize this approach with impoverished youth.

Keywords

poverty, youth, community outreach, empowerment, academic success

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Empowering Impoverished Youth Through Autonomous Community Outreach Strategies to Improve Learning and Academic Success

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In the 2013–2014 academic school year, 82% of public high school students graduated with a diploma in 4 years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016). While this statistic continues to trend in a positive direction, nearly 20% of students are still being left behind. A deeper examination reveals gaping disparities based on ethnicity. Asian/Pacific Islander (89%) and White (87%) students perform much better academically than Hispanic (76%), Black (73%), and American Indian/Alaska Native (70%) students (NCES, 2016). Analyzing further, students living in poverty represent an additional disparity group that warrants attention. Every reporting state in 2012 revealed that low-income students graduated at a lower rate compared to non-low-income students with some states at nearly 30% lower (GradNation, 2014). In 2013, 51% of public school students were categorized as low-income, thus representing the majority of the nation’s student body (Southern Education Foundation, 2015).

Jensen (2009) identified the following factors that affect behavior and academic success of impoverished youth: emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues. However, it is important to note that these factors even when combined, do not automatically guarantee academic failure. Jensen further noted that by understanding these barriers to learning, an educator can improve the likelihood of academic success for students placed at risk due to their economic status.

This literature review focused on students with varying degrees and labels associated with poverty (low-income, low socioeconomic status, deep poverty, etc.) and the impact that poverty has on learning, academic performance, and other factors related to student achievement. The author also investigated autonomous community outreach strategies with potential to empower impoverished students to improve their learning and academic success.

IMPOVERISHED YOUTH

Relationships between poverty and academic performance have been studied for decades in many geographic regions in the United States. Children living in poverty enter school already behind in terms of academic performance and social skills (Tauck Family Foundation, n.d.). In addition, other measures of academic success point in a negative direction when it comes to children from low-income homes. Children living in poverty are more likely to drop out of high school compared to affluent students (Tauck Family Foundation, n.d.). This can have a negative long-term effect when attempting to navigate through life without a high school diploma.

Children under 18 years of age living in low-income families (defined as less than 200% of the federal poverty threshold) have been on the rise in the U.S. (39% in 2008 to 44% in 2014), and multiple disparities in regards to ethnicity continue to exist (Jiang, Ekono, & Skinner, 2016). While a significant number of children from all ethnic groups reside in low-income households, they are disproportionally represented. Sixty-five percent of African American (6.3 million children), 62% of American Indian (0.3 million), and 62% of Hispanic children (10.9 million) live in low-income families compared to 31% of White (11.4 million) and 30% of Asian American
children (1.0 million) (Jiang et al., 2016). While this points to a concern with all ethnic groups when it comes to children living in poverty, it suggests that specific attention based on ethnicity is justified.

When it comes to the number of children living in deep poverty (a family of three surviving on less than $9,276 annually [less than $9 a day]), the statistics are alarming. Currently 11% of children under age 9 live in families categorized as deep poverty (Ekono, Jiang, & Smith, 2016). Analyzing this by state reveals gaping disparities as well. For example, 5% of children from North Dakota live in deep poverty whereas Mississippi (18%), South Carolina (16%), West Virginia (14%) and Kentucky (14%) are significantly higher (Ekono et al., 2016). While all 50 states are not immune to children living in deep poverty, this suggests that resources, strategies, and other means may need to be proportionally allocated based on state percentages.

Students born into poverty have different needs that educators should consider in order to improve academic success for this group. Pogrow (2009) discussed how impoverished youth in Grades 4 and 5 require specialized teaching methods as this is when this population begins to fall behind other students. Pogrow also noted that remedial teaching is futile after Grade 3; one potential reason for this is the lack of conversation in low-income homes essential to vocabulary and cognitive development. There are numerous pedagogical strategies to address this issue, but identifying these students early and often is critical. Pogrow suggested the following strategies when working with impoverished youth: increase sense of understanding through small group work, limit direct instruction, link concepts to students’ worldview (instead of the worldview of adults), and focus on more than test preparation.

When students from a low socioeconomic background enter a classroom, the potential for a negative perception and thus disadvantage presents itself. Walpole (2003) discussed how teachers have greater expectations from students of high socioeconomic status, while students in poverty are often viewed as having lower prospects and probability of being successful. Expectations being lowered and labeling students based on socioeconomic status is concerning. Zammit (2011) highlighted how students with a label of low socioeconomic status often becoming disenchanted with learning because of the message this label conveys regarding their academic abilities.

Another area for examination is the disparity in student performance over the past few decades between children from low-income and high-income settings. Reardon (2013) found that over the past 50 years, the gap between students coming from high income versus low-income homes continues to widen. Poverty affects academic achievement in a variety of ways. Lacour and Tissington (2011) noted how lack of resources associated with low socioeconomic status is closely correlated with low achievement for students. Resources are not limited to just financial means, but also include emotional and physical well-being, role models, and other components associated with optimal wellness.

There are additional factors for students living in poverty that affect their academic achievement. Parrett and Budge (2012) outlined that substandard housing, inadequate medical care, and improper nutrition can all have an effect on cognitive development and are associated with a number of health risks that impact student learning. In addition, poverty plays a major role in the stability of a student’s living situation. Students who move often from one location to another because of reasons associated with poverty (parents searching for work or other financial related reasons) end up being negatively impacted both academically and socially (Parrett & Budge, 2012).

There is a direct relationship between impoverished status and academic progress and achievement because poverty can result
in language gaps, attendance issues, summer learning loss, and motivational problems (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2014). These issues are not endemic to one particular state as child poverty continues to have a major impact across the county, and all 50 states experienced increases in child poverty over the past four years (Baker et al., 2014).

As previously mentioned, language gaps are one particular area that affects achievement for low socioeconomic status students compared to their more affluent counterparts. Children who are quicker at recognizing familiar words at 18 months have bigger vocabularies at two years of age and score higher on standardized tests of language and cognition in elementary school (Fernald, Marchman & Weisleder, 2013). Language development plays a key role in student achievement throughout their educational experience, and research shows that students living in poverty experience delays in their language development beginning in infancy.

Additionally, the high school graduation rates of impoverished youth is another area to examine for disparities. Jensen (2013) highlighted that half of all poor students of color drop out of school, and nearly 70% of all children who do not graduate from high school have lived in poverty for at least one year. When compared to affluent students, these statistics become even more telling. In 2009, the dropout rate for students living in low-income families was five times greater than high-income families (Jensen, 2013).

COMMUNITY OUTREACH STRATEGIES
Community outreach is an approach that allows for students to teach, research, work, and learn in a community setting. This literature review focused on community outreach programs that have shown success with economically disadvantaged youth. In addition, multiple grade levels including the K–12 school system and collegiate level were explored. Community outreach programs for this investigation were limited to the United States during the last 10 years.

One form of community outreach is defined as “service-learning” and this strategy is often used to link community service and in-class study at all levels (high school, college, etc.). Wasburn-Moses, Fry, and Sanders (2014) conducted a service-learning program at a midwestern university focused on mentorship between college participants and youth enrolled in an on-campus alternative school. At the end of the program, college-level participants reported an increased awareness of diversity and complexity in the life of their mentees. This provides one example of bridging the college classroom with the surrounding community to improve the learning experience for all members involved.

Service-learning is rooted in the work of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Kurt Lewin and allows for problem solving opportunities to present themselves and aid in the learning process for students (Mayhew & Engberg, 2011). This pedagogical approach is a form of community outreach that can be utilized with youth experiencing multiple risks. The local community provides an excellent forum for learning to take place, and outreach strategies have the potential to improve different facets of the community, especially for those living in poverty.

Mucedola (2015) discussed how activities designed by teachers to produce materials and products with students in class, while also learning content and practicing skills, can then be disseminated in the local community as a form of community outreach. This allows for learning to occur outside the classroom for all parties involved while also addressing needs in the local community. Mucedola further noted that proven health promotion models can be used as a framework for a community outreach program; existing health education organizations (e.g., National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, 2015; U.S.
Department of Health and Human Services, 2016) can serve as a resource when developing program goals and objectives. From a health education standpoint, community outreach in this fashion allows for all these vital resources in the public health field to come together to address issues in the community while empowering students and local community members during the process.

Another form of community outreach is through the utilization of community health workers. Zandee, Bossenbroek, Slager, and Gordon (2013) discussed how community health workers can be used for health promotion in underserved populations. Student teams were sent out in low-income communities to assess the population and administer care as a cost-effective approach. While community health workers can serve a variety of functions under the health promotion umbrella, the concept of community outreach and its effectiveness as a way to serve students and families living in poverty cannot go unnoticed and should be utilized.

The CASTLES (Communities and Students Together for Learning Enhanced Service) program falls under the community outreach heading and has been shown to be effective. Wofford, Froeber, Clinton, and Ruchman (2013) conducted an after-school CASTLES program for low-income African American youth to increase health knowledge (focusing on nutrition and exercise) and achieved significant results, including lowering the risk of type 2 diabetes in this group. There were 56 health units in this community-based after-school program and 46 children participated, focusing on team building and active learning. This was an effective community outreach method to influence behavior of these students and their community; it also provided an additional way to tackle disparities based on the intersection of socioeconomic status and ethnicity. Wofford et al. (2013) noted that transportation issues were a barrier for youth participation; however, this barrier can be overcome if the program is conducted during regular school hours.

The Science in Action service learning program was created for middle school students to examine the relationship between STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) projects and academic engagement, civic responsibility, and performance of students placed at risk due to their socioeconomic status. Newman, Dantzler, and Coleman (2015) found that student engagement and achievement for youth living in high poverty areas improved from this community outreach strategy. This project involved over 6000 middle school students, 126 science teachers, 20 schools, and corresponding communities. With this approach, learning situations are designed to teach students to become producers of knowledge and not just recipients of information (Newman et al., 2015).

Project Dignity was created as a service-learning experience for students while addressing needs in their local community. The process of identifying a need with authentic research strategies and community engagement was the focus; students would then verify the identified need with community members (International Baccalaureate, 2015). Interviews, surveys, and observational strategies were utilized and integrated into the curriculum. Poverty was one focus of this community outreach strategy, and the aim was for classroom instruction to be supported by activities to improve the health of the community (International Baccalaureate, 2015). This provides another angle on how community outreach strategies can reach low socioeconomic neighborhoods by utilizing stakeholders that live in those areas.

Some view community outreach as a culminating experience that occurs in classes with a practicum or internship. However, Baggerly (2006) discussed how service-learning type community outreach strategies should be implemented prior to practicum experiences by conducting classroom guidance lessons in school that serve low-income students
and provide opportunities for self-reflection (through journaling, reflection papers, creative activities and class presentations). Service-learning with children affected by poverty allows for specific multicultural needs to be addressed. Baggerly went on to highlight how this community outreach approach with low-income children can help them and school personnel ascertain how they learn best.

Community outreach strategies allow youth to be active and involved and presents unique problem solving opportunities that assists them in shaping their own identities. Nelson and Sneller (2011) highlighted a number of important aspects of service-learning programs that contribute to closing achievement gaps between students of poverty and those from advantaged backgrounds (including building prosocial behaviors, improving self-esteem, and enhancing school success for students). In addition, student satisfaction and engagement can be targeted. Students living in poverty who participated in service-learning were found to have unexpected satisfaction with community outreach projects which, in turn, increased their engagement at school (Nelson & Sneller, 2011). This provides further evidence that community outreach for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds can impact students not only within their communities, but within the regular school environment as well.

FINDINGS
This literature review highlighted a number of disparities with students living in various levels of poverty and the impact it has on learning and academic achievement. Jensen (2013) argued that there are no unmotivated students, just teachers whose classrooms are uncaring, irrelevant, and boring, and also fail to engage students to the point of meeting their needs. Students living in poverty have specific needs that must be accounted for in order to increase performance, retention, and graduation rates at all levels. While there are numerous disadvantages for students of low socioeconomic status, this does not ultimately prevent them from being successful if specific measures are taken by educators.

Disparities specifically outlined with this group centered on the state in which they reside, ethnicity, degree of poverty, resources, and labeling status. In addition, emotional and social needs, achievement levels, attendance barriers, language gaps, and dropout rates were also cited. Taken as a whole, this review suggests that impoverished youth have multiple areas that require attention in order to improve academic success.

Community outreach that comes in various forms (including service-learning) has shown to be an effective approach at improving student learning, engagement, self-esteem, and a variety of other important components of overall wellness for youth living in poverty. A number of different community outreach programs were described, but a consistent theme throughout was allowing the students to have autonomous project-based learning opportunities in their local community. This approach provides an environment to empower students and individuals in the surrounding community while improving learning, performance, and overall student achievement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE
As lawmakers, policy writers, and curriculum developers continue to address poverty and the impact it has on student learning, achievement, and quality of life, this review suggests community outreach strategies are a worthwhile endeavor. The previous review illustrated that students living in poverty have specific needs and a variety of community outreach strategies can be used to address these needs. In addition, the communities in which these students reside have much to gain from this approach.

Impoverished youth can be used as part of the solution to address their low
socioeconomic status instead of being viewed as part of the problem that needs fixing. While there continues to be a number of methods, policies, and programs to aid this group, a cost-effective and more efficient approach may be to allow for more autonomous service learning opportunities for these students. In addition, incorporating this pedagogical strategy of learning into regular curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation could prove to be a very effective way to meet the needs of this population.

SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW DIRECTIONS
Continued attention to addressing students living in poverty is justified, and community outreach strategies have shown promise at improving learning and academic performance. Sheldon (2003) found that schools that involve families and the surrounding community in the student learning process were effective at improving student performance. Community outreach strategies in the educational process at all learning levels as part of the regular school curriculum can be a valuable means to address multiple needs of impoverished youth.

Community outreach comes in various forms but the basic premise is having students learn material in the classroom under the instructors’ supervision, and then setting them up to disseminate, teach, observe, and research in the corresponding community. This process allows students to have a forum to practice skills, learn new knowledge, and obtain value through carefully developed cognitive, psychomotor and affective objectives for a particular unit. Dewey (1938) highlighted the benefits of learning by doing. Community outreach as a pedagogical approach allows students to take ownership of their learning while becoming active in the learning process.

Community outreach can be an empowering experience for students as they now become teachers. Nestojko, Bui, Kornell, and Bjork (2014) discussed how learning for students improves by virtue of them simply expecting and preparing to teach. Ketmao (2014) concurred that learning by teaching is an effective approach for students as it allows them to apply knowledge and skills and retain information. Students living in poverty and the communities in which they reside have specific needs that can be met when the stakeholders are at the forefront in addressing these issues. In addition, students can become empowered during this process and improve learning and academic success.

There are additional service-learning opportunities that can be utilized to address the needs of youth living in poverty. Classroom projects that allow for problem solving, account for different learning styles and cultures, and promote autonomy in the community have shown promise during this review. Implementing this approach in school districts with students living in poverty is warranted and can be a cost-effective strategy to address many issues in the surrounding communities in which these students reside.

CONCLUSION
There are over 16 million children in the U.S. living in families below the federal income poverty level (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2016). This situation has devastating consequences and impacts student learning, academic achievement, and overall quality of life. Bridging the school system with the surrounding community through community outreach opportunities has the potential to improve these outcomes for impoverished youth. In addition, attendance, retention, and graduation rates for low-income students can be improved with this approach as it leads to an empowering experience.

Community outreach strategies have great potential through the utilization of students living in poverty to help not only themselves, but the communities they reside in. While many current efforts and policies target improving
the conditions and causes of student poverty and view their circumstance as a negative, this approach is designed to put impoverished students in a position to become empowered and thus able to improve and sustain their situation by increasing learning and academic success.

Often students living in poverty will drop out of school to find ways to earn money in order to purchase material possessions they have been without. This temporary satisfaction soon dissipates and they are left with minimal options without having earned a high school diploma and additional education as well. Providing community outreach opportunities that connect schools with the local community creates a scenario where students have the potential to reap the intrinsic rewards that are associated with this experience and thus improve their desire to continue their education.

REFERENCES


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