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Interview with Eric Jensen: Enriching Mindsets for Teachers of Students in Poverty

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Interview with Eric Jensen: Enriching Mindsets for Teachers of Students in Poverty

Abstract

In this interview, Eric Jensen, an internationally recognized speaker and writer on student poverty and brain-based learning, discusses how the educational mindsets and practical strategies from his latest two books, *Poor Students, Rich Teaching: Mindsets for Change* (2016) and *Poor Students, Richer Teaching: Mindsets for Change* (2017), can enrich the learning of students in poverty. Some of the new mindsets include how to enrich classroom relationships, student achievement, student engagement, and school climate for student success.

Keywords

education, poverty, mindsets, brain-based learning, achievement gap

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Interview with Eric Jensen:
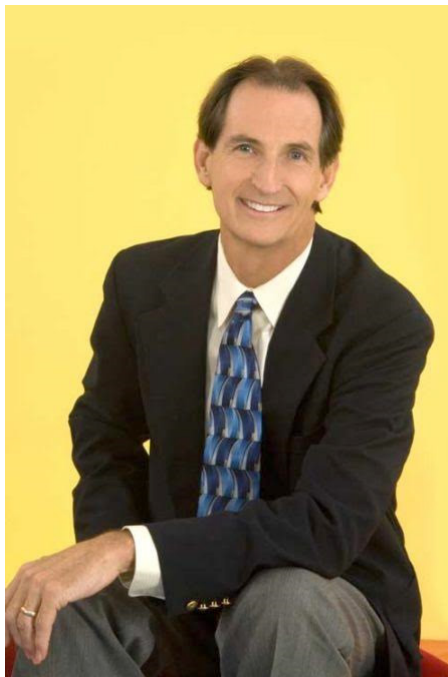# Enriching Mindsets for Teachers of Students in Poverty

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According to the American Dream, students regardless of their socioeconomic status should have a fair chance to advance to any position in society through education and hard work. Unfortunately, in the United States one in five students lives in poverty (Child Trends, 2016), which makes them likely to start the school year approximately four years behind their affluent peers (Reardon, 2011). This achievement disparity between low-income students and high-income students is called the "income achievement gap," and it has been growing for several decades. For children born in 1970 through 2001, the income achievement gap increased 40%, while the racial achievement gap between Black and White students narrowed. Currently, the income achievement gap is twice as large as the racial achievement gap (Reardon, 2011). Research also shows that the income achievement gap is already large for entering kindergarten students and does not change significantly as they advance through school (Reardon, 2011). According to Reardon (2013), "If we do not find ways to reduce the growing inequality in education outcomes—between the rich and the poor—schools will no longer be the great equalizer we want them to be" (p. 10).

On December 8, 2016, Dan Rea, Founding Editor, *National Youth-At-Risk Journal*, interviewed Eric Jensen, an internationally recognized speaker and writer on student poverty and brain-based learning. In this interview, Jensen offers practical evidence- and brain-based recommendations for schoolteachers, counselors, administrators, and policymakers to enrich the education of students in poverty and reduce the income achievement gap. According to Jensen, educators can and must make a difference in the lives and education of students in poverty not only for the sake of these vulnerable students but also for the benefit of society in general. As he states in the interview, it is imperative to educate the large number of students in poverty because "we're going to be living in their world, just like they're living in our world now."

Drawing on his latest two books, *Poor Students, Rich Teaching: Mindsets for Change* (2016) and *Poor Students, Richer Teaching: Mindsets for Change* (2017), he proposes that we must stop blaming students in poverty for their underachievement and focus on how we can enrich our own teaching to foster the hidden talents of all students. The impoverished mindset of teaching more of the same old way as we have done in the past is not going to produce new results. In the interview, Jensen shares new mindsets for enriching our teaching and cultivating the talents of students in poverty. Some of the new mindsets include how to enrich classroom relationships, student achievement, student

engagement, and school climate for student success. Furthermore, he addresses important concerns about teaching students in poverty such as how white middle-class teachers, who are currently the majority of our public school teachers, can reach and teach low-income students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

BIOGRAPHY

Eric Jensen, Ph.D., a former teacher from San Diego, California, has taught at all levels, from elementary school through university. He earned his doctorate in human development and, since the early 1990s, has synthesized brain research and developed practical educational applications, especially for educators of students in poverty. Jensen is a member of the invitation-only Society for Neuroscience and the President's Club at Salk Institute of Biological Studies. He cofounded SuperCamp, the first and largest brain-compatible academic enrichment program, held in 16 countries with over 65,000 graduates. He has authored 30 books for educators on brain-compatible learning and teaching with poverty in mind. Currently, he speaks at conferences and conducts in-school professional development on student poverty and engagement.

Dr. Jensen, what was your educational experience like growing up?

It was pretty chaotic for me growing up. I went to nine schools and had 153 teachers, and my father divorced early when I was two years old. He remarried when I was six years old, and his second wife, my stepmother, was a violent, alcoholic and abusive woman. I had two older sisters and my oldest sister moved out of the house and lived with my neighbors. When things around the house got really bad, my dad would just move my sister and myself. We'd move out and go live with our grandmother for a few months, and then our stepmother would

promise to be good and we'd move back. But the violence continued and so this whole cycle of moving out to escape violence, and then getting sweet-talked into coming back just went over and over.

So I didn't make friends in school because I never thought I'd be at the school for very long, and generally my school experience was not a good one. I'd say I had a rough time in school. I didn't feel like I belonged or fit in. Also, I started school a year early and so that meant that everyone in my class was a year older than me. However, there were three or four teachers that were good enough to get me hooked and going in the right direction. Two of those were middle school teachers, one a male and one a female. That really changed everything for me because then I started thinking, 'Wow, I *can* do things. I *can* learn and get better!'

How did your early educational and family experiences prepare and sensitize you to write books about helping students in poverty?

Most students from poverty are dealing with multiple risk factors. The average middle-class person has one or two risk factors in their life and that might mean a health issue. But most who grow up in poverty are dealing with three, four, or five risk factors. When I reflect, I had multiple risk factors growing up, which included a violent stepparent at home, an absent father, a loss of mother and sister, housing instability, and a lack of strong relationships.

So there were risk factors, but what I didn't have going against me was the added risk factor of being from a minority culture. Growing up I had white privilege, which meant that I didn't have to deal with racism. Also, my father used to say to me, 'Well someday when you go to college...' There was never a discussion about it; he just expected me to go to college, so my father had high expectations for me even though I was struggling in school. My grades in high school were C+, just enough to get me

into a local, state college, but my father was a plus factor for me, and my stepmother of course wasn't any factor at all, if anything a big negative!

Why should teachers and educators in general, be concerned about poverty today?

There are several reasons that poverty should be front and center for us. One is the numbers, just the raw number of those in poverty are increasing; second, the percentages of those are increasing so that now over 51% of all public school students are on free and reduced lunch, and the third is they are the next generation. So half of all the kids in public school today are from poverty, and they are the next generation. It's really in everybody's vested best interest to look after these students because they will be the ones that are either marginalized and our country goes downhill, or not. They could become ones that we strengthen and enhance, and we all gain the positives and the gifts from them. So I just say to everybody: 'Listen, this next generation, it's in our hands. We should care about it because of the large numbers of those in poverty and because that is the next generation and we're going to be living in their world, just like they're living in our world now.' So it's important for everybody.

You've extensively studied the brain and how to help students with brain-based learning. How does poverty affect students' brains and their learning?

I think there's multiple ways, and each one of them has a direct classroom application. One example is that students in poverty are more likely to experience chronic stress because of constant 'microaggressions' [e.g., racial slights, biased insinuations, implied stereotyping] in their surrounding environment. If you are a minority student in poverty, constantly being 'short of' and 'having less than' creates stress.

Also, when parents are stressed, then their kids feel it. So chronic stress is one way that poverty affects students' brains and that affects students' behaviors at school, and it affects them cognitively. Chronic stress suppresses neurogenesis, the production of brand new brain cells. Our new brain cells support memory, learning, and mood regulation, all issues for the poor.

The second one is they are less likely to get or have emotional support at home. All kids need someone who gives them a hug and says, 'You're a good kid, you're worthwhile, I'm behind you 100%.' They're less likely to get that, so poor kids are often out on a limb. The home teaching of positive social-emotional skills is often lacking, and they do not often see positive behaviors modeled at home. So if they come from a family where there is a lot of yelling and a lot of cursing at home, then that's what they bring to school.

And thirdly, students often have a huge cognitive gap between what's required academically in school and what they bring from home. They grow up with a smaller academic vocabulary and have underdeveloped memory skills. Many kids from poverty are survivor kids. They could survive on the streets for years, but in the classroom they are completely out of their natural environment, and teachers have to understand that there are many ways of being smart, and for some kids their street smarts makes them feel like they don't need school. Many teachers struggle with student behaviors in their Title I classrooms, but they often go about it all wrong.

So for teachers, understanding, 'How do I connect with these students and make relevant the school academics' is the challenge. Briefly, poverty affects kids in several ways: their classroom behaviors will be different; a lack of support from the community, the chronic stress of poverty interferes with their brain functioning; they aren't going to have the same social-emotional skills; their cognitive

differences are often going to create big gaps, and teachers who just pretend to go through the motions like 'Oh, I know how to teach' may find themselves having a seriously tough time. Most teachers just move on to other schools, with a different population to teach.

The majority of our schoolteachers in the United States are white, middle-class teachers. How do you propose to help these teachers to reach and teach students who are from a lower social-economic class and often from a different racial or ethnic background?

I think many of us have read studies, which show that sometimes same-race teachers help students do better. For many 'same-race teachers,' they're doing well by connecting with their students and letting them know 'I've had those experiences; I know what you're going through.' What any teacher of any ethnicity can do is to be empathic and caring. When a kid shows up late for class—instead of being the one that yells at them and says, 'That's going to cost you such and such'—the very first question is, 'Are you okay? Thank you for being here. Go ahead and jump in and join your team.' That's empathy, which understands these kids may come from a world that's very different from mine but I can still relate to them. So that's one of the first things they can do. When teachers are empathic, it matters less that students are a different race. The very first thing all kids want to know is, 'Whose side is the teacher on?' When kids start class at the beginning of the school year, within minutes they're making that decision in the classroom, 'Is this teacher on my side or not?' And ultimately, if the teacher is a different ethnicity, but they're on their side, it makes all the difference in the world.

So teachers have to keep in mind that the biggest questions are: 'Does that teacher respect the kid's culture? Does the teacher have empathy for this student? Does that teacher care what goes on in the student's life? Do they make an attempt to understand the student's culture?' Those are powerful, big questions, and for many middle-class Anglo teachers who don't ask those questions, you start getting the big drops in student performance. It's simple: kids will shut you down if you're not their ally.

Empathy, like you say, is so important, and in your 2016 book called Poor Students, Rich Teaching, *you addressed the need for empathy. Before we discuss the different parts of this book, tell us where you got the title of the book:* Poor Students, Rich Teaching? *Why do poor students need rich teaching?*

I started thinking about, 'Why is it that many students in poverty don't succeed, and why are they struggling in school?' The answers to these perplexing questions are not found in a deficit view of poor students but in the rich teaching of teachers that can foster their talents. The real question is, 'Are they getting the same old poor teaching or are they getting the rich teaching?' Rich teaching means that a teacher is respectful, empathic, caring, and enriching.

On the other hand, poor teaching is lacking in these rich qualities. Furthermore, poor teaching means the teacher has low expectations of students. However, if you have high expectations, that's the start of rich teaching. Do you teach students to become minimally competent or do you work with them until they become an expert? That's an example of rich teaching! And if you think through this, you could go into just about every aspect of teaching and say to yourself, 'You know the richness of my teaching is what's going to make the difference, and teachers who are doing the same old, same old poor teaching are probably going to struggle with their students.'

Each chapter of your book is about a different 'mindset' that is important for teaching and learning. What do you mean by mindset and

what part does a teacher's mindset play in rich teaching?

I think that the word 'mindset' has been both overused and underused. Mindset is actually the compilation of assumptions, beliefs and thoughts about something. So it's really a word that encapsulates a lot of things, and that's why it's such a rich word. When Carol Dweck wrote the book, *Mindset* (2006), it captured people because of its richness. But the truth is, if a teacher makes an assumption that a student is going to be average, then that mindset is going to be followed with a lot of actions about how to teach an average kid, and so I wanted to explain that the mindsets that teachers have truly influence their teaching. It is important for teachers to shift both their own and their students' own mindsets about learning and what they are capable of.

For example, you have a particular mindset about learning a new language: Can I learn a new language or not? Children who are three years old would learn a new language without any thought or limitation. Why? That's just part of their world, and the child does not know that a new language can be complex. And yet someone who is 66 years old might say, "I don't know, not at my age." So the mindset is actually fairly specific. The reason that I broke down the mindsets in the book, *Poor Students, Rich Teaching* (2016), is because I wanted teachers to know that having a 'growth mindset,' while it is powerful, there are many other mindsets that are equally powerful for rich teaching. For example, a 'relational mindset' says, 'We are all connected, we are all in this together, all of us will succeed together or all of us is going to struggle.'

Why did you begin your book with the 'relational mindset'? What's so important about it for rich teaching?

First of all the relational mindset begins with the most fundamental of teaching tools: connectivity. 'We are all connected; we are all in this together,' is the opposite of 'We're separate, there's me then there's you, we live in different worlds.' The relational mindset says we're all connected. So I put that first in the book because when students show up at school at the beginning of a school year, they are of course, hoping that they get a good teacher that year. Ironically, many teachers are hoping that they get good students. Our perception of another all begins with our relationship with them.

Teaching works far better when the teacher forms caring relationships with students, and it's especially important for students from poverty. And the reason I put it first is because if the relationship is bad or non-existent, then everything else in the classroom is going to fall apart. Every other teaching strategy that a teacher tries to use is probably doomed. It's that important. So I wanted teachers to make sure they heard that first. Even though they might get tired of hearing it, I want them to still pause and ask themselves, 'Could every student in my class, if they were asked, say they see their teacher as an ally? What do I know about the student outside of class? Would they come to me if they had a problem? Am I the first adult they would go to if they needed someone to talk to?' That's the kind of relationship that I want. Relationship means, 'Does the teacher share a little piece of him or herself each week in class? Are students willing to raise their hand and ask a question knowing that no one will bite their head off?' So relationships create the foundation for rich teaching, that's why it's first in the book.

Teachers today are preoccupied with the content of their lessons and meeting academic standards for testing. What can you say about the importance of the relational mindset for

achievement, which seems to be the bottom line in schools today?

I think for teachers that are a little bit skeptical about this whole relational mindset, I would say, 'We know that all teachers need to teach content to ensure that students learn, that's a given.' The important questions are: 'Is it going to be uphill and a drudgery all the time? Are the students going to give you pushback on it?' Or, 'Is it going to feel like you've got a partnership? Does it feel like you have a dance going back and forth, and your students are dance partners with you?' So when we talk about all of the content that's got to happen, my take on it is either you can make the content *all hard work resulting in pushback*, or you could have students that will do amazing things for one reason: 'My teacher cares about me, my teacher knows me, my teacher is on my side.' And that's why the relational mindsets always come first. Also, the content is far easier for teachers to teach when students say, 'I'm not sure if I buy that (idea, action, or request), but I trust my teacher, so I'm going to give it a shot.' That's why the relationship mindset is so important.

The second mindset in your book, the 'achievement mindset,' is directly related to student learning and achievement. How is this mindset different than merely teaching the content?

The achievement mindset is in the book to remind teachers that you can and should foster that mindset in their students. Instead of saying, 'Students either have it or they don't, they're either hard workers or they're not, they either put out effort or they don't,' what I'm saying is, 'The achievement mindset can be cultivated,' and for many teachers that's a new thought; it's a new mindset. They think that kids just show up, and they're either gung ho or not in school. However, my research reveals that once you start breaking down the achievement mindset

into its component pieces (e.g., right attitude, gutsy goals, fabulous feedback, persistence with grit), teachers begin to see how it can be taught to students. So the value of bundling the sub-skills into a single achievement mindset is that for many teachers having students who are high achievers is a huge boom. But most teachers don't know how to break the skills for high achievement into small micro-chunks to actually build it. That's missing and it's critical because students can learn to build an achievement mindset if the teacher shows them how to put the sub-skills together.

I sometimes hear teachers blaming the parents or the students for low achievement. How does the achievement mindset deal with that kind of blaming and excuse making?

It's very tough for professional developers, like myself, to deal with the blame mentality. Sometimes I put up a slide in my workshops, which shows two 4-year-olds pointing at each other and each is blaming the other one. And I say, 'Four year olds can point fingers and blame, adults are supposed to be better.' The pointing fingers mentality just creates 'stuckness;' it's an attempt to shift responsibility. When teachers point fingers at kids, what they're really saying is, 'I don't know how to make those students learn, and because I'd like to sleep at night, I'd much rather make it the student's fault for not bringing a better attitude every day or bringing better effort or bringing better cognitive capacity to the table.' I'd rather make it their fault because that way I can say, 'I've done my part; they have to do their part.'

Pointing fingers at work lets people sleep at night, and I'm not making the teacher the bad guy here. All I'm saying is that as a teacher you have a choice: teach at a school where your students fit you better (go to a middle-class school) or start making changes to fit your students better (at a Title 1 school). Just don't play the powerless or victim card, and we don't

need finger pointing. All it does is make you look like a little kid, like a finger pointing kid who says, 'It's not my fault.' I'm not trying to assess blame here. All I'm saying is, 'Where do we move forward instead of being stuck?'

One of the things I like about your book is that it goes beyond merely talking about the achievement mindset; it actually gives specific strategies to help students of all backgrounds to achieve, and one of those strategies is setting "gutsy goals." How is that different than just setting regular goals?

I think goal setting gets misused a lot. One way it gets misused is when people talk about goal setting as if there's only one way to do it or one type of goal, but I want students to set gutsy goals for themselves. Gutsy goals means take a risk. Gutsy means that others around you might look at you and think, "Are you kidding?" For example, there's a great (true) story in *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (Canfield, Hansen, & Newmark, 2013) about a high school student who was asked to write an essay by his English teacher, and the essay was on what do you want to do when you finish high school. In other words, write about what do you want to do with your life. The student, Monty, wrote an essay that said someday he'd like to have a 200-acre ranch, live in a 4000 square foot ranch home, and train horses for the rich and famous. He turned in the paper and the next day was shocked when got his grade back, he got an F grade on it! And when the student asked the teacher, 'Why did I get an F?' the teacher said, 'Well I did ask you to set goals, but I said make your goals practical; what you wrote isn't practical for you.' Then the teacher said, 'Well, if you are unhappy with your grade, you can rewrite the paper to make it more practical, then I will consider giving you a better grade.' So the kid goes home, and he talks to his dad about it, and then he reflects on it that night. The next day, Monty says to his teacher, 'I've made a decision.' The teacher said,

'What did you decide?' The kid said, 'You can keep the F, I'll keep my dreams!' So this speaks to high-poverty students; this speaks to the power of dreams and gutsy goals for all students. By the way, you can guess that this story would not have been in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* book unless there was a happy ending to it. The happy ending was that kid actually was the original Horse Whisperer, Monty Roberts, who did get a 200-acre ranch, and did get a 4000 square foot ranch home and did train horses for the rich and famous, and wrote five best sellers.

My point is, you need different types of goals. One of them is the gutsy goal, which are your dreams. The second type is your micro goals, like what small steps are you going to take this week to move closer to your gutsy goal, and you actually need both because your micro goals for this week are the reason that you stay motivated as much as your gutsy goals. So gutsy goals are ones that are specific, measurable, and time bound, but they're also amazing. That's what I like students to set. What would you do if you could do anything? Gutsy goals keep kids in school. They keep kids going! For many poor students, when the hope is gone, everything is gone. That's why I talked about setting gutsy goals, and the micro goals help them attain those because you can say, 'This week I got that much closer to my gutsy goal.'

Thanks for sharing that inspirational story. Another powerful teaching strategy for the achievement mindset is 'fabulous feedback.' Research shows that feedback is very important for learning. What do you mean by fabulous feedback?

I invite teachers to continually ask themselves: 'Is the feedback I'm giving working?' Fabulous feedback works by improving students' learning, but there are different forms of fabulous feedback. For example, a recent study showed that with students at the K–2 levels, sometimes the absolute best feedback is when the teacher's

face lights up, and they have a happy face with gestures like wow! That's fabulous feedback for students who are very young, like 5 and 6 years old. They often don't take corrective feedback quite as well as we'd like them to. However, when students are older, giving them actionable feedback about how to get better at what they are doing is more effective. Also, some students work better when the feedback is qualitative, such as 'I like how you stuck with it; I love the effort you kept putting into this over and over.' For others, they're more interested in quantitative feedback: 'I got 9 out of 15 on my quiz, how do I get 15 out of 15?' So with fabulous feedback instead of saying there's a right way, I invite teachers to ask, 'Is what I'm doing working?' Because there are many different, good forms of feedback.

You mentioned 'actionable feedback'; what do you mean by that?

For most students, when you really drill down to it, the ultimate feedback answers three questions. The first is, 'Where am I at right now?' Okay so I got a C on my test or I got a 9 on the quiz, so that's where I'm at right now. The second question is, 'Where am I going and what's my goal?' And if the student is trying to get 15 out of 15 on the quiz next week, then that says, 'Okay, I need to improve to get 15 out of 15.' The third question is, 'How am I going to get there?' That's truly actionable feedback. So many teachers for years have been telling students 'Where they are at' but that doesn't answer the other two questions, which are 'Where am I going?' and 'How do I get there?' So your ideal feedback does all three. However, if a student is 5 years old and in kindergarten, they aren't thinking of long-term goals, so the teacher needs to know where they want to take that student and how to help them get there.

Actionable feedback says, 'What's the very next thing I can do to improve?' For example, in response to an eighth-grade student that says,

'I don't know what I'm supposed to do next,' I say to the teacher, 'Give them a choice of three things: do you want to ask more questions in class; do you want to work with a partner for a few minutes before and after class; or do you want to reread a summary of our class lesson every day?' Give them a choice and let them try that out. Only when kids figure out how their own brain works and how to get themselves to do better will you ultimately get a better learner.

Another mindset that you talk about in your book is the 'rich classroom climate.' There's a lot of talk in public schools about how to improve classroom climate. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) requires public schools to identify a non-cognitive indicator, which could be school climate or some other measure of social-emotional skills, to encourage and evaluate school quality. How might focusing on the school climate and having a rich classroom climate mindset be beneficial to students in poverty?

Part of a rich classroom climate mindset is where the teacher says, 'How do I go beyond just having high fives in the classroom;' how do I go beyond saying, 'Okay, we celebrated that as a class?' The rich classroom climate is one in which we are looking deeply at what fosters important student needs in the classroom, that's what's different about it. And so when a 15-year old student shows up in your class and has never had anybody listen to what his or her life is like, but you take the time to listen, that's the start of a rich class. That's why having a voice is important in class. Kids need validation for, 'Am I worthy? Do I belong in class? Can I succeed in this class? Can I get better in this class?' A rich classroom climate mindset fosters all of those.

That means is it safe to raise your hand and take a risk? If you're wrong, does the rest of the class giggle at you or if you're wrong does the teacher say, 'Hey thank you for jumping in; we'll come back to that a little bit later in class, and you might end up with a different point

of view about that' or 'I like your enthusiasm, here's how we can sort this out a little bit better.' The classroom climate mindset says, 'How do I make my class a great place to learn, a great place to be part of a learning community?' Those are questions that strong teachers ask and answer all the time. Teachers who struggle think their classroom is a box to teach content in, but that's not how human beings are. Kids from poverty say, 'You know what? I don't feel that I get respected enough; I don't feel like my teachers listen. I don't feel like anyone cares about my situation, and just because I'm different that doesn't mean I should be sent to the principal's office all the time.' For example, in a classroom that has a rich climate, you're going to have students who may shout out profanity, and in a rich classroom climate the teacher makes ongoing, continued effort to be able to foster cultural responsiveness by understanding students better and helping them understand, that for example, we have two different languages that we use: a home language and a classroom language. 'Here's what's okay in our classroom, here's what's not, and still you're a good kid; I like having you in my class, you belong here, you're getting better in my classroom.'

Those are things that teachers need to say explicitly to students. But if you had a group of new teachers, and you said how many of you have ever said to a student: 'I like having you in my class, you belong here, you can do well in here?' Very few teachers *ever do that*. That's a rich classroom climate when you say it both explicitly or implicitly; kids need to feel like they belong and they are worthy of contributing in an academic environment.

One of your strategies for building a rich classroom climate is giving students a voice to express themselves. What are some ways that teachers can give students a voice?

What teachers sometimes do to give students a voice is hold a weekly class dialogue. Some will take a few minutes at the end of the week and say: 'I'm wondering if we can talk about how we did this week, and more importantly how did you feel like you were treated by me? Did I go too fast with the content? Did I ever accidentally make you feel put down, or did I not listen to you?" In other words, making sure students know that the classroom is a dialogue, the classroom is two-way, student input on how the class goes is just as important to me *as my point of view* of how the class went. So 10 minutes, once a week, just to ask students the question, 'What could I do better as a teacher?' In a safe classroom, with a rich climate, students will jump in and give you suggestions. Will you implement all of them? Maybe, maybe not, but you better hear them. That's an example of a rich classroom climate, a teacher who listens.

The rich classroom climate mindset is related to the 'engagement mindset.' These mindsets overlap to a certain extent. What's important about the engagement mindset for student learning?

For teachers, this notion of how do I get the content across, what we're really after is the learning. For students, this means, 'I'm engaged, I'm buying into it, I care about it, it's relevant, and I get to not just learn it but process it, talk about it, try it out, do it.' That's a lot different from a teacher merely saying, 'How do I teach it?' So the engagement mindset always asks the questions: 'How do I make my learning more engaging? How do I engage them emotionally and physically?'

For example, when I used to teach science, I would show pictures of things that were going on inside the body. So they would see a picture, and then they would get a quiz on it. When I reflect, that was the stupidest thing I could've ever done. There were many ways I could've engaged the students in that lesson. I could've

had students stand up and demonstrate body processes with their hands and bodies. For example, how do our brain cells work or how does our blood circulate? All of those things are so easy to have the students stand up and demonstrate with their hands, body language, and posture. Now, I do that during professional development. I have teachers use their hands to show how stress works in the body, and people remember that. The engagement mindset says, 'How do I engage students, so it doesn't just get memorized for the test; it gets remembered and understood for life?' Using gesturing is one way to do it, and having students do things with their hands is another way. To engage students, I'm always asking, 'How do I kick it up a notch? How do I deeply embed this in students' experience instead of merely covering it in a lecture?'

Thanks for sharing some of the mindsets and strategies from <u>Poor Student, Rich Teaching</u> (2016). You have followed up this book with another book, <u>Poor Students, Richer Teaching</u> (2017). What's different about this book? It seems like it's a continuation of the mindsets discussion.

Yes, you said the second book seems like a continuation and you are right on. I actually wrote this as one book originally, and the book turned out to be too long. It was almost 400 pages, which is simply too long for most readers. So, the decision was made by all of us, the publisher and myself, to break it into two books. So it is continuous although I do open with an introduction, and I do have a closing in it in case someone randomly buys one book and not the other. But I felt like the only way to communicate all of the mindsets effectively was just to break it into two books.

We don't have time to talk about the 'positivity mindset,' the 'enrichment mindset,' and the 'graduation mindset,' which are all covered in <u>Poor Students, Richer Teaching</u> (2017), but I

would like for you to talk about how students can learn to manage their 'cognitive loads' for learning, which is one of the strategies for the enrichment mindset in this book. What are some ways that teachers can help students to manage and increase their cognitive load capacity? And first of all, what do you mean by cognitive load?

So cognitive load is what we are holding in our head at any given moment. So if a teacher says to a student, 'Here's a number for you, and the number is 4, you got that?' The kid says, 'Yep, got it.' Then the teacher says, 'Now with 4, I want you to add to it 5 times 3.' Oops, you just kicked up their cognitive load a lot. Now the kid starts saying, '5 times 3, 5 times 3, 5 times 3...' Pretty soon, they're remembering the 3, and they forgot the 5, and they forgot the 4, and now they've just got one number in their head. Why? Because that same student is probably also thinking about other things like, 'What's going to happen when I go home?' I was a student that had an abusive stepmother, so when I was in school, most of my drifting thoughts during the day were things like what's going to happen when I go home today? And so I worried about being hurt almost every day.

The more things you pile into the brain and expect students to be able to hold or juggle them, the more you're hoping that they have this extraordinary capacity to do that and most students don't. This is a capacity, which is trainable; it's teachable, but most don't inherit it, so it has to be taught. Recent research on working memory shows that most adults can only hold one or two things in working memory. The old research that you might have heard from a study done many years ago was Miller's research, which talked about 7 plus or minus 2, but that research wasn't done in this generation, and it talked about things that they were motivated to learn, like a phone number. Most of us, we're lucky to hold one or two things in our head. Cognitive load is what are you thinking about in the moment so when a

classroom teacher jumps in, they are intruding in a student's world. And unless students have tools to deal with that, they'll just forget stuff, and it'll seem like they're dumb, slow, and stupid, and they're not!

How do the demanding conditions of being in poverty affect a student's cognitive load?

The cognitive load of students in poverty can readily become overwhelmed with everyday worries about scarcity and survival. It's hard for students to ignore or let go of what's happening in their everyday world when they come to a classroom. If they're a student of color, they may have experienced a microaggression or racism of some form on their way to school or when they arrived at the school building. They may also have experienced stressors at home. They may have someone who yells at them. They may have concerns over the health of someone else in their family. They may have a parent that's divorcing or leaving the family. In other words, there is a collective nagging of all these things that they are worried about, which are food, shelter, clothing, and will my dad be home when I get there? All of those overload the cognitive capacity of students to be able to show up and learn with a clean slate every day.

What are some ways that teachers can help students to manage and increase their cognitive load capacity, their capacity to take in new information, when they are so preoccupied with daily worries?

There are several ways. For example, you can ask students to gesture something. For example, just say this to them, 'Hold your left hand out, good. In your left hand, I want you to use your imagination to put the number 15. Got it? Really? What's the number? Good!' So next, I'll say, 'Now, put your right hand out. Your left hand has a number, so now we'll put a new number in your right hand. The number is 3.

What's the number? Three? You got it! Now what was the number in your left hand? 15? Beautiful!' So notice what I'm doing; I'm giving them, not just visualization, but I'm also giving them a tactile way to hold two thoughts. And then I'll say, 'So what number is in your left hand? What's in your right hand? Say it out loud! Great!' So I'm going to give them a way to hold things. Also, you can also do that by chunking complex learning into smaller bite-sized pieces to help students digest information more easily. Likewise, showing students how to make mind maps and visual organizers is a great way to increase students' capacity to store information. These are many ways to help students manage cognitive overload and increase their capacity to learn. Use their body, chunk it smaller, and draw it out.

For teachers who want to start applying mindset strategies for rich teaching in their classroom, where do you suggest they begin?

Well, I would go with my favorite five things. One, start with relationships and strengthen, build, keep them strong, and ongoing. Second, become culturally responsive in your classroom, so that you understand where your students come from culturally. Next, make sure that you never expect less than the best, meaning high expectations on everything they do. Then, build cognitive capacity and do that in an environment where you are constantly building social and emotional skills. I'd say those five things—relationships, cultural responsiveness, high expectations, cognitive capacity, and social and emotional skills—will take you really far in your classroom.

For the school principal that wants his teaching staff to begin implementing the mindset strategies, where might the principal and staff begin?

The first thing is the staff has to have good awareness of where they are at as a staff and as a school. So data is one source. I'm a big fan of student surveys, so I would suggest a student survey, and there are several good ones out there on the market. The youthtruthsurvey.org is just one of many good surveys, and I say that because when students speak the truth about their school, it can be extremely insightful; it can be targeted, and it can also be motivating for staff. So if the staff thinks, 'Oh, we're good with student relationships,' but most of your students say, 'I don't know any adult that I would go to if I had a problem,' then that can help the staff come around to the point of view that they really do need to make some changes.

So, my first step is to always build an accurate awareness of the school that you're at and what you really need done. That's got to be your starting point. Now what a leader can do depends a lot on career capital that they've built up. Career capital would be assets like what's the strength of the relationships that they have at that school and even at the district level. In other words, how much will people trust what you do? How much will your staff trust you? Another asset would be if they've done this before at another school. So the more career capital that a leader has, the more you can do, the quicker you can do it, and the more people are going to fall in line behind you. But, if you don't have that, you need to start at the bottom, which is finding out what your students are saying about your school, helping the staff get involved with solving the problems, and helping them take on ownership of that at the school, and you be the one that can help light the fuse to make good things happen.

Thank you for sharing some very useful mindset strategies for rich teaching from your two recent books. What plans do you have for your next book? I have a suggestion for a third book on mindsets. You might call it, <u>Poor Students, Nothing but the Richest Teaching</u>.

I love that, that's a great one. The book that I'm working on now is called *Change From the Inside Out*, and it's on the change process; why we change and how to jump start it.

Can you tell me more about your new book?

Well most people want others to change, but they don't want to change themselves. So this book is all about how do we get ourselves to change without making it quite so painful? The whole notion behind this is you can have amazing things happen at your school, but you'll just need to be a little better student of yourself, and a student of human nature to make that happen.

I look forward to reading your new book. Thank you for sharing all this valuable information for educators working with students in poverty.

It's been my pleasure, and I look forward to more good things coming out of your journal, so thank you.

CONCLUSION

During a time when the income achievement gap is growing and school budgets are shrinking (Reardon, 2011), Jensen offers educators cost-effective new mindsets and practical strategies, which are evidence-based, to enrich the education of students in poverty. Affluent parents significantly improve their children's education by providing them with enriching learning experiences (Reardon, 2013). Educators and schools also have the opportunity and means to improve the learning of students in poverty by using the enriching teaching strategies and mindsets described by Jensen. As a follow-up to this interview about Jensen's latest two books, educators will find it useful to read these books and the online companion study guides, which are listed in the bibliography along with several other publications by Jensen.

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