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A Students' Perspective on Poverty and Student Behavior/Responsibility in the Classroom

By Wallis B. Johnson, Ed.D.

“Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity, nothing exceeds the criticisms made of the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed and well-fed.”

- Herman Melville

Poverty

- As of February 2017, The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) reported that the United States has the second highest child poverty rate among 35 industrialized countries despite having the largest economy in the world (CDF, 2015).
- With respect to children, Free and Reduced Price Lunch is often the indicator of poverty (Burney & Beilke, 2008).

- According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), more than [15 million children](#) in the United States – 21% of all children – live in families with incomes below the [federal poverty level](#) – \$23,550 a year for a family of four (NCCP, 2017).
- The Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) reported that children are the largest group of people living in poverty in the United States (CDF, 2013).

Activity #3

The culture of poverty has some universal characteristics which transcend regional, rural-urban, and even national differences. There are remarkable similarities in family structure, interpersonal relations, time orientations, value systems, spending patterns, and the sense of community in lower-class settlements...” (Lewis, 1971, p. 137).

Eric Jensen in *Teaching with poverty: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it* (2009) focused on the effects of poverty on the cognitive functions of the brain and how that influences the educational process. According to Jensen, the four primary risk factors afflicting families and children living in poverty are:

“emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues” (p. 7).

A young man, 15 years old, told his teacher in late November that he had had a great weekend. His friend had taught him how to steal electronics from the local Walmart store without getting caught. He was so excited and happy because he had stolen enough that he would be able to give “really cool” presents at the holidays and still have enough to sell on the corner to make some money.

When the teacher questioned the young man about the fact that he had stolen something, he responded that it didn't matter because he had not been caught. The teacher explained that what he had done was wrong and that, if he had been caught, he might have gone to jail.

The student responded that his dad had been in jail seven different times and that he was always fine, so it would not really be a bad thing for him if he also went to jail.

Children being raised in poverty do not choose to misbehave; however, they face challenges that those students living a more affluent lifestyle may not. Jensen (2009) reports that living in challenging poverty situations may cause a child's brain to adapt in ways that may threaten good academic performance. "As a result, (the child is) more likely to act out, to lack social graces and empathy, to be impatient and impulsive, and to display inappropriate emotional responses" (Jensen, 2009, p. 14).

In generational poverty cases, there are “Low aspirations, high dropout rates, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, female-headed households, joblessness, welfare dependency, and homelessness (that) seem to be the fate of children born in ghetto communities. (This) contribute(s) to a poor sense of self...” (Quint, 1994, p. 7-9).

Activity #1

“Poverty (has) proved to be a burden simply too heavy to shoulder for most” (Burney & Beilke, 2008, p. 297.)

Living in these households puts these children at greater risk of mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders (Noguera, 2011; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). For children living in poor neighborhoods, the overall health and quality of life is much lower than for children living in middle-class neighborhoods. These conditions directly impact childhood development, as well as, academic achievement (Adelman & Taylor, 1999; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Jensen, 2009; Noguera, 2011; Syme, 2004).

Many research studies have focused on school success in relationship with gender, ethnicity, race and culture. However, “poverty may be the most important of all student differences...Focusing on overcoming the limitations of poverty may be more productive in influencing the lives of individual students” (Burney et al., 2008, p. 295). In a series of studies recently completed at Princeton, Harvard and the University of Warwick in the UK, researchers found that the condition of poverty “imposed a mental burden akin to losing 13 IQ points” (Badger, 2013, p. 6716).

Teachers and administrators in high-poverty schools spend more of their time reacting to immediate crisis in order to obtain a safe and productive learning environment (Luptin, 2005). “Extra minutes here and there being spent on minor discipline and welfare issues and on negotiating with pupils, parents and other organizations: a greater emphasis on classroom control at the expense of challenging pedagogy; more difficulty planning and financing extra-curricular activities and engaging parents; more time spent on distributing and collecting equipment, and so on” (Luptin, 2005, p. 591).

In order for students to be successful, teachers must understand that the turmoil of poverty **MAY** influence a child's ability to govern their own behavior (Goodwin & Miller, 2013).

Teachers need to understand that some students may come to school with a limited pool of appropriate emotional responses to academic demands (Jensen, 2009).

In a study published in 2004, Ansalone and Biafora found that student groups were formed in the first few days of school based on student vocabulary, racial differences and dress. Upon completion of their study, Ansalone and Biafora found that 40.6% of teachers interviewed reported that they adjusted class materials according to the “track” (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004, p. 256) of the students in their classroom.

They warn that “the belief that all children have potential to learn must be fundamental to our view on education” (Ansalone & Biafora, 2004, p. 257) for all children to be successful.

“ I’m heard rumors that teachers give kids nicknames or put them in groups – the bad kids. No kid is bad it’s just how they act.”

Jensen (2009) provides action steps that schools should consider when educating students, especially those from a poverty situation. He states that while academics are critical, school must ensure that the child's primary needs are met first. Students cannot achieve a high level of academic excellence if their needs for food, shelter and safety have not been met.

Parental involvement has been seen as beneficial to both high and low-achieving students. Communication between parents and teachers allows parents to gain insight into their child's schoolwork and school life. This, in turn, fosters more conversation at home between parent and child, thus the child begins to understand that his/her education is important to the parents. When parents are involved, teachers tend to pay closer attention to the student.

What may hinder parental
involvement in your school
community?

Ruby Payne (1996), in her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, discusses the importance of relationships “...because poverty is about relationships...the most significant motivator for these students is relationships” (Payne, 1996, p. 109). The first step in creating relationships is to make deposits that are the basis of that relationship. This is true for both students and their parents. Teachers and school administrators must ensure that opportunities are available for these relationships to occur and flourish. “...to honor students (and families) as human beings worthy of respect and care is to establish a relationship that will provide for enhanced learning” (Payne, 1996, p. 111).

“Credit recovery for me was really hard for me. I was crying. I had to do a lot of stuff. I said I can’t do it. My English teacher told me I could do it. She trusts me...She trusts me. She’s one of the best people in my life...She showed me loyalty all the time. She trusted me that I can do it. For me in my eyes I couldn’t do it. She trusted me. She showed me loyalty all the time.”

“I don’t trust teachers. I’ll be in one room working and I hear them talking about other students. Some teachers are just the same as students. Some students you can trust and some you can’t.”

“When students maintain positive relationships, they bloom academically” (Jensen, 2009, p. 90). The most important part of successful learning is due to the relationships that a student has had with an adult who believes that the child has worth and value (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001; Payne, 2005). When students, who have succeeded in school, are questioned about their success, “nine times out of ten (it) has to do with a relationship – a teacher, counselor, or coach who made a suggestion or took an interest in them as individuals” (Payne, 2005, p. 110).

“You can get a whole Ph.D. in education without reading a single thing said by a student about their experience of being in school. They are authorities on schooling, but nobody asks them.”

- Peggy McIntosh,

White Privilege; Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

Activity #2

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological advocacy design with personal depth interviews. The phenomenological interview provides the participant the opportunity to describe his or her life experiences of a phenomenon with as little direction as possible from the interviewer. Interview techniques have been found to be useful in obtaining rich, first person descriptions of diverse human experiences.

Findings

- Care for me
- Talk to me
- I want someone I can trust
- I need to worry about me
- Others motivate me

Care for Me

In describing why some students struggle in school stated that,

“Well some kids they’re like bad so like they don’t really care about it. When they want to turn it around it’s hard cuz they did all the bad things and they don’t pay attention in the class or otherwise some people have different learning styles. Uhm...that’s it or like family problems at home.”

“What makes a school bad is when you have a lot of bullying going on and like the teachers or anybody don’t do much to try to stop it and it’s when you like, well, you just have bad kids in there.”

“Not trusting a teacher is like a teacher I feel doesn’t like me or a teacher that has an attitude - immature teachers. Some of them argue with the students. I wouldn’t trust that. To make me trust teacher...uhm...I have to feel that they’re gonna be really truthful, like, nice. Not just spit words at me to make me feel better.”

“...sometimes they’re (teachers) very rude because sometimes they give us attitude and they’re like... they like...when we ask them a questions. They’re like that’s a stupid question and I think they be like oh I just explained that.”

“Well...I sometimes like I’ll be honest. I don’t always be like responsible in school because sometimes at (school) I don’t have a good day. I’m just in a bad mood and I get like very cranky and when I get cranky I don’t want people touching me. I don’t want people going near me. I don’t want people telling me what to do so I think that I’m not always, that, I just sometimes want ta be succeed but sometimes I don’t think I’m gonna be able to do so. I just...cuz it’s just like hard for me. Basically I don’t like get something. I don’t talk about it cuz the more I talk about it the more I’m gonna cry and the more I’m gonna cry and the more I’m gonna the more I’m gonna be angry about it. And like so I just keep it to myself because honestly I don’t have I don’t have sisters. I’m the only girl in my family so, and me and my Mom obviously aren’t as close so I just keep it to myself.”

“Well with my science teacher I shared this once with her because that day it was in the morning and she’s my homeroom teacher and my first block teacher so I was like in a really bad mood that day so she decided like to keep me for arts class and talk with me. And she told me that she just talk to me about like how if I stick to what I want and I stick to my beliefs than I can accomplish what I want but if I take a couple steps back then I have to start all over again. So she just told me to just stick to what you want, pay attention to you and don’t let anybody bring me down or don’t let anybody make me take my steps back...so...yeah...but I still sometimes think I’m like going to be able or might not be able to accomplish.”

Note to teachers:

“It’s never too late. You can talk to them (students) privately, ask them what’s wrong. Try every single day because they might say nothing’s wrong, but deep down inside there’s always something wrong...”

Talk to Me

“...Some people don’t want to be in school anyway. We need to find a way to make them learn. People should talk to them to find out what they like.”

“Our principal always repeats that word (life skills) so life skills mean that we need to follow these rules through and through...Some students don’t understand the rules. They don’t follow the rules. So I guess these students need some support to know and learn how to like be respectful.”

“Some kids don’t care when they get suspended. Some kids think it’s cool. They don’t get it like that’s on my (their) record. They look at it as I’m finally out of school.”

“Some rules they don’t give you a chance. They’re no warning rules. You do one thing and you get a consequence right away. I don’t think that’s fair unless you’re a trouble maker.”

*“I didn’t come to school
for 21 days in one
month... My brother
talked to me but I didn’t
listen...”*

In order for students to be successful in school, they need to understand the why and when of discipline. Research also indicates that school administrators and educators, in turn, need to understand the whole child in order to provide the best educational experience for each student (Jensen, 2009).

I Want Someone I can Trust

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot so most of my friends say she really don’t care what happens at school and I was like if you don’t pay attentions or be successful in class how will you go to college and if you don’t go to college how will you have a way to get a job or money? If you don’t have a job or money then how will you live? You’re not gonna be able to get our own clothes or wash. You’re not gonna be around your parents any more so they are not responsible of you so you’re whole life will be a disappointment...”

“(When kids aren’t responsible in school) it could be their lifestyle or their parents that aren’t encouraging them to learn... Probably they don’t have enough money or like...they feel like neglected or probably they don’t really care and their parents aren’t there to say anything or their parent don’t go to college. They don’t have good role models.”

*“...Uhm...like in my math class there’s a teacher...she...uhm...goes really fast in the class and we’re just freshman so we’re not really used to that so I guess when she goes through the classroom goes through the lesson the whole classroom just get mad like just wait I don’t get it. So I guess the teacher doesn’t really help or support that much...The teacher is teaching it but they are really not saying something to the kids that are really not paying attention. So I was thinking why don’t the kids who are paying attention goes to the front of the room and the kids that aren’t goes to the back so the kids that want to learn are paying attention won’t be disturbed and the kids aren’t paying attention can do whatever they want but if they want to participate they ca. So that I was thinking that. I did (try to share my ideas with the teacher) but sometimes I was trying to tell her and she sometimes just gets mad outta nowhere and says go sit over there. I tell her the students here are not really paying attention and why don’t we have different seating but she don’t do it not like I wanted it to be. **She don’t know that much about the students the way I do.”***

I Need to Worry About Me

*“If you have more responsibility...uhm...I don’t know how to say it...You will know what to do like...uhm...a bigger or greater idea of what to do so when you have more responsibility it’s like...uhm...your parents will let you do what you want to do. So if I have more responsibility when they have responsibility and my Mom said like I could go to like a store across the street with your friends she would let me because I have more responsibility and I won’t do anything wrong or bad. **So I get power from responsibility.”***

“Well, I wanna be the first one in my family to become like somebody important or somebody who has a really really good job so that’s why I take my school very serious.”

Others Motivate Me

“Cuz your succeed cuz you’ll be happy cuz you did something right. You reached your goal. Success and I guess when you do that, that encourages you to do more. Uhm...when you succeed that...uhm ...you would want to go to college to do more. When you succeed your parent will be proud of you will have more courage so you be like I wanna do everything. Courage is let me do everything. You won’t care who else will think about you cuz you will do what you want to do...”

“Ah...like I said about my Mom motivates me cuz it’s like something or someone that makes you want to like succeed. Like reach for your goals or like accomplish something or like works hard to made you reach for what you want. Yeah. Well, my Mom because uhm...she has really worked hard for her kids and I want to be like cuz I have made a lot of mistakes and I want to show her that I’ve changed so I just wanna show her that I...uhm...have...I just wanna show her that I can be that good daughter that she’s always wanted. Also I think that (long pause)...cuz my big brother, my oldest brother said that he like stayed back and didn’t get to his goals and he dropped outta college and so I just didn’t want be like just like him. And ...uhm...just...just be someone different...just be...(long pause)...Like I don’t want to be like cuz he disappointed my Mom and I don’t want her to feel that way about me.”

“When you’ve got only a few hours a week to counter the effects of years of poverty, you can’t waste a minute...Good teaching can mitigate the effects of low socioeconomic status and lack of school resources...(School) staff is the key to students’ success...” (Jensen, 2009, p. 150).

An Adult Looks Back

Carol Carson, Executive Director of the
Connecticut Office of State Ethics

- The oldest of six children
- Parents were alcoholics
- Can answer “yes” to 9 of the 10 ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences Study)
- Went to college and met her personal goals

Words of Wisdom from Carol

People in poverty live in an either/or world –
we need to present the **“AND”**

***How can we as educators present the “AND” to
our students?***

“We have to eat and we have to have a roof”

Do all of your students have food at home and a reliable, consistent roof?

“When my Aunt would say my name she said it like I was the most important”

Do you know your students' names?

Do you say their name while greeting/addressing them?

“When you’re in poverty, your display of wealth is your phone, sneakers, clothes and gold teeth.”

“As you go up the ladder, it’s how many homes you have.”

“One of the things that I’m proudest of is that my kids slept safely. I didn’t have that experience.”

I have had the pleasure of interviewing the experts on our educational system. Currently, I have been invited to interview students in two additional urban schools in New England.

It is my goal to provide a voice to those students who may not have an opportunity to speak and be heard.

Please contact me if you have additional questions or would like me to interview your students at wallisabe@comcast.net