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Literature Review

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How Does Poverty Effect Student Learning?

**CHAPTER 1**

Introduction

“In 2006, 17 percent of all children ages 0-17 lived in poverty” (childstats.gov, 2008). This is a significant number of children and is something teachers are going to be faced with in the classroom. Students are going to come to school without having enough to eat or even a place to sleep and it becomes our job to not only educate these students but to provide them with stability and a safe environment that they feel comfortable in. This topic is very interesting to me because I worked in a school where 74% of the students received free or reduced lunch and I would go home feeling so badly for these students, wondering what else I could do to give them the opportunity to succeed. I often felt that simply taking the time to talk with and get to know my students helped them immensely. When they realized they could trust me, they seemed much more comfortable in the learning environment.

Significance of Study

**CHAPTER 2**

Introduction

This chapter will discuss poverty and its effects on students and their learning. It will address the role that teachers must take on when faced with these situations. All too often we look at poverty as a disadvantage and although there is little good to come from poverty there is knowledge that comes with experiencing “real life” and a way that teachers can be accepting of all cultures and differences within their classrooms. The literature review will address the following questions:

* How does poverty effect student learning?
* What can teachers do to help combat factors of poverty at school?
* Does No Child Left Behind legislation help or hinder students faced with poverty?
* Are rural students at more of a disadvantage than urban students?
* What are the effects of poverty on the students besides lower academic achievement levels?
* What can students faced with poverty bring into your classroom?

*How does poverty effect student learning?*

When it comes to poverty effecting student learning many researchers have found that it is linguistic problems that hold these students back when it comes to achievement (Noble, McCandliss, & Farrah, 2007; Hart & Risley, 1995; Engel, Santos, & Gathercole, 2008). According to the 1995 Hart and Risley study, children who grow up in homes affected by poverty are exposed to a smaller vocabulary than children raised in higher socioeconomic situations and are therefore at a disadvantage (Hart & Risley, 1995). However, an article examining the Hart and Risley study finds that language may not be the problem, the problem may be society and the way we judge what is appropriate and what is not (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). Researchers have a tendency to gravitate toward explanations that fit with their own personal values. In the case of the Hart and Risley study they based their study on the idea that the upper socioeconomic professional society is the norm that all other cultures should be compared to (Hart & Risley, 1995). This is their idea and not necessarily the best solution for all cultures. The study by Dudley-Marling and Lucas claim that people of lower socioeconomic status may have a better grasp on language because they get straight to the facts when speaking and do not add unnecessary fluff (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). Although there are claims that the Hart and Risley study is biased there still seems to be some connection between poverty and language deficiency. Initial achievement studies have shown that the higher the socioeconomic status of the child, the higher the reading achievement in kindergarten (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). This could be in large part to more parent involvement at home, literature present in the home and parents who take the time to read to their children, as well as, time spent in preschools or kindergarten (Noble, McCandliss, & Farah, 2007). This exposure to literature at an early age seems to make a huge difference in the language abilities of the child.

*What can teachers do to help combat factors of poverty at school?*

A study by Nikki Aikens and Oscar Barbarin found that “although characteristics associated with the school environment accounted for a small portion of SES gaps in children’s initial reading skills, these characteristics accounted for a larger portion of differences in the rates of children’s monthly reading growth during the periods of interest, with the largest effect between the spring of kindergarten and the spring of first grade” (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). This shows that teachers can have a large impact on their students especially those that come to school and struggle to achieve. Teachers have a tendency to blame their students lack of preparedness on parents, when it truly is the job of the teacher to educate the students. Although it is convenient when students come to class prepared because they have parents who have spent time working with them, this is not always the case and is not something teachers can expect. Teachers dealing with students living in situations like these need to encourage those students so they can work on their homework at home regardless of the help they might receive from their parents. There are ways that teachers can help all of their students achieve regardless of their race or socioeconomic status.

Simple changes to your curriculum can make a lot of difference in how disadvantaged students achieve. A 2002 study by Becker and Luthar stated that “a curriculum that (a) builds on the cultural knowledge that children bring into the classroom (b) allows for opportunities for self-exploration and expression ( i.e., family tree assignments, autobiography reports); and (c) provides learning activities that are meaningful, relevant, and related to students; own interests and goals should lead to increased academic engagement” (Becker & Luthar, 2002). This example provides examples of “hands-on” learning and ways to get students involved. These ideas can be very helpful to all of your students not just those facing poverty. When looking at failing schools we see a lot of direct instruction and independent student work which really does nothing to get the students excited about learning. If we take the time to listen to student voice all of our students will have a better chance of success.

Research studying English language learners finds that it is better to look at what students can do rather than what they cannot do as far as writing and language is concerned (Schleppegrell & Go, 2007). I think these same ideas can be applied to our students faced with poverty who come to school already struggling with language. One approach in helping these students suggests looking at the meaning of what students have written and not being so hard on those students about their grammar. One suggestion is to think of the following three questions when evaluating student work; “What is the text about? How is judgment/evaluation expressed? And How is the text organized?” (Schleppegrell & Go, 2007). If the student is able to get the meaning of what they are writing out, the grammar will come with time. Teachers need to encourage their students and not discourage them by constantly picking apart their work. An easy way for teachers to encourage their students is to consistently find things that your students are doing well and provide them with positive feedback. Often times a student simply needs a stable adult in their life, someone who believes in his or her ability to succeed. Becker and Luthar stated “students’ feelings of acceptance by their teachers and school were strongly associated with their cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement in the classroom” (Becker & Luthar, 2002). When students feel that their teacher truly has their best interests at heart and have a relationship with their teacher in which they feel comfortable, those students are more comfortable in their classroom environment and comfortable with themselves and their learning process.

*Does No Child Left Behind legislation help or hinder students faced with poverty?*

Part of the No Child Left Behind legislation includes a policy that all students, regardless of economic or racial background, be held to the same standards of academic achievement. This is implemented within the state by implementing state mandated assessments. Students who are simply not good test-takers or who are struggling to keep up with their grade level are really at a disadvantage when it comes to these types of tests. When they fail the test it affects their motivation and self-efficacy and they begin to believe that they will never be able to succeed (Becker & Luthar, 2002). The idea of state standards and the idea of leaving no child behind really sets students up for failure, the tests and reforms need to take into account the differences in every child. Education is not a “one size fits all“ type of thing.

Another piece of the No Child Left Behind Legislation is the policy that students enrolled in underachieving or unsafe schools have public school choice (No Child Left Behind 2004). However, the location of failing schools and the demographics of those schools do not always allow for school choice. Failing schools in rural areas are really at a disadvantage because often times there are no other schools within that area. Inner city schools that are failing may also be at a disadvantage because students facing poverty may not be able to afford a switch (Zhang & Cowen, 2009). Researchers have found that often times when schools are failing there are other factors besides just student achievement causing these schools to fail. Failing schools do have a trend of having higher enrollments of students affected by poverty and minority students than choice schools. Failing schools also tend to have a higher percentage of teacher turnover (Zhang & Cowen, 2009; Becker & Luthar, 2002). These schools have a hard time finding highly qualified teachers who are willing to teach at these schools. As I mentioned above teachers at these failing schools tend to use more teacher-directed activities; direct instruction and seatwork so instead of really challenging their students and getting students excited about learning they are continuing the cycle of poor student achievement and producing students who do not have much self-efficacy when it comes to their academic success (Becker & Luthar, 2002).

No Child Left Behind and other education reform programs focus on what funding can do and what new programs schools can implement to fix the problems Americas schools are facing. These programs usually end up being unrealistic when implemented in real schools, especially schools that have high student poverty rates and minority populations. Our government needs to be looking at what can be done to help our existing schools fix their problems.

*Are rural students at more of a disadvantage than urban students?*

As mentioned above the No Child Left Behind legislation says that students enrolled in failing schools have school choice and may transfer to a choice school if they wish. However, students in rural schools are often without that choice. When the next closest school is thirty or more miles away it is not realistic for those students to transfer. Zhang and Cowen stated that “many rural schools face unfavorable challenges such as difficulties in recruiting and keeping quality teachers, shortage of funding sources, and geographical isolation, all of which are detrimental to student achievement” (Zhang & Cowen, 2009). Once again we see the importance of fixing the schools we already have because certain reforms really do not apply to every school. If we could find ways to improve these schools, starting with professional development for teachers, these students may not even need the option to change schools. If we continue to allow these schools to fail and do not make every effort possible to improve these schools we will be perpetuating the cycle of student failure.

*What are the effects of poverty on the students besides lower academic achievement* *levels?*

Students growing up surrounded by poverty have issues besides just lower academic achievement. There can be serious emotional problems, as well as, neurological problems these students are struggling with. These kinds of problems can be directly related to lower student achievement. Research has found that students raised in poverty lack the stability and safe environmental situations necessary for success. These students also face a lack of parental support which has been show to increase student achievement (Becker & Luthar, 2002). A 2007 study by Kimberly Noble, Bruce McCandliss, and Martha Farah that tested New York first graders from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds found that “SES accounts for variance in all neurocognitive composites except reward processing. SES accounts for statistically more variance in the language composite than in all other composites, which do not statistically differ from each other” (Noble, McCandliss, & Farah, 2007).

A problem often overlooked by schools and parents alike are the emotional problems students are facing. “12-30% of all school-aged children have emotional disorders damaging enough that eventually these children will suffer severe educational problems” (Institute of Medicine, 1994).

*What can students faced with poverty bring into your classroom?*

I have found studies that have decided to look at poverty in a different light. A study by Curt Dudley-Marling and Krista Lucas questioned the results if one were to look at students’ differences as assets instead of deficiencies (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). I find this idea very intriguing as it is easy to initially think of the negative factors that your students may bring into the classroom instead of looking at the positive and the knowledge and culture that can come with each student. Other research has looked into finding solutions for disadvantaged students instead of focusing on the trends of negative outcomes that usually result (Becker & Luthar, 2002). According to the Hart and Risley study, “children living in poverty fail in school because their homes are deficient in language” (Hart & Risley, 1995). This is an extremely harsh accusation and gives educators or others reading this study the impression that these students are bound to fail so why even waste your time trying to help them succeed. In looking at poverty with a more positive connotation researchers find that “from a sociocultural perspective, children develop, acquire, and are socialized to various literacies, as the actively participate in culturally defined systems of practices such as participating in religious classes, playing sports or games, and participating in formal and non-formal schooling activities” (Gutierrez, Baquedano-Lopez, & Turner, 1997). This study finds that children will acquire language through social events and interaction with people. Simply attending school can really help those students acquire the language they are lacking especially if they have encouragement from the teacher to be social. It is important to remember that “all children come to school with extraordinary linguistic, cultural, and intellectual resources, just not the same resources. It is the responsibility of teachers to draw on these resources in support of school learning, including teaching the language practices valued in school” (Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009). This research suggests that all children can learn from one another. Even the most privileged student has something to learn from the disadvantaged student and if the teacher is willing to incorporate culture and differences into the classroom, everyone will benefit.

Conclusions

There are many ways in which poverty affects people; this research has shown me that poverty can have a negative effect on student learning. When it comes to language numerous studies have found that the lower socioeconomic status of a student, the lower their chance for success. One thing I did not expect to find in my research was the idea that poverty inflicted students could be an asset to the classroom. These students may have more knowledge than their peers when it comes to living in the real world. All children’s cultures and differences should be embraced and should be used to the advantage of everyone in the classroom. Professional teacher development should have an important role in every school and every teacher’s life. There is no “best way” to teach and continuing to find different ways to educate students should always have a place in the classroom.

Educational reform needs to focus on fixing what we already have in this country, broken schools, not just providing alternatives to those schools and ignoring the problems that already exist. Rural and urban schools both have their share of problems and these schools and environments are so different they cannot be grouped together when reforms are planned. Every school deserves the chance to become a “choice” school regardless of its location or student population.

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