How Teachers Can Understand and Combat the Effects of Poverty on Literacy Development

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

Deirdre Nolan

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Abstract

Modern day teachers are faced with nearly unrealistic expectations and pressures in and out of the classroom. Their responsibilities include managing large and diverse groups of children, collecting and analyzing mass amounts of data, meeting school and state curriculum requirements, and much more. With the economic status of America today, another challenge teachers are faced with is to effectively reach and teach children who are living in poverty. Children from low-income families often have trouble with literacy development both before and during their school-age years. It is imperative that teachers understand the problems these students may have in this area and also know how to combat them. Teachers have the ability, and some would say responsibility, to help ensure that these students can be successful readers and writers in school, at home, and in their communities, as they grow older. In this thesis I will describe some of the obstacles that students living in poverty might face as well as how teachers can equip these students with the skills to overcome those obstacles. I will particularly focus on the obstacles and skills that are related to literacy development. I hope that current and future teachers will be able to use this thesis to gain a deeper understanding of what students living in poverty may have to deal with as well as gain resources with which to help these students be successful. Many of the teaching suggestions would support not just impoverished students but many children in the classroom. Teachers have to learn how to accommodate for many types of learners in their classroom, and I hope that the information and resources in this paper help them to do so.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Dr. Scott Popplewell and Dr. John Emert for advising me throughout the process of creating this thesis. Their encouragement and guidance was a source of inspiration, drive, and growth not only during the process of creating this project but also throughout my entire four-year career at Ball State University. I cannot express enough thanks for the time and faith they both granted to me.
Introduction

Today’s teachers have a challenging and very important responsibility to effectively educate all students. Teachers are subject to extremely high pressures and expectations from our society. Between keeping track of data, differentiating lesson plans, managing behaviors, and much more, teachers have to consider an extensive list of things throughout the day. The most important thing teachers consider is their students, especially those who are less fortunate than others outside of school. Effective teachers keep their students in mind when planning and teaching, so that they can try to meet each of their needs. Students who live in poverty have different needs than other students and they deserve teachers who will take the time to understand and meet those needs, even in the midst of all the other pressures in the realm of education. While it can often seem like, as teachers, our plates are already too full, we have a responsibility to serve these children as best we can. This process begins by learning about what issues children in poverty are faced with so that we can understand their backgrounds and potential obstacles for learning. We then must consider what we can realistically do in the classroom to support these students in reaching their full potential. If we understand their obstacles and equip them with the tools and skills to overcome them, they will have the sky as their limit.
Understanding the Obstacles

In order to assist children and families from low SES backgrounds, we first need to recognize and understand the issues they are dealing with because of that status. The amount of poverty in the United States has reached a frightening level in the past few decades. This century, the United States has jumped to having the highest poverty rate of all developed nations (Kellett, 2009). Celeste Rosemary-McKibbon, author of *Increasing Language Skill of Students from Low Income Backgrounds*, lists potential negative effects of living in poverty that can cause problems when impoverished children try to learn in school. One of these effects is having a lack of food, which can cause health issues at birth and shortly after. If a child is malnourished in infancy, when much of their body is rapidly developing, it can affect their cognitive development. Impaired cognitive development is another thing for teachers to be aware of, as it will affect the student’s needs and performance in school as well. Having a lack of food as an elementary school student is also a problem because if the body is not given enough fuel it will not be able to concentrate or perform well throughout the school day.

Similar to having a lack of food, another common negative consequence to living in poverty is lack of sleep. This can be due to not having heat in the home, not having proper bedding areas, being stressed, or having a disruptive family environment at night. The family environment in a students’ home has an enormous effect on their performance in school (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2008). Unfortunately, it is common for children in poverty to live in unstable home environments where adults are at work for long hours, there are not two parents living in the home, and there are emotional (and sometimes aggressive or even abusive) issues. These conditions all influence the child’s
performance and attitude at school. They particularly influence literacy since it extends into all subjects at school and is crucial to many forms of understanding and communicating.

Another struggle that students living in poverty deal with that teachers also need to try to be aware of is having an inconsistent home. Students living in poverty may not go home to the same place every night. They might stay with a single parent for a month, then with grandparents for a few weeks, and so on. Moving from place to place like this can be confusing and draining for students, and it makes it even more important for teachers to create a stable and consistent environment in the classroom. Another issue associated with having an inconsistent home is having trouble keeping homework organized or even completed. Since these students may be moving between multiple places quite often, it can be difficult for them to have a consistent place to do their homework or to have an adult nearby each night who can assist them. They may also be prone to losing materials such as library books, homework papers, and notes from teachers. Additionally, these students may have problems with attendance because of a lack of transportation. Depending on where they are staying and who they are staying with, there may or may not be someone with means to bring the student to school. If they have to walk to school they may not be able to do so in bad weather, particularly in the wintertime in places that get a lot of snow and ice. Not being present at school (possibly the students' only consistent and stable environment) can cause these students to fall behind their peers in performance and learning, especially if they do not have support at home to help with homework and read books with them.
Perhaps the most pertinent effect of poverty in regards to learning in school is the lack of resources and cognitive stimulation in students' homes. Families in poverty tend to have fewer books, and often fewer people with time available to read books to children, so there will usually be very little literacy support at home. Furthermore, there are often fewer opportunities to explore and enrich learning situations (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2008). Much of what we learn is through exposure and experience, especially in regards to language development. If children in poverty are not exposed to linguistics and literacy regularly from a young age, many of them will be behind in those areas when they enter school. This situation also means that whatever these children learn and do in school is usually not being reinforced at home, so it can take much longer for students to learn important skills such as reading when their only exposure to it is what their teachers provide at school.

While these are some potential effects of poverty that it is important for teachers to understand, they are by no means affecting every child in poverty. As teachers we cannot assume that because our students live in poverty they are malnourished and have no home literacy support, because in many cases hardworking parents try their best to overcome the odds and support their children. However, it is very important that teachers know what obstacles their impoverished students might be facing so that they are able to offer them appropriate support.
No Excuses, Just Expectations

Simply because some children were born or brought into impoverished circumstances and may face a number of the obstacles aforementioned does not mean that they have to be low-achieving students. As teachers it can sometimes seem easier to categorize students as being low performers based on what we know about their home lives, but this can simply become an excuse for not working harder to meet these students’ needs. Furthermore, if teachers hold low expectations for these students then we are setting them up to fail. Many people who live in poverty already have low self-esteem, and if they see that other people (especially teachers and other adults in their lives) do not believe in their potential it is very rare that they will try to reach it.

Rosemary-McKibbin explains that many people living in poverty have an external locus of control, meaning they believe that luck and chance have more to do with what happens in their lives than their own decisions and actions do. She goes on to add that they usually have low personal efficacy, which means that they do not think that they have much personal power over things in their lives. If this is the case for some of our students, we have to seriously consider what we believe about them because they will pick up on whatever that is. If we take our knowledge of their impoverished home lives and assume that the barriers they face will prevent them from succeeding in school, that attitude accompanied with their possible external locus of control and low personal efficacy does not provide much opportunity for improvement for those students. On the other hand, if we look at those students and realize that their home environments may challenge them with different obstacles than other students but that they still have potential to learn just like any other student, it will give them the chance and
encouragement they need to be able to succeed. Knowing these students’ environmental obstacles should motivate us teachers to reach out and help them more, not deny them encouragement and opportunity. According to Harry and Rosemary Wong, one of the things that truly effective teachers do is hold high expectations for all of their students. Teachers’ expectations have a profound impact on student performance. More often than not, students will live up to whatever is expected of them. This means that if teachers hold low expectations (possibly because of a misled assumption about the child’s abilities), their students are not likely to try to exceed those expectations. On the other hand, if a teacher holds high expectations for a student, they are very likely to meet that level of expectations. By holding high expectations for their students, teachers are communicating that they believe in their students, therefore instilling encouragement and motivation in those children to work hard and live up to their potentials rather than stopping short (Wong & Wong, 2009). Perhaps even more than other students, children in poverty can benefit greatly from knowing that a caring adult believes in their capabilities.

While it can be tempting to assume that the job of teaching is too involved and difficult, or the responsibility for helping these students belongs to someone else, the classroom teacher is the one who can make the most significant positive impact (Wong & Wong, 2009). When teachers have children from poverty in their classrooms to consider along with the rest of the extensive list of pressures and responsibilities, it can be easy for us to fall into a very basic, less engaging style of teaching. Teachers may feel discouraged or unmotivated and do the bare minimum, they may not be in an environment where they are encouraged to make thoughtful decisions, reflect, and
analyze, or they may not have enough knowledge about people in poverty (they maybe even have some prejudgments) or about the wide range of effective pedagogical strategies and tools available to them (Haberman, 1991). These feelings cannot be used as excuses, for teachers hold the heavy responsibility to care for and meet the needs of these students, and they often may have to creatively use their resources in order to do so.
How Teachers Can Help

Now that we understand the challenges children in poverty face, especially in regards to delayed literacy, and also see the clear need for teachers to support these students, let’s discuss how we can respond as teachers in the classroom. According to Roseberry-McKibbin, two ways we can tackle the problems associated with literacy development in impoverished children are prevention and intervention. Prevention can include working with the local community or state and federal governments to implement or support educational programs that can help reduce the number of families in poverty, provide support for students before they enter a school classroom, or any other method of support that will prevent children from being in poverty or facing the challenges associated with it. Intervention includes ways teachers can effectively assist and support students in their classrooms who have come from impoverished backgrounds.

An example of a prevention method that is currently used in our society is Headstart. Headstart is a federal program available to provide cognitive, social, and emotional support to children in low-income families from birth to age 5 (Early Childhood Knowledge and Learning Center, 2012). According to Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter, involvement in Headstart programs often results in parents reading more to their children at home and children’s letter-word identification and vocabularies improving but not on their oral comprehension or phonological awareness (Booth & Crouter, 2008). Another mode of prevention teachers could opt to become involved in is advocacy for children in poverty. This could include hosting awareness events for parents in the community, donating time or funds to nonprofits who work to help those in poverty, or even working toward passing legislature to provide more support to those
living near to or under the poverty line. It is clear that programs such as Headstart and advocacy are positive support systems that can help children overcome some of the obstacles poverty provides, but they are not the only or the complete solution.

Another way we can help impoverished students improve in literacy is to provide intervention through appropriate support in the classroom. In their book *Children Language and Literacy*, Genishi and Dyson quote Dr. Lorrie A, Shepard explaining that “[f]or teachers to be effective in supporting student learning, they must constantly be checking for student understanding” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). One way that teachers can support students’ learning in the classroom is to administer regular progress monitoring to gather updated information about students’ understanding and academic performance. This progress monitoring can come in the form of written observations, running records, formal assessments, etc. and can provide teachers with updated information about the students strengths, improvements, and needs. To work alongside this progress monitoring, teachers and/or schools may choose to participate in a Response to Intervention (RTI) program. RTI involves a three tiered system in which students who are struggling with literacy are given more individualized support for literacy instruction. The teachers continue to administer progress reports during the time the students are receiving additional support to determine whether they need to get even more support (in Tier 3), or if they have received enough additional support to return to the regular classroom setting. The ultimate goal of RTI is to equip students to go back into the regular classroom setting and be successful (Howard, 2009). The regular progress reports and assessments help teachers maintain relevant data on students’ performance in certain areas.
Once results from these assessments are gathered, teachers can then take this information and use it to plan lessons appropriately. Since students in poverty may have different needs than other children in the classroom (and still other students will have another set of different needs), teachers should implement differentiated instruction so in order to meet their students’ different needs. Differentiated instruction involves adapting parts of a lesson or activity for specific students so that they can succeed. For example, if a student in poverty struggles with decoding words (partially because they do not receive any reading practice or support outside of school) and they are taking a test to assess their comprehension skills, the teacher may read the test aloud to that student so that they truly measure their comprehension skills. If the student read the test silently like most of the other students, it may produce inaccurate results because the trouble with decoding would prevent the true assessment of the students’ comprehension skills. By modifying the way this assessment was administered, the teacher gave the student a more fair opportunity to succeed and show their knowledge and skills.

Another way teachers can assist their students living in poverty is to create a positive classroom environment. One aspect of this environment is providing a safe and consistent atmosphere where students feel comfortable, like they belong, and they know what to expect. Fostering and modeling caring relationships with and between students can positively impact students who live in poverty and may not have strong positive relationships at home. Being consistent with daily procedures, discipline, and praise can make an enormous difference to students living in poverty. Oftentimes those students’ home lives are extremely chaotic and those students crave the routine, consistency, and positivity of a well-run classroom. Another important aspect of a well-run classroom is
the use of effective teaching strategies. When it comes to teaching literacy skills, one of
the most effective (and enjoyable) teaching strategies is incorporating literature into
instruction (Graves, Van Den Broek, and Taylor, 1996). Using literature in reading
instruction can expose students to multiple types, levels, and genres of text. Introducing
students to the variety of literature that exists and then allowing them to choose what
books they’d like to read often makes literacy instruction much more motivating and
engaging for students (Haberman, 1991). Encouraging working with peers is also an
example of an effective teaching strategy to use with all students, including those living
in poverty. Just as professionals reap benefits from discussing and collaborating, students
learn from working with their peers as well. Organizing heterogeneous groups or pairs of
students can help students learn from and support each other, while also fostering positive
relationships. Forming these bonds between classmates can be very important for
children living in poverty because they often have difficulty making friends and finding
people who can relate to them (Taylor & Pearson, 2002). Incorporating peer work, using
literature in instruction, and creating a positive and consistent classroom environment can
be very beneficial ways for teachers to help impoverished students.

Another effective strategy that teachers can use to reach out to students in poverty
is to understand and respond to the students’ lives outside of school. When teachers
make an effort to understand the students’ backgrounds and their community it can be
very beneficial because the teacher will most likely be better able to implement strategies
and interventions that they know will support the students where they need it most. In
their book *Disparities in School Readiness*, Booth and Crouter describe family-focused
interventions as a way for teachers to learn about their students’ communities and reach
out to equip the students’ families with ways to support their child’s literacy. Family-focused interventions involve home visits where professionals bring reading-related materials and activities to use with the children and model for the parents how to do so. These visits should also include modeling, prompting, and support of parent-child reading as well as teaching them methods to reduce children’s disruptive behaviors (Booth & Crouter, 2008). All of these interventions will help parents learn how to better support their children’s literacy at home, which in turn will help their performance in school. Booth and Crouter more specifically recommend this type of intervention as a way for paraprofessionals to reach out to preschool age children living in poverty, which could be used as a preventative measure to equip students and their families with the support tools and skills they need to be successful once they enter school. It may be more realistic for individual paraprofessionals to perform home visits than teachers, but regular teachers could definitely adapt this idea into an educational workshop at the school or community library where parents are invited to learn how to support their children’s literacy at home.

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to find parents living in poverty who are available to participate in home visits or travel to workshops because of work schedules, transportations issues, and the like, but that definitely does not mean there is nothing else teachers can do. Other ways teachers can help parents support their children’s literacy at home include home literacy packets and homework procedures. Home literacy packets can look different depending on what the teacher has available and wants to use, but usually consists of a large Ziploc or tote bag with an appropriate level book and matching literacy activity that students can easily take home and complete with their parents. This
method can alleviate the problem of students' homes not having resources to practice reading with, because they can take home these guided resources from the school. Even if there are no adults available to work through the home literacy packet alongside the child, the teacher can design the activities at an appropriate difficulty level so that the student could complete them independently. Teachers can relatively easily create large sets of these home literacy packets with various genres, levels of books, and literacy skill activities. Homework procedures can also be beneficial ways to help alleviate school-related stress in students' homes. Especially for students who do not have a consistent home or have a chaotic home environment, some children may benefit from a procedure that prevents them from losing homework, notes, library books, and so on at home. One example of a homework procedure is to give each student a folder with pockets designated for unfinished homework and completed homework. Keeping a consistent procedure using these folders at the beginning and end of each school day can provide the students with the structure they may crave, especially if they do not have structure at home. If the folder also becomes an item that gets lost in a chaotic home life, teachers can also think about designating time before and/or after school when students can complete their homework in the classroom, where they have a calm environment and an adult to support them when needed. There are so many ways that teachers can help students from impoverished homes, that there is no excuse for us to deny them that support.
## Practical Programs and Resources for Teachers

The table below outlines some practical programs that teachers can implement to help impoverished students with their literacy development as well as some resources you can access to learn how to carry out these programs and gain ideas for how to use them.

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<th>Program</th>
<th>Description/Use</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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<tr>
<td>Head Start</td>
<td>Teachers can encourage low-income families with children age 0-5 to participate in this federal program that promotes school readiness</td>
<td>Head Start Website-Program Locator: <a href="http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc">http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc</a> hs/about/directories</td>
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<tr>
<td>Response to Intervention (RTI)</td>
<td>Teachers can encourage their school corporation to establish an RTI program to support students struggling with literacy and equip them with skills to succeed in the general classroom</td>
<td>RTI Website: <a href="http://www.rti4success.org/">http://www.rti4success.org/</a></td>
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<td>Family Literacy Nights</td>
<td>Teachers can plan Family Literacy Nights to be hosted at the school where families are invited to participate in reading and writing activities with their children and learn how to support their children's literacy at home. These events can also build positive connections between home and school.</td>
<td>PDF from Illinois State Library: <a href="http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/publications/pdf_publications/Ida140.pdf">http://www.cyberdriveillinois.com/publications/pdf_publications/Ida140.pdf</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Focused Interventions</td>
<td>Teachers can collaborate with other professionals in the community to set up home visits to support students' reading and teach parents how to help their children.</td>
<td>Video of Wisconsin School Reading Night: <a href="http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7OnoZA6tQ">http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7OnoZA6tQ</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a Safe and Positive Classroom Environment</td>
<td>Teachers can promote academic success in students (especially those from low-income families) by creating a positive learning atmosphere, establishing consistent classroom management, and holding reasonably high expectations.</td>
<td>Book: Disparities in School Readiness: How Families Contribute to Transitions into School by Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Book: The First Days of School: How to Be an Effective Teacher By Harry and Rosemary Wong</td>
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Conclusion

Poverty is unfortunately a reality for many young students these days and it affects the way they learn in the classroom. Many times these students are behind their classmates in performance, particularly in regards to literacy in the early grades. These children also bring a whole slew of issues and obstacles to school with them that are different from the other students', so as teachers we need to understand what those are and how to effectively respond to them, especially because this is not a problem that will be eradicated anytime soon. Teachers need to prepare for a future where classrooms are becoming more diverse, so we need to be prepared to meet many different kinds of needs (Genishi & Dyson, 2009). These students have just as much potential as their classmates, but they have different obstacles to overcome, so it is our great responsibility as teachers to use our efforts, knowledge, and resources to understand these obstacles and equip our students with the tools and skills to overcome them and work toward their full potential.
References


