

More Feet Hitting the Road:
Ten Ways to Get Impoverished Children's Test Scores Up

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Introduction

There are many concerns facing public schools today that impact the learner outcomes of all students. Educators have to seriously consider the constantly shifting student populations. One population consists of parent and teachers who live daily in poverty. Poverty in America is on the rise (Rebell, M.A. & Wolfe, J.R., 2012). Many poor children enter public schools unprepared to learn. They often have a limited quality of prior learning experiences in their home environments when compared to children in higher socio-economic classes. Even though some children attend Head Start and other pre-schools, there are students who still enter Kindergarten lacking prior experiences that set children up for success in the early grades. Kindergarten and first grade curriculum requires students to have many prior knowledge experiences.

Concerned and dedicated teachers are doing their best to fill the gap with these students, yet some teachers are grasping for solutions and effective teaching strategies. Professional development in elementary schools generally includes the subjects of reading and math; however, teachers who teach children of poverty desperately need more strategies and reinforcements in their regular education classrooms. In order to meet the state mandate improving test scores, smaller classes could very well be the best solution for this big challenge. With fewer students in classes, the teacher could be more accessible and responsive to students who need accommodations and modifications (Hedges, B., & Konstantopoulos. 2000). In addition, average performing students would receive more individualized attention.

The primary purpose of teaching is to teach to learner outcomes. This article discusses ten ways to achieve greater learner outcomes in the classroom for struggling students, thus resulting

in higher end of the year test scores. In addition, these suggestions are good for all classrooms in general.

1. Collaborative Teaching – More Teachers in the Regular Education Classroom

In the lower elementary grades, reading has been and most likely will still be the primary focus in instruction. Students must become fluent readers to be successful in all subjects. In many American elementary classrooms, reading is usually taught in the morning. The teacher is the sole person responsible for teaching students how to read. In many classes, the teacher has no reinforcements except for possible additional literacy specialists who pull out of the classroom's small groups for intensive intervention instruction. Although this practice is effective for many schools, an alternative is teaming the literacy teacher with the elementary teacher in the regular classroom. Teachers trade off working with small groups. Two teachers remain in the classroom during the main time. The entire class is taught phonics lessons together (Gerber, P. & Popp, P. 2000).

I was a teacher for several years. Teaching reading was a difficult task in that I had no extra help except for one teacher taking the lowest four readers out of the classroom for an hour and a half literacy time. The school mandated whole group reading and the method was not all that effective. Later, we went to Balanced Literacy and began implementing small group ability instruction. These were flexible groups in students could move to higher groups when ready to do so. One year, I was asked to be a literacy coach. It was a wonderful year. Every morning I went into two classrooms every morning. The teacher and I would teach reading to small groups. We would often alternate groups. In each classroom, I would teach hands-on phonics lessons. My goal was to increase students' attention spans. Most mornings, we would spend up to forty-five minutes. Students could stay on task when they were active and engaged. Other teachers told me I couldn't do this, but I did! In the afternoons, I would pull out the lowest readers for small group instruction. We frequently tested the students' reading levels. I even had the Reading Recovery teacher check my scores. Reading scores soared with this method. The average progress of all second-graders combined increased two years and two months. Our scores surpassed any other at-risk school in the school district (S. Ferguson, personal communication on May 25, 2011).

2. Whole Group Extended Phonic Lessons

As mentioned in Strategy One, phonics should be an emphasis for at-risk students. These students need more implicit, intentional teaching with phonics emphasizing the most frequent word families and rhyming words (Joseph, L. & McCachran, M., 2003). Another popular emphasis in Balanced Literacy is on word wall words and high-frequency words. In this collaborative teaching model, the main writer used a whiteboard (for modeling sentences) and phonics handouts. Direct instruction was used including questions and answers with the students. All students (even diagnosed ADHD students) remained on task up to forty-five minutes working together in pairs. Much time was spent on the evaluation level of the Bloom's Taxonomy. To explain, the teacher (main writer) would model an incorrect sentence. Students would be challenged to help the teacher correct sentence. The final step in the lesson was for the students to correct the sentence on the whiteboard. Individual students would respectfully and gleefully tell the class what the teacher did incorrectly, pointing out the mistakes. The students then were required to explain how the sentence should have been constructed. Through this process, students found great satisfaction stating the standard of performance (how to write a sentence correctly.) Once students could correct many sentences, their overall topical writing was greatly improved. The use of extended phonics time was well-spent; students could apply what they had learned to the books they were reading.

3) More Early Literacy Teachers in the Afternoons

For even more intensive reading instruction in the early grades, elementary schools need more early literacy teachers in the afternoons (Jannette, K., & Baughn, S., 1999). One plan would be to utilize retired teachers who still have the energy, expertise, and drive to teach. These individuals would be experienced teachers who do not want the responsibility of teaching

and what it entails. However, they would be teachers who want to remain in the profession while working half days. To their benefit, these teachers would be free in the morning to conduct personal business and commit a few hours in the afternoons to work with identified struggling readers. The ultimate goal of this plan would be to recruit required experts in the field of reading who still have the energy and passion for reading and teaching.

4. More Math Intervention Teachers

Since the emphasis in the early grades is on teaching a child how to read, math is sometimes viewed as a subject of second importance. Math is sequential; when a student misses one or more concepts, math then becomes a frustrating and disliked subject because the student cannot go on to the next concept. Thus, the student is doomed. It becomes impossible to catch the student up in math. Some elementary schools have well-grounded math intervention programs; however, some school districts should recognize the need in this area and fund more programs in math intervention. As educators well know, early intervention is the key to early success.

As with the collaborative literacy strategies discussed earlier in this article, the same plan with math intervention can work (Gibertson, G., Witt, J., Singletary, L. & Van DerHeyden, A., 2007). In elementary schools, math is often taught in the morning during reading instruction. As true in reading intervention, regular classroom teachers need backup human support in math intervention too. Whole class traditionally would still occur in addition to implementing a plan for small group instruction and possible one-on-one tutoring when necessary for a student who is far behind in math. The goal is to get all students in the classroom caught up in math. This is a big challenge; teachers should still believe that all children can learn and that all children can learn math. Another goal is to have both teachers work together on a checklist documenting which students are struggling and what skills need to be taught. An individual plan of instruction

must occur for the child to be successful. In concurrence with reading intervention in the afternoon, additional math teachers could pull out students for more instruction during the afternoons.

5. Closer Coordination with Special Education and Regular Education Teachers

Some schools have a good fit between special education and regular education teachers, but some do not. In some schools, the regular education teacher signs off on the IEP at the IEP Team Meeting and never sees the IEP again. At that point, there is very little effort for either teacher to communicate intervention strategies, let alone come up with a plan for intervention. The educational plan of intervention has been abandoned for the most part. There are either no more team meetings concerning the child's goals and needs or only one more team meeting during the school year with little or no collaboration between both teachers. Thus, for the benefit of the child, there is a dire need to initiate more communication between both teachers (Talmor, R., Reiter, S., & Feigin, N., 2007). The ultimate goal is to intervene for the child's best interests. Otherwise, the IEP becomes a meaningless and worthless piece of paper. The bottom line is that both the teacher and the special education teachers should have a copy of the IEP while having frequent conversations about how both parties will provide intervention strategies for the student. A two-way commitment and communication are vital ingredients in the child's academic success.

6. More Professional Development on Inclusion and an Implemented Successful Inclusion Program

This suggestion is related to the preceding suggestion. Even today, teachers need to know the definition of inclusion. What are the goals of inclusion? How can inclusion benefit the student in the classroom? What does the research say about inclusion? What type of inclusion

program does the school district advocate and provide? Regular education teachers often have vague ideas on inclusion, how the program in their school operates (or does not operate), and what the intended purposes are (Gurgu, H., Uzuner, 2010; Johnson, I. R., 2009).

If schools plan to have a successful inclusion program, regular education teachers as well as special education teachers need to be educated and informed about the benefits of inclusion and how the model can work practically. The following is a public elementary teacher's account of her school extremely vague, if non-existent, inclusion program:

When I taught first grade, I had several students who were very poor. They were behind in everything. I was never given a copy of the IEP; I never knew what the special education teachers wanted me to do with one student. All they would talk about was modified time. I wasn't sure what modified time. One teacher told me she would come and work with Daniel every day for about twenty minutes. She would not remove him from the classroom; she would sit next to him. Day after day this teacher would come to the classroom, get down on her knees, and quietly talk to Daniel. I overheard her several days getting on Daniel because he was not trying hard enough. Daniel always cried every day she came to the classroom. I didn't know what to do. To me, this was a kind of child abuse; yet I felt helpless. I didn't know what inclusion or modified time was, yet I knew it couldn't be what I saw every day (K. Raymond, personal communication on May 11, 2011).

7. Departmentalization in the Early Grades: Social Studies and Science

Since the foundational skills of reading are the most important skills taught in elementary classrooms, the subjects of science and social studies are often minimally taught and/or neglected altogether. The teachers in third and fourth grades understandably grumble that these subjects were not introduced earlier in the curriculum and that they had to play *catch up* on these subjects. On high-stakes assessment testing, these subjects are often included. Social studies and science can be exciting subjects when taught in a developmentally appropriate way. To increase test scores, departmentalization is a good option for teachers (Chan, T. & Jarman, D. 2004). In grade levels that have two teachers for one grade, (such as first and second grades) one teacher can become a well-prepared expert in social studies and the other teacher can become an expert in

science. Also, students would benefit from two different teaching styles and strategies. Each teacher has one course preparation per day (or even perhaps two or three afternoons a week). Thus, students will be in all curricular areas.

8. Implementation of Cross-Age Tutoring Program

Most any type of tutoring program can be effective with any struggling student. Cross-age tutoring has rich benefits for the child being tutored (Topping, K & Byron, A. 2004). Cross-age tutoring is a highly motivating strategy for young children where older students with more experience scaffold younger students. Children are flattered when older students give them attention. They see older students as *cool* role models. The relationship between the younger and older students forms a powerful bond of mutual respect and nurturing. The increased motivation would jump start the learning journey. For some children, the tutor can be more effective than the child's teacher. Wise teachers realize that other positive relationships with students can inspire children to learn. Cross-age tutoring does not happen by chance; it has to be a thoughtfully planned program within the school setting and/or school district.

9. Parent Education Program Including Parent and Community Volunteers

Teachers are concerned about the lack of parent involvement in many children's education. On the other side of the coin, there are many parents who *do care* and *want* to be involved to some extent. These parents want to know what is going on in the classroom and how they can support the teacher in educating their children. Beyond PTO's, a planned parent education program should be developed in elementary schools. A planned program could consist of two or three nightly programs each semester or school year where parents are encouraged to attend to hear about ways to help their children at home. Easy reading strategies and math strategies could be taught to the parents. Parents would be encouraged to ask questions

concerning their children's education. Attendance would be optional, yet encouraged. It is important to provide foundational learning skills for parents who chose to attend these programs and support their children's learning (Lauren, P., Wilkerson, S., Aptharp, H., Snow, D., & Marnn, G., 2006).

At these nightly parent programs, these same parents would be invited to help in after school intervention reading and math programs once or twice a week (depending on the comfort level of the parents' subject preferences). From this point on, a more proactive parent may volunteer to head up a community program after school that includes volunteers. These programs give students motivation and individual attention that ultimately should raise test scores.

10. The Implementation of Technology

Technology is a fact in today's world. Without knowing how to use technology, students will most likely experience a dismal future in many areas of employment and other life situations (Fleschman, S. & Pacuilla, H., 2006). Due to funding from several sources, there are classes in schools of poverty that have computers and smart boards. The dismal reality is that they are sitting and not being used due to a lack of adequate teacher training. Even when there has been training, the training has not addressed the many options the smart board is designed to do. What teachers need is a *monkey see, monkey do* training. This would consist of hands-on training where each individual teacher actually views what is modeled by the trainer and then, in turn, imitates the very same action. This type of training session would take more time than the usual *show the options training*.

In addition, more than one training session needs to occur to ensure new technology placed in classrooms. Several frequent, close together training sessions should occur until

teachers are comfortable using the smart board, Elmo, and other technologies in the classroom. The ultimate goal is to get teachers comfortable working the technology.

Technology opens up a wide world of options in delivering instruction. However, teachers must feel that they are proficient in using technology; or they will avoid it at all costs. The key to using the technology is in the type and frequency of interactive training sessions that occur.

Closing Remarks

It's sad to say, no doubt, that there will always be poverty in America. Even with the many advantages children have today that can prepare them for a quality public school and university education, some children will come to their first day of Kindergarten very behind. Children will enter the classroom with prior experiences for solid foundations for future learning. In reality, teachers and schools cannot change the home lives of students; but educators can try to fill in the gaps.

Thus, teachers carrying the challenge totally on their own have a daunting and sometimes overwhelming responsibility of achieving higher learner outcomes that result in higher test scores. To reiterate, many children in poverty show a lack of knowledge of the prerequisite skills that middle and higher socio-economic status children generally show. It is hoped that using one or more of these recommendations will increase scores in elementary public schools. Sometimes less *is* more; however, when it comes to these ten suggestions, more reinforcements get more results. The quest is to raise children's learner outcomes and scores. With careful planning and implementation, the ten suggestions from this article can do just that.

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