The Relationship Between Students Living in Poverty and Those Who Teach Them

Suzanne Calder

Abstract

There is a correlation between students living in poverty and low academic achievements. Students who live in poverty often come to school with less knowledge and experiences than their peers. Communities these students live in, and the schools they attend, do not always have the resources to attain higher educational accomplishments. Educators must recognize poverty as an issue and build relationships with these students while in their classrooms and schools. Educators should also partner with members of the communities to create projects where students can have pride in their academic accomplishments, and also within the communities in which they live.

Students living in poverty attain lower levels of education (Palomar-Lever & Victorio-Estrada, 2017), so educators need to support these students for them to become more successful (Palomar-Lever & Victorio-Estrada, 2017). Poverty affects students across our nation (Khanna & Meisner, 2018), including several families in my community, Portage la Prairie (Citizens for Public Justice, 2017). As an educator in my community, I have worked with many students who live below the poverty line. Children who live in poverty do not get much of an opportunity to escape it, because they come from homes where the parents are struggling (Bryce, Iglesias, Pullman, & Rogova, 2016). These children live in communities that have high levels of poverty (Neuman, Kaefer, & Pinkham, 2018), and they go to schools that do not have the resources for them to obtain a high level of academic success (Neuman et al., 2018). With these obstacles that our students face, "poverty remains the biggest obstacle to education" (Birdsong, 2016, Conclusion section, para. 1). As teachers, we need to learn how to help our students through these barriers. Teachers are an important influence in students' lives, but we should also look to our schools to lead changes that will provide an encouraging environment for students (Turner & Juntune, 2018). Partnerships between schools and community groups can have a promising effect on those students living in poverty (Thompson, n.d.). The school culture must learn to recognize and understand the signs of students living with poverty, and provide them a safe and reassuring setting to develop into effective citizens for our society.

Poverty Affects Academic Achievement

Many homes are filled with love, but for those living in poverty, love does not always overcome the deficiencies that poverty can create in a home, community, or school, or the implications it can have on academic success (Jensen, 2009). Living in a home that is under a lot of stress can result in children's needs not being met, which in turn can affect children's academic performance. Children living in poverty may lack access to adequate medical care, which can affect their brain development, causing a ripple effect on their academic success (Spies, Morgan, & Matsuura, 2014). These children do not always receive the nutrition they require to grow developmentally, and they may not be healthy enough to stay consistently in school. Absenteeism affects children's ability to advance their learning and to make relationships with teachers necessary for them to understand their learning style (Spies et al., 2014). Many of these stressors can also influence students' behaviour at school, consequently affecting their social lives (Jensen, 2009). When children lack friends at school, it is more difficult for them to want to remain there to learn. It is unfortunate that children are born into home situations that they do not have control over, but if we, as educators, understand that they

did not choose this path, then we need to support them when they come to school (TeAchnology, n.d.).

Research shows that living in a community of low-income families has a correlation with attaining low academic achievement in school (Morrissey & Vinopal, 2018). Teachers need to understand that living in an impoverished community is an important factor in predicting a child's success. Families living in poverty generally have less access to the resources that make their community a positive place to live. Many impoverished communities do not have access to a library or preschool development programs. With the lack of these resources, many parents become stressed and feel the effects of this lack of support (Morrissey & Vinopal, 2018). A community can play an important role in influencing and determining the success or failure of children (Neuman et al., 2018). When students come from a high-poverty community, educators need to be responsible for creating a sense of a positive community within the school, which may provide the students a higher potential of success.

Children who attend schools in high-poverty communities are more likely to receive a negative educational experience. These schools are less likely to have high quality teachers. Within the schools, the teachers are not exposing students to the same degree of literacy education that many students in low poverty schools obtain (Neuman et al., 2018). Children living in poverty often begin their education lagging behind in their developmental domains, compared to children living in low-poverty communities (Morrissey & Vinopal, 2018). Once the children are in school, the education they receive may not be as high level as that for their well-to-do peers (Neuman et al., 2018). When children do not receive a good quality delivery of curriculum, it can have additional negative effects on their love of learning. This lack of quality teaching will affect students as they continue through their educational experience, increasing the academic gap (Morrissey & Vinoplay, 2018). Once the children realize that there is a difference between themselves and their peers, they often start to withdraw and "disengage from school at the age of 9 or ten years old" (Horgan, 2009, p. 370). Children living in poverty also have a hard time staying in school because of health issues or social anxiety, knowing that they do not fit in with some of the low-poverty students (Horgan, 2009). Health issues, including anxiety, begin the cycle of school absences and incomplete assignments, which also leads to an increase in the academic gap (Jensen, 2009). School is often the one stable place for many children living in poverty with whom I have worked. It is educators' job to make school a safe and positive learning environment, which may encourage students to want to further their education, be positive role models in their community, and end the cycle of poverty within their homes (Spies et al., 2014).

Teachers Can Support Students Living in Poverty

While in schools, teachers have the ability to build relationships with their students, create a culture of understanding within their school, and reach out to community members to support their teaching within their classrooms. It is important for teachers to understand the degree of influence we have in our students' lives (Dell'Angelo, 2016). For teachers to gain a better understanding of these experiences and their students, they should participate in the simulation activity, *Living on the Edge* (United Way Winnipeg, 2018). It gives teachers and educational professionals an understanding of the difficulties that those living in poverty face on a daily basis. Professional development in the effects of poverty may help teachers to teach from a different perspective and change their relationship with students living in poverty (Parker, 2015). I have heard teachers complain numerous times about the excuses students use for not completing assignments or being absent, but I believe they are unaware of what students living in poverty are going through. If they understood students' situations, they could be more effective teachers and have better relationships with their students (Johnson, n.d.). When students gain a trusting relationship with their teachers, it supports those teachers' efforts in having high expectations (Spies et al., 2014). Teachers should always expect nothing but the

best from their students because that encourages all students to reach their highest potential (Whipple, Genero, & Evans, 2016). Teachers may have to differentiate or adapt their teaching style to help students become successful, because not all students learn the same way (Johnson, n.d.). Having teachers who understand their students, build positive relationships with them, and have high expectations will generate a school of successful students.

Creating a school that, as a whole, understands the culture of poverty (TeAchnology, n.d.) needs to begin with the administration (Dell'Angelo, 2016). Administrators can encourage their school to have a positive teaching culture, programs that can be of support to students and families living in poverty, and more school involvement by the students living in poverty. Listening to the teachers and their ideas creates a team approach to teaching among administrators and their staff (Dell'Angelo, 2016). The administration could look at flexible scheduling for students who need to start late or leave early, which may cause less student-teacher friction within the classroom (Birdsong, 2018). Parents living in poverty would likely appreciate the flexible scheduling, because it can assist them, and create a positive partnership between themselves and the school (Parker, 2015). Schools can build positive relationships between themselves and families through information nights when families learn about the different programs offered to their children, including a teen clinic, social services, career counselling, or after-schooling activities (Dike, 2017). If educators examine what students are interested in and are capable of, we can serve the students better (Parker, 2015). Encouraging students who are living in poverty to be members of any of the extra-curricular activities that the school has to offer, whether it be sports, arts, or student council, may create a feeling of control over their lives, even if it is only at school (Horgan, 2009). Schools and their stakeholders can be both supportive of the students living in poverty and provide them with the knowledge and experiences to become important citizens of society.

Schools can also look beyond the classrooms to support students living in poverty. Partnering with community supports, programs, and services may improve the overall experiences that students living in poverty have as they complete their education (Zyngier, 2017). School-community partnerships that occur when the community programs (such as Boys & Girls Clubs) come into the school or when the students go out into the community (*Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada*, 2018), help students to feel "empowered" (Zyngier, 2017, p. 23). Community programs can come into the school during the day or after school. If members from the community come into the school and share their experience and knowledge, it creates a hands-on aspect whereby students can "learn new skills" and build relationships with members of the community (Zyngier, 2017, p. 22). There have been programs wherein the students have gone into their community and worked on project-based assignments that improved the communities they live in, giving them more pride in their work and showing that they can make a difference (Luter, Mitchell, & Taylor, 2017). When schools and teachers work with community programs, it provides positive experiences for students living in poverty. It motivates teachers to teach in a way that is both successful and meaningful to the students and themselves, and it gives an overall feeling of community between the school and the city it is happening in (Luter et al., 2017).

Conclusion

We live in a society where poverty has an influence on our students in many ways, including an effect on their ability to achieve high academic standards. The constant reminder of living in poverty does not escape children; as a result, these children are more focused on daily life than on gaining a higher education (Horgan, 2009). Children may initially use school as an escape when they are younger, but then begin to believe they will not prosper as much as their peers, and as a result do not want to continue with school, thus continuing the poverty cycle (Gullo, 2018). We as teachers need to hold the highest standards, and if we can get students to believe in themselves as worthwhile citizens, then they might have a better chance of breaking

the poverty cycle (Neuman et al., 2018). As teachers, we have the opportunity to be with the students daily, for the better part of the year, so we need to want to make a difference. Understanding our students through education and building relationships gives us more knowledge of what we can do for our students (Dike, 2017). In order to break the cycle of poverty in our country, we need to start with the families in our communities. We can reach these families through our schools. By providing a positive, hands-on educational experience to our students living in poverty, they can become the change that makes them proud of the community and school in which they live in and attend.

References

Birdsong, K. (2016, January 26). Ten facts about how poverty impacts education. *Fast forword.* Retrieved October 11, 2018, from https://www.scilearn.com/blog/ten-facts-about-how-poverty-impacts-education

Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada. (2018). Retrieved December 27, 2018, from https://www.bgccan.com/en/

Bryce, R., Iglesias, B., Pullman, A., & Rogova, A. (2016, January 19). Inequality explained: The hidden gaps in Canada's education system. *Opencanada.org.* Retrieved October 11, 2018, from https://www.opencanada.org/features/inequality-explained-hidden-gaps-canadas-education-system/

Citizens for Public Justice. (2017, October). *Poverty trends 2017.* Retrieved November 1, 2018, from https://www.cpj.ca/sites/default/files/docs/files/PovertyTrendsReport2017.pdf

Dell'Angelo, T. (2016). The power of perception: Mediating the impact of poverty on student achievement. *Education and Urban Society, 48*(3), 245-261. doi:10.1177/0013124514531042

Dike, V. E. (2017). Poverty and brain development in children: Implications for learning. *Asian Journal of Education and Training, 3*(1), 64-68. doi:10.20448/journal.522.2017.31.64.68

Gullo, D. (2018). A structural model of early indicators of school readiness among children of poverty. *Journal of Children and Poverty*, *24*(1), 3-24.

Horgan, G. (2009). "That child is smart because he's rich": The impact of poverty on young children's experiences of school. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 13*(4), 359-376. doi:10.1080/13603110802707779

Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Johnson, C. (n. d.). Six effective practices can help teachers help students from poverty succeed. *Leading learning for children from poverty.* Retrieved November 1, 2018, from http://amle.org/BrowsebyTopic/WhatsNew/WNDet/TabId/270/ArtMID/888/ArticleID/351/Leading-Learning-for-Children-From-Poverty.aspx

Khanna, A., & Meisner, A. (2018, June 18). Riding by riding analysis shows child poverty in Canada knows no boundaries. *Campaign2000.ca.* Retrieved October 26, 2018, from https://campaign2000.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Campaign-2000-Riding-by-Riding-Child-Poverty-Report.pdf

Luter, D. G., Mitchell, A. M., & Taylor, H. L., Jr., (2017). Critical consciousness and schooling: The impact of the community as a classroom program on academic indicators. *Education Sciences, 7*(25), 1-23.

Morrissey, T. W., & Vinopal, K. M. (2018). Neighborhood poverty and children's academic skills and behavior in early elementary school. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 80*(1), 182-197.

Neuman, S. B., Kaefer, T., & Pinkham, A. M. (2018). A double dose of disadvantaged: Language experiences for low-income children in home and school. *Journal of Education Psychology, 110*(1), 102-118.

Palomar-Lever, J., & Victoria-Estrada, A. (2017). Academic success of adolescents in poverty. *Social Psychology of Education 20*(3), 669-691.

Parker, D. C. (2015, February). Poverty and schooling: Where mindset meets practice. *What works? Research into practice.* Retrieved November 2, 2018, from http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/ww_mindsetpractice.pdf

Spies, T. G., Morgan, J. J., & Matsuura, M. (2014). The faces of hunger: The educational impact of hunger of students with disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 50*(1), 5-14. doi:10.1177/1053451214532349

TeAchnology. (n.d.). *More on the effects of poverty on teaching and learning.* Retrieved October 11, 2018, from http://www.teach-nology.com/tutorials/teaching/poverty/1/

Thompson, J. G. (n.d.). How one school is fighting poverty. *Teaching community: Where teachers meet and learn.* Retrieved November 2, 2018, from http://teaching.monster.com/benefits/articles/3049-how-one-school-is-fighting-poverty

Turner, S. T., & Juntune, J. (2018). Perceptions of the home environments of graduate students raised in poverty. *Journal of Advanced Academics, 29*(2), 91-115. doi:10.1177/1932202X18758259

United Way Winnipeg. (2018). *Living on the edge: Taking a look at poverty.* Retrieved November 1, 2018, from https://unitedwaywinnipeg.ca/lote/

Whipple, S. S., Genero, C. K., & Evans, G. W. (2016). Task persistence: A potential mediator of the income-achievement gap. *Journal of Applied Research on Children, 7*(1), 1-30. doi:10.1007/s11218-017-9389-7

Zyngier, D. (2017). How experiential learning in an informal setting promotes class equity and social and economic justice for children from "communities at promise": An Australian perspective. *International Review of Education, 63*(1), 9-28. doi:10.1007/s11159-017-9621-x

About the Author

Suzanne Calder is a high school teacher enrolled in her first year of the Master of Education program, administration stream. She currently specializes in family studies and is working on implementing child care as a vocational opportunity at her school. She is a mother of three teenage hockey players.