Instructional Strategies for Students in Poverty

What accommodations, if any, should be made for students in poverty?

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Should accommodations be made in the classroom for students living in poverty? If so, what should those accommodations look like? Researchers’ opinions on this vary widely, but one thing most everyone can agree on is that the number of children living below the poverty line is increasing. This paper seeks to explore the impact of poverty upon student learning and behavior and provides both instructional and classroom management strategies proven to be effective when working with students in poverty.

According to the United States Census Bureau, 43.6 million people lived in poverty in 2009, and this is the third consecutive annual increase in the number of people living in poverty (2010). For children under the age of eighteen, the poverty rate increased from 19.0 percent in 2008 to 20.7 percent in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This economic reality translates into more than one in five American children living in homes without sufficient financial means. According to Armstrong (2010), “poor diets result in vitamin deficiencies, particularly B vitamins, and anemia, which can cause long-lasting neurological deficits when untreated” (p.49). Armstrong also points out that asthma and lead poisoning, both common among children living in poverty, can negatively impact brain function and interfere with learning (2010). Physical ailments such as these can affect students’ functioning and behavior in the classroom. These statistics seem to indicate that students living in poverty may have different behavioral needs than their middle-and-upper-class peers. If this is the case, what specific behaviors can be expected from these students?
Sato and Lensmire (2009) cite the work of educator Ruby Payne in which Payne lists behaviors related to poverty. According to Payne (as cited in Sato & Lensmire, 2009), students living in poverty:

- (a) laugh when disciplined as a “way to save face in matriarchal poverty”;
- (b) argue loudly with the teacher;
- (c) make angry responses;
- (d) make inappropriate or vulgar comments;
- (e) physically fight because they “do not have language or belief system to use conflict resolution”;
- (f) always have their hands on someone else;
- (g) cannot follow directions because “little procedural memory is used in poverty” and “sequence is not used or valued”;
- (h) are extremely disorganized because “planning, scheduling, or prioritizing skills” are “not taught in poverty”;
- (i) complete only part of a task because they have “no procedural self-talk” and “do not ‘see’ the whole task”;
- (j) are disrespectful to the teacher because they “may not know adults worthy of respect”;
- (k) harm other students, verbally or physically;
- (l) cheat or steal because of “weak support system, weak role models/emotional resources”;
- and (m) talk incessantly because “poverty is very participatory.” (p.366)

Pogrow (2009) explains that when teaching students in poverty, information seems to go “in one ear and out the other” (p.409). Pogrow (2009) claims this is because the brain can only retain new information if related information preexists in the brain in order for a Velcro-like connection to be made between the old and new content.

Pogrow’s concern is that students born into poverty have not mastered an “initial, specialized, thinking development stage” (2009, p.410). This stage is developed by
engaging in what Pogrow (2009) calls “home language,” which these students may not have had experience with. In addition, Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford (2010) assert the notion that students in poverty enter school linguistically disadvantaged because they have been deprived of literacy-promoting experiences as young children. The research seems to indicate that children born into poverty necessitate different teaching and learning strategies from those of their middle-and-upper-class peers. If this is the case, what training is provided to teachers who are working with students in poverty?

In 2007, approximately 11.2 percent of students in Tennessee received special education services (Tennessee Department of Education, 2010). Most teachers take a basic Special Education class during their course of study and graduate college prepared to address the unique needs of this group of students. In 2009, approximately 46 percent of students in Tennessee received free or reduced lunches (Tennessee Department of Education, 2010). Bennett (2008) points out, “If this single statistic is used as an indicator of poverty, it is interesting to note that unlike the identified special education population, there is little if any instruction provided to preservice teachers regarding working with low-income students” (p.251). Bennett (2008) also asserts that college courses which focus on multicultural education do not pay particular attention to this subgroup of students, leaving a gap in preservice teachers’ understanding of the needs of students in poverty.

Haberman (2010) echoes this concern, stating there is actually a “pedagogy of poverty,” a specific form of teaching students in poverty that has become accepted but does not work. Haberman (2010) provides fourteen teaching acts that currently constitute
urban teaching: “giving information, asking questions, giving directions, making assignments, monitoring seatwork, reviewing assignments, giving tests, reviewing tests, assigning homework, reviewing homework, settling disputes, punishing noncompliance, marking papers, and giving grades” (p.82). Haberman (2008) explains these teaching acts lead to student resentment and resistance, and teachers burn out because of the emotional and physical exhaustion they face as a result of constantly attempting to maintain authority within the classroom. If this is the case, and these widely-practiced teaching strategies are seemingly ineffective with students in poverty, which teaching strategies have proven to be effective with these students?

Bennett (2008) claims that the majority of teachers in the United States are white, female, and from middle-class backgrounds. Bennett (2008) expresses concern that these teachers’ lives “rarely intersect with low-income students until they enter the classroom” (p.252). According to Bennett (2008), teachers should engage in a driving tour of their local communities in order to develop an awareness of their students’ economic backgrounds and develop a commitment to being culturally responsive in their teaching. Bennett (2008) believes good teachers “see students as individuals, not as a collective” (p.253).

Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford (2010) offer several strategies for working with students and families living in poverty. At the school level, administrators should “hire and retain teachers who believe in their students, increase collaboration throughout the school, use creative scheduling, and spend money on things that work” (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010, p.110). Within the classroom, teachers should “create a
positive classroom environment, focus on assets instead of deficits, plan lessons and activities that are appropriate and meaningful, and create a classroom that is high in challenge and low in threat” (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010, p.110). Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford (2010) also assert the importance of designing effective forms of communication with families and integrating community resources. Pogrow (2009) offers an alternative instructional strategy to the traditional remediation and test preparation teachers typically reach for when their students are not making academic progress. According to Pogrow (2009), students can improve their sense of understanding in content areas by practicing higher order thinking skills through “intensive, small-group, Socratic conversation” (p.410). These Socratic conversations should be carefully planned by the teacher, should last around 35 minutes daily, and should link concepts to students’ worldview instead of the worldview of adults (Pogrow, 2009).

Haberman (2010) offers several effective indicators of good teaching of students in poverty: involving students with explanations of human differences, helping students see major concepts as opposed to isolated facts, allowing students to be involved in planning their activities, grouping students heterogeneously, and actively involving students in their own learning. According to Haberman (2010), these teaching strategies can help to “create an alternative to the pedagogy of poverty” (p.87).

The number of students living in poverty is increasing with each passing year. These students may have behavioral and instructional needs that differ from those of their middle-and-upper class peers. It is important for teachers to identify these differences
and utilize strategies that have proven to be effective in teaching students in poverty.

Using the teaching strategies discussed in this paper, teachers may create a culturally responsive classroom while finding their students in poverty accelerating their learning and retaining content.
Works Cited


