

Important Work: Teaching Children of Poverty

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“What do you want to be when you grow up?” That was the topic to the first paragraph I was ever asked to write. As a child in school I was told by my teachers that I could be anything I liked, a doctor, a lawyer, a veterinarian, anything was possible. But, how true is this statement in reality? We tell our children that the world is their oyster, but as the years go by and they increase in age, they begin to see it... And that is the gap between the quality of education they can afford and the cost of the education that they cannot afford that is tied to their dreams. Many people may believe that children who come from high poverty settings do not want to learn or better themselves, but that is not the case. For my essay I will be discussing the challenges and opportunities that come with being an educator in a high poverty setting, the unique needs associated with working with under sourced learners, and I will be sharing my personal views on these topics.

When you begin a conversation about poverty and education, the first thing that comes to mind is the challenge that students and teachers face during the learning process. But, the first thing that comes to my mind is the gap that needs to be bridged before learning can even take place. Many teachers will tell you that teaching in high poverty locations is not an easy task and that they face many obstacles when trying to educate their students (Openo 18). However, no matter the circumstances, children who come from poverty stricken areas shouldn't be given a lower quality of education than students who come from families with higher income brackets. Most children who come from high poverty areas have the same if not more dedication to their studies than children who come from wealthy homes. It is essential that quality education be

available to everyone and at the same time we need to make sure that students are actually valuing this education. But, before students can begin to value education we need to make sure that they value themselves.

In a way, the teachers must have a sort of intervention with their students before a quality education can begin. Students need to believe in themselves, and have confidence in their abilities before they can even begin to be given new information. Many students who come into higher education do not believe that they can be anything other than what other people from their demographic have become. As a result, they limit their possibilities. A lot of children who grow up in poorer households do not know the ways they like to learn or even what they would like to learn about because the value of learning may not have been stressed in their home (Openo 18). If students from these demographics get to a university, they may have never had any experiences with higher education before. As a result, they do not know what they should be doing and don't have anyone to guide them in the right direction.

But, at Francis Marion University, there are teachers who understand that these children are under a lot of pressure. While researching, I found that most children who decide to pursue higher education at FMU who come from poverty settings are first-generation college students. According to Ms. Kimberly Ellisor, the Director of Financial Aid at FMU, approximately 87 percent of students receive financial aid of some sort (Ellisor). This percentage is high because often students and their families cannot afford to cover most of the cost. More than likely, the previous generation did not have the funds to attend school but wants their children to have the experiences they didn't (Perkins 15). Often the parents of these children invest what little money they have into

their children's education. They want their children to do better financially than they did, have better jobs, make more money and be able to help them in times of financial need. Many students that attend FMU are from Florence and come from poor backgrounds, in every sense of the word. Most of the time when they go to school, their end goal or focus is to get any degree that will make them money (Perkins 15). Oftentimes these students have been poor all their life and their only desire is to no longer be poor. Actually learning and retaining information they like may take a back seat. Typically, students come to FMU because they want a degree that will make them rich and they don't even realize that higher education is about so much more than money... It's about education. Most students are so focused on getting a high paying job that they aren't concerned with growing up to be happier. They have a fixation with money and jobs and they believe that making more money automatically equals a better life.

When talking about education it is important that we take into consideration not just the challenges that come with being an instructional leader in a high poverty location, but also the opportunities. It may sound cliché but if you are a good mentor to your students then you can actually make a difference in their life. Teachers should be someone that their students can look up to and show them why they should be valuing their education (Bartholomew 53). At FMU in particular the students seem keen on finding professors to connect with and educators who want to help and see them succeed. In reality, while it is important for an institution to spend money on better technology for their students and the emphasis today for most job fields is to have employees who are well versed in technology, institutions of higher learning really need

to make sure that they are investing in people (Bartholomew 53). The importance of smaller class sizes and mentors cannot be stressed enough.

While researching I decided to speak to Dr. Flannagan, a Professor of English at Francis Marion University who has been teaching for over 23 years. She was born in rural Kentucky on a farm in a high poverty area. She is both a child of poverty and an educator of students who come from similar backgrounds. In interview Dr. Flannagan stated that, "Personally, I don't have a registration card for being poor, but my family lived in the red...but because I was influenced by mentors, that made all the difference. People think they are dumb because they are poor and believe that since they are dumb and poor they can't do well in school" (Flannagan). Honestly, we cannot discount the importance that having a strong support system can make on a student. A strong support system can help them change their life for the better, and a teacher is the person who can make all the difference.

We must also consider the unique needs of under sourced learners. It is no secret that there are under sourced learners here at FMU. There is an old adage that says it's easy to get into college but hard to get out and this is very true. Students often pour money into college because they believe that they can get it all back very quickly once they come out and jump straight into the workforce. This is an issue that greatly concerns Dr. Flannagan, "I worry about the amount of loans that students take out. It's like a downward spiral. If you don't like education you backslide on it, fail classes, drop out, then you owe money, and then they have nothing to show for it. It's almost like the system is designed to keep you poor" (Flannagan).

When students come to FMU and all they care about is getting out and making money, they often find themselves stuck and failing classes over and over because they are taking classes that they don't enjoy or majoring in subjects where they struggle. What they don't realize is that college is full of rigorous standards and if they don't find proper guidance on their educational journey they may not be as successful as they could have been. There is a generalization that people who come from high poverty situations lack care for education and that they cannot see the value of "education for education's sake" (Flannagan). However, this is not always the case. There are many students who if they were given real world advice while in school and had good experiences with education they would learn that education has a value in and of itself.

In conclusion, poverty does not mean that the people who are in it are uninterested in or devalues education. Personally, I don't believe that students should let the gap between the quality of education they can afford and the education that they cannot define the kind of life they can make for themselves. I believe that all children should receive an equal education, regardless of their financial status. While it may be true that a lot of people are more interested in having a high paying career, I don't believe that anyone is content to just get by in life. And money does not equal everlasting happiness. It is important that professors, teachers, mentors and educators step into their students' lives early on so that they can help them and prevent potential problems. I believe that we need to place a higher focus on funding tutors and mentors for children who live in higher poverty areas and that with time and patience, this system could reap benefits for everyone concerned.

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