

Important Work: Teaching Children of Poverty

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As an education major you constantly hear representatives from the Center of Excellence asking “In this class did you discuss poverty? And do you feel that you are more aware of the challenges that you may soon face as a teacher in the classroom teaching students of poverty?” Ironically, the reality of this statement is that I have lived in poverty all my life therefore, understanding how poverty affects students is more than just going over content for me, it is my lifestyle. I understand first-hand how poverty affects the brain, by slowing down the parts of the brain that affect mood and behavior. As a student currently dealing with the effects of living in poverty, I can connect and relate to students who are facing the same circumstances. I can relate to these students not only because I have experienced poverty, but because I am living through it and I am overcoming all obstacles along the way. My goal is not to explain to students the challenges that I have faced, my goal is to be as influential as the teachers, guidance counselors, and other positive role models who encouraged me to believe in myself and not statistics.

According to The Center of Excellence, “Children living in poverty are more likely to: fall behind their classmates in school, be assigned to lower ‘tracks’ in education, be retained in grade, be labeled as ‘problem’ students, be absent, truant, and to drop out of school altogether, and earn lower scores in standardized tests of knowledge and achievement.” I have been physically and mentally fighting to overcome statistics such as these since the day I was born. For example, I was placed in Gifted and Talented classes in the 4th grade, I was in the top 10 percent of my high school graduating class,

and I when I got to college I quickly passed the Praxis Core, a standardized test that can prevent students from advancing in the education program. The question is “If you knew that I was living in a home of four, with a single mother, with less than \$10,000 coming in annually would you really expect me to achieve ‘greatness?’” My response is maybe not at first, but fortunately I was given powerful teachers and other role models who helped shape my future by never setting limits on what I could achieve.

Growing up living in a housing development, also known as the “projects” all my life, only gave me a desire to go to college to earn enough money to get my family out of our current environment. I was always embarrassed to tell people where I lived, and I would make up all kinds of stories to hide the struggles I had to face. I did not want anyone making fun of me or feeling sorry for me. Raised by a single parent of three beautiful girls, living off two minimum child support checks and one check from government assistance, I never thought I would be in college. My family is my number one priority and I always felt pressured to be working to help with the bills instead of being “selfish” trying to earn a degree. However, with a little guidance from Dr. Heyward, the assistant director of The Testing and Counseling Services at Francis Marion University, I understood that I was helping my family by going to college, I was breaking a cycle. Dr. Heyward and several other teachers and mentors reminded me that I oversaw my own destiny, not the situation that I was born into.

The way teachers treat, teach, or even speak to students of poverty must be done with exceptional care. Students facing these hardships find it hard to trust others, they feel outcast, unwanted, and certainly not able to succeed. Teachers must constantly provide a listening ear, a daily dose of motivation, extra guidance, quality

time after school when applicable to do so, and even a small bin of snacks because you cannot even begin to think if you are hungry. According to the article “Students Facing Poverty The New Majority” by Steve Suitts, “Public schools must ensure that they have the resources to help low-income students reduce school absences, avoid school suspensions, and improve both their mastery of subjects and their persistence and grit.” As a future teacher, I will ensure that all students have the resources they need to be successful and confident in my classroom the same way that my previous and current teachers have made it possible for me.

According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, “Increased exposure to these risk factors that may impair cognitive and behavioral development: single parent, non-employed parent(s), inadequate nutrition, maternal depression, low parental education, etc.” I have been exposed to all five risk factors listed above. It hurts doing research about where you were labeled to be in life, but it’s thrilling and emotional to recognize that you are not at those set places, only higher. Teaching children in poverty can change so many lives, if done effectively and patiently. Teachers and guidance counselors have a significant impact on how students deal with poverty. According to The Center of Excellence, “43% of students’ academic performance can be traced to the quality of the teacher in the classroom.” “Students from disadvantaged backgrounds learn at the same rate as students when they have effective teachers.” Having teachers and mentors in my life who saw potential in me allowed me to believe in myself and it cause me to stop feeling sorry for myself.

Furthermore, I started setting elevated expectations for myself, it was either all A’s on every assignment or getting an explanation from the teacher as to why I did not

make an A and how I can improve. According to the article “The American Dream” by Susan B. Neuman, “Far too often, people underestimate the capabilities of students who live in poor neighborhoods, equating poverty with low ability. In reality, however, these students are eager to learn and develop greater expertise when given the opportunities to do so.” I am now ready to prove a point, to push myself to not be labeled, and to fight for students all over the state living in poverty by teaching students their current situations do not determine their future outcomes.

Teachers can be a life changing factor for students living in poverty. My favorite teacher from Mullins High School, Mrs. Hulsizer taught me that my personal life never affected how she felt about me as a student or a person. This meant I no longer had to be ashamed or lie about having a family car, a daddy figure around, or about watching shows that I never saw because my sisters were my only source of entertainment. In high school, my guidance counselor Mrs. Jane Suchy also played a valuable role to my success not only in high school but college too. My freshman year of college, I experienced a dramatic breakdown and I was about to add another percentage to the college dropout rate for students in poverty. However, this amazing woman contacted the Counseling and Testing Services at Francis Marion University and I was contacted to come in and receive help. Mrs. Suchy would call me and talk to me, pray for me, and she was the motivation that I needed to finish freshman year. When I got to college I met the most challenging yet amazing teacher that I desire to be just like, Mrs. Jane Brandis. Mrs. Brandis inspires me beyond words and provides me with so much encouragement. Her teaching skills, work ethic, and grand expectations speak volumes to my life as a current student in poverty and as a future teacher. Mrs. Brandis

pushes me in every class, challenges me to mark every piece of work with excellence, and she provided me with the support and encouragement that I was missing from my own mother who drop out of high school and could not relate to my college experiences. I'm thankful that I had teachers and mentors come into my life to alter the path that was set out for me. I believe that with guidance and efficient teaching strategies we can encourage students living in poverty to want to beat statistics by staying strong and fighting for the life that they deserve.

Did college, my teacher, and other positive influences in my life help me to overcome poverty? No, but they all helped me to grow confident in my abilities, understand that I also deserve a college education, and set high expectations for myself when no one else cares. I still struggle financially, already living in debt, emotionally from never having a father figure and always feeling like I am expected to be the bread winner for my family, and I even suffer physical repeating a lifestyle of eating unhealthy food because it's cheaper when pre-diabetes is knocking on my front door. However, this essay has allowed me to read more about poverty and I realized that I do not stand alone in this fight against it. According to The Center of Excellence, "Nationally, 9% of children live in extreme poverty, defined as income below 50% of the federal poverty level (or no more than \$11,812 for a family of four." Living in poverty for twenty-two years has made me resilient. I now understand how important it will be for me to support, encourage, monitor, observe, provide resources, make accommodations, and set high expectations for my students who are living in poverty.

Works Cited

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