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Important Work: Teaching Children of Poverty

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I would like to begin this discussion by telling you a story about a student. This student was born into a home where both parents stopped their education after receiving high school diplomas or the GED equivalent. The mother and father were both employed; however, they simply were not making enough money to make ends meet. Communication Across barriers describes this as a form of “Working-Class poverty.” Characteristics include: living paycheck to paycheck, renting a place to live, little to no health care, no money for any extras and an outlook of personal deficiency.(CAB 2012) This mixture of factors could be described as a recipe for disaster.

The student’s situation, as in a self-fulfilling prophecy, quickly deteriorated into a whirlwind fueled by physical abuse, drug abuse, hunger, changing schools, moves across country, infidelity, separation, divorce, loneliness and confusion. None of these factors are very healthy for a student under the age of 8, who, according to UNICEF’s research on the formative years is in the prime of his cognitive, social, emotional and physical development (UNICEF 2013).

Based on what has been stated so far in the story, I imagine you would expect to see this student on the next episode of Cops or on the Mugshot photo magazine in all the gas stations. Despite all those odds against that young student, here I am, writing this essay on how I help to teach children. Children that have found themselves in the same situations that I once knew and lived, children of poverty.

The NEA’s article, Teaching Children From Poverty and Trauma states, “the rule of thumb is that a person cannot enter into the pain, joy or meta-story of another person any further than that person has gone into his or her story.” (NEA 2016). When I work

with students of poverty, who more often than not are experiencing the other negative side effects of poverty like abuse and neglect, I am able to relate to them on a very personal level because I share most of the same experiences. There always seems to be great joy in my students when they realize that I have been in the same situation they are currently experiencing and managed to get out. Seeing someone they can look up to and use as a motivation to overcome their situation has worked wonders for me in the classroom.

Being one of the few male teachers in the Elementary education setting, I already attract a lot of wanted and sometimes unwanted attention. One thing that I've learned is that there is always at least one student watching every second of every day. Many of my students began to dress up and wear their button down shirts or as they like to call it, "Church clothes" to school because they want to dress like me. While these behaviors are quite flattering, they are also quite stressful. For many of my students, I fill a void in the form of a male role model. More often than not, this absence is a factor of a poverty-stricken home.

Because of my unique situation, I have had the opportunity to implement the Red Tie Club. This is a club where the behavior health counselor and I choose 5th and 6th grade boys who are in need of mentors and we meet with them after school on Thursdays. Those same days we dress up in khaki pants, white shirts and a black tie. Our meetings consist of successful male guest speakers from the community such as police officers, coaches, mayors, etc. We focus our meetings on displaying appropriate behaviors and preparing students for interviews and life after they finish their education. The BHC and I try to model appropriate behaviors for students to mirror instead of the

negative behaviors they are experiencing at home. Research shows that students will act out the things that they see. NEA's Poverty Handbook states, "Mirror neurons are the way a caretaker passes on humanity to the next generation. The child imitates and learn from what he sees from those early care givers." (p. 18 NEA 2016) The students we target for Red Tie often come from backgrounds of poverty and are often times faced with neglect of a complete absence of a care taker because they are trying to work to make ends meet. We do our best to fill those voids as best we can with positive additions to the students life.

Aside from mentoring students after school and trying to be a positive male role model in their lives, like every classroom teacher, I am also responsible for their educational well-being. Research strongly supports a correlation between strong relationships and student performance. While some students can dislike their teacher and still be successful, based on my experience, this is not the case for students in poverty. If I had to pick one factor that is essential to be successful working with students of poverty it would be building a positive relationship. The AMLE article, Leading Learning for Children From Poverty mentions, "after a relationship has been established, the attention moves to believing. Effective educators believe that the student can be successful." (AMLE 2013). This quote implies that until a relationship is established, successful education of a student from poverty is impossible.

Every student has the capacity and desire to learn, it just has to be unveiled and brought forth. Students of poverty bring a lot more baggage with them on a daily basis than most students. With just a little extra attention and a teacher that cares, those students can begin to see a way out of all that. School should be a place where those

stresses of life at home whether its hunger, abuse or just a lack of companionship should not apply. These students of poverty should be able to see school as a place of safety and compassion and as a tool for them to become greater than their current situation. The last thing a student like that needs is to be admonished about being late because they missed the bus or scolded for not bringing a pencil. Of course, none of this is possible if a meaningful relationship is not established. It takes really knowing your students to be able to support them effectively. If myself or any other teacher puts forth just a little extra effort to build a meaningful relationship with these students and really tries to motivate these students, they could end up breaking the cycle and become the first one in the family to go to college, own a house or cross over into a new socio-economic class. This growth should be the goal of all educators, but especially those who find themselves working with students from poverty.

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