IMPORTANT WORK: TEACHING CHILDREN OF POVERTY

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WORD COUNT:1180

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Going through school, I was never sure what I wanted to do when I grew up. It seemed that everyone around me knew their plans post high school or already had it planned out for them since they were born. Unfortunately, this was not my case. I was the student who made decent grades and did everything I could to get by. However, I knew I wanted to do something that would change the lives of those around me. To me, making a difference was what I was meant to do. It was not until my Junior year of high school that I found my passion. My English teacher at the time spoke to me about this class that she thought I would do well in: Teacher Cadet. I was apprehensive at first but agreed and began the class the next semester. I was hooked after the first day of field experience because day one was when I met him, Trey. The young boy who changed my life forever.

Trey was a kindergarten repeat who constantly got into mischief. He was a trouble-maker. He did not listen during instruction. He had behavioral issues, never did his homework, and could still not read a thing at 7 years old. My cooperating teacher brought me aside and asked me to work with him for the next few weeks on his reading. I was a 17-year-old student who came from a good family who might not always have had everything they wanted but always had everything they needed. Therefore, I was not aware how to handle and/or discipline or correct this type of behavior, but that did not stop me. I was determined to find a way to break this continuous cycle he was going through.

First, I asked my cooperating teacher what kind of background Trey came from. I discovered that he came from a single parent home with a mother who did her best to

provide for her family but worked the majority of the time. He lived in a one-bedroom apartment in a neighborhood with a high crime rate along with his mother and middle-school aged brother. She said that there were days when he came in without having had a bath in days. She explained that some days were better than others. But majority of the time, he went home on red from his misbehavior. My heart was broken to hear that someone had to live like this. I began researching ways to help students that come from low socioeconomic status families. I found out that living in this type of situation not only interferes with the student's inability to learn but their overall being. According to the article, "Teaching Children from poverty and Trauma" author Ernest Izard quotes, "poverty is a chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors and affects the mind, body, and soul" (5). In learning this, I began working with Trey, trying to figure out how he learned best.

I quickly realized that Trey had terrible self-esteem. While reading, he constantly said things like "I can't," "it's too hard," and "I'm not smart enough." His lack of self-confidence, at times, got him in trouble because he would neglect to do his work in class and at home. Trey would tell me that at home, his older brother told him he was dumb because he could not read. According to Ernest Izard, "students from poverty have come from and often continue to live in an environment where the rate of discouraging words is higher than the rate of encouraging words" (11). I learned that Trey's mom worked multiple jobs and did not have much time to sit down and help him with homework. In research, I found that poverty can increase the likelihood that a student will be depressed. Izard argues that "stressors from poverty and trauma are cumulative and work to impact brain structure and neuronal processes" (12). I observed

how some days Trey would be withdrawn from others in the classroom. He would put his hoodie on and lay his head on his desk. On these days, I would not push as hard. Rather than have him try and read to me, I would read to him and discuss what was on his mind that day.

After working with him and getting to know him more as a student and individual, we created the affirmation, "Can't don't live here" to help when he was feeling down. According to the article "How Poverty Affects Classroom Engagement," author Eric Jenson states, "effort can be taught…students who show little or no effort are simply giving you feedback "(27). Giving Trey daily affirmations and making reading exciting and fun encouraged him to want to learn and do better. When the cooperating teacher and I began giving more positives than negatives he was receiving at home, it optimized both his learning and growth in the classroom. Jenson observed "In a study of more than 1,800 children from poverty, school engagement was a key factor in whether the student stayed in school" (27). The lead teacher thanked me for taking the time with him because she too saw the improvement he had in not only his academics but his overall behavior as well.

As teachers, it is vital to take the time to individually observe each of our students to figure out their background, their abilities, and their learning styles. Eric Jenson employs, "the primary factor in student motivation and achievement isn't the student's home environment; it's the school and the teacher" (28). Teachers should start small. During centers or recess time the first few weeks of school, observe the students. How do they interact with their peers? Do they do their homework? Do they wear the same clothes every day? What kind of vocabulary do they use? Note these observations.

Over time, revisit these notes and determine their progress. Then, we must establish what we as teachers can do to improve our instruction to ensure the success or our students. According to Eric Jenson's article, he states "studies show that high-performing teachers can overcome the problems of underperforming kids. Like effort, cognitive capacity is teachable" (28). This proves that it is our responsibility as teachers to be the change. We must do everything in our power to not just tell our students *what to do*, rather teach them *how* to handle a problem, *when* to respond to conflicts, and *who* to contact when they need assistance.

As a future educator, my goal is to bridge the gap of poverty and trauma in my students. I want to show them that regardless the background they come from they can be successful not only in the classroom but in their lives as well. I want to show my students respect and take time to get to know each of them individually. By understanding the differences between each of my students and learning how to address these differences, I will be capable to mitigate some of the negative adversities of poverty.

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Important Work: Teaching Children of Poverty
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