

The Impact of Poverty on Cognitive Development: Teaching Children of Poverty

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The word “poverty” can bring many different images to one’s mind. People tend to picture stereotypical “poor” people such as a family from a far country living in a makeshift hut or a grimy, homeless man sitting on the side of the street with a cardboard sign begging for money. Unfortunately, most do not understand just how many people in the world find themselves facing poverty every day, and even the thought of children having to endure such conditions seems too much to bear. However, despite such ignorance, the harsh reality of child poverty continues to prove itself as a serious roadblock for aspiring students and without an appropriate understanding of its impact on a child’s brain, teachers cannot properly guide these less fortunate young people toward a better future. Poverty harms the cognitive development of children, and as a result, their academic performance suffers.

To truly grasp the entirety of the issue of childhood poverty, one must first understand its prevalence in today’s world. The line of poverty varies according to the number of people in a family. For example, a family of four is considered impoverished if their annual income falls at or below \$25,283 (U.S. Census Bureau). In the year of 2017, 12,808,000 children fell into this category which makes up 17.5 percent of all children in the world (U.S. Census bureau). According to these statistics, approximately 1 out of every 5 children has to face the

challenges and cognitive setbacks that result from living in an under-resourced environment at a young age. This issue impacts so great a number of individuals that it cannot go ignored. These young people deserve the opportunity to be heard because the struggles they face are real, and their education is important.

While poverty plays many roles in hindering an individual's academic success, the most shocking and harmful aspect relates to a child's cognitive development. Those that grow up in an impoverished family often have to cope with daily stressors that wealthy and middle class children do not face on a regular basis. These stressful situations may result from poor parenting, lack of proper nutrition, demanding life events, or other challenges common among those with a low socioeconomic status (Luby). In a study led by Dr. Joan Luby, the heartbreaking reality of what poverty really does to a child's brain comes to light. In this study, a total of 145 different children had their brains scanned in order to discern whether their low socioeconomic status left an impact on their brain development in any way. Many of the children below the poverty line showed lower white matter, gray matter, hippocampal, and amygdala volumes than that of the average child (Luby). Both the hippocampus and the amygdala aid in regulating stress and processing emotions (Luby). This explains why low income would affect these areas of the brain in particular. Dr. Luby's study clearly points

to the fact that poverty causes visible damage to a child's brain, and put them at a disadvantage in the academic world. As an issue that harms such a great number of students not only academically but also physically, it should be taken seriously.

Children of poverty not only have visible brain impairments, but they also tend to score lower on standardized tests. This fact makes itself known in a study performed by Dr. Seth Pollack, Dr. Nicole Hair, Dr. Jamie Hanson, and Dr. Barbara Wolfe. In this study, approximately 389 children between the ages of 4 and 18 took two standardized tests every two years for a total of six years. Just as predicted, children of poverty tested with lower scores. In fact, "On average, children from low-income households scored 4 to 7 points lower on standardized tests" (Hair). Society accepts standardized tests as a reliable measure of one's academic knowledge, and when an individual scores lower than the accepted average, then it is assumed that they are falling behind academically. Because the poverty stricken students in this study had an average score that fell below the normal standard, it can be concluded that low income has a negative effect on the cognitive development of children and that these young people are falling behind.

Because poverty remains so prevalent in the world today, teachers must recognize the impact that it has on their students. Their brains do not develop properly because of the stressors resulting from their low socioeconomic status, and as a result, they score lower on standardized tests and often struggle in school. Whether it results from poor income, malnutrition, or familial issues, which are all common problems for low-income families, they have to deal with stressful situations every day. The conditions that these children have to live in cause harm to their cognitive development and ultimately leave them at a disadvantage in the academic world. Teachers have to understand what these young people are going through if they want to properly educate them.

Works Cited

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