

Teaching Children Of Poverty: How Poverty Affects Classroom Engagement

The article “ How Poverty Affects Classroom Engagement” of the book “ Faces Of Poverty” (Educational Leadership company), written by Eric Jensen and published in May 2013 on a website called "ASCD Learn.Teach.Lead” deals with children from low-income households and the corresponding difficulties with engagement in schools. In our society we experience that same teaching provided to both middle-class students and students from poverty does not necessarily result in the exact same results. It is obvious, that students from the lower-class struggle with engagement in school and are in many ways like cognitively, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally distinct from others. Eric Jensen points out seven differences between middle-class and low-income students that occur in school and how teachers can "help mitigating some of the negative effects of poverty”(Jensen, 2013, p. 1). A prerequisite before dealing with these seven factors is to get to know your students well and to bring respect.

As a first difference, the article mentions Health and Nutrition. In general, we can know that several health-related factors can affect attention, reasoning, memory, and learning. There is a connection between Health and the crucial skills needed for school or learning. An example is the lack of exercise, common for poor people as well as receiving or prescribing appropriate medical attention by doctors. Conclusively, the poor have more untreated diseases than people of the middle-class. Furthermore, nutrition is an important factor connected to learning abilities, since students from low-income households are exposed to food with lower nutritional ingredients. It is proven that our brain and memory need a proper diet in order to work. As a result, poor students have more trouble listening or follow directions, which affects their reading ability, behavior

and different skills needed for engagement in school. The article demonstrates what teachers and schools can do helping to minimize this factor: they can guarantee more physical activity in school, which will build student health and reduce some major issues with poor diets. Increasing student's oxygenation is important to help them manage themselves better and can be supported by having them engage in stretching and relaxation.

Another difference can be recognized when it comes to vocabulary. Poor children who grow up in low socioeconomic conditions have learned a smaller vocabulary during their childhood than middle-class students have, which causes academic failure because poor children have complications in understanding the words their teachers might use. Also, they are unfamiliar with a lot of words used in reading assignments, which makes them stop reading the material and participating in class. In fact, there are options teachers can help building vocabulary and introducing new words with the use of games and daily routine activities.

Additionally, teachers should remind their poor students daily that they do not need to feel depressed or demotivated and teach them effort and strength. This represents the third factor, the difference in effort between poor students and middle-class students. It can be challenging to make them put more effort into studying and participating, but it is proven that there is a connection between liking your teacher and working harder. This means teachers need to strengthen their relationships with students and build respect in order to make learning more relevant. The article asks teachers to give more positive than negative feedback to make students feel proud of themselves. "In a study of more

than 1,800 children from poverty, school engagement was a key factor in whether the student stayed in school (Finn & Rock, 1997)” (Jensen 2013, p.2).

The fourth factor is “Hope and the Growth Mind- Set”, which refers to future-thoughts and expectancy. Poor students often feel helpless and have more negative thoughts about future events, which affects also the student’s attitude about learning. Lower class students easily think that failure is more likely because they think they are not smart enough to succeed. At this point it is important to teach them that brains and memories can change and grow and that they always can improve learning skills, it is a choice. Teachers need to use phrases which do not hurt students and simultaneously reinforce effort as well as a positive attitude.

“Commonly, low-SES children show cognitive problems, including short attention spans, high levels of distractibility, difficulty monitoring the quality of their work, and difficulty generating new solutions to problems (Alloway, Gathercole, Kirkwood, & Elliott, 2009)” (Jensen 2013, p.2).

All the mentioned cognitive problems can make school a real challenge for poor students, but teachers need to remind them that intelligence is a teachable skill and can be increased by putting more effort into learning. Therefore teachers need to focus on providing suiting opportunities to improve cognitive core skills. The article tells to “begin with the basics, such as how to organize, study, take notes, prioritize, and remember key ideas. Then teach problem-solving, processing, and working-memory skills” (Jensen 2013, p.3).

An additional article “Six effective practices can help teachers help students to succeed” written by Cynthia Johnson and published in December 2013 on the website “AMLE-

Association for Middle-Level Education”, states a similar fact: “Poverty does not mean a person is unable to succeed. Children who live in poverty can meet high expectations and standards” (Johnson 2013, p.1)¹.

Another difference between poor students and middle-class students can be seen when it comes to relationships. In homes of those from poverty, it is more likely that parents offer negative comments in an inappropriate language to their kids than in middle-class homes. Often poorer students have only a single-parent caregiver, which can create both instability and uncertainty because the children miss a role model. Because of that, it can be hard to handle relationships for children who lack role models and support. Unfortunately, the article also mentions that low-income parents are often “less able to adjust their parenting to the demands of their higher-needs children” (Paulussen-Hoogeboom, Stams, Hermanns, & Peetsma, 2007).

This basically means for teachers to care about your students to gain their trust in you, and to make sure to know about your students’ backgrounds, families, hobbies etc.

Last, the article mentions the factor “Distress”, which means acute and chronic stress, and explains the bad impact on children’s immune systems, brain development, success in school and social competence skills. Children living in poverty often experience gradual chronic stress which leads to misbehavior and a severed attitude towards school. As a teacher, it is necessary to find out the real issue-daily stressors-

¹ Johnson, Cynthia (December 2013). Six effective practices can help teachers help students from poverty succeed. Retrieved from: <https://www.amle.org/BrowsebyTopic/WhatsNew/WNDet/TabId/270/ArtMID/888/ArticleID/351/Leading-Learning-for-Children-From-Poverty.aspx>

and to build a deeper relationship with the affected student. Still, it is important to give the student more chances to control their own daily lives at school and not to pressure the student.

To sum it all up, the reader can see that teachers face big challenges when it comes to teaching children living in poverty because you really need to understand the deep issues poor children are dealing with in their lives. It is crucial moving step-by-step in the child's direction, to get to know the child better, to inform yourself about backgrounds and family status, and to understand the problems as well as complications in order to help poor children with engagement in school.

It might be a long procedure to help a poor child that is struggling in school, but just because it is a challenge this does not mean teachers can run away from it. In my opinion, the teacher also represents an important person to a child whose parents do not really care about anything or whose parents are making it hard for their child to engage in school. Teachers are the ones who educate these children also in terms of personality development as they grow up. Even if it sometimes might seem that the student is not reacting to the teacher's advice, it might just be harder for the child to trust the teacher and fears to be disappointed. Educators must recognize and acknowledge each student's race, background, and difficulties as a central dimension of who they are and how they experience the world.

I am an exchange student from Germany and I came across this topic "Children in Poverty" already in some other classes before and it surprised me in a positive way. . I never heard of it before and I would like to suggest it in my country, because we have a lot of poor children who are immigrants. To me, this topic is of great significance,

because it also challenges the teacher. There should be people who check classrooms with children living in poverty constantly or at least on a routine basis. I am sure there are districts common for classrooms with poor children and the teachers who teach those classes need to be trained in many ways. As the article above already mentions seven differences, seven chances to do things better for poor children, it is crucial to start training teachers in all these facts. We as teachers need to do better first before expecting it from our students.

Resources:

Jensen, Eric (May 2013). How Poverty Affects Classroom Engagement.
Retrieved from: <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may13/vol70/num08/How-Poverty-Affects-Classroom-Engagement.aspx>