

Quality Education for Students of Poverty:
Training Teachers to Even the Playing Field

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Abstract

This paper explores the negative impacts of poverty on student learning and strategies that schools can implement for tackling those challenges. Teachers must find literature that students, no matter what socioeconomic status, can relate to and learn from. This ability in teachers comes from quality training, abundant resources, and solid relationships with students.

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Many aspects of the classroom contribute to the learning that takes place there. Taking into account the different cultures, socioeconomic status (SES) characteristics, family layouts, multiple intelligences, and teacher training is vital to success. Providing literature to a classroom of students is also vital to their success, but the presence of these resources is not enough.

Literacy Struggle

As stated in Bushman (1997), educators need to choose the literature they expose to their students carefully in order to inspire continued reading, but this presentation of literature is a learned skill. Many educators admit that the literacy struggle with students begins because text is not a part of their everyday lives. Homes of under-privileged children often do not have books readily available or provide modeling of regular and consistent reading for pleasure or learning. These issues are evident in early grades, but are habits that affect students throughout their education.

The Role of Poverty

One of the biggest obstacles for students is rooted in poverty. Payne (1996) outlined the difference between the middle class frame of mind and the driving forces in the lives of those living in poverty. These “hidden rules” are evident drastically within the classroom. Payne (1996) outlined clearly by stating, “Quite simply, one rule is that non-verbal communication is much more important than verbal communication. A second rule is that physical fighting is often necessary for survival” when describing the actions of a child in poverty (p. 1). These differences need to be noticed by teachers in order to understand the actions and thoughts of

students and provide relevant learning.

A Study of the Benefits of Teacher Training

The training of teachers is vital to the effective teaching of literature, demonstrated by McGill-Frazen, Allington, Yokum, & Brooks (1999) in their study of six full-day kindergarten classes in a large urban school district (p. 68). Three different groups were formed in order to collect data. The first was a controlled classroom where no books were added, and no training was conducted. The second was a books-only classroom where 250 children's books were given to the classroom and parents had a library of books, but no training was conducted. The third group consisted of classrooms with 250 books, a parent library, and a total of 30 hours of training for each teacher (McGill-Frazen, et al, 1999, p. 68). A number of standardized assessments collected data from 377 students as both pretests and posttests, observations were made of the learning environments, and teacher logs were collected (McGill-Frazen, et al, 1999, p. 69).

Results

The findings made it clear how important it is to provide teacher training along with resources. Often, schools think that giving the correct resources to teachers will solve problems, but that is clearly not the case.

Discussion

Professional development needs to focus on using the resources provided to ensure resources benefit the growth of students. It is unfortunate that no information was given about how the books added to these classrooms were chosen, the details about the training provided to teachers, and/or any data collected concerning the parent lending library and if this lending

library inspired any literacy exposure at home. These points would have been interesting insights into the introduction of literature into the classroom. Also, it would have been interesting to have students and parents complete a survey (for example see Appendix A), to collect data on their thoughts towards literature.

Though this study was conducted with kindergarten teachers, it is clear that the findings would apply to literature and training in all grades; teachers cannot just read novels with students, they must truly engage and teach literacy skills with rich text. Getting a class set of novels is not going to transform the learning environment, reading abilities, or attitudes towards reading in a classroom, but pair quality literature with a trained, effective teacher, and the possibilities are endless.

References

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Appendix A

Student Reading Survey

Directions: Please answer the questions honestly; there are no right or wrong answers.

On a scale of 1 (not really my thing) to 5 (expert status) rate yourself in these categories.

1. How would you rate yourself as a reader?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2. How much do you enjoy reading?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3. How well do you understand what you read?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4. How well do you sound out new words?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5. How well do you figure out definitions of unknown words?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please write your answers to the following questions. Be as descriptive as possible.

6. What are your strengths as a reader?

7. What are your weaknesses as a reader?

8. What is the best book you have ever read?

9. If you could choose to read about anything, what would your choice be?

10. Do you ever read outside of school? If so, how much? If no, why not?