

Poverty and its Effect on Childhood Literacy

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Abstract

Poverty is a culture all its own. It is also a socioeconomic class that traps individuals in a vicious cycle that future generations find hard to break free from. Education, and especially the ability to read and write, are key components to a child's education and can be the key to breaking out of the cycle of generation poverty. The effects of poverty, the lack of food, appropriate shelter, or access to educational materials such as books, put students at a disadvantage before they even enter kindergarten. Teachers who work with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds need to be aware of the affects of poverty on schooling and what they can do to address the literacy needs of such students.

Former governor of Louisiana, Kathleen Blanco, once said in her address to the state Congress that “Education is a fundamental solution to poverty” (2004). Webster’s dictionary (1998) defines poverty as the state of having little or no material possessions (561). However, for the individuals who find themselves grouped in the lowest brackets of the socioeconomic scale, poverty becomes much more than material possessions. Poverty creates its own culture. Educators, such as Ruby Payne, have observed a register of language that encompasses structured discourse patterns and story formation among individuals of low socioeconomic status. Rules, such as which register of language to use, register of language govern the lives of those in poverty including what can and cannot be said, what actions one must perform under a given set of circumstances, and what one choose when faced with a choice or decision. These characteristics of poverty set it apart from the other social classes more so than any middle and upper class characteristics. No one sees the characteristics of poverty more vividly than the individuals charged with educating the young minds of the future: school teachers. Educators have a responsibility to teach history, science, mathematics, and, most importantly, literacy, to children from all backgrounds and walks of life; regardless of the rules and characteristics that define their home culture. Literacy, a key component of a well-rounded education, becomes a critical component to ending the generational cycle of poverty; however, all other areas of a child’s life must fall into place for the child to become a successful reader and writer. If a student’s basic needs do not get met, then the student’s educational needs cannot be addressed. Poverty affects a student’s ability to learn at school by putting the student at a disadvantage before they set foot in kindergarten. If all students need to read at grade level by 2014 as mandated by the 2004 No Child Left Behind Act (NLCB), then educators must understand the

effects of poverty on schooling, why these students come in at a disadvantage, and what they can do to address the literacy needs of their students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the poverty line has only made small increases while the number of families who live below the line has increased drastically. The U.S. Census Bureau (2009) defined the poverty line for a family of four at \$21, 834 and the US Department of Food and Agriculture (2008) uses those numbers to determine the number of children eligible for school breakfast and lunch programs. In addition, children who qualify for these services, because of their family income, also qualify for variety of services such as free textbook rental. Schools that qualify for federal funds and whose enrollment includes more than 30% of children from low-income families receive the label “low-income schools”. For the 2008-2009 school year, 42% of Indiana public school children qualified for free or reduced lunch (Indiana), though not all of those children’s families have incomes below the poverty threshold. According to the children’s defense fund report on child poverty in America (2007), in the state of Indiana 13.9% children identified as white fall beneath the poverty line while 35.7% of African-American children and 29.3% of Hispanic children live at or below the poverty threshold. The number of children classified as “living at or below the poverty threshold” will only continue to increase as the economic recession that started in late 2007 continues. This increasing number of children will continue to put a strain on schools as they adjust to meet the diverse needs of their learners.

Poverty can have a severe effect on a child’s performance at school. Students from a low socioeconomic background lack access to nutritional food and basic health care as such items are often much more expensive than the alternatives of fast food or going without care. A study conducted by the Dr. Bebermeyer of the Texas Medical Center (2003) found that students who

do not receive the necessities for health care are more likely to become absent from school due to situational circumstances like a sick-to-the-stomach feeling caused by a poor diet or a toothache due to poor dental health. Students not at school cannot learn and, therefore, fall further and further behind their peers. Child Trend's 2005 research on student absenteeism concluded that:

School attendance is a critical factor for school performance among youth. Studies show that higher attendance is related to higher achievement for students of all backgrounds. Students who attend school regularly score higher than their peers who are frequently absent... chronic truancy (regular unexcused absence), in particular, is a predictor of undesirable outcomes in adolescence, including academic failure, dropping out of school, substance abuse, and gang and criminal activity (1).

Students of poverty have higher mobility rates, and thus higher rates of absenteeism, as their parents move to find jobs, housing, or cheaper standards of living. Educators have a hard time reaching students who rotate in and out of their classrooms. Highly transient students come in at different levels of performance which, in turn, puts a strain on the teacher to catch the student up to her or his classmates' current level of performance. A conversation on reading comprehension might have already been covered at the student's old school but might not be approached till April or May at the new school so the student is left to sit and wait till her or his classmates come to that point. Likewise, if the student did not learn how to decode new words at her or his old school, but the new school already covered the topic, then student will be lost amongst the class discussion about comprehension strategies.

A separate study conducted by Doris Walker-Dalhouse found that absenteeism and "high mobility constrain teachers and school connections and negatively affect students' literacy experience, understandings, and background knowledge" (Walker 84). Students not in school

will have a difficult time gaining the information they need to build background knowledge and experiences to connect to other literature. Students who cannot build background knowledge or make connections to literature will have a difficult time become fluent readers and writers. Both of the studies conducted by Child Trend and Walker-Dalhouse confirm what teachers have innately known for years: students not present in the classroom do not learn.

In addition, many U.S. households cannot adequately feed their families despite the existence of federal aid programs. The U. S. Department of Agriculture (2005) classified 11 percent of U.S. households, or around 12.6 million families, as food insecure, a term used to describe households that were “uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet the needs of all household members because they had insufficient money or lacked other resources” (Barton 17). A study published in *Agricultural Research* (2003) found that proper nutrition aided young children in the formation of neurological synapses as well as strengthening bones and tissue connections. A lack of proper nutrients, such as a deficit of calcium or iron, contributed to the weakening of the bones and muscles. Children whose diets were not high in nutrients were also shown to have problems with attention and memory during classroom assessments. Milk can be a key source for an individual to obtain their daily nutrients from. However, milk can also be an expensive purchase, especially for a family of four or more. Kendall Plumber, a store clerk for the Walmart in Goshen, Indiana, quoted the price of one gallon of milk at \$3.97 (2009). On the same day, the price for a 2-liter bottle of Mountain Dew, a carbonated beverage devoid of nutrients like iron and calcium, was only \$1.00. If a family purchased even two of the Mountain Dew bottles that day they would receive a savings of \$1.97. Over the course of a 52 week year the savings add up to almost \$103.00. An individual who has come onto hard times may need that \$103.00 to pay rent, car insurance, or an emergency health

bill. Karen Springen wrote an article for Newsweek (2007) on the high cost of nutritious foods versus the low cost of “junk food”. Springen writes that “the cost of fresh fruits and vegetables is increasing faster than the cost of other foods throughout the country” (48). She continues her article by drawing the connection between poverty, food insecurity, and obesity by saying that the three are related “not because poor people are getting too much food from assistance programs but because they are not getting enough resources to obtain a healthy diet” (48). In a study conducted by researchers regarding the performance of kindergartners and food insecurities, “kindergartners from less food-secure homes scored lower at the beginning of the kindergarten year than other children, and learned less over the course of the school year” (Barton 17). Students who are hungry cannot concentrate on schoolwork, let alone standardized tests, and this inability to concentrate can affect student performance on such assessments.

The best way to examine the effects of poverty, such as student absenteeism or lack of nutrients, is to compare data for two schools that are identical in every way except the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. The standard for comparison used in the study was the Indiana Statewide Testing for Education Progress (ISTEP), a standardized assessment administered to all Indiana children in grades 3-9th grade as recorded by the Indiana Department of Education. Highland Elementary School, located on the fringe of Bloomington, Indiana, serves a kindergarten through sixth grade population. It has a student population between 300-500 students with 10-25% of the students considered a minority. Within the school, 40-60% of the children receive free or reduced lunch fare. In the fall of 2008, the average ISTEP score for 4th grade language arts was 79%. Mildred Merkley Elementary school, however, lies just 3 hours to the north on the outskirts of Valparaiso, Indiana and serves students in grades kindergarten through sixth. Mildred Elementary also has a student population between 300-500 students with

10-25% of the students considered to be a minority. However, less than 20% of Mildred Elementary's students qualify for the free or reduced lunch program. The average ISTEP score for 4th grade language arts was 93%. According to the Indiana Department of Education Website (2009) the difference between the two schools, where every variable including locale was held the same except for the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, was a 14% disparity.

Absenteeism and hunger are not the only reasons, however, for gaps in student achievement, especially in regards to literacy programs. G. Whitehurst and C. Lonigan (1998) found that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds “acquire language skills more slowly, exhibit delayed letter recognition and phonological sensitivity, and are at risk for reading difficulties” (Whitehurst 848). Their study also found that children from low-socioeconomic households do not have as much access to books as their middle class peers and do not receive as much literary attention, through the reading of books or other means, by their parents or guardians. In a similar report published by Nikki Aikens (2004), as child characteristics were kept the same, such as neighborhood location or race, when SES increased, “so did children’s reading achievement at the initial assessment in the fall of kindergarten” (242). In addition, “children in high poverty schools evidenced slower reading growth between the spring of kindergarten and the spring of first grade” and there was “no evidence that teacher experience, preparation, or classroom literacy instruction influenced initial reading scores or monthly reading growth rates” (249). The studies completed by Whitehurst and Aikens help underscore the importance of strengthening the family literacy environment by focusing on parental literacy, early-childhood reading programs, and a larger focus on literacy outreach in the community.

For children who come from homes of poverty, though, money to buy books, or to even buy gasoline to drive the car to the library to borrow books, cannot be found. Money goes to the essentials, such as food, rent, and clothes, and the “extra” money that a family might find itself with often goes towards making essential repairs on cars or paying costly medical bills rather than purchasing entertainment items like books. A child’s basic needs, such as food and clothing, must be taken care of before a family buys a book. No teacher would be happy to find out that a child has an entire library of books at home while at the same time the child lacks a basic pair of shoes to keep their feet warm and dry from the deep snows of winter. Parents, educators, administrators, and the community alike must look out for the best interest of the child and the education of a student can only happen after the basic needs of that student are met.

Considered one of the leading theorists on understanding poverty and how poverty affects a child’s performance in school, Ruby Payne has published numerous books and held hundreds of conferences around the country regarding the job of educators in relation to students of poverty. In essence, Ruby Payne works to inform educators that poverty does not only concern itself with the monetary condition of an individual. Poverty, she argues, includes a set of values, rules, and knowledge that pass themselves on between each generation and she argues these ideals occur in all races and ethnicities of the United States. These “rules of poverty”, along with the rules for the middle and upper classes, do not appear in any kind of posted form but they are considered to be the hidden rules of poverty. While no one explicitly states them, the importance of learning them is imperative to an individual who wishes to survive in a particular socioeconomic class. Charles Karelis (2008) agrees with Ms. Payne in the idea that poverty becomes its own culture, with values, ideas, and practices that do not change simply because an individual receives a monetary gift. Poverty does not become a situation individuals simply subsist in because they

know of no other alternative. The culture of poverty transmits itself between generations with a set of rules and values unique to the individuals who live in the lowest socio-economic brackets.

The rules for a particular socioeconomic class cannot be numbered as they are not written down or verbally stated rules. The rules regarding the concepts such as time, register of language, or perception of personal space are innate within the individuals of the social class. Around the 1970s, many individuals began to feel that public schools were beginning to run as middle class institutions, thereby jeopardizing students who do not come from such backgrounds. Howard Entwistle (1978) writes that schools are “incorrigibly and uncompromisingly middle-class in orientation (38). He continues by saying that schools seem to “feel it is their obligation to the public to transmit middle-class norms onto their working-class students” (71). Both Howard Entwistle and Ruby Payne agree that if a student is to be successful in moving from one social class to the other, they must learn to understand and accept the norms and protocols of that new cultures. Learning those norms and protocols, however, can be difficult when the rules are visibly posted or verbally stated.

In today’s schools, educators often talk with their students about students considering all the possible consequences when making a decision or before deciding on a course of action. They work with students on planning for their futures and encourage students to dream of becoming college graduates, lawyers, doctors, professional chefs, or business CEOs. According to Ruby Payne (1998), however, planning for the future and considering all the consequences of one’s actions are middle class norms. She writes that individuals from a low-socioeconomic background, time bases itself on the present and decisions will be made based on feelings of the moment or made in consideration for one’s overall survival. In a middle-class setting though, one uses time for “making decisions about the future and deciding which course of action to take

based upon its ramifications or rewards” (59). For example, students who act impulsively, like grabbing the first cupcake from the birthday party tray, often receive a verbal warning or chastisement for their behavior. However, Payne argues that such a student may simply be responding to their survival need of hunger or the student may be unable to identify the consequences of their actions as no one has ever taught them to think before they act (59). Donna Tileston (2003) confirms Payne’s observations by adding that educators have the increasingly difficult task of convincing students to finish the task at hand. She writes that students need constant feedback because they need the chance to reflect upon their decisions and actions. In a case study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (1999), student actions, beliefs, and values were found to mirror that of the individuals who lived in their homes and neighborhoods. Educators must understand the culture and values that guide students of poverty, and ultimately, as this will lessen the frustration and anxiety educators may experience when working with students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

No one expects educators to influence or affect a family’s economic resources, but poverty does not deal only with the issue of money. If educators can influence the other areas in a child’s life, emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical among others, then students have a greater chance of breaking from the generational cycle of poverty. In order to succeed in school, though, educators must teach students how to read. Achievement in each subject, be it math, social studies, or science, depends on a student’s ability to read and comprehend the activity at hand. Though the number of students living at or below the poverty level continues to increase each year, educators have found tested, successful educational practices to reach students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds.

While structure, procedures, and choices should always be the keystones of an educator's classroom management plan, instructors need to seriously consider the reasons for student behavior when determining the appropriate course of action to take in regards to teaching children from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. Behaviors unacceptable in the classroom may be necessary for survival in a student's neighborhood. In addition, the nonverbal behavior differences between teachers and students of varying cultures, including poverty, can result "in classroom clashes that will inhibit student progress" (Campbell, 2007, 2). For example, students who always seem to have their hands on someone else may do so because the culture of poverty values nonverbal communication signals as a way to reaffirm the verbal message. Rather than repeatedly chastising the student for the behavior, educators need to allow the student to do other things with their hands, such as doodle, hold them behind their back in line, or other constructive means that do not disrupt the rest of the class. Payne (1998) observes that students who laugh when disciplined may do so as a way to "save face" in the neighborhood and, rather than continuing to discipline the child for further disrespect, educators should discuss with the student three or four other behaviors that would be more appropriate (103). In addition, individuals of poverty often find themselves as participants of dialogue exchanges, a reflection of the casual register of language, and educators need to be wary of falling into the trap of arguing loudly with the student during a confrontation regarding behavior or choices. Rather, educators need to develop methods, through behaviors sheets or other means, that allow the student to write their answers down to questions like "what did you do" or "list four other things you could have done" so as to allow the educator to discuss the student's answers after the situation and emotions have subsided.

Instructionally, and once classroom management issues have been taken care of, many techniques educators can implement many techniques to improve students' literacy skills. The U.S. Department of Education began "Project Athena" in an attempt to help children in poverty develop advanced skills reading comprehension and literary analysis in three Title I schools located in three different states (2006). The study found many positive instructional strategies such as a systematic approach involving a high-powered curriculum and the use of powerful teaching and learning modes linked to student assessment. In the article "Uncovering the secrets of high poverty, high success schools", Douglas Reeves (2009) discovered similar findings to the Project Athena study: high powered, clear curriculum choices matched with high expectations and a committed, quality staff can indeed develop strengthen children's literacy skills despite the background students may come from. Focusing on academic achievement, monitoring progress, and planning interventions confirmed the work of Ruby Payne. Mr. Reeves observed nine high-poverty schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in an effort to uncover why they were performing so well on state assessments despite the obvious challenges they faced in educating all of their students. In the schools, he saw graphs, charts, and tables trumpeting the schools reading achievement scores. Cases lined with books, letters from favorite authors, and exemplary literary works were displayed throughout the school for all individuals to see as a reminder their commitments to achievement and success with students. The schools Reeves observed matched his early hypothesis in that "schools who clear that literary achievement was important saw the most significant gains" (16) in student literacy as well as other subject areas.

Ruby Payne calls on instructors to teach students of low-socioeconomic levels to write in formal register, the "language" of the middle class, if instructors hope to see students succeed outside of the school setting. Douglas Reeves (2009) agrees with Payne, citing that "the use of

such written responses appears to help teachers obtain better diagnostic information... students 'write to think' and, thus, gain the opportunity to clarify their own thought processes" (18).

Teaching students formal register, the language the business world uses, only provides students with a set of skills that transfer from school to career. Teachers must explicitly teach formal register to students, though educators need to approach the topic with caution so as not to make students feel inferiors because of their home language. Literary texts operate on many forms of register including frozen texts where the language will always be the same, formal texts with complete sentences and specific word choices, consultative texts that include formal register in conversation pattern, and casual texts that limit themselves to between 400- and 800- word vocabularies. Students should have access to a variety of these genres, literary registers, and leveled books so that they can apply the skills they have learned in reading and writing to text they see. Additionally, Payne suggests students should learn to express their displeasure in the formal register as it will lessen the chance of discipline for language use in the classroom, such as getting reprimanded for saying "this sucks" as opposed to "this is not interesting to me". Educators need to encourage students to participate in the writing and telling of stories since stories become the basis for dialogue in casual register. Stories also should be used in math, social studies, and science to develop concepts as students will be most familiar with "teaching-through-story" style of instruction. Students who hear stories are less likely to "view the lesson as a lecture" and the child has concrete model to follow because "they identify with the characters in the book or oral tale" (Lim, 2007). Stories also provide ways for students to critically think because stories teach children to "become the authors of their own solutions (Lim, 2007). When a student's culture becomes the focus within the classroom, whether it's his or her race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or socioeconomic level, she stops feeling out of place and

start participating more in the lessons. Students who are only passive involved in the material have “limited retention of knowledge” and students who participate, and thus become engaged in the material being presented, “internalize the information and retain it longer” (Felder 1997).

When constructing a project to address literacy disparities between the students of a particular population, community members need to seriously consider addressing the issue of early literacy. Communities where various stratifications in the social economic scale exist need to put in the effort to address the differences children of that community will bring with them to school if the community expects to see their children grow into successful and productive members of society. Researchers Betty Hart and Todd Risley (1995) found that children living in families receiving welfare “heard approximately 10 million words by age three, whereas children in families in which parents were classified as professional heard approximately 30 million words in the same period” (132). As such, children in those situations enter kindergarten with a 20 million word disadvantage. Kindergarten teachers who wish for their students to come in with similar skills levels, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, need to invest themselves in helping to develop quality community early-literacy based programs. The Boston’s Children’s Museum partners with local preschool, Head Starts, child care providers, and families to the museum for free on seven different events to provide families and caregivers with information on “leveling the sandbox and improving child literacy” (Barton, 2007, 25). The Family Support Center in North Carolina teaches caregivers the skills need for raising literacy levels and “provides a cooperative play center that is open to home-based caregivers” (Barton, 2007, 25). Schools need to send books into the homes of every young child in the community as a way to try and give all children a starting point for literacy. Even children who could recognize basic concepts of print in kindergarten outperformed their peers with literacy related tasks in the end of

year compared to “those who were not familiar with letters, sounds, or the idea of words and print” (Risley, 1995, 193). Schools that put in the effort to educate the early learners within their community reap the rewards later when their students outperform others on literary assessments.

Literary concepts and skills, such as teaching students to monitor their own cognition, should be taught to all students regardless of socio-economic status. Students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, however, do not often have the experiences in systematic problem solving or organization that build “the self-systems and metacognitive systems of the brain” (Tileston, 2003, 2). Therefore, in order to improve student reading, educators need to use a variety of instruction interventions to address these skills. Graphic organizers, like character webs or maps, give students the tools to identify main concepts or assign specific labels to a concept and sort out relevant and non-relevant information. In *A Guide to Graphic Organizers*, James Bellanca (2007) writes on the scientific basis for using such a tool in the classroom and how by using a researched proven method like graphic organizers to meet the needs of students from poverty. Systematic approaches to tackling texts, like the direct teaching of self-questioning strategies, help students monitor their own comprehension. Rubrics show levels of performance and, when taught explicitly, students can begin to evaluate their own performance and work. Tilestone (2003) wrote an entire chapter in her book dedicated to the use of rubrics in the classroom and reminds educators that “No assignment should be given to students without a rubric or matrix telling them exactly what is expected” (26). Even young, not-yet-reading children can handle a rubric that contains picture symbols that translate to explicit instructions for students. For example, a picture of a boy sweating and working hard can symbolize to students that a task deserves their best effort. Ruby Payne (1998) writes that rubrics can be especially helpful in working with students of low-SES levels because “students of poverty have

a difficult time planning or scheduling ahead” and rubrics provide the help students need “to develop the cognitive skills to plan ahead as the consequences of their choices are clearly laid out” (120). Finally, the teaching of comprehension strategies as a method to aid in becoming a fluent reader receives much praise from researchers and educators alike. Cathy Block (2001), author of *Comprehension Instruction*, champions the use of teaching students to formulate their own questions. She writes that students taught to monitor their comprehension, either by asking questions or through other means, improve in their ability to draw a relationship between reading and comprehending the text (58). Students should receive instruction through explicit models and demonstrations on how to ask questions concerning their own comprehension and they need ample opportunity in both guided and independent practice so they can fully develop their new skill.

Beginning in 1990s, researchers have conducted studies that draw a connection between poverty and a child’s ability to read. As the credit crunch of 2008-2009 continues, more and more families find themselves dropping below the poverty threshold where more and more children will find themselves without the necessary resources to do well in school. Currently, the United States faces an increase in situational poverty as more individuals find themselves without jobs and the means to pay off their mortgages, cars, or other deemed necessities. Individuals born into poverty, often considered then to be in generational poverty, find it incredibly difficult to surface from that situation and break the cycle. An education, and more importantly the ability to read and write, can get a student far in life. Students who can read and comprehend, write persuasively, or competently communicate their ideas orally will go much further in life. These students can read for information, write persuasive letters, and even gain admittance to the college. However, even students who can read and write still need appropriate

role models in order to accomplish their goals in life. Next to the parents or legal guardians, educators spend the most amount of time with a student. In a unique position, educators influence and make a difference in the lives of young people. It costs nothing to be an appropriate role model for a student but the impact of doing so can produce tremendous benefits. Educators who find themselves in these unique positions not only have the chance to teach a child how to read, but also provide the student with the stepping stones to transitioning out of poverty.

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This 2008 study looks at the various factors that make up a child's background culture, such as family, school, and neighborhood, to determine what impact the background culture has on a child's early reading ability. Specifically, the study was interested in what impact a child's socioeconomic status (SES) had on their reading level and the discrepancies it could present in early reading. Children around the age of kindergarten to third grade were the main focus of the study. In the end, it was determined that while family life contributed greatly to reading discrepancy scores in kindergarten, school and neighborhoods made bigger differences in terms of students, the SES differences, and their correlating effects on early childhood reading.

Barton, P. E., Coley, R. J. (2007) "The family: America's smallest school. Policy information report" *Educational Testing Service 2-48*. Retrieved on Feb. 16, 2009, from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED498878&site=ehost-live>

Family and school both play important roles a child's success in reading and, overall, school. Different factors, such as family finances and literacy development, were examined to determine if there was a correlation or not in a child's ability to succeed in school. The authors attempted to determine which family and home characteristics could be used, if any, to predict student success in the classroom. Major discrepancies were found to exist between racial groups, low socioeconomic backgrounds, and literary achievement.

Payne, R. (1998). *A framework for understanding poverty*. Highlands, TX: RFT Publishing Co.

Ruby Payne discusses the different rules that social classes hold for each other can affect how students work in school in her 2008 article. She argues that formal education takes place at a middle class level and therefore, students from a background with little formal education, namely those of a lower socioeconomic status, already come to school at a disadvantage. Teachers need to be aware of the different rules and practices their students of various social classes play by and work with all students on overcoming the challenges they face. Nine strategies are presented in the article for teachers to work on to help raise achievement levels for students in poverty. Those nine practices are as follows: build relationships of respect, make beginning learning relational, teach students to speak in formal register, assess each student's resources, teach the hidden rules of school; monitor progress and plan interventions, translate the concrete into the abstract, teach students how to ask questions, and forge relationships with parents. Teachers who learn to

incorporate these practices in their classroom can help all child learn to read and, ultimately, succeed.

Stambaugh, T. & VanTassel-Baska, J. (2006). Project athena: a pathway to advanced literacy development for children of poverty. *Gifted Child Today* 29, 58-63. Retrieved on Feb. 16, 2009, from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ746301&site=ehost-live>

In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education's program Athena was begun as a way to discover the best practices in helping impoverished students develop and improve reading skills. The program worked towards finding the best teaching practices in language arts for grades third, fourth, and fifth, as well as working to develop assessment that would be appropriate to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Research was presented over a four year period from three Title I schools in three different states. The study found the literacy improvement for children with low socioeconomic backgrounds was possible through systematic approaches that focused on systematic approaches that were matched with sound teaching and learning models engaged students better. Students who were assessed in different methods than standardized tests alone also showed literary gains in the areas of comprehension and critical thinking.

Walker-Dalhouse, D. (2008). Homelessness, poverty, and children's literacy development. *Reading Teacher* 62, 84-86. Retrieved on Feb. 16, 2009, from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ927193&site=ehost-live>

The literacy rate of children from extremely low socioeconomic backgrounds or those who are considered to be homeless has been evident to educators for years. The 2008 article is a collection of the data gathered from studying such children. Three-fourths of children living in poverty do not read at grade level, as cited within the article. Walker-Dalhouse argues that schools and teachers may not be prepared to meet the needs of those students who come from such backgrounds because they lack the certain training. However, teachers can develop programs and best practice methods to meet the literary needs of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Those best practice lessons though, need to be crafted to best meet students' literary discrepancies in ways that respect their culture regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Summary of “Poverty and its Effect on Childhood Literacy”

- Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds do not make the same gains in literacy as their middle and upper-class peers. (Aiken 2008)
- Poverty has its own culture, with a set of values, rules, and ideas unique to the people of the lowest socioeconomic brackets. Teachers need to understand these differences in order to reach all of their learners. (Payne 1998)
- The poverty line for a family of 4 at \$21,834, families who receive less than become eligible for free school breakfast and lunch programs. (US Census Bureau 2008)
- Students of poverty have higher absenteeism rates from school and/or changes schools frequently as families move or living situations change. (Dalhouse-Walker 2008)
 - Students of poverty do not receive the same medical care nor do they have access to the same nutritious food their middleclass peers do. (Springen 2007)
- Students of lower-SES backgrounds come to school with lower vocabulary levels and less exposure to the concepts of print due to the lack of books, reading materials, spoken conversations in the home. (Barton 2007)
- Students of lower-SES backgrounds have a different set of rules, values and cultural norms. (Payne 1998)
- Teachers should instruct students by using: graphic organizers, direct instruction with demonstration and modeling, and teaching through stories. (Reeves, 2009)
- The best, and cheapest, way for a teacher to impact the lives of their students, from poverty or not, is to become a caring, appropriate, and dedicated role model who works to ensure all students can read and write.