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### Poverty and its Effect on Students' Literacy

People come from all different socioeconomic classes: the upper class, the working middle class, and the lower class often facing poverty. Individuals of the upper class do not have the same concerns as those individuals who come from the lowest socioeconomic class. Part of this is due to the upper class having fewer barriers keeping them from education, and academic success. Upper class children have books, food, appropriate shelter, transportation, and access to numerous materials that enhance the learning experience. Early on, books and other educational materials, surround these children helping them develop literacy. Education, a very important part of life, leads people to mastering literacy and other needed skills needed for success in the job market. One might ask how literacy skills relate to ones socioeconomic background. The key to wealth and power lies within literacy, and without it, one is unable to escape poverty. Poverty has a huge impact on how students' perform in academics and how they achieve success in the job market; therefore, it is the educators' responsibility to provide the best education possible for individuals in order to break the vicious cycle that poverty has bestowed on them.

Before one can fully grasp the importance of breaking the vicious cycle and the role that literacy plays, one must understand the definition of poverty. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2007) defines poverty as the "lack of money or material possessions" (563). Throughout the world, people do not have jobs that pay enough to provide for financial needs and material

possessions, while others have no source of income at all. These individuals do not have homes or apartments to live in, and struggle to feed themselves and their families from day to day. This is a vicious cycle known as poverty, and it passes from generation to generation. Parents are more concerned with keeping their children alive and putting food on the table, than providing them with a good education. Literacy is the key to escaping poverty but the problem is that without some kind of education, literacy becomes impossible. Literacy, along with all aspects of education, leads to wealth and power. The uneducated and illiterate often find employment difficult. Poverty's cycle begins here. Individuals who are educated and literate receive employment over those who are not. It is all part of the way the economy works and the fight to survive. One will have a very low chance of escaping the vicious cycle, if born into a family who faces poverty. Intergenerational illiteracy is "a sociocultural phenomenon whereby illiterate parents inadvertently sponsor home conditions that may seriously hinder their children's reading and writing development, thus perpetuating a cycle of illiteracy" (Cooter, 2006 ,p.698).

For those who live in poverty, the first day of kindergarten is where their education begins. Yes, one goes to kindergarten to begin school but learning should not begin here. Young children should start learning as early as possible. "Although all children go to school, the background of some puts them behind their peers academically from the start" (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010, p.105). The earlier children are introduced to words, books, and other educational materials, the more advanced they will be in literacy development. Unfortunately, those who live in poverty do not have the means to provide their young children with educational materials. They do not have books, educational games, or even bills and newspapers for the child to observe and explore. Children who live in poverty enter kindergarten already behind students who have had access to books, words, and other educational materials.

This is where the poor self-esteem will first start attacking the child and will cause him or her to continue to fall further and further behind. “Children living in poverty give up on school because of low self-esteem” (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010, p.105). If students do not feel as if they are as capable as their peers are, they will develop a low self-esteem and the wiliness to try will vanish. The article also states that teachers “give up on children because of a perceived lack of trying and unwillingness to learn” (106). On occasion, there are teachers who are unwilling to push students’ to do their best no matter how difficult it may be to reach discouraged students. When entering the world of education, every individual must make it his or her goal to reach the needs of each student. If a child’s teacher gives up on him or her, there is no reason for the child to accept failure. Teachers must do whatever it takes to help with the abolishment of the vicious cycle of poverty and its effects on students.

Another barrier that keeps students who live in poverty behind on their education is their attendance in school. How is one to learn if they do not attend school and lack educational materials at home? The answer is simple. These individuals will not learn, and will miss the important educational elements of that day. Often times these students are absent which means they are missing valuable education time in the classroom. When absent, teachers are unable to help these students excel and grow academically. To help absent students keep up with their peers, teachers should plan and provide assignments in advance to help the student stay ahead. This may be hard for teachers to do, but it is only one way of adapting to the needs of the student. Students facing poverty are often absent from school for numerous reasons. If living a life in poverty, there is often no source of transportation. Therefore, if a parent does not own a car or have money to ride a bus or pay for other means of transportation, their children often remain at home. Poverty is not the children’s’ fault, and they should not have to suffer the

consequences. In addition, it is not the teachers' fault for the child falling behind, but the teachers' responsibility to do everything they can to modify for the needs of each student is essential.

Looking at absences of students, transportation is not the only factor that is to blame. When parents of children fail to find jobs or other means of financial support, there is often no food to provide for nutrients. Children need healthy nutrients to stay healthy and for their bodies to develop correctly. When there is no food to eat, and no clean water to drink, one's body will not be able to function properly. Students who are sick will be absent from school. If they are able to attend school, students will not have the stamina to successfully make it through the day. American School and University (2009) states that reduced and free lunch options at school have increased dramatically over the last few years, and in 2009 numbers increased by 425,000 (10). Although these options help dramatically, it is not enough. School is not in session on the weekends, over the holidays, and throughout the summer. On days where school is not in session, there is most often no free and reduced lunches served.

Another factor that plays into the absences of these students is that they are often from broken families. Single parents, who do not have financial means to support their children, often have to move from place to place to find employment or resources to provide for their families. When consistently moving from place to place, these children do not attend school on regular bases and do not meet the academic standards that are required of them. If the students are not going to school and meeting the standards, they will not excel on in school. Numerous people living in poverty have given up on academics and have dropped out of school due to failing grades and academic achievement. They fall too far behind, and fail to find reasons to continue with their education.

Other than the lack of educational materials, and poor attendance in school, many other struggles face these children in the academic setting. In order for students in any socioeconomic class to be successful, support from parents is essential. “Parent involvement has been consistently shown to produce positive results in students’ literacy achievement” (ST. GEORGE, 2009, 32). Students need their parents to reinforce the homework and assignments. This helps reinforce the importance of turning each assignment in, and the understanding of each. “Students who have parental support have a much higher chance of excelling academically” (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010, p.105). Involved parents often collaborate with educators to solve problems and to help gain information on how their children can improve on his or her academics. However, parental support often remains unseen. Children who live in poverty often do not have the much-needed family guidance. This is due to the lack of education that their parents have and the fight to survive. Often times those who raise families in poverty have not completed their education themselves. This makes it intimidating for parents to talk with teachers, and to attempt to help their child with academics. Poor family support leads students to believe that their academic studies are unimportant and often this adds to the end of their days in school.

When students do not have educational materials, good attendance in school, or do not have parent support to meet academic standards, they do not become literate and well educated. Sadly, these children will continue to live their lives in poverty and the cycle of poverty will continue throughout generations to come. It is the duty of teachers and other educators to put an end to the vicious cycle of poverty. Teachers must do whatever it takes to educate all students in their classroom regardless of what goes on outside of school. “School is often a place of refuge, comfort, and stability” (MacGillivray, Ardell, & Curwen, 2010, p. 390). A safe and family

friendly classroom will allow parents to feel welcome to collaborate with the teacher about ways of helping their child succeed. Teachers must create a friendly environment, welcoming to all. Teachers must meet the needs of all students even those who are at risk and those who struggle greatly. To reach those individuals who enter kindergarten without any prior knowledge on literacy, teachers should implement modifications and adaptations. Although difficult with such wide ranges of students, teachers must have early intervention so that students do not continue to fall behind. The earlier the teacher can reach the needs of the students facing poverty, the better chance the students will have of catching up and being successful.

Poverty has an enormous impact on students and their education. With the lack of resources, nutrients, appropriate shelter, transportation, and parental support in academics, it is hard for individuals to excel in their education. When looking at the provided studies and their data, it is clear that poverty is a vicious cycle passed from generation to generation. In order to prevent the cycle from continuing, it is teachers' responsibility to do everything in their power to reach the needs of each student. Teachers must be adamant in helping each student succeed despite the many obstacles that stand in the way. By educating students, wealthy and poor, teachers can make a difference in the lives of each child. When teachers, parents, and students work together to collaborate and create a safe and educational atmosphere, any child can learn. Emphasizing literacy, when educating those who face poverty as well as those who do not, is necessary. Literacy will help end the vicious cycle of poverty, and will open the door to better lives.

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