

Poverty Does Not Equal Disability

I am an educator with over 25 years of experience. Most of my career has centered around working with at-risk, low income, minority students. My consulting takes me to schools in large urban areas, as well as to small rural districts. Although the scenery may be different, in that some schools are in large cities and others in small country towns, there are consistent themes for the children in these schools. Regardless of the size of the school, the issues facing children of poverty are universal.

Without question, the most common characteristics of children of poverty in school settings are low academic achievement and behavioral difficulties. When I am called to consult, more often than not, it is to evaluate these students for special education and to provide recommendations for improving academic achievement and reducing inappropriate school behaviors. What I meet the child, spend time observing the school setting, and reviewing student records, more often than not, what I find is not a child with a disability, but rather a child who comes from a family with limited financial resources. When you look into the eyes of a child of poverty, it is clear that these children are no different than other children. The difference you see if the child in question needs understanding, compassion, patience, love, attention and mentoring from the adults who are charged with teaching this child.

Children of poverty are at a disadvantage compared to their middle-class peers even before they enter school. Poverty can also impact a child's ability to succeed in school. According to the Urban Institute, children of poverty are approximately 30 percent less likely to complete high school. The education level of their parents is typically limited. These families tend to work long hours, face significant stress, and tend to discipline their children with the same strategies used by their parents (McKernana & Ratcliffe Signe, 2012).

These children have limited exposure to books and limited enriched conversations with adults. Adding this dilemma, children of poverty tend to spend less time interacting with other children, making it difficult for them to learn the skills needed to develop positive peer relationships. What is even worse, many of these children have experienced some form of childhood trauma, that would make most adults seek the attention of a therapist.

The majority of teachers in the United States are white middle-class, females. When they start school, these children lack the appropriate school behaviors that are expected by classroom teachers. Their behavior is often viewed by teachers as aggressive or inappropriate, when in fact, at the core of these behaviors is a child that needs to be taught the social rules of the school (Goins. & Ford, 2017). Research has shown that these teachers often have difficulty understanding the children from backgrounds different from their own and often view the child's circumstances as a deficit or disability. They are more likely to display inappropriate social responses, are impulsive and usually have a limited range of emotional reactions (Goins. & Ford, 2017; Jensen, 2009).

The best way to help reduce the achievement gap is to address the discipline gap first. If children are not taught appropriate school behaviors and expectations, they are more likely to fall further and further behind in school. The achievement gap grows larger because these students are often sent to the office and removed from class. The result is that these students spend so much time out of class that they fall further and further behind in school. This only perpetuates the problem. The impact of inappropriate behaviors will inevitably impact academic achievement. We must not wait until the achievement gap is so large to intervene. Educators must be intentional about teaching all children expected school behaviors. Teachers must

understand that children raised in poverty come to school with a limited understanding of appropriate behavioral responses the very first day of school.

We must adopt schoolwide systems of Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS). These programs must be used with fidelity throughout the school and across all grade levels. Educators must be intentional when teaching children appropriate school behaviors. Rather than telling children to respect school property, we need to show them what respect looks like and have them practice. Children will not understand what respect means in a school setting until we teach them, and model for them, and let them practice.

Educators must also become students. Teachers must learn the factors that impact children of poverty and reframe their thinking. Poverty in no way equates to a disability. Children at some point or another will misbehave. Let's be flexible. Create opportunities for children to practice appropriate responses and then reward them for their proper behavior.

I have often heard teachers and administrators alike say that there no time to teach classroom management strategies, we must improve student academic achievement. Sadly, this type of mindset will not only damage student achievement but will increase discipline problems in a school. It may take a school six weeks at the beginning of the year to teach appropriate school behaviors, set classroom and school expectations, model and practicing appropriate school behaviors. But in the long run, the results will bring about not only more time on classroom instruction, but also fewer discipline problems. Academic achievement will improve, and the discipline gap will decrease. The time spent upfront teaching intentionally teaching appropriate school behaviors will change the outcomes for all students.

References

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