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The Correlation between Poverty and Reading Success in Children's Early Years

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Abstract

It is important that young children from low-income families, and who are also categorized as being from a low socioeconomic status, acquire the early literacy skills that support their development. These skills should enable them to transfer their learning as they progress through succeeding grades. Research indicates that young children will be more successful at reading if they have access to quality learning materials and enriching literacy programs. The purpose of this article is to better understand and briefly discuss how poverty negatively influences early reading success. Children from low-income families often have significantly lower pre-academic skills, infrequent interactions with learning materials, and experience less parental involvement. This article discusses some of the research that has explored how poverty affects reading success in children's early years. The greater the degree of poverty, the less likely students are to meet acceptable reading standards. The most recent studies on the correlation between poverty and reading success still indicate that the cycle of disadvantage is yet to be broken. Implications and limitations for these students' literacy skills and overall academic success are discussed.

Keywords: poverty, economically disadvantaged youth, young children, early education, low socioeconomic status, reading success

Poverty is a hindrance to children's education and well-being and is strongly predictive of limited academic opportunities, social exclusion, ill health, and marginalization (Dickerson & Popli, 2014; Cooper & Stewart, 2013). In the United States, there currently are more children living in poverty than during the entire period of the Great Depression (Potter, 2015). For these disadvantaged children, poverty begins almost immediately from birth. Some low-income families are victims of generational poverty and decreased literacy abilities. Some live in economically depressed areas. Since their families are low-income earners, the lack of academic opportunities in their early years are more likely to cause these children to be reared in information and learning material-poor environments. They also have limited opportunities to attend after-school and summer enrichment programs (Burney & Beilke, 2008). Students from low economic environments are at risk of reading failure (Hagans & Good, 2013).

The result of these disadvantages is a large achievement gap. This is evident as the students begin and progress through Kindergarten. Because low socioeconomic status has no quick fixes, these children and their families can remain in this state for extended periods. Unfortunately, due to these circumstances, the gap will widen over time (Carpenter, Ramirez, & Severn, 2006). Early reading success is achieved when students are mentally and physically prepared to learn. Students who lack the basic hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) do not have the tools necessary for effective stimulation of their intellectual abilities to take place. The diets of many poor children do not supply them with the essential nutrients needed for a healthy physical, social, and academic development. Malnourishment has more serious repercussions for children under the age of three years. They are more likely to experience permanent disabilities, weakened immune systems, and less motivation to learn (UNICEF, 1998). Many children are not attending school physically, socially, emotionally, or cognitively ready to learn. Millions of

American children go to school experiencing poor health, hunger, low self-esteem, attention deficits, violence, and low expectations (Children's Defense Fund, 2000). Children need healthy and strong foundations if they are to successfully thrive. According to Investing in Children (2001), "deficits in meeting these needs can severely hinder a child's performance at home, at school, and in adult life" (p. 2).

Early education students whose families are below the poverty line are unable to access the resources necessary for learning when compared to their counterparts from families with higher incomes. It can be surmised that poverty can strongly determine a child's academic achievement. The following sections discuss some of the research concerning this correlation between young children in poverty and reading success.

Children, Poverty and Health

The National Center for Children in Poverty (2017) stated that one of four children in America lives in poverty. Forty six percent of these children live in poverty-stricken environments. Access to food, clothing, housing, and medical services is difficult at best. Research shows that there is a strong and detrimental relationship between low-income students and their health. Poor children are not as healthy as non-poor ones (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997). According to Children's Defense Fund (2000), poor children are susceptible to serious physical and mental disabilities and maladies. The poverty they are experiencing is associated with poor nutrition and substandard living conditions. This includes living in dangerous neighborhoods where substandard services and juvenile delinquencies are common occurrences.

Many young children in poverty are victims of health disorders. Mental health and asthma are two examples of these disorders. According to Pacheco et al. (2014), asthma is one of the most common disorders associated with these children because "racial/ethnic minority

families with low incomes tend to reside in neighborhoods with low housing quality” (p. 467). Many of these families live near highways, bus depots, other high traffic areas, and places prevalent with contaminants of the air and ground. The resulting exposure to such toxicity and environmental hazards is a contributing factor to asthma. Children in poverty have a 25.8% chance of experiencing asthma due to their living conditions.

Pulcini et al. (2017) also discovered that asthma and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) are more commonly found among children living in poverty. Children with ADHD can experience anxiety and depression. They can experience lack of focus, impulsivity, and be disruptive. As an educator with over twenty-five years of K-12 experience, I have seen young children with ADHD and asthma struggle with school life. Those who are from low-income families attend school the least. This sporadic attendance negatively affects their reading success. Not many students can continue from where they stopped. Since these students’ families are unable to afford regular health care, school absenteeism, learning potential, and overall academic performance continue to be severely affected (Racine, 2016).

Researchers such as Hagans and Good (2013) compared the influence of early literacy intervention on the reading skills of students from low socio-economic backgrounds with affluent students. The researchers examined seventy-five first graders from three elementary schools. They discovered that the reading skills of the affluent students superseded their counterparts. The students from a low economic background were at an increased risk for reading disabilities although they were receiving specific reading intervention. Absenteeism, ill health, lack of parental involvement, and student interest were some other factors that influenced reading disabilities. It is likely that parents who are poverty stricken are unable to afford the out of school resources that can assist their children to experience reading success. The parents may

also be experiencing educational deficiencies that hinder them from assisting their children.

According to Metcalf, Hoffman, & Boatwright (2013), parents at the low socio-economic levels are more focused on providing for the day-to-day basic needs of their children.

Low economic status does not mean that parents devalue education and are not concerned about their children's futures as are their affluent counterparts. The significant disadvantage that they face is financial. They lack the finances necessary for healthcare and educational needs. In contrast to Metcalf et al. (2013), Rank (2004) indicated that there are parents, who, although poor, desire better for their children. They are poor but not unambitious. He stated that "research has repeatedly demonstrated that those who fall below the poverty line...hold the same fundamental aspirations, beliefs, and hopes" (p. 48). Compton-Lilly, (2003, 2007) and Gorski (2006) are two other researchers who refute the stereotype that if parents are poor, they devalue education. Lareau (2003) conducted a study in which a comparison was made between children and families living in poverty and their more affluent peers. The findings indicated that all families wanted their children to be happy, healthy, and academically sound.

Children, Poverty, and School

It is an established fact that many inner-city schools have the most poverty-stricken student populations (Kozol, 1991). Research shows that where a student resides influences where and with whom he goes to school. It is unfortunate that status affects the American educational system. Children in low economic communities do not have the same advantages and resources as children in higher income areas even within the public school system (Cashin, 2015; Siegel-Hawley, 2014; Tate, 2008). Children who are in poverty are more likely to drop-out, have higher rates of retention and higher special education referrals (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997).

Although the research of Fernandes and Sturm (2010) focused on elementary school facilities

and their correlation to recess, obesity, and physical education, they determined that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were attending schools that had outdated equipment and poor facilities. They stated that “schools with a high fraction of minority children were more likely to report an inadequate playground. Children from low-income households or from racial/ethnic minorities were also less likely to have an adequate playground at school” (p. S32). Even in recreation, children in poverty are disadvantaged.

The Children’s Defense Fund (2000) concurs with some of the research of Fernandes and Sturm (2010). The CDF discovered that inner city schools face several challenges that some rural and suburban schools do not. Some of these challenges include over-crowding, dilapidated facilities, insufficient equipment such as computers, teacher shortages, and low student achievement. According to Hirsch (2003), poor children will not learn well. He discusses how poverty has serious effects on children’s literacy skills, and states that “low-income students have more to learn—and in an effective program they begin to catch up” (p. 29).

Educational institutions are matriculating better prepared teachers. Teaching institutions are providing instruction using the most current teaching and learning concepts and technology. Student teachers are participating in more and lengthier mentoring programs and usually in service training as a means of cooperative collaboration in preparation for the rigors of the classroom (Aderibigbe, 2013). These teachers are still teaching or going to teach poverty-stricken and hungry children. What then is the solution? How can the teachers be effective? Some teachers are aware of their students’ status, some are not. How can the students focus on their reading task without worrying about their home environment or when next they are going to eat? Children should not be anxious about when their next meal will be or what their home environment will be like after they leave school.

Some students are living in various environments such as homeless shelters. How can this child focus on his homework? How can we as teachers, expect his caregiver to encourage him to complete his tasks when she is more concerned with the length of stay at the shelter and where the child will go next? Racine (2016) indicated that it will be a team effort to care for our poor students. Teachers are essential members of this team. By understanding these students' backgrounds, they can have a positive impact on student learning outcomes. The awareness of student's backgrounds should encourage teachers to exercise patience. Young children should not be directly or indirectly marginalized. They are not responsible for their circumstances. It is understood that teachers are not compensated to show love and affection. However, these students may display better reading outcomes if it is evident that their teacher is as patient as she is vigilant about their reading success. Hollingworth and Drake (2011) encourage teachers to help and motivate students to love reading. The activities should be stimulating, practical and memorable. Although teachers are providing research-based reading instruction, they should display patience and give students time to grasp and practice concepts. Since children in poverty are more likely to experience difficulties, Cavanaugh et al. (2004) urge teachers to identify and prevent reading difficulties as early as possible. Children who are poor readers in their early years are likely to struggle with reading throughout succeeding grades and into their adult life. It is preferable that students leave our classrooms literate and functional. Our future depends on their capabilities. Let us begin by providing what they need.

Schools in America provide breakfast and lunch programs. Students have prepared meals before and during the school day. During the COVID 19 pandemic, most schools were still providing this service. My school district is in an urban, low-income area in the southeastern part of the United States. Most parents there are experiencing poverty. Although instruction is fully

virtual, breakfast and lunch are still provided. Parents can go to designated locations or go to their child's school. It is unfortunate to see them arrive in droves and on time twice a day to retrieve the meal packages, but neglect to collect or ask for the well organized and labelled learning materials and equipment. Although these items are offered in addition to the food, most parents decline and state that they will return at another time for the school supplies. I live in hope that low-income parents and families will recognize and acknowledge that education is one of their ways out of poverty and lend full support to the school in its quest to educate their child. Based on personal interactions and testimonies, some of these parents are experiencing literacy deficiencies. None of the parents who admitted to the deficiencies have expressed the desire to improve their circumstances, even after viable solutions were suggested. It is unfortunate that the results of the lack of educational skills have not stirred them to action. This lack of parental involvement and interest is hurting our young children. It is also a strong indicator that some students may not be receiving as much, if any, educational stimulation in their home environments.

How Can Parents and Teachers Close the Gaps?

Parents can help by being more involved in their young child's reading success. The home environment is a crucial place for reading reinforcement and stimulation. No parent should feel that his low socioeconomic status means that he is less of a person due to his income or lack thereof, or that he cannot encourage his child to strive for greatness. The desire to break the poverty cycle is overdue. Schools have many resources. Personnel and other tangible support are available to help parents find reasonable solutions to the ills they are facing. Community partners are also offering services, some are free of cost. Parents should not feel hopeless. All their needs may not be met but accessing what is available is a strong beginning. Malika, Granillo &

Belliard (2021) explain what they discovered is the reason some parents in poverty do not access the services specifically created to assist them. They state that although researchers, the government and school districts have provided resources to close the gaps for the marginalized, "...it is well documented that many in these communities either distrust the "system" and do not engage with these resources or simply do not know about them" (p. 64). Some parents gave reasons for their lack of involvement in their children's education. They stated that there were numerous roadblocks, and they did not have the time to decipher the bureaucracies and policies. Other parents stated that they were uncomfortable discussing their personal problems with strangers. Malika et al. (2021) provided their solution:

"We implemented an innovative way to do so by incorporating community health and education workers (CHEWs) who can serve as liaisons between families, resources, and schools, providing health and educational outreach and advocacy. Informed by Maslow's hierarchy of need, we believed that what happens outside of the classroom directly impacts a child in the classroom; thus, helping parents and students to connect to resources more effectively ultimately prepares the child for success in the classroom" (p. 65).

According to Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz (2017), the classroom is a "...place where the special mix of teacher, student, and text come together to create wonderfully complex human interactions that stir the minds of learners" (p. 3). Effective teachers, their students, and their reading materials and equipment are this "special mix." Teachers can help young children in poverty to master their reading tasks. Kozol (1991) is of the belief that when teachers are sympathetic to their students' backgrounds, instruction becomes more meaningful. Most teachers are aware of their students' circumstances; this knowledge can help them to first address physical

needs like hunger before they attempt to maximize the students' brain power. Simons, Irwin, and Drinnien (1987) suggest some ways in which educators can help low-income students overcome their obstacles. Some examples of the variables that teachers can control are as follows:

- Ensuring that the student's basic needs are met. Encourage participation in the school's breakfast program and distribute learning materials.
- Teaching students about self-awareness and regularly discuss their hopes, dreams, and achievement.
- Providing opportunities for practice so that students can make good choices.
- Fostering creativity and bestow commendation for small and large accomplishments.

Teacher quality and teaching quality (Vacca et al. 2017), are tools that meet the demands of "strong instruction" (p. 5). Young children living in poverty need this type of instruction if they are to succeed at reading.

Limitations

Of all the researchers reviewed for this brief commentary, Sadler and Highsmith (2016) are among the few who studied how systemic racism, politics and income inequalities contribute to economic crisis that causes poverty. For example, they examined the Flint water crisis in the state of Michigan. According to these researchers, the geographic setting, political policies, and new independent governments created by white suburbanites, contributed the "urban economic crisis that ultimate precipitated the Flint water crisis" (p. 144). Other studies, such as those from Burney & Beilke (2008) and Dickerson & Popli (2014), also discuss the problem of poverty and its effects rather than on immediate, viable solutions. Future research on said viable solutions are needed.

Implications

Living in poverty has implications for how young children grow and develop. Their future depends on their ability to communicate effectively. If the negative influences of poverty are not addressed, students will experience reading failure albeit they continue to transition to each grade. Studies show that students from low-income families will enter high school with scarcely enough literacy skills. In their research, Reardon, Valentino, and Shores (2012) discovered that only about one third of American middle school students can read competently. They added that “literacy skills vary considerably among students...roughly 10 percent of seventeen-year-olds are at the level of the typical nine-year-old” (p. 17). Reardon et al. (2012) concluded that race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background influenced children’s literacy skills. They stated, “African American and Hispanic students begin high school with average literacy skills three years behind those of white and Asian students; students from low-income families enter high school with average literacy skills five years behind those of high-income students” (p. 17). Because of these disparities, the researchers indicated that by the time these students are in high school, it is too late to remediate and close the reading gap. Reardon et al. (2012) noted that racial and ethnic disparities are not as prevalent as they were approximately fifty years ago. However, socio-economic variations in literacy skills are increasing. According to Stinnett (2014), these students will be at least five years behind the students from higher income environments.

Reading achievement correlates to the home environment and the parent-to-child ratio. Poverty directly influences behavioral problems at school (Eamon, 2002). Teachers should be aware of students’ circumstances so that instruction can be tailored to meet their reading needs. Medcalf et al. (2013) state that “children must feel competent...through opportunities and

experiences...education must give children the opportunities and experiences that will help them develop those skills and dream of a better future for themselves and for the world” (p. 1333).

It is time that high poverty schools cease having a higher concentration of inexperienced teachers. Haycock & Crawford (2008) pointed out that “Minority and poor students...were typically taught by significantly more than their fair share of unlicensed, out-of-field, and inexperienced teachers who often didn't have records of strong academic performance themselves”. (p. 15). Since young children are already in poverty and facing multiple negative repercussions, policymakers and school leaders should ensure that well trained teachers are compensated for being in low-income school districts. Their knowledge, skills and expertise are needed to bridge the existing gap. School leadership, including the school's outreach team, and policymakers, should collaborate to ensure additional support and resources are allocated to the students who are experiencing poverty. Still, parents and families bear responsibility for inquiring about and accessing school and community resources that can lead to employment, better employment, or better living and working conditions for themselves and their children. To eradicate the negative consequences and repercussions of poverty, our society needs involved leaders who will inform national policy regarding resources, knowledge and skills that can help families better themselves.

Conclusion

The purpose of this brief commentary was to highlight the disparities associated with poverty and their lasting effects across multiple aspects of students' lives especially their ability to read effectively. Some of the literature reviewed did not provide viable or proven solutions to avert the poverty crisis. They mostly discussed the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic problems that students and their families are and have been facing. More research that shows how families

in poverty elevated themselves thereby improving the academic achievement of their children is needed. I strongly believe that successful models can be an inspiration, especially for those families who stated they were uncomfortable discussing their personal problems or experienced bureaucracies. Many programs and strategies exist to help with successful reading outcomes. However, young children who are experiencing health disorders, hunger, or feelings of anxiety about their circumstances, will not be focusing on the methodology being used to help them learn. Their hierarchical needs must first be met before they are ready to focus on the goals of schooling.

Young children need to be properly fed, be in a safe environment, and be actively engaged in school activities that are purposeful. Learning to read is the first step for leading these youngsters out of poverty. The cycle can be broken. It will take the previously mentioned team of stakeholders to make this a reality. Young children are not responsible for themselves. Their parents and teachers have significant contributions to make in their reading success. Income equality will never happen in America or in any society. However, a child's low socio-economic status should not prevent her from having full access to services, qualified teachers, and enriching programs, especially government funded programs, that will help her to learn. Poverty is a factor that affects young children's reading success, but it need not be a hindrance.

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