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Understanding the Nature of Poverty

Chris Hawkins teaches history in a high-poverty secondary school. He's been teaching for 14 years and believes he's a good teacher. But he gets frustrated in his classes and hits a wall of despair at least once a week. His complaints about his students are common among many who teach economically disadvantaged students: chronic tardiness, lack of motivation, and inappropriate behavior. Mr. Hawkins complains that his students act out, use profanity, and disrespect others. "It's like going to war every day," he says. The recurring thought that goes through his mind is "Retirement is only six years away."

How would you feel if your son or daughter were a student in Mr. Hawkins's class? Only two short generations ago, policymakers, school leaders, and teachers commonly thought of children raised in poverty with sympathy but without an understanding of how profoundly their chances for success were diminished by their situation. Today, we have a broad research base that clearly outlines the ramifications of living in poverty as well as evidence of schools that do succeed with economically disadvantaged students. We can safely say that we have no excuse to let any child fail. Poverty calls for key information and smarter strategies, not resignation and despair.

What Is Poverty?

The word *poverty* provokes strong emotions and many questions. In the United States, the official poverty thresholds are set by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Persons with income less than that deemed

sufficient to purchase basic needs—food, shelter, clothing, and other essentials—are designated as poor. In reality, the cost of living varies dramatically based on geography; for example, people classified as poor in San Francisco might not feel as poor if they lived in Clay County, Kentucky. I define poverty as *a chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors and affects the mind, body, and soul*. However you define it, poverty is complex; it does not mean the same thing for all people. For the purposes of this book, we can identify six types of poverty: situational, generational, absolute, relative, urban, and rural.

- **Situational poverty** is generally caused by a sudden crisis or loss and is often temporary. Events causing situational poverty include environmental disasters, divorce, or severe health problems.
- **Generational poverty** occurs in families where at least two generations have been born into poverty. Families living in this type of poverty are not equipped with the tools to move out of their situations.
- **Absolute poverty**, which is rare in the United States, involves a scarcity of such necessities as shelter, running water, and food. Families who live in absolute poverty tend to focus on day-to-day survival.
- **Relative poverty** refers to the economic status of a family whose income is insufficient to meet its society's average standard of living.
- **Urban poverty** occurs in metropolitan areas with populations of at least 50,000 people. The urban poor deal with a complex aggregate of chronic and acute stressors (including crowding, violence, and noise) and are dependent on often-inadequate large-city services.
- **Rural poverty** occurs in nonmetropolitan areas with populations below 50,000. In rural areas, there are more single-guardian households, and families often have less access to services, support for disabilities, and quality education opportunities. Programs to encourage transition from welfare to work are problematic in remote rural areas, where job opportunities are few (Whitener, Gibbs, & Kusmin, 2003). The rural poverty rate is growing and has exceeded the urban rate every year since data collection began in the 1960s. The difference between the two poverty rates has averaged about 5 percent for the last 30 years, with urban rates near 10–15 percent and rural rates near 15–20 percent (Jolliffe, 2004).

The Effects of Poverty

Poverty involves a complex array of risk factors that adversely affect the population in a multitude of ways. The four primary risk factors afflicting families living in poverty are

- Emotional and social challenges.
- Acute and chronic stressors.
- Cognitive lags.
- Health and safety issues.

Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1995) estimated that in 1995, 35 percent of poor families experienced six or more risk factors (such as divorce, sickness, or eviction); only 2 percent experienced no risk factors. In contrast, only 5 percent of well-off families experienced six or more risk factors, and 19 percent experienced none.

The aggregate of risk factors makes everyday living a struggle; they are multifaceted and interwoven, building on and playing off one another with a devastatingly synergistic effect (Atzaba-Poria, Pike, & Deater-Deckard, 2004). In other words, one problem created by poverty begets another, which in turn contributes to another, leading to a seemingly endless cascade of deleterious consequences. A head injury, for example, is a potentially dire event for a child living in poverty. With limited access to adequate medical care, the child may experience cognitive or emotional damage, mental illness, or depression, possibly attended with denial or shame that further prevents the child from getting necessary help; impairments in vision or hearing that go undetected, undiagnosed, and untreated; or undiagnosed behavior disorders, such as AD/HD or oppositional personality disorder.

It's safe to say that poverty and its attendant risk factors are damaging to the physical, socioemotional, and cognitive well-being of children and their families (Klebanov & Brooks-Gunn, 2006; Sapolsky, 2005). Data from the Infant Health and Development Program show that 40 percent of children living in chronic poverty had deficiencies in at least two areas of functioning (such as language and emotional responsiveness) at age 3 (Bradley et al., 1994). The following two sections examine how inferior provisions both at home and at school place poor children at risk for low academic performance and failure to complete school.

Poverty at Home

Compared with well-off children, poor children are disproportionately exposed to adverse social and physical environments. Low-income neighborhoods are likely to have lower-quality social, municipal, and local services. Because of greater traffic volume, higher crime rates, and less playground safety—to name but a few factors—poor neighborhoods are more hazardous and less likely to contain green space than well-off neighborhoods are. Poor children often breathe contaminated air and drink impure water. Their households are more crowded, noisy, and physically deteriorated, and they contain a greater number of safety hazards (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 2004).

Although childhood is generally considered to be a time of joyful, care-free exploration, children living in poverty tend to spend less time finding out about the world around them and more time struggling to survive within it. Poor children have fewer and less-supportive networks than their more affluent counterparts do; live in neighborhoods that are lower in social capital; and, as adolescents, are more likely to rely on peers than on adults for social and emotional support. Low-SES children also have fewer cognitive-enrichment opportunities. They have fewer books at home, visit the library less often, and spend considerably more time watching TV than their middle-income counterparts do (Kumanyika & Grier, 2006).

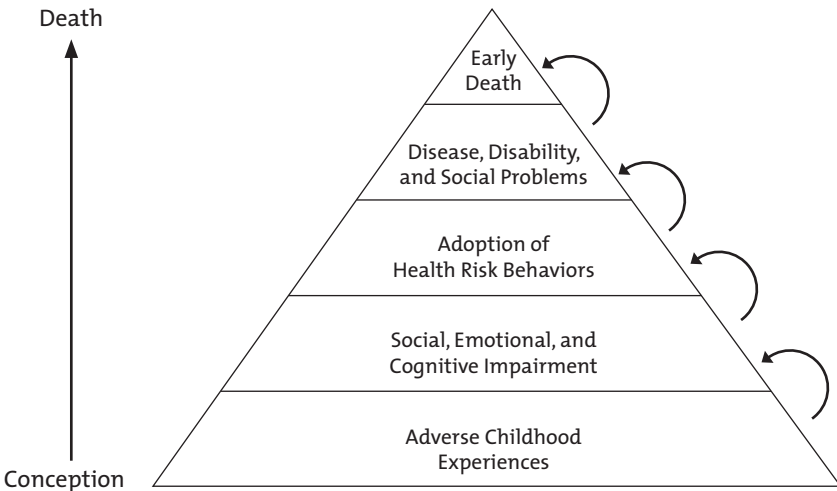
Often, poor children live in chaotic, unstable households. They are more likely to come from single-guardian homes, and their parents or caregivers tend to be less emotionally responsive (Blair et al., 2008; Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005). Single parenthood strains resources and correlates directly with poor school attendance, lower grades, and lower chances of attending college (Xi & Lal, 2006). Contrast these children with their peers living in stable two-parent families, who have more access to financial resources and parental time, receive more supervision, participate in more extracurricular activities, and do better in school (Evans, 2004).

Young children are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of change, disruption, and uncertainty. Developing children need reliable caregivers who offer high predictability, or their brains will typically develop adverse adaptive responses. Chronic socioeconomic deprivation can create environments that undermine the development of self and the capacity for self-determination

and self-efficacy. Compared with their more affluent peers, low-SES children form more stress-ridden attachments with parents, teachers, and adult caregivers and have difficulty establishing rewarding friendships with children their own age. They are more likely than well-off children to believe that their parents are uninterested in their activities, to receive less positive reinforcement from teachers and less homework help from babysitters, and to experience more turbulent or unhealthy friendships (Evans & English, 2002).

Common issues in low-income families include depression, chemical dependence, and hectic work schedules—all factors that interfere with the healthy attachments that foster children's self-esteem, sense of mastery of their environment, and optimistic attitudes. Instead, poor children often feel isolated and unloved, feelings that kick off a downward spiral of unhappy life events, including poor academic performance, behavioral problems, dropping out of school, and drug abuse. These events tend to rule out college as an option and perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Figure 1.1 shows how

1.1 Adverse Childhood Experiences Model



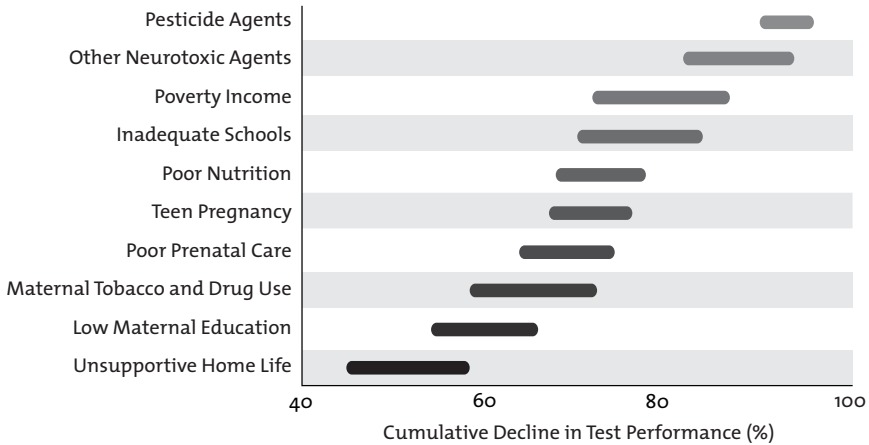
Source: Adapted from "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study," by V. J. Felitti, R. F. Anda, D. Nordenberg, D. F. Williamson, A. M. Spitz, V. Edwards, et al., 1998, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), pp. 245–258.

adverse childhood experiences can set off an avalanche of negative life experiences, including social, emotional, and cognitive impairment; adoption of risky behaviors; disease, disability, and social problems; and, in the worst cases, early death. Figure 1.2 demonstrates the negative correlation between adverse risk factors and academic achievement.

Poverty at School

Studies of risk and resilience in children have shown that family income correlates significantly with children’s academic success, especially during the preschool, kindergarten, and primary years (van Ijzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Riksen-Walraven, 2004). Due to issues of transportation, health care, and family care, high tardy rates and absenteeism are common problems among poor students. Unfortunately, absenteeism is the factor most closely correlated with dropout rates. School can help turn children’s lives around, but only if the children show up.

1.2 Adverse Economic Risk Factors and Academic Correlations



According to this study, each of these factors represents a “risk cost” of 5–15 percent. The factors are correlative, not causal, but taken together they result in a precipitous drop in test performance.

Source: Adapted from “Environmental Toxicants and Developmental Disabilities: A Challenge for Psychologists,” by S. M. Koger, T. Schettler, and B. Weiss, 2005, *American Psychologist*, 60(3), pp. 243–255.

Attendance problems often indicate negative parent attitudes toward school. Parents who did poorly in school themselves may have a negative attitude about their children's schools (Freiberg, 1993) and, in an effort to protect them, may even discourage their children from participating (Morrison-Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). These parents are often unwilling to get involved in school functions or activities, to contact the school about academic concerns, or to attend parent-teacher conferences (Morrison-Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). Poor children are also more likely than well-off children are to attend poorly maintained schools with less-qualified teachers, and their day-care facilities—if available at all—are less adequate (NCTAF, 2004).

In addition, in many cases, low-achieving high school students report a sense of alienation from their schools. Believing that no one cares or that their teachers don't like them or talk down to them, students will often give up on academics (Mouton & Hawkins, 1996). Kids raised in poverty are more likely to lack—and need—a caring, dependable adult in their lives, and often it's teachers to whom children look for that support.

Action Steps

Deepen staff understanding. It's crucial for educators to keep in mind the many factors, some of them invisible, that play a role in students' classroom actions. Many nonminority or middle-class teachers cannot understand why children from poor backgrounds act the way they do at school. Teachers don't need to come from their students' cultures to be able to teach them, but empathy and cultural knowledge are essential. Therefore, an introduction to how students are affected by poverty is highly useful.

Consider summarizing information from this chapter or other sources and sharing it with staff. Hold discussions at staff meetings that inform and inspire. Form study groups to explore the brain-based physiological effects of chronic poverty. Debunk the myths among staff members who grew up in middle-class or upper-middle-class households. For example, some teachers perceive certain behaviors typical of low-SES children as “acting out,” when often the behavior is a symptom of the effects of poverty and indicates a condition such as a chronic stress disorder. Such disorders alter students' brains (Ford, Farah, Shera, & Hurt, 2007) and often lead to greater impulsivity and

poor short-term memory. In the classroom, this translates into blurting, acting before asking permission, and forgetting what to do next.

Change the school culture from pity to empathy. When staff members work with children raised in poverty, a common observation is “Bless their hearts, they come from such terrible circumstances.” The problem with that sentiment is that it leads to lowered expectations. Encourage teachers to feel empathy rather than pity; kids will appreciate your ability to know what it’s like to be in their shoes. Establish a school culture of caring, not of giving up. You can help foster such a culture by speaking respectfully, not condescendingly, of and to your student population, and by using positive affirmations, both vocally and through displays and posters.

Embracing a New Mission

Beyond its effects on individual children, poverty affects families, schools, and communities (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). And the problem promises to get worse. Children of immigrants make up 22 percent of the total child poverty cases in the United States (Rector, 2005), and immigration rates continue to increase. Because of the massive influx of immigrants entering the United States every year, the ensuing competition for low-wage jobs, and the statistical link between low-wage earners and increased childbearing (Schultz, 2005), the number of U.S. children in low-income situations is forecast to rise over the next few decades.

We need to address this rising problem, and soon. The timing and duration of poverty matter. Children who experience poverty during their preschool and early school years experience lower rates of school completion than children and adolescents who experience poverty only in later years. In addition, for those who live below the poverty line for multiple years and receive minimal support or interventions, each year of life “carries over” problems from the prior year. Ultimately, these translate to earlier mortality rates (Felitti et al., 1998).

But there is hope. I present research findings in the next few chapters that suggest that early childhood interventions can be quite potent in reducing poverty’s impact. Schools around the world are succeeding with poor students, and yours can, too. We must end the cycle of blame and resignation and embrace a new mission to help all our students fulfill their potential.