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An Equity Literacy Approach to Poverty and Education



Featuring Dr. Paul C. Gorski

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***An Equity Literacy Approach to Poverty
and Education***

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Objectives

We will:

- Learn about the major themes from the last 20 years of research on teaching students in poverty;
- Consider what approaches for educating low-income students might look like if we understood their experiences with poverty more fully; and
- Become familiar with on-the-ground, research-based strategies for reaching and teaching students in poverty.

An Initial Reflection

Why are poor people poor?

Why are wealthy people wealthy?

3

How I Know "The Poor"
Are Not "The Problem"



How I Know Teachers
Can Be a Big Part of the Solution



Warming Up

A Short Quiz

6

The Most Practical Note

If we start with the belief that poor people are poor because poor people are deficient, we already have lost. The single most practical strategy for every one of us:

Let go of the stereotypes...

7

Stereotypers Are Us

- Brainstorm all the stereotypes you know about low-income people
 - And note where they come from

8

Stereotypers Are Us

Stereotype: Laziness

Ah, but: A vast majority of poor people do work (CDF, 2008). According to the Economic Policy Institute (2002), poor working adults *spend more hours working per week on average* than their wealthier counterparts.

9

Stereotypers Are Us

Stereotype: Don't Value Education

Ah, but: Low-income parents have the exact same attitudes about education as wealthy parents (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Li, 2010; Leichter, 1978; Varenne & McDermott, 1986).

(More on this later...)

10

Stereotypers Are Us

Stereotype: Substance Abuse

Ah, but: Alcohol abuse is far more prevalent among wealthy people than poor people (Galea, Ahern, Tracy, & Vlahov, 2007; Humensky, 2010). And drug use equally distributed across poor, middle class, and wealthy communities (Saxe, Kadushin, Tighe, Rindskopf, & Beveridge, 2001).

11

Stereotypers Are Us

Stereotype: Bad Parents

Ah, but: Research has continued to show that low-income parents care just as much about their children, and work just as hard—or harder—to advocate for their children, as wealthier parents.

12

Stereotypers Are Us

The nature of stereotyping

- Selective evidence-gathering
- In-group favor

My dad and road rage

13

The Three Ideologies

1. Deficit ideology
2. "Grit" ideology
3. Structural ideology

The Three Ideologies

1. Deficit ideology
2. "Grit" ideology
3. Structural ideology

Low-income student not doing well in class. One evening you contact parent who doesn't respond. What are your assumptions?

The 'Culture' or 'Mindset' of Poverty

- What is it?
- Who made it up?
- What the research says
- Why it's dangerous

Silliness: My grandma and Somali children

16

Deficit View Is...

- A perspective that explains outcome inequalities as resulting from supposed moral, intellectual, and cultural deficiencies in disenfranchised communities and individuals
 - The "achievement gap"
 - The "glass ceiling"

Deficit View Is...

- The single most formidable in-school barrier to progress on educational outcome inequalities because it masks the real issues.

Understanding the Challenges of Low-Income Families

Starting with What We Know

- Challenges low-income students and families experience outside schools that affect their experiences in schools;
- Challenges low-income students and families experiences in schools.

Pre-School

- Less access
- When they have access, it's to lower-quality pre-school
- According to brain research, this is critical because of the cognitive development that happens during pre-school years (Duncan, Ludwig, & Magnuson, 2007)

21

Pollution

- Air and water in low-income neighborhoods more polluted
- More likely to live near hazardous production and storage sites (Walker et al, 2005)

22

Neighborhood Factors

- Low-income neighborhoods more likely to have lower-quality social, municipal, and local services; greater traffic volume, fewer playgrounds; less green space (NCTAF, 2004)

23

Health

- Less access to health care (Koenig, 2007)
- Less access to preventive measures (Pampel et al, 2010)
- Less access to prenatal care (Temple et al, 2010)
- Higher levels of chronic stress and depression (Wadsworth et al, 2008)
- Less access to healthy foods (Pampel et al, 2010)

24

In School, the “Great Equalizer”:

This opportunity gap is characterized by the lack of access to:

- Quality preschool
- Adequately funded schools
- School nurses, counselors, and other school support services
- Affirming school environments (bullying)
- High academic expectations
- Higher-order, engaging pedagogies
- Opportunities for family engagement

Also:

- Safe and affordable housing
- An affirming society
- Recreational opportunities
- And on and on and on

Part of the problem with the “culture of poverty” model is that it is largely silent on these conditions—it distracts us from them...

26

Thoughts...

These are the reasons for outcome inequalities, not cultural deficiencies (Depere et al, 2010):

“Thus, children raised in advantaged neighborhoods appear to receive higher quality child care and to attend more advantaged schools, even when family characteristics, such as the quality of the home environment, are held constant. In turn, *access to advantaged institutions may explain why children in comparatively advantaged neighborhoods tended to have higher vocabulary and reading scores than their peers in less advantaged neighborhoods*” (p, 1241).

27

From “Culture of Poverty” and Deficit View to Equity Literacy: Principles

- Outcome inequalities do not result from cultural defects in low-income families
- Outcome inequalities do result from inequitable access to resources and experiences in and out of school
- Our job as educators is to refuse to replicate that inequitable access in our spheres of influence—a matter of *equity*, not a matter of *culture*

A Bit of a Shocker, Perhaps

- One of the factors that best predicts how well a student in poverty performs is who or what her or his teachers blame for poverty and for achievement gaps
 - Students whose teachers believe that poor people are poor because of their own deficiencies perform worse in school
 - Students whose teachers refuse to blame poor families for their poverty perform better in school
- So our first step has to be shifting our attitudes about poverty and dropping the deficit views of low-income families

Research-Based Strategies for Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty

Incorporate music, art, and theater across the curriculum (Pogrow, 2006; Wetz, 2004).

- Less likely to have access out of school
- Improves engagement and performance across subjects

What are some ways you can do this?

Research-Based Strategies for Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty

Have and communicate high expectations (Figlio, 2005; Jessim & Harber, 2005; Rouse & Barrow, 2006).

- Pedagogically, especially

What are some ways we can communicate high expectations pedagogically?

Research-Based Strategies for Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty

Adopt higher-order, learner-centered, rigorous pedagogies (Kennedy, 2010; Ramalho, Garza, & Merchant, 2010).

- Collaborative and cooperative learning
- Interactive and dialogic teaching

Research-Based Strategies for Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty

Incorporate movement and exercise into teaching and learning (Basch, 2011; Fahlman, Hall, & Lock, 2006).

- PE and recess being cut at high-poverty schools
- Fit students perform better at school and—*bonus!*—are better behaved

Research-Based Strategies for Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty

Make curricula relevant to the lives of low-income students (Duke et al, 2006; Haberman, 1991, Sanchez, in press).

- Increases student engagement
- “Portage”

What does this look like in practice?

Research-Based Strategies for Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty

Teach about poverty and class (Kelley & Darragh, 2011; Streib, 2011).

- Provides students an opportunity to challenge stereotypes people have about them
- Demonstrates our recognition of challenges students in poverty face outside of school
- Use MLK, Helen Keller, Mark Twain, etc.

Research-Based Strategies for Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty

Analyze learning materials for bias (Jones, 2008; Sano, 2009).

- “Hobo”
- Often very subtle

Research-Based Strategies for Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty

Promote literacy *enjoyment* (Kellet, 2009; Vera, 2011).

- Use literature circles in which students choose a common book to read
- Use a variety of media, including multimedia programs
- Incorporate drama into literacy instruction

Quick Reflection

Choose two or three and note how you can respond to them in your own teaching:

- Incorporate arts
- Have and communicate high expectations
- Adopt higher-order, engaging pedagogies
- Incorporate movement
- Make curricula relevant
- Teach about poverty and class
- Analyze learning materials for bias
- Promote literacy enjoyment

Four Relational Commitments

Quick Meditation

1. Imagine a place where you felt completely welcomed and validated
2. Imagine a place where you felt alienated and invalidated—some place you had to be on a regular basis and couldn't just walk away if you were uncomfortable

Relational Commitments

One: Choose a resilience view, not a deficit view, of families in poverty.

- Remember that people in poverty are drowning in deficit views of themselves
- Must be a conscious choice to reject the deficit view, let go of biases, understand inequality
- Research is clear on this: it can't be an act, it has to be real

Relational Commitments

Two: Engage in *persistent* family outreach efforts.

- Remember that low-income parents often have experienced schools as hostile environments
- Reach out consistently, not just when there's bad news
- Never assume you know what a lack of responsiveness means; remember evening work, etc.

Relational Commitments

Three: Build trusting relationships with students.

- Remember that low-income youth regularly experience authority figures in negative ways
- Address bias and bullying
- Dress humbly

Relational Commitments

Four: Make opportunities for family engagement accessible to low-income families

- Remember challenges: time (multiple and evening jobs), paid leave, transportation, child care, hostile environment

Final Reflection

The research points most ferociously at one conclusion:

If you believe that poor people are poor because of their own deficiencies and not because of structural barriers, you are likely to contribute to the very inequities we're here to eliminate. *Our attitude about poor families is the most critical single variable affecting the schools we are creating for them.*

But no pressure. 😊

45

Questions and Discussion!

Thanks!

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