

Educating Students from Generational Poverty: Building Blocks from A to Z

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A) High clear expectations. Expect all kids to learn. Students from generational poverty report an overwhelming sense that teachers do not believe in them. Teachers have told many students that kids like them did not need an education.

Teachers, Administrators, and Counselors represent every educator the student and their families have ever had. For the most part, these experiences are negative. Know this and work to show students that you believe in them and failing is not an option.

B) Recognize that motivation differs between social classes. Motivation to achieve in education is generally based on the assumption that there is a “value” of education. Most people living in poverty never have had a meaningful relationship with someone who has benefited from the educational system. My doctoral research on people growing up in generational poverty who now have Bachelor’s degrees showed that the meaning of education was “STRESS.” The stress of getting there, being on time, having the right clothes, lunch etc. Participants in my study were motivated to achieve only when education related to their values (e.g. “I want to help my family.”).

C) Meaningful assessment. Assessment must be linked to rigorous curriculum and instruction. All three areas must be examined for being inclusive of different learning styles. Feedback from assessment should also be well thought out. Too many students from generational poverty believe they are not smart. It is important to recognize that “constructive criticism” is a middle-class concept. For people from poverty, constructive criticism is often taken personally and can damage relationships and esteem. It is one more message that they do not belong and school is not for people like them. Students can be ask from day one how they would like to receive assessment information. Wording such as, “fragment,” “run on,” etc., written on papers is useless as these words are not used in their homes and unless they are carefully explained with examples from the lives of students, they are not helpful. Written feedback is not considered feedback to students from poverty backgrounds. They get their information verbally through relationship. They do not trust or value print. Homework as an assessment of how the student is doing is ineffective for students living in poverty. The chaos and crisis world of generational poverty leaves little room for academic endeavors.

D) Relationships change lives for students from generational poverty. Especially when the adults are bi-cultural – meaning that: they are comfortable maneuvering middle-class systems (such as education systems); the adults work to expose students from generational poverty to possibilities and opportunities; the adults have a consciousness about what it means to live in generational poverty in the U.S.; and the adults are able to suspend judgment of behavior and choices made in a poverty context.

E) Poverty needs to be defined. Poverty could be generational, working class, situational, temporary, etc. It also needs to be discussed openly in the school an in the

classroom to reduce class/status issues between students. If structural causes of poverty are clear and the damage stereotyping and judging are illuminated, students not living in poverty are often more supportive and those from generational poverty are empowered to externalize the poverty and not see it as their own deficiency. Educational efforts to raise consciousness about race issues can serve as a model for increasing awareness about poverty related barriers in the educational environment.

F) The curriculum and activities should include entertainment. Entertainment is often used as a way to escape the harsh world of poverty. Spotlighting the kids most at risk as much as possible in positive ways can increase parental involvement and engagement with the school. Schools can use the expertise of families and students living in poverty to create opportunities for positive school experiences.

G) Mentor programs. Mentor programs are successful with students from generational poverty when the mentors are be-cultural (they understand the world of generational poverty, they have abilities to help students through middle class systems, and the mentors introduce their students to their network of people and resources). They use their network and social capital to open doors of opportunity and help the students to create their own network of support.

H) Literacy approaches that include understanding of oral culture are most effective. Oral culture is linked to poverty across race lines. People in poverty get their primary information from other people, not books. This shapes how they think and trains the brain to operate in very specific ways. People in poverty tend to exhibit the characteristics and learning styles of oral culture, including: relationship based, spontaneous, repetitive, present orientation, concrete learning, tuned in to the big picture, learn through storytelling, shows emotions readily, and agonistic which means more physical. (This is a lecture/workshop that every teacher should have). Walter Ong is best known for his scholarly writings in this area. The implications for education for students and families living in generational poverty are tremendous with this knowledge.

I) Expectations for staff, administrators and teachers including having a consciousness about structural causes of poverty, understanding of what the experiences of generational poverty are like, knowledge of current best practices for educating across generational poverty barriers, and zero tolerance for low expectations and judgments of students living in poverty.

J) Regular evaluation and assessment of teachers, staff administrators based on criteria related to experiences of students from poverty backgrounds. Evaluation criteria such as effectiveness in building relationships with students families from poverty, meeting and accepting the students where they are, exposing students to college and career possibilities, and abilities to explain subject matter from generational poverty perspective.

K) Variety of teaching and communication styles including concrete and oral culture styles.

- L) Diverse teachers who can identify with students based on common knowledge, and experiences, and teachers who meet students where they are and help them get to where they want and need to be.
- M) Collaborative work and knowledge of other community groups/people working for the success of families in generational poverty. Teacher knowledge or access to knowledge of community efforts related to breaking poverty barriers is essential. No one organization can address the complexities of generational poverty. Partnerships are critical.
- N) Professional development that includes knowledge and best practices on educating students from generational poverty.
- O) Field trips, speakers and other opportunities to increase exposure to possibilities.
- P) Ensure low teacher, staff, and administrator turnover to allow for relationship development. As much as possible, use staff or administrators who “KNOW” the students as substitutes to avoid interrupting the learning.
- Q) Opportunities in the classroom for development of student-to-student relationships to better understanding different social class experiences.
- R) Broaden definitions of “multicultural” and “cultural competency” to include generational poverty or social class. This can be called “socio0culturall” competency to encompass socio-economic factors affecting the educational process.
- S) Include the wider community in efforts to educate students from generational poverty. School staff, teachers and administrators need “full resource backpacks.” Ensure opportunities for extracurricular activities at no cost.
- T) Create family involvement by focusing on common ground (i.e., we love your child, you love your child, what can you tell us about your child, here’s what we – educators - have learned about your child). When the focus is on education, parents may have little or no positive experiences to connect and relate with educators.
- U) Create a shared vision with students from generational poverty about what education can mean.
- V) Ensure smooth transitions between assignments, classes, and grades. Maintain as many connections as possible and link students to new mentors who can help them in their new endeavor.
- W) Keep classroom size low; assign specialty teachers to classrooms, bring in community help, use administrator expertise, Title One funds, etc. Be creative.

X) Create safe, clean buildings and grounds, up to date textbooks, equipment and materials.

Y) Develop a school culture/climate in which learning can occur with the principal playing the key leadership role and modeling socio-culturally competent behavior.

Z) Suspend judgment and assumptions about families and/or behavior. Take time to learn the “WHY” behind the situation and strive for understanding to promote education success.