

About Addressing Poverty: What's a School's Role?

Because America's schools are so highly segregated by income, race, and ethnicity, problems related to poverty occur simultaneously, with greater frequency, and act cumulatively in schools serving disadvantaged communities. These schools therefore face significantly greater challenges than schools serving wealthier children, and their limited resources are often overwhelmed. Efforts to improve educational outcomes in these schools ... are thus unlikely to succeed unless accompanied by policies to address the OSFs that negatively affect large numbers of our nations' students. Poverty limits student potential; inputs to schools affect outputs from them.

David Berliner

One of the most important debates we're having in education today is between those who think poverty must be addressed in order to improve learning and those who think we can improve learning even if our efforts to fix poverty continue to fall short...(as they have.) I am in the latter category, which is not to say that I think fixing poverty is a waste of time and money. I support every effort to address poverty, but the poverty problem has been used as an excuse to avoid accountability in education and you can have accountability even in schools that serve low-income kids. In fact, it is more important than ever. Many reform opponents insist we just direct our energy to fixing poverty even as they demand resources for schools. We have to do both -- but even if we fall short in addressing the poverty battle, we have to improve education. We may never be able to get single moms of low-income kids to be better mothers and read to their kids and make sure they do their homework and don't watch TV, but we should at least be able to make sure that for the six hours they are in school it is as productive as possible and that means we have to help schools and teachers get better and hold them accountable.

Comments from a Principal

The potential barriers to learning and teaching encountered by students living in poverty have been well documented. There have been concerns about a culture of poverty and a culture of classism; concerns about stereotyping, bias, prejudice, low standard setting, and self-fulfilling prophecies related to students and their families (Ceballo, 2004; Center for MH in Schools, 2018; Gorski, 2008; Hopson & Lee, 2011; Lewis, 1961; Pennington, Heim, Levy, & Larkin, 2016).

Berliner (2009) delineates out-of-school factors (OSFs) that are “common among the poor that significantly affect the health and learning opportunities of children, and accordingly limit what schools can accomplish on their own: (1) low birth-weight and non-genetic prenatal influences on children; (2) inadequate medical, dental, and vision care, often a result of inadequate or no medical insurance; (3) food insecurity; (4) environmental pollutants; (5) family relations and family stress; and (6) neighborhood characteristics. These OSFs are related to a host of poverty-induced physical, sociological, and psychological problems that children often bring to school, ranging from neurological damage and attention disorders to excessive absenteeism, linguistic underdevelopment, and oppositional behavior.” A seventh factor is “extended learning opportunities, such as pre-school, after school, and summer school programs that can help to mitigate some of the harm caused by the first six factors.”

*The material in this document reflects work done by Sim Beauchamp as part of her involvement with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA,

Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Commonly Cited Concerns Related to Schools in Poverty Neighborhoods

One concern has to do with the impact that expectations can have on students. Problems can arise because of low or too high expectations in determining what is an optimal match for facilitating effective learning and performance (i.e., personalizing instruction in terms of a student's motivation and capability).

Another involves anyone who brings to school a negative attitude about the students, families, school, and/or neighborhood. (Too often this is labeled a "deficit model"-- a term that has many problems associated with it.)

A third concern is that the discussion often colludes with inappropriate negative stereotypes about teachers and school (e.g., the accusation that the impact of poverty is being used as an excuse for not doing a better job").

And, then, there is the core concern that the role of schools in addressing the impact of poverty too often is framed in the way Washington Post columnist Jay Mathews formulates it: "good teachers should be able to raise the achievement of even the poorest kids." Framing it in this way can hinder development of a comprehensive system of classroom and school-wide learning supports that can enable learning by addressing interfering factors.

So What is a School's Role?

While schools cannot be expected to address all the problems arising from poverty, as the Carnegie Task Force on Education has stated, when the impact affects learning, the school must meet the challenge. That is, it is necessary to do whatever can be done to address the impact of poverty both in the classroom and school-wide.

For those concerned about ensuring that all children and youth have an equal opportunity to succeed, it is clear that prevailing school improvement designs are too limited in nature and scope to counter factors that interfere with effective school learning and teaching. In recent years, there has been a remarkable disconnect between what is planned and what is needed. A significant shift in policy and practice is essential.

To effectively address learning, behavior, and emotional problems manifested by so many students, schools must adopt a broad focus of causality. Such a perspective encompasses not only a biological understanding, but also an appreciation of the psychological, socio-cultural, and schooling factors that motivate youngsters' behavior. Such a reciprocal determinist perspective of development enables schools to group student problems along a continuum. At one end are those for whom internal factors are the primary determinants of the behavior; at the other end are those for whom environmental factors are the primary determinants; and at each point along the continuum, there are those for whom some degree of transaction between internal and environmental factors determine the problem behavior.

From this perspective, treating the various problems that arise by developing discrete programs is not a good approach. Additional piecemeal and ad hoc initiatives are not practical. Rather, the focus must be on a fundamental transformation of how schools provide equity of opportunity and how schools and communities can redeploy and weave resources to achieve this result.

To these ends, schools need to embed their efforts to deal with the negative effects of poverty, and other barriers to learning and teaching into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for preventing problems and providing student/learning supports. A particular focus is needed on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. That is, for schools to play a potent role in reducing poverty, they must (1) rework how they address student and

school factors contributing to so many students not doing well and (2) identify critical gaps in the existing approach to providing student and learning supports, and (3) outreach to a wide range of community and home stakeholders to help develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system.

For more on school improvement practices designed to develop a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for preventing problems and providing student/learning support, see the following (free) resources from the Center at UCLA:

> *Addressing barriers to learning: In the classroom and schoolwide*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

> *Improving school improvement*
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

For more resources, see the Center's online clearinghouse *Quick Finds* at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm>.

Note: The emphasis in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* on greater subgroup accountability, adding “nonacademic” accountability indicators, and how resources are distributed provides opportunities for states and districts to move in this direction. Of particular relevance to addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students, the reauthorization replaces what has been described as a maze of programs with a “Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grant” that provides states and districts with flexibility in how students and families are assisted.

Example of a Study on the Impact of School Climate in High-poverty Schools

Hopson, L. M., & Lee, E. (2011). Mitigating the effect of family poverty on academic and behavioral outcomes: The role of school climate in middle and high school. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33, 2221-2229. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740911002568>

Concerned with the persistent achievement gap between students from poor families and their peers, this research examined risk factors associated with poverty and strategies for promoting resilience. Specifically, the study examined associations between family poverty, social supports, students' perceptions of school climate, behavior, and grades.

As expected, poverty was associated with poor grades and behavior, while positive perceptions of school climate are associated with positive grades and behavior. Perceptions of school climate moderate the association between poverty and behavior, such that students from poor families who perceive a positive school climate exhibit similar behaviors to their peers from higher income families.

A hierarchical linear regression investigated the relationship between family, poverty, social supports, school climate, and grades. Students from poor families reported lower grades than their higher-SES peers. More parental support was associated with better grades, and more support from friends was associated with better grades. The addition of the social support variables reduced the effect of family income. The data suggest that school climate has a stronger association with grades than social supports from family and friends.

The authors conclude that: “School climates characterized by supportive relationships, emotional and physical safety, and shared goals for learning are associated with school connectedness and academic success. A positive school climate may be especially important for students living in poverty.”

About Enhancing School Climate

The concept of school climate currently is playing a major role in discussions about the quality of school life, teaching, learning, and support. School and classroom climates range from hostile/toxic to welcoming and supportive and can fluctuate daily and over the school year.

School and classroom climate reflect the influence of the underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, and traditions that constitute the school culture. And, of course, the climate and culture at a school also are shaped by surrounding political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

A variety of studies indicate that a positive climate can have a beneficial impact on students and staff; a negative climate can be another barrier to learning and teaching. Analyses of research suggest significant relationships between classroom climate and matters such as student engagement, behavior, self-efficacy, achievement, and social and emotional development, principal leadership style, stages of educational reform, teacher burnout, and overall quality of school life. Research also suggests that the impact of classroom climate may be greater on students from low-income homes and on groups that often are discriminated against.

Because of the correlational nature of school climate research, cause and effect interpretations remain speculative. The broader body of organizational research does indicate the profound role accountability pressures play in shaping organizational climate. For example, pressing demands for higher achievement test scores and control of student behavior often contribute to a classroom climate that is reactive, over-controlling, and over-reliant on external reinforcement to motivate.

A range of concepts have been put forth for consideration in discussing school and classroom climate. These include social system organization; social attitudes; staff and student morale; power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures; curricular and instructional practices; communicated expectations; efficacy; accountability demands; cohesion; competition; "fit" between learner and classroom; system maintenance, growth, and change; orderliness; and safety. Moos groups such concepts into three dimensions: (1) relationship (i.e., the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment; the extent to which people are involved in the environment and support and help each other); (2) personal development (i.e., basic directions along which personal growth and self-enhancement tend to occur); and (3) system maintenance and change (i.e., the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change).

What research and theorizing have not articulated well is that school and classroom climate are emerging qualities. That is, climate is a temporal, fluid quality of the immediate setting, and it emerges from the complex transaction of many factors.

Given current ideas about what factors affect school and classroom climate, good schools and good teachers work diligently to create an atmosphere that encourages and supports whole child learning and wellness and prevents learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems. The focus is on enhancing the quality of life for students and staff not only in the classroom, but school-wide. This includes (1) a curriculum that promotes not only academic, but also social and emotional learning and fosters intrinsic motivation for learning and teaching, (2) a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports that addresses barriers to learning and teaching and re-engages disconnected students in classroom learning, and (3) a governance/management approach that is inclusive of key stakeholders.

Concluding Comments

Given that schools have an important role to play in reducing poverty, that role must involve more than the fragmented and marginalized approaches generally advocated for schools. Dealing with multiple, interrelated concerns, such as poverty, child development, education, violence, crime, safety, housing, and employment requires multiple and interrelated solutions. Just adding a few additional services and programs to schools is not a solution. Indeed, what is generally advocated is just a recipe for perpetuating the current marginalized and fragmented set of efforts that have been demonstrated to have only a limited impact. Interrelated solutions require wide based collaboration. In particular, schools, homes, and communities need to work together strategically in pursuing shared goals related to the general well-being of the young and society.

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For more on this topic, see the resources listed in the Center's online clearinghouse Quick Find entitled:
>*Children and Poverty* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1102_01.htm