

Impacts and Interventions of Children in Poverty

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Introduction:

According to research in 2015, “51 percent of students in public schools lived in a poverty household” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 5). More than half of students attending a public school come from a house in poverty and with that comes challenges that can impact their success in the classroom. Poverty causes emotional, physical and social challenges, which ultimately leads to trauma. “The number of students living in poverty who have been traumatized has been estimated between 50-80 percent” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 5). When children live in poverty that are forced to face challenges with fewer support and resources, causing them to rely on resources outside of their home. This gives schools the opportunity to provide an environment for these children living in poverty, where they do have resources and are able to learn. However, in order for these children to learn, school officials must first learn themselves on the impacts of poverty and how it can hinder a child’s ability to learn.

Literature Review:

“Trauma in children who come from homes of poverty show high levels of trauma. Research has shown that poverty impacts the lives of students by creating emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 5). Regarding health and safety issues, children living in poverty are at prominent risk. Children from deprived homes are exposed to violence, contaminated water and air and dangerous, crowded and deteriorating homes. “Evidence has shown the effect of exposure to violence in childhood on children’s brain development, mental health problems, physical health and social capital in later life” (Schrader-McMillan & Herrera,

2016, p. 218). Moreover, according to further research, “children from poverty have a higher risk of chronic diseases and mental health issues from having experienced just one adverse childhood experience” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 6). All of these factors create an obstacle in the classroom for children to learn. Research has shown that “emerging neuroscience research supports the hypothesis that children living in extreme poverty can develop pathways in their brains differently from children living in more moderate or affluent circumstances” (Goodman, 2018, p. 98). Early maltreatment has extremely prevalent negative effects on brain development. Since our brains are sculpted by early experiences, what children are exposed to at an early age is that more detrimental. According to an ACE Study, “constant stress without relief increases the baseline resting stress level of a person, changes the brain, lowers the immune system, and in turn, increases health and emotional issues” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 17). These children are already at disadvantage with health issues that will affect their attendance and focus in school. Not only are as a result of poverty do children face physical problems, but also mental problems. “Poverty’s impact on the brain is especially seen in the student’s executive function skills: attentional skills, working memory, ability to prioritize, and ability to self-regulate” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 12). Poverty also increases the likelihood of a child developing depression. “This poverty-related depression perpetuates a lack of hope that the student cannot break out of the cycle of poverty” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 12).

Trauma from living in poverty not only affects the child, but it also effects the family, school and community. With families living in low-socioeconomic households and experience of trauma, they are at risk of passing on the same lifestyle to the next generation. “Even in wealthy, industrialized countries, poverty negatively impacts on child health, starting life with increased

rates of prematurity, low birth weight and maternal depression, and continuing into childhood with increased rates of asthma, dental caries, inadequate or inappropriate nutrition, as well as increased exposure to trauma and abuse, violence and crime” (Lieberman & Merrick, 2009, p. 2) These children are coming into life already at a disadvantage due to the environment they are bringing brought up in. Regarding school systems, children of poverty have an economic impact on educators. “More and more local educational agencies (LEAs) are considering or implementing pay for performance in the compensation plans for educators” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 6). This means when students fail achievement tests, fail to graduate or drop out, this has a direct economic impact on educators’ pensions and even their retirement plans. Research has shown that in these environments, “many students are almost destined to drop out around ninth grade or shortly after” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 14). Lastly, trauma a child in poverty faces also affect the community. The stressors from poverty and trauma will hold a community back from progressing and being successful. “Economically, the community will not build a stronger future when students do not graduate or graduate with less than adequate academic, life, and working skills” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 14).

With all this research in mind, it is apparent that the impacts of poverty are prominent and effect a large group of people. When a child lives in poverty, the root of their problem is at their home. As a result, “schools are in a central position in the life of a community to be that place of safety, hope, and healing to families and their children (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 13). Elementary schools, specifically, are most definitely in a position to provide care and assistance to children poverty because “while children of all ages may be affected directly and indirectly by poverty, young children are particularly at risk, because they

are wholly dependent on their parents and caretakers for adequate subsistence and care” (Pac, Nam, Waldfogel & Wimer, 2017, p. 35). Currently, there are some programs in the United States in place to intervene with the issue of young children in poverty. For instance, the United States has programs in place to provide either free or reduced priced meals to students. The School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) provide subsidized meals to all children in participating schools that meet income-based eligibility criteria (Bartfeld, Berger & Men, 2019, p. 1). A study was conducted at an elementary school in Wisconsin where rather than only providing breakfast and lunch to students who meet the income-based eligibility criteria, meals were given to every student in the School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program. During the second year of this new meal program being put in place, a 3.5 percentage point reduction in the percentage of students with low attendance. As a result of this study, it was concluded that “offering meals free to all students through the CEP may modestly reduce the risk of low attendance among economically disadvantaged students in participating schools” (Bartfeld, Berger & Men, 2019, p. 1).

Another program in the United States put in place to help young children living in poverty is the Head Start program. Comprehensive services provided by the Head Start program include education, social, health, and nutrition interventions for all preschoolers (Hines, 2017, p. 3). The Head Start program was a program developed in 1965, after the War on Poverty in America, to provide services to pre-school students living in low-income households before they go on to kindergarten. Moreover, the Head Start Program also provides each child with comprehensive services, including at least one hot meal per program day and services such as physical health, mental health, dental referrals, and home visits (Hines, 2017, p. 3). Regarding mental health services, a study was done with 54 low income preschool children in the Head

Start program who had reported disruptive behaviors. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of child-centered play therapy with preschool children exhibiting disruptive behavior in the classroom (Hines, 2017, p. 31). In child-centered play therapy, children are provided play materials that allow for a wide range of emotional expression including anger, and at the same time, afford opportunities for the development of self-control” (Hines, 2017, p. 37). The results of this study showed positive support for the effectiveness of child-centered play and “indicated that children who received CCPT showed a statistically significant decrease in aggression in the classroom overtime” (Hines, 2017, p. 35).

Critiques

The programs that are in place in the United States to intervene with young children living in poverty seem to have a focus on the student’s behavior in class and how their actions affect the school. There are food programs put in place to make sure students have the energy and attention-span to focus in school. There are mental-health services put in place when students are misbehaving and disturbing the teacher and the students. While these are all important problems to be addressed, I believe the child’s overall well-being inside *and outside* the classroom is being overlooked. Not all students coming from a home in poverty is going to show obvious signs of struggle such as misbehaving in class. As we have seen from research, trauma that comes from poverty includes lack of attention, motivation, depression and anxiety. These symptoms are more passive than misbehaving and acting out in class, however that does not mean the child does not have trauma and been exposed to violence. Moreover, these symptoms do not just stay in the classroom, they are with the child wherever they go. That is why intervention programs should focus more on the “whole-child” rather than just their performance in school.

The United States schooling system is based on academic scores and obedience. The typical “perfect” student is someone who does all their homework, behaves in class and scores high on tests. That is why it is no shock when interventions for children in poverty at school focus on the students’ ability to thrive in school. For instance, one of the ways the *Teaching Children from Poverty and Trauma. National Education Association* article, one of the ways the author tried explaining to the audience why intervening children living in poverty was the negative economic impact it would have on educators and a community in general. This just goes to show that in general, when a person is impacted by something, especially economically, that is what will raise them to worry. While education is important, so that person is able to go on and be self-sufficient and a functional member of society, mental health is also just as important. A child could have all the resources to be successful in school and free meals, but if they are depressed and have unresolved trauma, they are not going to go on to be a functional member of society.

For many students living in low-income households, school is their escape. In this safe space, students should be provided with opportunities that support their mental health. There should be spaces throughout the school that allow students to take a break from academic work. Whether it be free play, gym class, art class, music class, recess or field trips, these are the outlets that allow them to be a kid and forget about their worries at home. Children living in poverty live in constant stress and schools should provide opportunities where they do not have to be on edge. While there is a huge emphasis on the importance of teaching teachers how to teach to students that come from poverty, there should be just as large of an emphasis (and economic support) on extra-curricular activities. Moreover, students should also be taught coping skills in school that they can bring home with them. Whether it be mindfulness, yoga, listening to

music, writing in a journal, coloring or deep-breaths, these are skills that help the “whole-child.” There should also be trained trauma-informed therapists at a school that children can talk to at any point during the day. These same trained professionals would also benefit from giving presentations to classes about their services, what they do, how they can help and mental health information in general. Children will not be able to take advantage of these services if they are not aware of them. Moreover, many children will not take it upon themselves to go to talk someone, so the information sometimes has to be brought to them.

Future Directions for Educators in Elementary Schools

Young children are living in poverty are particularly at risk not only because our brains are sculpted by early experiences, but they are also dependent on others for care. Those working in elementary schools are in the perfect position to provide intervention to these students and provide them the correct care that not only helps them in the classroom but their overall well-being. Programs such as School Lunch Program and the School Breakfast Program are essential, especially to a young child, as they are developing, because it provides them with two meals during the day that they do not have to worry about whether or not they will have something to eat. Additionally, the Head Start program provides intervention at the perfect time to pre-school students, before they go on with the rest of their school career. As someone with the goal of becoming a future elementary school teacher, it is essential to advocate for each of your students and make sure they have the correct resources to be successful. Therefore, teachers must make sure their students have consistent access to these programs and are provided with both the correct physical and mental services. Moreover, teachers must make sure they create a classroom environment where the student feels safe and validated. In order for this to happen, they must be listened to and feel that they can go to their teacher for help. In the *Teaching Children from*

Poverty and Trauma. National Education Association article, it discusses the issue that may arise with teachers who have students living in poverty. When students come in with stress and trauma from their home life and the teacher picks up that stress, “that, in turn, can elevate stress levels and causes health issues, burnout, and may even result in leaving the profession” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 19). To prevent this from happening, teachers must also take it upon themselves to participate in correct self-care strategies and deal with unresolved trauma they have of their own, so they are able to provide the correct and appropriate help to their students. Teachers must have the mature enough self-awareness to realize their limitations. Furthermore, these students living in poverty are more likely to not have than have appropriate emotional responses and/or self-love. When children are young, their brain is just developing, and they are like “sponges” since everything they see and hear “sticks to them.” As a result, they are going to learn a lot of behaviors from their teachers. If a teacher is kind, greets each child with a warm smile each day, is polite and treats everyone with kindness, students are not only going to feel welcome and loved in the classroom, but they will learn socioemotional skills as well. If a student feels scared, sad and stressed in the classroom, they are not only not going to want to learn, but they are not going to want to be there. This is because “if the educator’s preferred modality for teaching is the same as the student’s modality for the storage of painful memories, the student may not be able to learn from the particular educator’s teaching style” (Izard & National Education Association, 2016, p. 21). Being an educator of young minds’ is a large and important responsibility. These young minds are that more delicate with they have faced trauma as well. That is why it is so important these elementary educators advocate for their students and provide them a safe where they feel loved and attentive and motivated enough to learn.

Conclusion

In sum, with the correct interventions, from elementary educators and schools, of child poverty, the impacts of poverty have the ability to not be as detrimental. Child poverty not only has an impact on the child, but on the family, the school and the community. The trauma that results from living in poverty and being exposed to contaminated water, air, little to no food and violence, include emotional, physical and social impacts. All of these impacts have an effect on the child's performance in school and their overall well-being. Right off the bat, these students are already at a disadvantage from their other peers in school who do not come from a low-income household. In order for elementary schools to provide the correct and appropriate interventions for these children living in poverty, they must focus on the student as a whole. With programs such as School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program and the Head Start program, students will not be as much at a disadvantage as their other peers who do not come from poverty. Moreover, teachers must take it upon themselves to work on their own unresolved traumas, participate in the correct self-care strategies and realize their own limitations to provide students the safe and loving classroom environment they not only deserve, but need. Overall, elementary school educators are in the position to provide their students the environment and resources they need to deal with the impacts and trauma that results from poverty.

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