The Effects of Poverty on Childhood Development

TCED/COUN 716

The University of Tennessee at Martin
Abstract

Poverty is a major contributor to the failing educational performance of students in the United States. Low socioeconomic status affects physical well-being, brain development, educational performance, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Because 20% of children in the United States are classified as living in poverty, the impact of these numbers creates an immense strain on the public educational system. Educators are now facing sky-rocketing numbers of students who are malnourished, have poor hygiene skills, and little to no parental involvement in their child’s development and education. With little to no academic modeling, the vacuum poverty creates leads to the development and suffusion of generational poverty. This paper serves to analyze the devastating effects poverty can have on the development of young students and the challenges it presents to their education and future.
The Effects of Poverty on Childhood Development

Introduction

The United States Census Bureau (2008) defines poverty in a statistical manner. By assigning a dollar amount to certain variables, such as family size and structure, it creates a minimum monetary amount necessary to provide adequate basic needs. A family income falling short of this number is then classified as living in poverty (Bureau of the Census, 2008). Poverty is generally divided into two types. Situational poverty is a sudden decline in resources, usually resulting from job loss, death of a family member or divorce. Although it does not come without psychological impact, it is generally considered relatively temporary. When a family’s socioeconomic status has remained at or below poverty for more than three generations, this is considered generational poverty (Carter, & Barrett, 2006).

According to the latest statistics provided by the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), almost 20% of children under the age of 18 live in poverty. Poverty, however, is much more than dispassionate numbers. The multifaceted issues influencing these children living in poverty manifest themselves physically, psychologically, and socially. Because high numbers of children fall within these classifications, poverty, and the multitude of complex problems that are inherently linked with it, can have devastating effects on childhood development and education (Bennett, 2008). In the United States alone almost 13 million children live in poverty according to the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (2005). This number translates into one in six children living below the poverty level, and those numbers are increasing. Research shows those numbers are even worse for minority levels; studies by Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford
Running head: THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY ON CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT
(2010) indicate that one in three African American children live in poverty. The Hispanic population, predicted to soon represent one in four of the American populace is 58% more likely to have households living below the federal poverty level (Martin, 2007).

The psychological effects of poverty are extraordinarily stressful and damaging to a developing child. Children often feel shame and humiliation being raised in poverty. Insecurities develop as they notice their worlds are different from their peers. The damage these negative feelings have on a developing child creates low self-esteem, diminished self-efficacy, and educational gaps seen as early as kindergarten (Evans, & Schamberg, 2009). Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds often demonstrate lower or lagging academic performance. Because of the burden of family life and the stresses of making ends meet, often times schooling and homework spin to the periphery of attention for those children living in poverty (Beegle, 2003).

Poverty and Children

Having defined poverty and its prevalence in the United States, it is important to note the contributing dangers of poverty. Frequently poverty comes partnered with other stressors, such as drug and alcohol abuse. Subsisting under the poverty level creates extraordinary amounts of stress, resentment and anger. These negative feelings can lead to violence and physical abuse. It is reported (Levine, 2009) that children raised in these circumstances are at extraordinarily high risk for mistreatments such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. All of these contributing factors increase the likelihood that impoverished children will develop mental health issues. Despite the well recognized effects these stressors have on children, colossal gaps exist between children needing mental and physical healthcare treatment and those that actually receive it.
Based on data by Burns, Phillips, Wagner, Barth, Kolko, Campbell, & Landsverk (2004), over 50% of children living in poverty have expected mental health needs, however only 16% actually ever receive the help in which they have been referred. The gap between required help and its actually receipt is developmentally significant. Left alone, the stressors of abuse, violence and neglect caused by poverty can lead to mental and emotional damage (Burns, et al 2004).

It is important to study the effects parental influences can have on a child of poverty. Impoverished homes are more likely to be single parent households and of these, 72% are headed by a female parent (Bureau of the Census, 2008). Within the parameters of generational poverty, mothers are increasingly likely to have little to no prenatal care, low birth rates, poor nutrition, and non-existent aftercare after birth (Wadsworth, Aviv, Rhinehardt, Wolf, Santiago, & Einhorn, 2008). Often times these low parenting skills are born from insufficient income to meet child care needs; detached priorities, such as spending money on alcohol or drugs can lead to physical and emotional neglect. Additionally, the psychological stress of unemployment or lack of sufficient income on parents can also lead to austere and abrasive parenting. Parents under the distress of poverty also demonstrate less nurturing, reduced genuine concern for healthy development, and little academic modeling (Magnuson, & Votruba-Drzal, 2009). Often the lack of employment or the efforts to seek employment increases the chances for family upheaval, creating stressful transitions. These stressors often contribute to neglect of the mental, emotional and educational needs of impoverished children (Wadsworth et al., 2008). The effects of neglectful and inadequate parenting due to poverty can breed teenage delinquency, insufficient and incomplete education, and poor health habits. Without proper guidance and education, the cycle of deprivation and abuse breeds itself, creating a vortex generational poverty.
Poverty comes with a cornucopia of hazards and threats that place impoverished children at risk. Positive nutritional habits are crucial for young developing minds and bodies. Malnutrition can be a serious detriment to cognition, memory development and language aptitude. Under-nutrition is at epidemic proportions among the impoverished in the United States; studies estimating that nearly 12 million American children consume diets well below nutritional recommended allowances (Brown, & Pollit, 1996). Because research shows that lack of important nutritional dietary needs can have deleterious effects on the developing brain, and can also lead to learning disabilities and behavior disorders, this problem exposes a storm of potential limitations for impoverished youth. (Croll, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2001).

Although the United States spends billions providing public assistance and free public education, much of this money is wasted when a child presents to the classroom academically weakened by poor nutrition (Brown, & Pollit, 1996). Despite the fact that government assistance is widely available through programs such as food stamps or EBT cards and WIC, often times these funds are misused or abused. Instead of using government funds designed to help provide for children, often times the cards are sold for cash to buy non-food items, non-approved items, or even drugs and alcohol. Even well-meaning parents conclude that nutritious healthy food is simply unaffordable, and instead opt for cheap, filling food; observably this has led to an increase in incidences of diabetes and obesity in children living in homes below poverty standards (Fennal, & Brown, 2006). The emotional effects of the deprivation of nutritional food can lead to devastating body image distortions, dysmorphia, and eating disorders; lack of knowledge and apathy about proper nutrition leads to a lifetime of poor eating and health habits. All of these are
Other risks and dangers often associated with poverty are the high rates of drug and alcohol abuse. Sharma (2008) indicates that impoverished households are predisposed to have at least one type of substance abuse. Alcoholism, the most rampant, is a gateway to increasingly neglectful parenting as well as physical abuse. As a growing child witnesses this in the home, they are more likely to repeat the behavior (Englund, Egeland, Oliva, & Collins, 2008). Often times, alcohol abuse is observed synonymously with physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse (Englund et al., 2008). Because these types of abuse often times go unobserved or unreported, children are more likely to be exposed to the abusive behavior until adulthood, or until they escape from it by running away from home (Englund et al., 2008).

Research shows that the stress of low socioeconomic status can lead to adolescent psychological problems, the likes of which include anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues (Wadsworth, 2008). Moreover, students coping with poverty face deep humiliation and embarrassment when their appearance, clothing, and personal hygiene, are not the same as their peers (Beegle, 2003). A side effect of this psychological damage is extreme low self-esteem and self-efficacy. This can lead to frustration, angst and insecurity when it comes to the educational arena, which can then lead to behaviors that are misinterpreted as apathy. Teachers habitually give up on children because of this misperceived unwillingness to learn. Studies show that education is the most successful solution to breaking the cycle of generational poverty (Beegle, 2003); impoverished children must overcome ostensibly insurmountable odds when already debilitated by their environmental upbringing and unjust social bias. Educators have a moral and
Evaluating the Effects of the Risks and Dangers

Brain development is of critical importance to the cognitive, emotional and social growth of children. In physiologically terms, at birth the brain weighs 25% of what it will at adulthood. From birth till the age of three, the brain undergoes rapid development and enlargement (DiPietro, 2000). In fact, the weight of the brain will triple during this time; synaptogenesis, or brain cell growth and development, is so profound that the density of the brain’s cells is higher than it will be at any other point in its life span and it is 50% denser than the adult brain (Dipietro, 2000). Because the enlargement and evolution of the brain is incredibly vigorous in childhood, socioemotional development, language development and motor skills are highly sensitive to both positive and negative environments. Chronic environmental detriments such as poor nutrition, inadequate nurturing, and little healthcare can rapidly destroy critical brain development during the early periods of childhood development. Because the brain is in critical mass maturation during the early formative years, inadequate supply of emotional and physical requirements can impede emotional development and expression, stunt physical growth, and prohibit the development of higher lever brain capacity.

One of the most profound and dramatic effects poverty can have on brain function is the physiological impairment to the human capacity for memory development. Research has shown that there is a formidable relationship between memory acquisition and the income-achievement gap (Evans, & Schamberg, 2009). Human physiological development has shown
negative response to the stressors of the chronic demands of indigence. In studying the physiological effects of an impoverished existence, stressors such as hunger, abuse and neglect are measured in indices termed allostatic loads. More specifically, allostatic loads are a scientific measure of the wear and tear poverty causes to human health and development. Evans and Schamberg (2009) demonstrate that the duration of childhood poverty and the subsequent exposure to elevated allostatic loads is expressly proportional to the diminution of the developing child’s functional memory. Elevated chronic stress during childhood caused by poverty is a well-established basis for decreased adult functional memory.

While research exists demonstrating the effects of poverty on childhood brain development, the emotional impact of poverty on the developing child is far from peripheral. Glasser (1990) theorized the basic emotional needs of children as love, fun, freedom and survival. Children who have been reared in a void of these emotions and exposed to stressors divergent from these basic needs will fail to develop a strong sense of trust, self-worth, and belonging. Without these basic needs being met, children can develop a “flat effect” (Gold, Samuels, & Southall, 2003) in which normal reactions to negative stressors receive little to no response. Gold et al. (2003) explain that prolonged withholding of basic needs like food and love from a child can create instinctively protective, almost lifeless reactions to stimulus that would, in a normally developing child, create feelings of chaos, havoc and distress. This self-numbing has also become evident in attitudes towards education as well.

Impoverished children enter the classroom already having strikes against them. As discussed, they are environmentally, socially, and developmentally behind their typically developing peers. In addition, they are then expected to adapt and perform in a classroom environment that has been modeled around standard middle class socioeconomic standards
Results from research (Berzin, 2010) suggest that young impoverished youths lack aspirations and motivation towards education. Furthermore, their realities are based more in survivability and maintenance of the lifestyles to which they have become accustomed instead of pursuing higher education (Berzin, 2010). This cycle of repetition is indicative of all the characteristics of generational poverty. One aspect of generational poverty that is important to note is the repudiating attitude towards change that impoverished families pervade to their children. The cycle of repetition can often be encouraged, if not promoted, through reluctance to accept the success of a child over the parent. It has been noted (Baker, 1987) that embedded in generational poverty is the deep seeded resentment of any family member who dares challenge the lower socioeconomic lifestyle, and break free from the cycle of repetition. The resentment that is harbored is rooted in generational expectations; expecting more for oneself is considered an insult to the lifestyle provided (Baker, 1987). Unfortunately as Baker (1987) states, the cycle of repetition is a strong influence on impoverished youth, especially given the strong emotional impacts of equivalent socioeconomic surroundings that reaffirm their own situations as normal.

The Educational Front

Poverty has an astonishing effect on the classroom. It is well established that poverty is one of the primary causes of school truancy and dropouts (Cuthrell, et al., 2010). Since the inception of No Child Left Behind (2001), schools, teachers, and administrators are being held responsible for the scholastic achievement of all students. The call to provide a meaningful education to each and every student has created pressure for teachers to understand their students; more specifically the at-risk students that have potential to fail. Studies suggest that
efforts made by teachers can have a profound difference in creating a positive experience in the educational journey of an impoverished student (Pascopella, 2006). Teachers are called upon to be aware of student life; they need to be prepared with the knowledge enabling them to recognize the subtle and often misunderstood manifestations of poverty among students. Students that are withdrawn, sullen and seemingly apathetic are not necessarily displaying apathy towards education. Teachers should be armed with patience, understanding and concern for the needs of the diverse students in their classrooms. Teachers should be in tune with their students and be adept at recognizing the indicative signs of an at-risk impoverished student. Students that present to the classroom with soiled clothes or seasonally inappropriate attire should trigger a teacher’s concern for a potential problem. Another revealing sign of an at-risk student is certain peer to peer interaction. Because an impoverished student may not be fully exposed to or lack the impetus for personal hygiene, it is often their peers who become hyperaware of the differences. Peer to peer interaction in this regard can often manifest itself in bullying or taunting. Teachers, counselors and administrators should be well prepared to subtly address the needs and deficits of a student whose hygienic circumstance may be unhealthy for themselves and for others. Because these students may be unacquainted with positive hygienic concerns, the teacher should be able to instruct the student regarding proper cleanliness in a respectful and accommodating manner.

For teachers to be fully prepared for the challenges they may face in their classroom populace, they must avail themselves to the resources that contain vital information about the students in their classroom. Counselors, administrators and seasoned teachers are all appropriate resources for culling information about potential at-risk students (Gay, 2002). Additionally, to promote the academic success for the economically disadvantaged students in their classrooms, and in keeping with NCLB (2001), teachers must be aware of best pedagogical practices.
Examples of those include maintaining high educational and behavioral standards for all students as well as recognizing that apathy can mask insecurity for the impoverished student. Teachers should also promote significant relationships by taking interest in each student. Strong familial relationships typify impoverished families (Baker, 1987) and this requisite transfers to the classroom. Through these methodologies, teachers can face poverty with the knowledge and power to help impoverished students break the cycle of generational poverty, make a difference in lives, and promote the educational success of each and every student.

Closing Remarks

The blight of poverty in the United States is a deeply concerning challenge facing the education of youths who grow up within its confines. The devastating path of generational poverty leads to the failure of families, neighborhoods, and schools in rearing responsible, culpable and constructive contributors to society. The fighters on the forefront facing the challenges of poverty are indeed educators. Now more than ever teachers are called upon not only to impart curriculum to students, but they must also play the role of a co-parent. Motivating students to learn must be only one facet of the responsibility teachers confront. No Child Left Behind (2001) has deemed that all students must achieve measurable success in the classroom; teachers are faced with classrooms filled with diverse students that no longer fit the middleclass measure of educational motivation. Teachers must be knowledgeable about the signs and symptoms of both generational and situational poverty. Specific attention must be paid to impoverished student’s coping skills to promote a rebound in self-esteem, self-efficacy and academic achievement. Because education is viewed as one of the most significantly successful opportunities to break out of cyclical poverty, educators have an ethical and moral accountability to maintain high educational standards for students ensconced in generational poverty. For
students who may seldom see any other way out of their devastating situation, an educator’s
efforts to promote and motivate high academic performance are crucial to breaking the cycle of
generational poverty.

References


Professional Association of Georgia Educators. (2005). Breaking the cycle of poverty, 7(2),


http://www.tpronline.org/index.cfm
Running head: THE EFFECTS OF POVERTY ON CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Name: ________________

Course: TCED/COUN 716

Protocol For Term Paper: The term paper will be 10 plus full content pages with a minimum of 10-15 plus references from the UT-Martin Library full-text electronic databases.

Rubric For Evaluation of Term Paper: Excellent: 100 points possible-relevant and complete, accurate information and research-based; overall impression including presentational/writing style (APA) is strong.

Points: 100

Acceptable: 50 plus points possible-most of the information is relevant and appears complete, accurate information but research literature appears incomplete; overall impression including presentation/writing style (APA) is acceptable.

Points:______

Unacceptable: 0-10 points possible-information is either irrelevant or incomplete, information is not sufficiently research-based, overall impression including presentation/writing style (APA) is unsatisfactory.

Points:______