

Chapter 4

Viewing the Contamination of Student Achievement Through the Lens of Poverty

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the growing number in the underserved population of school-age children and their families who live in poverty and raises awareness as to how that factor directly contaminates student achievement. It is important to understand the federal definition of poverty and the attendant unique social environment. This chapter highlights an appreciation for the history of American race relations and its role in poverty-related behavior, as well as examines the inherent biases prevalent in American communities and schools that work to restrict opportunities for underprivileged families and children. It explores the impact of changing a culture of poverty through the lens of schools and role models, subsequently understanding multidisciplinary approaches for eliminating policies that alienate and exclude the poor. It includes best practices in pedagogy, services, and support for marginalized populations that will illuminate for the practitioner how the contamination of student achievement occurs and empowers them to assist those trapped by poverty.

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INTRODUCTION

U.S. public school students rank at the top or near the top of the world in reading, mathematics, and science when controlling for poverty. (Tienken, 2017, p. 8)

Four seemingly simple words that change the rank of our nation's public school students from top of the world to not so much: "when controlling for poverty" (Tienken, 2017, p. 8). We cannot wait. Creating powerful change is necessary now. Upon joining conversations related to the current condition of our national education system and creating powerful change, it is common to hear the words crisis, low achievement, gaps and lags, and most notably, poverty. The cultural divide that echoes through our schools from coast to coast perpetuates teachers' daily lives. It would be pleasing to see a more equitable distribution of wealth than there is in actuality, but the reality is that there isn't equality of wealth, and educators are faced with this disparity every day. Children from lower-income backgrounds perform lower on achievement tests than their higher-income peers.

Families who are well off financially have the option and let's say the privilege of choosing where to live, and in many cases, causing racial and socioeconomic separation between the rich and the poor. When given the choice, if the rich would choose integration of the rich and the poor, it would equalize things (Wall, 2017); but it's the Matthew effect that seems to apply here as cumulative advantage or disadvantage. This is the phenomenon of the rich getting richer and poor getting poorer, whereas the children who attend the schools with the best facilities and the most resources yield the greatest opportunities to instill a mindfulness of possibilities. The rich children do better in school, and doing better in school leads to a better job, likely making them richer, but in doing so we risk increasing inequities and further fragmenting society (Reardon, 2011). The poor children do not do better in school, facing the consequences of hunger, malnourishment, stress, and suppression, all having a negative impact on cognitive development, not leading to a better job and likely making them poorer.

When there is appropriate funding and per-pupil spending is consistent over time, research has indicated that student achievement increases (Baker & Levin, 2014). When student achievement increases, the likelihood is that poor children will graduate from high school, which can lead to a better job and an increase in future income and the overall economy. When looking through the lens of poverty, however, the reality is that student achievement in the United States is grossly contaminated, and that top-of-the-world ranking plummets. Schools, policymakers, and stakeholders, all have a responsibility to shrink these gaps, both in wealth and in subsequent academic achievement. Solutions must be fair, adequate, and most importantly, sustainable.

THE ARDUOUS CRUSADE

Equity vs. Equality Defined

Because here's the thing: Treating everyone exactly the same actually is not fair. What equal treatment does do is erase our differences and promote privilege. (Sun, 2014)

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