

**TEACHING TRIUMPH: ENHANCING PEDAGOGY TO
REALIZE THE ACADEMIC POTENTIAL OF STUDENTS
FROM POVERTY**

by

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It is the goal of this thesis to introduce an enhanced pedagogy with the purpose of better equipping educators to teach students from poverty, thereby closing the academic achievement gap that exists between socioeconomic classes in the United States. In it, I examine the impact that growing up in poverty has on academic potential and performance, and then explore practical methodological improvements that educators can employ in the classroom in order to overcome the deficits that growing up in poverty creates, and thus better serve socioeconomically disadvantaged students. My research consisted of exploring academic literature on the impact that poverty has on students' academic capacities, as well as on strategies and techniques for maximizing academic performance and achievement for those students. The thesis will first provide a synthesis of scholarship on the impact of poverty on student learning capacity. Next it will introduce and examine pedagogical methods to effectively address that impact in the classroom. Finally, it will apply that intelligence, so as to produce original work in the form of annotated lesson plans geared towards overcoming the deficits created by poverty and providing all students with equal opportunity to realize their academic potential.

Acknowledgements and Dedication

I would like to express my profound gratitude to Professor Ellen Scott for the tremendous support and commitment that she demonstrated throughout this process as my primary advisor. For her incredible patience, wisdom, insight, encouragement, and belief in me, I am extremely thankful.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my sister, Alison, who inspires me daily to work harder and be better. I am so proud of you. I look forward to working alongside you to serve people in need for a long lifetime to come.

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I. Introduction to the Thesis

“Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.”

*Paulo Friere, **Pedagogy of the Oppressed***

A Poverty Problem

If the utopian vision of America as the land of equal opportunity is to be realized, many factors must first undergo dramatic transformation. In order to support the pursuit of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” for *all* people in these United States, significant changes must be made to our *modus operandi*. Today, our global society is full of peoples who are exploited, oppressed and given unequal opportunities to live safe, happy, free lives. America is no exception. Poverty is the result of this inequity. While some members of society benefit and gain advantages that allow them to rise to the top, others are unable to support themselves due to inadequate resources, leading them to live unstable lives. They suffer hardship and struggle, striving simply for survival in a world that seems to systemically hold them captive in their plight. This gulf in quality of life that exists between the lower classes and their middle and upper class peers, and the inescapability of the resulting disadvantage, is among the most dire and urgent challenges currently facing this country. It has long been so.

On January 8th, 1964, less than two months after the assassination of his predecessor, President Lyndon B. Johnson stood before the nation and delivered the State of the Union address. Fourteen minutes into that message to the American people, President Johnson famously decried widespread conditions of inequality that led “many Americans [to] live on the outskirts of hope” and declared an “unconditional war on poverty.” His urgent goal, he stated, was to “replace their despair with opportunity” and give all people “a fair chance to develop their own capacities.”

Poverty and economic inequality had, of course, existed, both within the United States and worldwide, long before President Johnson delivered that speech. However, the attention brought to the severity of this domestic poverty crisis by the President of the United States himself, illuminated the ugly reality of poverty closer to home. The declaration of the War on Poverty ignited a national conversation concerning the causes of, and potential solutions to, poverty in America, which has carried on ever since.

Today, in spite of the efforts of the Johnson administration and countless others since, the problem of poverty in the United States persists. According to the most recent findings of the U.S. Census Bureau, 45.3 million Americans are currently living in poverty, representing 14.5% of the national population. The poverty rate among children under the age of 18 is 19.9%. These rates are 5-10 percentage points higher than those in China, France, Russia, Switzerland and Canada (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013).

There is, additionally, considerable concern that the threshold for determining poverty is outdated and fails to accurately represent the modern necessary income required to meet one’s needs. The Census Bureau measurements may not fully account

for societal and economic changes that have taken place since the 1960's when such metrics were initially implemented. This risks leaving families that are truly struggling to meet their needs misrepresented as technically living above the poverty line, while skewing data to make it seem like fewer Americans are affected by poverty than actually are (Beegle 22). In any case, there are undeniably millions of Americans who live in poverty, and it should be the goal of all citizens to take action towards rectifying this inequity.

A School Solution

The complex combination of causes of economic inequality means there are many possible solutions that can serve to attempt its undoing. Education is one factor in particular, though, that seems to hold esteem as having the potential to exert especially great equalizing power in this battle. In fact, later in his 1964 State of the Union Address, a key resource to which President Johnson proposed turning in order to combat poverty was the public education system: "Our chief weapons in a more pinpointed attack will be better schools" he declared, pledging record-setting funding and expressing belief in education as a means by which liberation from the cycle of poverty might be achieved. This trust in education as means for self-determination seems to have been long ago engrained in our national consciousness: "U.S. schools have historically been thought of as the great equalizer—the social institution best suited to ensure that all children have an equal opportunity to learn, develop, and thrive" (Reardon 15). Or, as author Sabrina Tavernise stated in a recent article in the New York Times: "Education was historically considered a great equalizer in American society, capable of lifting less advantaged children and improving their chances for success as

adults.” However, research demonstrates that education has traditionally failed to have this desired impact.

In the 1960’s, researchers at the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) began conducting studies on the disparity in educational achievement between black students and white students. Soon, the racial disparity in educational achievement began to be distinguished from the economic disparity in educational achievement. Race continues to correlate with disparities in educational attainment, however it plays much less of a role than it did 50 years ago, while the importance of family income has increased. As Sarah Garland writes, “Social class has become the main gateway—and barrier—to opportunity in America. The country is far from fulfilling [Martin Luther] King’s dream that race no longer limit children’s opportunities, but how much income their parents earn is increasingly influential.”

Over the past five decades, much research has been conducted to demonstrate that the achievement of low-income students lags behind their more fortunate peers. Summarizing the evidence for an income achievement gap, Stanford researcher Sean Reardon writes, “Historically, low-income students as a group have performed less well than high-income students on most measures of academic success—including standardized test scores, grades, high school completion rates, and college enrollment and completion rates. Countless studies have documented these disparities and investigated the many underlying reasons for them” (10). It seems that the disparity created by poverty in society has crept into schools and haunts disadvantaged students in their academic performance.

Reardon has further demonstrated that this income achievement gap has grown by as much as 40-50% over the past 50 years. Reardon argues that several factors contribute to this growth, including an economy shifting away from middle-class blue-collar jobs and towards a stark dichotomy between low-skill, low-wage and high-skill, high-wage jobs. Additionally, he cites growing income inequality, lower potential for social mobility and growing class segregation as causes for the growing income achievement gap in education.

Reardon is careful to point out that evidence suggests that this gap is already present when students begin school, and while the gap reflects the inequality present outside of schools, it doesn't widen significantly over the course of students' educational experiences, indicating that factors outside of schooling are primarily responsible for the gap. However, Reardon and many others point to school as one of the key potential institutions for providing solutions to this problem and thus contributing to closing the income achievement gap. If schools are to provide any solution, the education system itself must be held accountable for ensuring that it does not internally exacerbate the problem by systematically discriminating against any group of students, whether based on socioeconomic status, race, gender, or any other identifying characteristic.

Summarizing the guiding premise of this thesis, author, researcher and longtime educator Eric Jensen writes, "Research tells us that quality teaching can offset the devastating effects poverty has on students' academic performance" (*Engaging* 7). Great teaching is believed by scholars to have the potential to negate the detrimental impact of poverty on academic achievement. Jensen explains that factors such as

curriculum, school administration and nutrition do “have an effect on student engagement and achievement, but their role doesn’t come close to the role that good teaching plays” (*Engaging* 22). If students are to put their hope in the education system to equip them to overcome their circumstantial deficits and move out of poverty, improving teaching methods and classroom efficacy will be key. Simply put, better teaching has the potential to make an enormous difference in the lives of low-income students.

The premise here is that poverty is a prevailing and desperate problem facing American society today, and that education has incredible potential to address and rectify the problem. A better understanding of the impact that poverty has on students’ abilities to leverage their education into liberation from their disadvantage, and an exploration of solutions and support that must be implemented in the classroom as means to that end, offer the opportunity to significantly diminish the disparity between poor and rich in this country, offering a higher quality of life to all.

Personal Interest

Recent developments in my own life have led to this project taking on an increased relevance (and urgency), and will afford me the opportunity to apply what I’ve uncovered in this research almost immediately. Some months ago I received an invitation to join Teach for America as a secondary English and Language Arts teacher in rural Appalachia, beginning in the fall. This has given the research and completion of this project added utility, and will serve, I hope, to make me a more prepared, and ultimately more effective, teacher. Therefore, the purpose of this project is practical and personal. However, my hope is that the lessons and strategies that I’ve learned, the

knowledge that I've gathered, and the original resources that I've produced could theoretically benefit other teachers working with low-socioeconomic status demographics. I hope to have assembled a helpful collection of intelligence on teaching methodology that contributes to an important, ongoing national conversation about how to maximize the potential of schools and serve needy students. Yet, whether or not its utility can be expanded that broadly, I proudly expect to put to use this accumulation of information in a middle or high school English classroom in a rural Appalachian mountain town beginning in August.

Project Summary

This project will seek to lay the groundwork for how schools and educators ought to rethink the pedagogical methods employed for the cause of making education an equalizing force. The research scope has focused on information pertaining to secondary education, meaning both middle and high school, and has been limited to exploration of the American education system. It has slanted slightly towards rural poverty rather than urban poverty, though in many cases no distinction was made. In chapter two, it will first evaluate and synthesize data-driven literature that explores the way that growing up in an environment of poverty causes students to enter school with deficiencies that keep them from maximizing its potential for transformation in their lives. These include the impact on one's ability to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by education made by such factors as the chronic stress often present in the lives of the poor; the impact of multi-faceted isolation that poverty causes; the consequences of internalizing poverty as a personal deficiency; the role played by parental involvement in student educational achievement; the effects of one's

perception of school or education and potential that they hold for self-improvement; and the advantageous strengths one develops while growing up in poverty.

Next, in chapter three, it will explore research-backed solutions to these deficiencies, which have the potential to make school an environment that counteracts the detrimental forces of living in poverty and maximizes the strengths that such struggle cultivates, allowing ideally, for students to break free from the cycle of poverty in which they were raised. It will focus on the importance of several factors and solution-creating methods including helping students to better understand and contextualize their own poverty; maximizing the strengths cultivated by living in poverty that students bring to school; approaching education holistically so as to ensure that students' basic needs are met; raising expectations and setting high goals; increasing student engagement; and building and nurturing several healthy relational dynamics in the school context.

Finally, the project will culminate with a model application of the information gathered in chapters two and three. The fourth chapter will offer a glimpse of what effective education of students in poverty will look like. It will serve as a practical application of concrete pedagogical methods that research tells us will yield higher scholastic results for impoverished students. This final chapter will consist of lesson plans designed to effectively implement the intelligence gathered in this thesis. The lesson plans will be supported by two appendices that offer material sets of classroom tools for educators: a list of guiding classroom operating principles and a list of questions that represent useful information for educators to gather about their students. These will form a body of original output based upon the assembled research.

The claim that this thesis will make is that by better understanding the needs and deficits of their students in poverty, and employing superior pedagogical methods, educators can help realize the potential that education has to act as an equalizer and allow students to escape poverty and create for themselves healthier, happier lives.

II. The Impact of Poverty on Students

Introduction: The Complexity of Poverty

This chapter will examine the impact that growing up in poverty has on students. Primarily, it will explore the ways that growing up in poverty creates obstacles to academic success for students. If educators are to use their platform in the classroom in order to help students from poverty achieve academic success and thereby open doors out of poverty, they themselves need to understand the deficits that are created by growing up in poverty. Before getting into the adversity that poverty creates for students in the classroom though, we must first frame an appropriate mindset for educators to adopt in preparing to teach them, so that teacher ideologies don't themselves become obstacles to student learning.

Dominant ideas about the poor affect our ability to teach and serve them. Some of those ideas are captured by the concept of a "culture of poverty," developed by Oscar Lewis in 1961. His premise was that universally, all people living in poverty function the same way based on shared norms, values and characteristics that form the "culture of poverty." The theory inspired much research, which unequivocally discredited it. Several studies found that "differences in values and behaviors among poor people are just as great as those between poor and wealthy people" (Gorski 33). One critique of Lewis' work claims that,

Lewis' list of 'cultural traits of the poor evokes a powerful negative image of poor people as a lazy, fatalistic, hedonistic, violent, distrustful, people living in common law unions, as well as in dysfunctional, female-centered, authoritarian families who are chronically unemployed...Lewis argues that the poor create an autonomous, distinct subculture or way of life that becomes encapsulated and self-perpetuating over generations.

Ultimately, the poor's way of life, which is allegedly inferior to the mainstream way of life, keeps them impoverished. For anyone wanting to indict the poor, the culture of poverty theory is a powerful metaphor that spawns a sweeping, holistic image. It provides public policy makers and the general public with a relatively nontechnical, yet "scientific" way to categorize and characterize all poor people. (Foley 115)

In fact, people's experiences of and reactions to poverty vary widely. Addressing the attitudes and behaviors of impoverished people living in Harlem, New York may vary significantly from addressing those of the poor in rural West Virginia, or on a reservation in Wyoming, or living in slums in Brazil. And yet while the culture of poverty that Lewis describes doesn't exist, there are consistencies that scholars employ in order to better understand the poor. As Jonathan Kozol writes in *Savage Inequalities*,

There are also poor and mainly white suburban districts and, of course, some desperately poor and very isolated rural districts. Children in the rural districts of Kentucky, northern Maine, and Arkansas, for instance, face a number of the problems we have seen in East St. Louis and Chicago, though the nature of the poverty in rural schools is often somewhat different. (74)

This quotation reflects the reality that while it is important to recognize the particular needs of unique groups, some consistent patterns and themes do emerge among enough people in poverty that targeting them can help to mitigate the consequences that living in poverty can have and provide solutions to the deficiencies that poverty creates. These predictable patterns of adversity will be what this chapter seeks to examine. Educators must be aware of, and address, these consistent deficits, but must do so cautiously, so as not to assume that all people will emerge from poverty having been impacted in the same way. Citing studies performed by other researchers, Donna Beegle's writing reflects this notion:

No one theoretical framework can completely describe the life experiences of those living in poverty (Bane and Ellwood, 1994). People experiencing under-class poverty present a wide array of personalities, backgrounds, experiences, and life chances (Levine and Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992), and that renders any attempt to define social class and types of poverty challenging and controversial. However, defining the characteristics of a particular social class helps us make sense of daily realities, lived conditions, and the worldviews of its members and provides insight into why people occupy their position in a certain class. Not paying attention to social class and its implications erases the struggles of poverty from our collective consciousness. It diverts attention from the structural and political causes of these struggles, and keeps us trapped in a vicious circle of blaming and focusing on deficiencies. Focusing on the commonalities that emerge illuminates the realities of people living in poverty and improves our chances to understand their needs and successfully respond to them (33).

Deficit theory, mentioned here by Beegle, is another ideological framework that obstructs good teaching. As Donna Beegle puts it, “The overriding belief in the United States is that people are making a ‘choice’ to be in poverty” (20). This idea posits that poor people are inherently deficient, and that they are, for example, “unmotivated and have weak work ethics” and “tend to abuse drugs and alcohol” (Gorski 34). Deficit theory represents “the poor as responsible for their own plight through degraded characters, attitudes, and behaviors” and is “toxic to teaching-learning interactions” (Dworin and Bomer 101). Rather, “teacher educators need to be aware of the siren call of deficit perspectives in public discourse and popular culture, to better help their students develop an alternative discourse, one that sees students, whatever their background, as competent, inventive, worthy, and respectable” (Dworin and Bomer 103).

When a student who lives in poverty enters a classroom, an understanding of the adversity created by the circumstances of his or her life is vital. It’s important to recognize that growing up in poverty will likely have made an impact on his or her

development: “chronic socioeconomic deprivation can create environments that undermine the development of self and the capacity for self-determination” (Jensen, *Teaching* 8). The student will likely possess both strengths and weakness particular to the experiences he or she has had and it becomes important to let their strengths, rather than their weaknesses, define them. School can serve as an environment to help correct or improve upon the student’s challenges, whether poverty or otherwise, but he or she must be understood to be just as capable of such improvement as any other student. A student is not poor because of inherent deficiencies; a student becomes deficient in certain ways as a consequence of living in poverty.

In order to accurately understand the impact of poverty on students, a distinction must be made between generational and situational poverty. Situational, or temporary poverty, occurs as the result of an event or circumstance that causes an income drop precipitating a short-term plunge below the poverty line. This shift may follow an acute crisis such as a medical issue, divorce, death, environmental disaster, or unemployment. Those affected by situational poverty “are often surrounded by people who are educated and able to earn a living wage. They have had a solid safety net...they have not internalized the poverty as their own fault, but blame poverty on the situation” (Beegle 37).

In contrast, generational poverty is classified by at least two generations of a family being born into, and living below, the poverty line. Generational poverty is a chronic, long-term condition of living in which poverty defines and dictates one’s entire life and identity. Typical patterns of generational poverty, as discussed by author Donna Beegle, include an income insufficient to meet basic human needs, highly unstable

employment, reliance on federal or state aid or charity, inability to own land, high geographic mobility rates and frequent migration, fear of authority figures, and a focus simply on survival (35). The resulting attitudes found prevalently among those in generational poverty include “a perspective that ‘life happens to you and you have no power to make it happen’” (Beegle 34). The impact of generational poverty shows up consistently and predictably in all impoverished communities. Characteristics and norms found commonly in patterns in communities in which many are living in generational poverty include such aspects as the importance of personality, sense of humor and one’s ability to entertain, the importance of relationships resulting from viewing people as possessions, an oral-language, casual register, an orientation towards basic needs and survival, a belief in fate and destiny as driving factors in one’s life experience, a temporal focus on the present, and a distrust of the education system as foreign and hostile, among others (Beegle 35) (Payne 51-3). Those who have the most difficult time maximizing the potential of education to improve their circumstances are those caught in a more crippling cycle of generational poverty.

Furthermore, in order to understand the adversity faced by those in poverty and its consequences on their educational experiences, so as to better serve their needs, educators must recognize the complex web of factors that negatively impact the poor. For a family in poverty, adverse factors outside of school such as lack of insurance, lack of transportation, lack of health care, addiction, unemployment, and countless others can combine to make life extremely challenging and complicated. According to a study by researchers Graber and Brooks-Gunn in 1995, 35 percent of poor families experienced at least six such risk factors, and only two percent experienced none, while

only five percent of upper-class families experienced six or more risk factors, and 19 percent experienced none (Jensen, *Teaching* 7). This illustrates how a crisis concerning one factor can lead to a secondary crisis concerning another and then another, until it feels as if poverty is an all-encompassing state of futility. As Jensen puts it, “Poor children are disproportionately exposed to adverse social and physical environments” (*Teaching* 8). Some of the same factors may affect middle or upper class families, but for families in poverty a crisis or need in one aspect of life is harder to isolate and address singularly, so these crises accumulate and ultimately have greater consequences on students’ academic performance.

The inability to meet even their most basic human needs leaves families living in poverty facing incredible hardship. As Eric Jensen puts it, “students cannot be expected to function at a high academic level when their basic needs—for food, shelter, medical care, safety, family and friendships, for example—remain unmet” (*Teaching* 70). Malnutrition and fatigue, for example, which are common consequences of living in the unpredictable instability of poverty, are stressors that have a significant negative impact on students’ ability to perform well in the classroom. Extreme hunger, specifically, has consequences in the classroom, as explained by Donna Beegle: “this level of hunger affects not only their feelings of self-worth, but also their health. The brain and cognitive abilities are also impaired by lack of nutrition. Most report that their families are, as a result of hunger, stress, and a lack of medical care, ‘sick all the time’” (50).

Without meeting these basic needs, students cannot learn effectively. Donna Beegle points out that in spite of research consensus regarding the correlation between

socioeconomic advantage and school achievement, people fail to recognize that “raising the achievement of lower-class children requires the amelioration of the social and economic conditions of their lives, not just educational and school reform...Children will continue to be left behind unless they have access to adequate housing, food, health care, safe places to play and a caring, supportive community” (29). In addressing administrators working in low-income schools, Jensen adds that,

Kids raised in poverty—those kids who have the greatest social, academic, emotional, and health needs—are often those who have the least access to essential human services and classroom accommodations...Kids who get wraparound support are able to stop dwelling on their problems and limitations and to start focusing on the educational opportunities available to them. Until your school finds ways to address the social, emotional, and health related challenges that your kids face every day, academic excellence is just a politically correct but highly unlikely goal (*Teaching* 69-70).

This chapter will seek to illuminate the tremendous adversity faced by those living in poverty, and how that adversity can complicate their ability to take advantage of the opportunity for escape afforded by their educational experience. It operates under the premise that there are complex physiological and psychological deficiencies created by growing up in poverty, and that this leaves such students at an academic disadvantage that reveals itself as a gap in educational achievement between Americans of different economic classes. If we harness the potential of teachers and schools to combat this disadvantage, an effective education received from the public school system might then liberate students from the struggle of poverty, and empower them to academic success, ultimately leading to a better life.

Stress Detriment

Stress, in moderation, can be healthy. However, in the wrong context or over an extended period of time, stress becomes detrimental and has negative consequences on its victims. Such negative stress often weighs heavily on the poor, due to the multitude of factors that contribute to it. The inability to meet even the most basic human needs leaves families living in poverty under an incredible amount of stress. The effects of this stress negatively impact students' abilities to perform and achieve in school, or to maximize the opportunity it provides.

Discrepancy in Stress Levels Between High and Low Income Students

According to Eric Jensen and others, low-SES children are more subject to both of these types of stress than their more affluent peers, which “exerts a devastating insidious influence on children’s physical, psychological, emotional and cognitive functioning—areas that affect brain development, academic success, and social competence” (*Teaching* 22). In particular, due to an increased number of stressors, “children living in poverty experience significantly greater chronic stress than do their more affluent counterparts” (Almeida, Neupert, Banks & Serido 2005). The frequency and intensity of both stressful life events and daily hassles are simply greater among low-SES children (Attar, Guerra & Tolan, 1994). Such studies demonstrate that living in poverty results in increased stress-levels.

Physiological and Neurological Consequences of High Stress for Students

The high levels of stress experienced by students in poverty have detrimental physiological and neurological consequences. To summarize the problem, Eric Jensen

writes, “Chronic exposure to poverty causes the brain to physically change in a detrimental manner” (*Teaching* 2). Jensen cites studies by Coplan et al., Cook & Wellman and Vythilingam et al. in 1996, 2004 and 2002, respectively, which demonstrate that such constant stress has a “devastating, cumulative effect” on the brain. Increasing the danger of such stress to students is the well-documented fact that the effect of stressors is cumulative: “each stressor builds on and exacerbates other stressors and slowly changes the student” (*Teaching* 29).

The consequences of stress on students have detrimental physiological and neurological effects on academic performance in a variety of ways. Citing a number of studies, Eric Jensen points out that stress is linked to over 50 percent of all absences, impairs attention and concentration, reduces cognition, creativity and memory, diminishes social skills and social judgment, reduces motivation determination and effort, increases the likelihood of depression and reduces the growth of new brain cells (*Teaching* 26). In each of these and many other ways, high stress levels among low-SES students leads them to enter school with deficiencies that must be overcome in the classroom in order for school to act as an equalizer between students of all economic classes.

Cognitive Lags Created and Exacerbated by Chronic Stress

As children grow and develop, they build highly complex cognitive capacities. Socioeconomic status has been shown to correlate with development of cognitive ability (Jensen, *Teaching* 31). The environmental stress of growing up in poverty tends to have a negative impact on children’s cognitive ability that becomes a deficiency and leads to a widening achievement gap in the classroom. According to Jensen, and citing several

studies, “there is a gulf between poor and well-off children’s performance on just about every measure of cognitive development...the correlations between socioeconomic status and cognitive ability and performance are typically quite significant (Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst, Guerin & Parramore, 2003) and persist throughout the stages of development” (*Teaching* 31). Students living in poverty experience an array of adverse environmental factors that cause their brains to physically develop differently than those of their higher-SES peers. This means that in the classroom, students from poverty experience cognitive lags that lead them to require extra effort and support in order to overcome those deficiencies. Encouragingly, such cognitive delays are not permanent and can be alleviated if addressed properly, taking advantage of the opportunity that school affords, to contribute to closing the income achievement gap in education.

Loss of Control and Lack of Personal Agency

Chronic stress also results in students feeling like they have little to no control over their lives. In fact, Jensen defines stress as, “the physiological response to the perception of loss of control resulting from an adverse situation or person” (*Teaching* 22). At the root of the stress felt by those living in poverty, and the detrimental effects of that stress, lies the impression that one has no control over their life, that life happens to them and that they have no agency in changing it.

Students enter school with both physiological and psychological deficiencies caused by circumstances over which they feel they have no control. Poverty then becomes central to its victims’ identities and leads to their self-perceived inability to affect change in their own lives. Students come to “believe that they have no control over their situations and that whatever they do is futile. Because of these persistent

feelings of inadequacy, individuals will remain passive even when they actually have the power to change their circumstances” (Jensen, *Teaching* 113). This leads to a subscription to belief in fate and destiny that many in poverty describe (Payne 42). Beegle adds that for those in generational poverty, “their harsh living realities leave them feeling like they have no control over their lives. Their daily lives are a series of reactionary battles for survival with little, if any, opportunities to shape or choose their futures” (50). As Jensen puts it, “chronic stress can result in...an increased sense of detachment and hopelessness over time” leading students to “give up or become passive and uninterested in school” (*Engaging* 18). Education, Beegle writes, can serve only as “a distraction from being able to meet our daily basic needs...” (3). Impoverished students would “have very likely never identified with people who benefitted from education,” and thus that “schools may be seen as places where you don’t belong or places where you are punished for your poverty” (Beegle 28). Students who grow up in poverty come from an environment in which they tend to feel as though they lack agency and self-determination. As Beegle writes, “it is difficult to value something when you don’t have any sense of ownership over it” (Beegle 28).

If school becomes a place that incites this feeling of helplessness and lack of control as well, the stress felt by poor students, as well as the consequences of that stress, will only increase. Instead, school could have the potential to be a place where students in poverty can address and overcome the learning deficits created by poverty-induced stress, as well as a place where they can feel agency and exercise control in a healthy and meaningful way that will counter act the stress with which they’re faced outside of school.

To summarize, living in poverty is extremely stressful, and such stress has a detrimental impact on student learning capacity. Impoverished students are more likely than their wealthier peers to undergo such stress, and suffer its consequences. These consequences include physiological and psychological damage and diminished cognitive capacities. The impact of that stress includes fostering a devastating sense of loss of control among poor students, which is too often only exacerbated in the school context. Without understanding the harmful effects of the chronic stress that students from poverty experience, educators will have a hard time using the classroom to help students overcome those effects.

Isolation Equation

The environment in which students from poverty tend to grow up often looks starkly different than that in which middle and upper class students grow up. In several ways, poverty acts as a barrier, serving to isolate the poor from the more fortunate. In Donna Beegle's words, "people from poverty are isolated and have few opportunities to interact with others who are not in situations like them" (vii). Students who grow up in poverty also see a deficit in the human resources available to them, and may have trouble adapting to the way the middle class employs language, as schools and educational standards tend to reflect and operate from middle and upper class norms and expectations (Payne 3). This means that people in poverty come to view school as foreign and hostile because it functions using norms that are unfamiliar to people who have grown up in poverty and been thus isolated. This isolation will be discussed in five

important, related, yet distinct contexts: class isolation, social isolation, linguistic isolation, isolation from print culture, and the dichotomy between home and school.

Class Isolation

The first, more broadly over-arching isolation that occurs does so between social classes. This concept is founded upon the idea that growing up in poverty limits one's exposure to the norms, rules, expectations and lifestyles of other middle and upper classes. We live in "a world divided, where people are confined to their respective social class, living in isolation within the boundaries of that class, and with the odds of escaping poverty getting smaller" and furthermore, there are increased concentrations of people who are poor in both rural and urban areas, resulting in fewer contacts with those who are not experiencing poverty (Levine and Nidiffer, 1996). According to research in the 1980's, people in poverty in the United States have become more isolated and the communities in which they reside increasingly poorer (Wilson 1987). In a testimonial, Donna Beegle writes that, having grown up in generational poverty she, "had never heard the life story of a middle-class person before. I had been so isolated that I had only known people from generational poverty" (8). The problem with this systemic class isolation is that it "maintains stereotypes and prevents meaningful cross-class connections from occurring..." (Beegle 59). Kozol echoes this sentiment, describing poor students at a school in Chicago where he conducted his research as being "cut off and disconnected from the outside world" (70).

Beegle explains the roots of this theory of social class isolation in the context of the ideas of German philosopher Max Weber. Weber defined social status as "societal honor", which "required people to live a specific lifestyle, including language, social

conventions, rituals, patterns of economic consumption, understandings regarding and relations with outsiders, and matters of taste in food, clothing, grooming and hairstyle” (qtd. in Beegle 32). Beegle expands on Weber’s ideas, writing that,

The respective status or class norms can be worlds apart. In addition, if an individual is not living in the style expected, he or she is looked upon as deficient, or pushed away as an outsider. Membership in a social class is determined by an individual’s ability to identify with and respond to a complex set of expectations shaped by the values, beliefs, and habits of its members. Often, individuals from a certain social class interact exclusively with each other. As a result, the expectations of people living in poverty reflect the expectations of those with whom they identify and interact the most: others in poverty. This limited sphere of interaction is a factor in limiting their prospects of breaking through the boundaries of their social class. (32)

Echoing these ideas set forth by Weber and later Beegle, Dr. Ruby Payne, in her well-known and somewhat controversial book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, discusses at length what she calls the “hidden rules of poverty”. These are the generalized norms and values of those in poverty, presented as distinct from norms and values of those in the middle or upper classes. Payne’s argument is that our values and norms reflect our environment and growing up in one social class, such as in generational poverty, will lead to a lack of understanding concerning the norms and values of the middle and upper classes. If, then, someone who grows up in poverty must seek success in school, an environment that operates using different norms and values, that person may have trouble achieving success in that foreign environment. Payne’s work has been criticized on grounds of subscribing to both the deficit theory and the culture of poverty theory, which have been widely discredited. Nonetheless, her

discussion of the ways in which social class isolation produces challenges for students coming from poverty and hoping to succeed in school holds some validity.

Both Payne and Beegle demonstrate that growing up in any one social class leads to increasingly complete isolation from those living in other social classes. This makes it difficult for one to successfully navigate an institution that operates within the norms of a different social class. This isolation results in students coming to school from dramatically distinct environments. In Eric Jensen's treatment of this dichotomy, he points to the disproportionate accumulation of cultural capital between students of different classes, citing research by Kumanyika & Grier from 2006 that lists some such examples: "lower-SES children also have fewer cognitive-enrichment opportunities. They have fewer books at home, visit the library less often, and spend considerably more time watching TV than their middle-income counterparts do" and "live in neighborhoods that are lower in social capital..." (*Teaching* 8).

In *Savage Inequalities*, Jonathon Kozol points to another factor exacerbating this isolation: the schools themselves. Magnet schools draw the top students, widening the divide between the academic achievements of students in poor areas. "Very poor children" he writes, "...are 'even more isolated' as a consequence of the removal of the more successful students from their midst" (59). Even schools themselves then, contribute to this social isolation by segregating student populations by class, as a reflection of the parallel societal isolation. Contributing additionally to the instability-induced isolation of poverty is the frequent mobility of families in poverty. Unstable employment for parents often means frequently moving to wherever work may be. This repeated uprooting of students from schools make it that much harder to become

grounded in consistent expectations and norms of any class or community (Beegle 8).

The isolation thus created between social classes causes students who come from poverty to be at a distinct disadvantage when attempting to achieve success within institutions such as schools that operate using middle-class norms.

Social Isolation

An important component of class isolation, deserving of its own treatment, is the resultant social isolation. Such isolation “perpetuates poverty” (Beegle 95). In 1986, French philosopher and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu published a book called *Forms of Capital*. In it, he defined social capital as follows:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word (Bourdieu 88).

Living in the middle and upper classes generally comes with substantial social capital. Individuals tend to have access to fairly substantial networks of people from whom they might, by interacting socially, benefit. This includes adults who have benefitted from an education. It further includes stable, healthy adults to serve as resources for information and support, as role models, as mentors, and as positive influences, among other things. Such a social circle may include peers, friends with whom students share similar interests and life experiences, who will form mutually beneficial relationships. Contrastingly, students living in poverty tend to have far fewer social resources surrounding them. Adults tend to be overwhelmed by their own stress and, regardless of

how much they care for a given youth, might find it impossible to devote time and energy into mentorship. Friend groups form and are important to students in poverty, but there is an increased likelihood of such peer-peer social interaction revolving around risky or unhealthy behaviors. Donna Beegle adds to the definition of social capital as follows: “Social capital refers to connections among individuals—the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behavior that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperation possible. It refers to institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions” (94-5).

This discrepancy between the abundant resources generally afforded by the social capital of an upper-class student and the scarcity of similar resources for a lower-class student leads to a deficit in social skills. Facing an accumulated deficit in such social skills, a low-SES student will find it harder to achieve success in school. Eric Jensen writes,

“Strong, secure relationships help stabilize children’s behavior and provide the core guidance needed to build lifelong social skills. Children who grow up with such relationships learn healthy, appropriate emotional responses to everyday situations. But children raised in poor households often fail to learn these responses, to the detriment of their school performance” (*Teaching* 17-8).

Students from poverty simply tend not to develop as wide a range of appropriate emotional responses as their advantaged peers, and thus the classroom must become a learning ground where the students can make up for that deficiency.

Because of a diminished network of available, constructive, social capital, poor students are often left with a social-emotional deficit that makes it difficult to be successful in the highly social school environment. This deficiency, created by class

isolation, perpetuates and exacerbates the achievement levels of low-SES students compared with their wealthier peers.

Linguistic Isolation

As a product of class isolation, the distinct ways in which people of different social classes communicate contributes, as well, to the difficulty that students raised in poverty find they have when trying to succeed in the American education system. The well established premise here is that people of different social classes tend to grow up communicating in different ways, both verbally and non-verbally, as a product of their environment, than their wealthier peers. Discussed at length in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, Ruby Payne introduces her readers to different language registers, citing research by Martin Joos. In particular she distinguishes between the casual register and the formal register. Often, poor students, she writes, “do not have access to formal register at home” and thus “cannot use formal register”. This lack of access at home leads to students falling behind academically when they’re expected to be able to operate within the formal register at school: “the problem” writes Payne, “is that all the state tests—SAT, ACT, etc.—are in formal register...The use of formal register...allows one to score well on tests and do well in school and higher education” (28). Surely some of the blame must fall on the schools for having set forth standards that benefit the upper classes simply because of the way they communicate, causing other less fortunate students to fall behind immediately.

In Donna Beegle’s testimonial she tells of how upon arriving at college, just after escaping generational poverty, others perceived that she “didn’t look ‘right’, talk ‘right’ or have the ‘right’ family” (11). She describes her experience learning to

communicate according to middle-class norms as “in effect, learning a second language”. Speaking of her own experience, and that of others from generational poverty, she writes, “we did not say things incorrectly, but rather in ways that differed from ways the middle class said things—speaking with a sentence structure and language that was clear and consistent but did not match what was expected of us in school” (12).

Research shows that children who grow up in poverty develop a significantly smaller vocabulary than they’re wealthier counterparts. Studies indicate that even in early childhood the children of professional parents add vocabulary at twice the rate of children in welfare families. This discrepancy later places such students at risk for academic failure (Jensen, *Engaging* 11). The feeling of inferiority based on diminished vocabulary leaves poor students feeling inclined not to participate “because they don’t want to risk looking stupid...” (Jensen, *Engaging* 12). The isolation that exists between social classes causes this linguistic disparity between them as well. The cycle perpetuates itself because schools don’t explicitly teach their students how to effectively communicate in the formal register, actively building their vocabulary in order to equalize that discrepancy, nor are they able to value the strengths of communication distinct to the lower classes. This verbal, linguistic isolation that starts poor students off already behind academically is embedded within a broader dichotomy that must be understood if we are to comprehend what unique qualities growing up in poverty develops in people. This is the distinction between oral culture and print culture.

Oral Culture vs. Print Culture

Scholars have criticized Dr. Payne's unfairly disparaging distinction between the ability of the upper classes to use formal register language and the tendency of lower classes only to use casual register language. In fact, we find that while there is a distinct difference between the way that members of the upper- or lower-classes generally communicate amongst themselves, each respective mode of communication is not only valid, but has strengths that the other does not have. Oral culture, the mode of communication generally used amongst those living in poverty is distinct from, but by no means inferior to, the print culture-values and mode of communication generally employed by the upper classes.

Dr. Beegle traces the origins of the theory of "oral culture" to Walter J. Ong, who, in 1982, published a book called *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. He was the first, she writes, "to connect 'oral-culture' learning and communication styles with poverty experiences" (72). Oral culture and print culture are each classifications of ways in which people exchange information. They are the two main styles by which we communicate and learn. Oral culture (or orality) is defined by Beegle as "the natural state in which we are highly attuned to our senses...and devote a great deal of attention to sensory information. Orality emphasizes our connection to the environment and the people in it" (97). Conversely, print culture (or literacy) is defined (citing Ong's book) as "a learned way of relating to the world. People...process information by analyzing and sorting sensory input into distinct categories of styles and reasoning developed by reading" (97). She emphasizes that "each style brings rich opportunities for human growth and connections" (98).

Characteristics that define oral culture, according to Ong and Beegle among others, could be endless but can generally be grouped into the following seven categories:

Relationship oriented, spontaneous, repetitive, holistic, emotional, present oriented, and physical (agonistic). The strengths inherent in these characteristics will be further developed later, but in order to more clearly distinguish between oral and print culture, those seven significant aspects of oral culture can be contrasted by the following seven generalized components of print culture: linear, temporal, analytic/abstract, self-disciplined, ability to delay gratification, ability to strategize, and future oriented (Beegle 98-9).

Research consensus values a balance between oral and print culture. Those who are “bilingual” and can use both modes of communication to exchange communication will be better off. Walter Ong claimed that it is towards oral culture that we, as humans, are naturally inclined, and only upon being explicitly taught the value of print culture can we begin to utilize it as well. The problem is that schools and other institutions often operate using print culture values and methods, which leave those who are more familiar and comfortable with oral culture at a distinct disadvantage. As Donna Beegle writes,

Currently, the majority of our institutions are designed to honor, validate and serve people with print culture skills...We lose talent and potential by shutting out the gifts of oral culture and focusing only on print culture styles of learning and communicating. We have to find ways in our schools and organizations (which are largely oriented to print culture) to establish, value, and include some of the oral culture styles of communicating and learning. We must move to models that honor oral culture styles of communicating, while teaching the skills of print culture. (100)

There is nothing wrong with print culture being used in schools, but if we expect all students to be equally prepared to employ print culture, we will systematically leave

certain students behind, namely those who come from poverty, where oral culture is more prevalent. It is this nature of unequal education that perpetuates the income achievement gap in schools.

The Home/School Dichotomy

It is this genre of dichotomy between the world of home and the world of school for given groups of students that perpetuate inequality in academic achievement in this country. Among the challenges of teaching high school English in a community of rural, generational poverty, one award-winning teacher cited that “manners and expectations at home often conflict with school manners and expectations” (Young 88). When our classrooms and academic standards place value on norms, qualities and characteristics only found amongst certain groups of students, they open the door for academic advantage to be created based on economic advantage. For students who grow up in poverty, school represents a foreign and often hostile world, which operates far differently than their communities or families. At worst, this leads to schools systematically punishing students for consequences of their poverty: symptoms over which they have no control.

Students who grow up in poverty will find that the school environment is different than their home environment—perhaps even dramatically so—which will contrast the familiarity and comfort that middle- and upper-class students tend to encounter at school. Eric Jensen writes that, “When teachers remain ignorant of their students’ culture, students often experience a demotivating disconnect between the school world and their home life. As a result they give up” (*Engaging* 12). This disconnect leads to discomfort and alienation from education that have a detrimental

impact on students' ability to maximize the opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty that education affords.

Schools must instead both value and celebrate the advantageous and beneficial norms and values which students have adopted from their home environments. They must celebrate, and promote the importance of, the existence of differences between different groups within our society, and identify the inherent strengths found within such communities as those that operate employing lower class norms. Secondly, schools must not presume that one "culture" is superior to another, but instead, explicitly teach members of all social classes the skills and values that they will be expected to know in order to achieve success in a different class.

Identity Crisis

As previously mentioned, it is a fairly common opinion amongst Americans that people who find themselves stricken by poverty somehow deserve their misfortune, or have earned it, or have chosen it, or warrant it because of some intrinsic characteristic of inferiority. The prevalence of this opinion amongst the general public is problematic. What is equally problematic, if not more so, (though also understandable), is the prevalence of this opinion amongst the poor themselves.

According to Paulo Friere in his 1970 landmark book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, people, upon being labeled by their social system, will eventually own it, and believe, themselves, what is being said about them (Beegle 56). Friere himself states it as follows:

Self-deprecation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So

often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness (63).

Those who live in poverty often come to see themselves as fundamentally inferior, as if their poverty is a result of factors inherent to them rather than a result of systemic inequality and injustice.

The danger of this internalization is grave. It is a consequence, partially, of the feeling of having no control over one's life, and thus no hope for mobility or self-determination. In school, if ignored and let alone, this internalized inferiority greatly hinders academic achievement as a result of apathy and discouragement. This hindrance contributes to the formation of a gap in achievement between students whose higher economic status keeps them from subscribing to such notions of personal deficiency and students who are poor and think of themselves as somehow innately worse suited for academic success.

Contextualizing Poverty

The inability of those living in poverty to recognize their circumstances within the context of, and as a result of, larger patterns of inequality in America is a significant component of one's internalization of poverty as a personal deficiency. Rather than seeing their situation as a result of systemic inequality that works to widen the gap between the poor and the rich, keeping the poor in a seemingly inescapable cycle of poverty, poor people all too frequently blame themselves. As Beegle puts it: "Since poverty is seen by many as a personal deficiency, people living in generational poverty receive strong messages from society that they are to blame for their poverty conditions.

People in generational poverty ‘internalize’ the blame and, like others in America, are rarely aware of the structural and systemic causes of poverty” (35). She contrasts this outlook of those in generational poverty from those in situational poverty, using the specific example of immigrant poverty. Immigrants, she claims, citing the work of Paulo Friere, “seem to do better than people born into poverty in the United States, because they view poverty as a systemic problem and not their personal problem” (37). Friere himself, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* writes that, “As long as the oppressed remain unaware of the causes of their condition, they fatalistically ‘accept’ their exploitation” (64). Beegle adds that, “poverty-related barriers such as lack of basic education and work skills and unstable living conditions were viewed as personal deficiencies rather than the result of a social structure that lacked basic support services” (56). If, instead of understanding one’s poverty as a personal deficiency, those living in poverty recognized that their poverty was, in fact, a result of broad social factors, they would then be free from the captivity of helplessness and discouraging insufficiency. Recognizing the larger factors at play in one’s poverty would keep individuals from feeling like their poverty was somehow their own fault, and instead allow them to focus their energy on seeking solutions.

Detrimental Impact on Self-Determination and Identity

The belief among the poor that they are responsible for their poverty and that they were born with innate characteristics that destined them to be poor, leads to a difficulty in separating themselves from their poverty and taking control of their lives. Poverty is often accompanied by feelings of shame and humiliation (Beegle 46). “Feelings of shame” writes Beegle, “follow people from poverty into educational

situations and into their relationships with others” (47). Jensen writes, “chronic socioeconomic deprivation can create environments that undermine the development of self and the capacity for self-determination and self-efficacy” (*Teaching* 9). According to Jensen, research shows that “when children gain a sense of mastery of their environments, they are more likely to develop feelings of self-worth, confidence, and independence” (*Teaching* 17). Unfortunately, students living in poverty rarely feel like they achieve mastery over their environment because of the instability and chaos caused to their environment by their conditions of poverty. This can lead to teenage depression, for which, according to a 2004 study poverty is a major predictor (Jensen, *Teaching* 17).

In summary, when poverty is internalized as a personal deficiency, it comes with feelings of shame and humiliation. People living in poverty are left feeling like the central, unchangeable component of their identity is that they are poor, and that everything in their life is impacted by that fact. The education system has traditionally tended to perpetuate this notion by subscribing to deficit theory. However, if schools can be employed as means to help those in poverty understand their poverty as a product of larger social influences, and externalize it, they will be liberated from the captivity that their poverty identity may have enabled, allowing them to take better advantage of the opportunities for social mobility provided by the educational system.

Parental Perspective

Busting the “They-don’t-care” Myth

Impoverished parents are often believed not to value education and therefore not to care about or support the educational opportunities that school affords their children.

There exists a perception that because poor families cannot lend the same type of support that their wealthier counterparts are able to, they don't value education. In fact, their support is shown in different ways, and reflects a different urgency of needs and priorities. Donna Beegle writes, "Families living in poverty may have no frame of reference for education being a positive influence in their lives, but they overwhelmingly want what they see as 'best' for their children. Support may mean something very different to those in poverty than it does to those in middle-class society" (14). For parents, the potential for their children to receive the 'best' is typically associated with education even if school failed to deliver on its potential for those same parents when they were young. Citing a 2003 study, Eric Jensen states that "People living in poverty typically value education as much as middle-income people do (Compton-Lilly, 2003, qtd. in *Engaging* 12).

This difference in what constitutes parental support tends to be ignored by researchers who claim parental apathy. Citing research in support of the idea that poor families don't support student education, Beegle points out that

Researchers often define support as getting kids to school on time, showing up for conferences, being involved in school activities, and creating a time and a place for homework. When these behaviors did not happen, the data were interpreted as the parents not supporting their child's education (*viii*).

Parents in poverty put so much time into addressing basic needs such as food and shelter, or perhaps working a second job, that it becomes nearly impossible to spend time engaged with their children's scholastic life. As Eric Jensen puts it, "Impoverished parents are often dealing with the chronic stress of poverty, struggling just to stay afloat,

which results in less attention, support and affection for the developing child”

(*Teaching* 87).

Beyond having more basic needs to address, parents often additionally stay away from school because of their own internalized feelings of inferiority. If school is viewed as hostile and humiliating, or simply one more source of stress, parents will likely be more inclined to avoid participation. Jonathan Kozol describes this perspective on school this way: “The poorest parents, often the products of inferior education, lack the information access and the skills of navigation in an often hostile and intimidating situation” (60). Their own experiences in school may have fostered this mindset: “parents who did poorly in school themselves may have a negative attitude about the children’s schools” (Jensen, *Teaching* 11). Furthermore, if school doesn’t represent any real means of social mobility, but is instead viewed as providing a more abstract and illusory opportunity, parents will tend not to engage.

In an article on lessons learned from experience teaching students from generational poverty in rural America, Carl A. Young summarizes the complex issue well:

Many parents have little education or little interest in education or distrust it altogether. Often, these parents are not on the same page as the school or their children in terms of educational goals. Many want their kids to do well, but success in school is either an abstract concept for them or they are simply not active in the school setting (85).

Poor families simply lack the resources to show support for education in the same ways that upper- and middle-class families are able to. Based on their own experiences, they may be skeptical of the value of education as means to liberation from the cycle of poverty, seeing effort made in that realm instead as futile and detracting from their

ability to meet their more basic needs. However, plentiful research demonstrates that families do, in fact, want their children to maximize the opportunities that education does provide, and are invested in seeing their kids succeed in school.

Ways that parents can act as hindrances

Even in spite of their best intentions to contribute to student success in school, families can unintentionally provide barriers to that reality. The families of poor students are responsible for creating the environment in which their children grow up and evidence shows that the circumstances of their poverty and lack of resources often lead to parents and family members being unable to provide a healthy enough climate to keep students from developing educational deficiencies. The need to spend more time working, their own lack of education, and increased rates of incarceration, divorce, health maladies, and addiction, among other factors, lead impoverished families to create an environment in the home that has consequences that are not conducive to maximizing potential inside of school. The classroom must then serve as a healthy alternative environment with a climate conducive to overcoming the deficiencies accumulated outside of school. And yet, as we'll see, it's vital that it does so while still involving and investing whole families.

Importance of Investing Whole Support Systems

For people in poverty, in the absence of material goods and money, great importance is given to one's relationships with people, and family in particular (Payne 52). For people in poverty, in the words of Donna Beegle, "Connection to others is at

the heart of everything, and people are always their first priority” (72). Carl A. Young expresses this concept this way:

One of the hidden rules that works against poor people is that in poverty, you don't have things, you have people. They are your real possessions, your anchor in the world. They've got your back—and you don't want to give them up. So when people become the 'possessions', getting educated becomes feared. Because if a person gets educated, they leave—and you've lost your dearest possession (Young 84).

Because of the high value placed on the people in one's life, it is vital that in order to invest and effect change in them, one reaches out to the people who form their “possessions”, that is the family and friends (Beegle 85).

If educators and other helping professionals seek to support a given student without appealing to his or her family, it will be difficult to find success. An understanding of the value placed upon their families by students themselves will help illuminate the potential that investing their support systems can have on helping them achieve academic success.

Education Perception

For schools to perform the equalizing function to which national educational leaders are committed, it is imperative that students who have traditionally struggled to achieve success recognize, subscribe to and embrace their potential. They must believe in the potential of school to address their needs and help them succeed so that, inspired by their belief, they can set lofty and ambitious goals, the achievement of which will help them break the cycle of, and escape, generational poverty. Conversely, if a student has a negative perception of school or education, it will likely have the effect of keeping schools from being able to function as an equalizer as well as exacerbating the

challenges or barriers to education created by each of the preceding factors. Four categories affect students' abilities to achieve success in school: the education system's responses to poverty, ability to create a safe, familiar space for all students, impact on external stress, and relevance to future aspirations.

School Systematically Punishes the Poor for Being Poor

The way students from poverty interpret the perception that the education system or schools have of *them* will be tremendously significant in affecting student belief in the possibility for schools to ignite positive change in their lives. If students feel that the school system is slanted against them, creating an environment in which they are systematically judged or even punished for their poverty, they will come to view the entire educational system with disdain. This will have the effect of compromising their belief in its power to enact change and making it difficult to utilize the classroom as a solution to, and possible escape from, the adversity that poverty creates in their lives.

Unfortunately, students who grow up in poverty often do develop negative beliefs about schools, and perceive school as a "prison", where students are "punished for [their] poverty conditions" (Beegle *viii*). The issue, Beegle explains, is that "There are many structures in place that deny people in poverty the support they need by punishing them for things that are, most of the time, out of their control" (59). In schools, this shows up as punishment for such things as tardiness and not completing homework. Or in registration and equipment fees that restrict extracurricular participation among low-SES students (Beegle 59).

Narrating the prevailing perception of teachers among poor students, Beegle writes, “Teachers don’t understand us. They also feel/look like the ‘enemy’ to us. It seems as if they don’t like people like us. They act as if we are invisible and make us feel unwanted, not cared about, and stupid because we don’t know things that others seem to have mastered” (54). There are, of course, exceptions to this perspective, but it seems clear that this perception would result in a distinct disadvantage to academic success. If educators are interested in reversing the internalization of poverty as a personal deficiency, it becomes imperative that students aren’t unjustly punished or looked down upon for their poverty at school. The consequences otherwise are dire: “Believing that no one cares or that their teachers don’t like them or talk down to them, students will often give up on academics (Mouton & Hawkins, 1996)” (qtd in Jensen, *Teaching* 11).

School is Uncomfortable, Unfamiliar, Humiliating,

In the unfamiliar cultural context of school, poor students often feel uncomfortable. The education system comes to represent shame and humiliation rooted in their having internalized poverty as a personal deficiency. Beegle explains, “Feelings of shame follow people from poverty into educational situations and into their relationships with others” (47). School thus becomes an unsafe and disarming place and leads to student skepticism of its potential to serve their needs. Because schools operate so differently than the environments that they’re used to, “low-achieving high school students report a sense of alienation from their schools (Mouton & Hawkins)” (qtd in Jensen, *Teaching* 11). This alienation leads to apathy and compromises the school’s ability to act as an equalizer.

As Donna Beegle writes, based on her own research, “People in poverty often report feeling like they do not ‘fit in’ or do not ‘feel comfortable’ in the educational environment. The underlying reasons for discomfort and not fitting in are related to their poverty and poverty-related conditions” (68). The stigma attached to poverty causes students to feel ashamed, which can be reflected as defensiveness, and result in behavioral outbursts. Beegle further explores this problem and its consequences, explaining the roots of student disconnect with schooling: “Being in school and facing its demands is in sharp contradiction with the pressures and realities of their lives. This split in focus results in a strong disconnect with their schooling experience, often leading to many school problems and a high number of dropouts” (35). If, instead, schools were perceived as a safe, familiar environment where people in poverty were not looked down upon, it would allow students to better take advantage of the opportunities that school has the potential to provide.

School Adds to Stress, Distracts From Survival

For students who are concerned with meeting their basic needs and surviving the chronic crisis of poverty, school can seem like a relatively low priority. Consequently, school comes to feel like a hindrance, keeping students from addressing their more fundamental needs. Writing of her own experience in poverty, Donna Beegle explains, “In my world, education served as a distraction from being able to meet our daily basic needs or from being close to my family, the only thing I had. I learned early on that education meant additional ‘stress’ to our family” (3). Going to school only adds more stress to an already stressful existence, meanwhile failing to provide solutions.

Later, Beegle expands this concept further, reaffirming based on her research that education is often “perceived as a major cause of stress for people in poverty” and “represented more problems in their already-troubled lives”, constituting “a source of discomfort, unhappiness and stress” due to a feeling of “not belonging in school” (68). The paradigm must be shifted among students coming from poverty, so that school is seen as a solution to their stress rather than an added source of stress. Otherwise, students will find it difficult to embrace or appreciate the potential for education to serve their needs, and will thus fall even further behind academically as a consequence of their negative mindset.

School as Irrelevant; Purpose as Abstract

Lastly, comes the dangerously prevalent perspective that education is pointless, unhelpful and holds no potential for liberation from the cycle of poverty. In this desperate, yet common, case, students come to understand education as utterly disconnected from their desires and having no bearing on their aspirations. As Carl A. Young puts it, the problem lies in the fact that, “Students don’t really see the reason to succeed in school and don’t buy into the notion that education can bring meaningful results” (85). Donna Beegle explains: “Education is a luxury that makes no sense when you can’t pay rent or buy food” (20). Later she narrates the prevailing perspective of the poor on education, writing that it is, “Useless. It is for other people, not us. It only takes us away from our family and causes additional stresses because we don’t have the status symbols to belong” (54). According to participants in her own research, “they had no direction and did not understand what they could do with an education...Education had no perceived impact on their lives, nor did it offer prospects for success in their context”

(67). In the words of Dr. Ruby Payne, education “may be valued and revered as abstract but not as reality” (42). This abstract view of the value of education refers to a sense that education is valuable, but that its value is irrelevant in the context of a student living in poverty. Research tells us that one’s beliefs about school are heavily influenced by the beliefs of their parents, based on their parents’ educational experiences. If a poor student’s parents went to school and did not benefit from their education, or did not go to school at all, why should they believe that it will serve any other purpose for them?

The notion among any student that education has no value or potential to serve their needs, and help them break free from the adversity of poverty, is problematic. If school is seen as irrelevant and purposeless, we can’t possibly hope to engage students and get the buy-in necessary to helping them close the academic achievement gap separating them from their wealthier peers. The perception among poor students that education provides no hope to them for a better life, will lead to the inability of schools to effect meaningful positive change in their lives.

Each of these four troubling and problematic perspectives on education found commonly among poor students has the effect of crippling the education system’s ability to alleviate the academic deficiencies created by growing up in an adverse environment such as poverty. If students and their families don’t recognize the potential of education to make a real, positive difference in their lives, schools lose their power to do so. A negative perception of schools for any number of reasons will make it especially hard to utilize them in the battle to close the income achievement gap.

Cultivated Strengths

Students in poverty also develop strengths based on the adverse circumstances in which they grow up. Donna Beegle states explicitly that, “there are unique personal strengths that exist in the context of poverty” (x). Paulo Friere writes, “Almost never do they realize that [impoverished people], too ‘know things’ they have learned in their relations with the world and with other women and men” (63). Standing in stark contrast to deficit theory, this concept celebrates the advantages and benefits that poor students acquire as a result of their poverty, and explores the way that what they bring to the classroom can be used to improve their academic performance.

Oral Culture

The distinction between oral culture and print culture (or orality and literacy) made earlier did not consider the advantageous attributes cultivated by growing up in oral culture. Among these advantages are the following: “a freedom of verbal expression, an appreciation of individual personality, a heightened and intense emotional experience, and a sensual, kinesthetic approach to life usually not found in the middle class or among the educated” (Payne 113). Donna Beegle explores these strengths in detail. She establishes the potential for positive attributes to be derived from qualities specific to those living in an oral culture, including that poor people are “relationship-oriented, spontaneous, repetitive, holistic, emotional, present oriented, and agonistic” (98-9). Emphasizing relationships means that people of oral-culture value human capital highly, are loyal and trusting, and place high value on friendship. Their spontaneity increases an affinity for variety, and an ability to be flexible and adaptive. Being repetitious means that information is engrained by its relevance and worth. Being

holistic means that significant meaning is communicated through gestures, tone and context. Non-verbal communication becomes important. To be agonistic is to tend to communicate and learn in a physical manner. This promotes the importance of physical touch as well as kinesthetic learning. Being emotional refers to the importance of communicating by varying your voice and showing emotions and feelings readily. And finally, being present-oriented places higher value on the present and keeps people from drifting away, especially in becoming absorbed by the future (Beegle 72-3).

Much more could be made of these positive attributes of those living in a primarily oral culture. The important takeaway is that emerging from oral culture equips people with certain advantageous qualities, which, if they were to be accepted, celebrated and maximized in schools, would have the potential to increase poor students' opportunities for academic achievement.

Survival and Leadership

In addition to the benefits cultivated by growing up in an oral culture, students who come from poverty have often developed skills of survival and leadership that their wealthier peers do not possess, and which schools fail to celebrate. Jonathan Kozol outlines some of these positive qualities in *Savage Inequalities*, writing that students are often, “determined and persistent and strong-minded people who have character and virtues you do not see everywhere...There’s something here that’s being purified by pain. All the veneers, all the façades, are burnt away and you see something genuine and beautiful that isn’t often found among the affluent...It’s as if they are refined by their adversity” (Kozol 43). As Eric Jensen explains, “Most low-SES kids’ brains have adapted to survive their circumstances” (*Teaching* 57). They are wired for survival.

Beegle adds, “People in poverty have unique strengths and characteristics from living in survival mode” (77). Later she emphasizes this notion, claiming that, “Every individual, group, family and community has strengths” (Beegle 79). This includes those raised in poverty.

Due to frequently higher rates of independence that can sometimes verge on neglect at home, children growing up in poverty are forced to grow up quickly and thus develop leadership skills as they learn to fend for themselves and look after younger siblings or possibly struggling parents. They have assumed more real-world responsibility than their wealthier peers, have done so earlier, and are capable of putting such experience to work in leading others in school, if given the opportunity.

The strengths acquired and developed by those growing up in poverty allow them to enter their educational experience with qualities that have the potential to improve their chances at academic success. Understanding those attributes within the context of the larger ensemble of characteristics, both positive and negative, of those coming from poverty, can permit educators to create a better learning environment that maximizes for students the opportunity to escape the captivity of poverty.

Conclusion

Exposure to one’s environment, no matter what it is, impacts the way one experiences the American education system. All people enter schools with a unique life experience, which permits varying levels of academic success and achievement. For students who grow up in poverty, certain patterns can help to identify what effects of growing up poor might have had on their ability to be successful in school.

Unfortunately, many of these environmental factors are negative and make it more

difficult for education to act as a liberator from the hardship of poverty. This section has considered the positive and negative factors that students who grow up in poverty bring to the academic context. These factors, in general, make success harder to come by in the scholastic environment and contribute to a widening gap in academic achievement between students from different socioeconomic demographics. Specifically, this chapter covered the roles that chronic stress, isolation, the internalization of poverty as a personal deficiency, parent involvement, perception of school, and strengths developed by growing up poor, play in impacting student potential for academic achievement. This chapter has portrayed what poor students bring to school, and will be followed by a section exploring how to use the education system to address those factors and thus maximize the potential that education provides to help students escape poverty.

III. Enhancing Pedagogy

Introduction: Unlocking Liberating Potential

In classrooms, in order to help their marginalized students achieve otherwise unthinkable success in the classroom, and thereby open doors to a bright future free from poverty, educators must employ particular strategies that include principles such as the importance of such principles as putting in context the systemic barriers to education created by poverty; encouraging, maximizing and expanding the strengths developed by growing up facing the adversity of poverty; employing a holistic approach to education; setting high standards, expectations and specific, measureable goals; giving students ownership and responsibility; increasing engagement; and, perhaps most importantly, cultivating positive relationships. These strategies directly address the problems introduced in the first section, and can make the difference between a student associating school with failure while growing to resent it, and maximizing his or her educational opportunity while becoming a promising young person with a bright future. Operating at maximum potential, the latter should be what the education system strives to achieve.

Understanding Poverty

In order for students to begin to address the way that growing up in poverty has molded them, they must be made gently aware of the larger contextual patterns into which their lives and circumstances fit. Before they can begin to overcome the academic deficiencies and barriers to learning that poverty has helped to create for them, they must see their poverty for what it is. They must have their eyes opened to the

larger forces at play so that they can externalize their poverty and begin to use their education to re-form their identities based on other attributes.

Educator Recognition of Particular Features and Consequential Impacts of Poverty

For educators to help students understand the role that poverty plays in their lives and the impact that that may have in the classroom, it is vital that educators themselves pay close attention to the specific circumstances of poverty their students face. As Paul Gorski writes, as educators, “We must educate ourselves about class and poverty” so as to “...reject deficit theory and help students and colleagues unlearn misperceptions about poverty” (35). While the effects of poverty reveal themselves in patterns, each community or even family will experience poverty differently and it will impact the specific imprint that it leaves on students prior to their arrival, and throughout their time, at school. The difference between growing up in rural poverty rather than urban poverty is heavily cited as an example of this, though other factors play similar roles, such as social resources available, the presence of varying stressors, or the prevailing local attitude towards education. Making sure that they understand the particular plight that struggling families in their communities face, educators can then begin to demonstrate to students how their experiences with financial hardship might create added difficulty in achieving success in school. This increased awareness of the particular consequences of poverty that they face will allow for increased student success.

Teaching Students to Externalize their Poverty

Students must be then explicitly taught to see their poverty for what it is and how it affects them. The problem, writes Donna Beegle, is that “In most cases, the fact that many of the barriers have systemic roots is invisible, even to people in poverty” (55). While imparting that everyone’s experiences will differ and there is no one way that poverty affects everyone, educators must demonstrate that there are consistent challenges that students from poverty are more likely to encounter in the education system than their higher-socioeconomic status counterparts. According to the work of Paulo Friere in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the poor who achieve more success in schools “seem to do better...because they view poverty as a systemic problem and not their personal problem” (Beegle 37). It must be explained that the values and norms from which they came are not necessarily bad, but that the education system tends to operate using a different set of expectations, rooted in middle- and upper-class norms. They must understand that it is not their fault that they come to school unprepared for its differences and then they must then be given time to learn to function within the framework of middle-class norms, and to make adjustments to that new way of working and interacting.

It is important for students who grow up in poverty to see poverty in its bigger picture. They must understand that it is a product of complex social and economic forces, which operate on a very large scale and impact people all over the world. It would be beneficial, for example, to learn some about the history of poverty in the United States and what is being done to combat it in the present.

We must...teach about issues related to class and poverty—including consumer culture, the dissolution of labor unions, and environmental injustice—and about movements for class equity” and furthermore, “teach about the antipoverty work of Martin Luther King Jr., Helen Keller, the Black Panthers, César Chávez, and other U.S. icons—and about why this dimension of their legacies has been erased from our national consciousness (Gorski 36).

The danger of failing to do so lies in the fact that otherwise, “...people in poverty from different races, will fail to see their common struggles and unite” (Beegle 56). Students must learn to see their poverty not as a personal problem but as a national, social issue that happens to affect them.

Rejecting Poverty as an Inherent Deficiency

Most importantly, students must externalize their poverty so that it doesn’t become, in their eyes, a product of any sort of inherent, internalized deficiency. According to Paulo Friere, “Because we do not teach about structural causes of poverty, people in poverty often think of themselves as somehow deficient and less worthy than others who live in more affluent circumstances” (Beegle 63). Rather than, “thinking of themselves and their neighbors as fundamentally deficient, victims incapable of taking charge of their lives and of their community’s future,” they must come to see that their identity is shaped and impacted by their hardship but that their identity does not cause their hardship (Beegle 80). Students must learn to see their family’s poverty as an external environmental factor, and separate from their core, defining traits and attributes. This way students may redefine how they think of themselves and form their identities and personalities based on more positive qualities and characteristics, taking control of parts of themselves that they may otherwise have felt were unchangeably formed by their poverty.

Included here is the importance of imparting to students that they aren't playing on a level playing field, an idea that has become so engrained in the American conscience, it poses a great danger to student self-conceptualization in school. Internalizing the idea that each student has an equal shot at success in our society leads to notions of inferiority and personal failure when students observe their peers achieving vastly superior academic results for reasons that may reflect resources and factors well outside of their control: "Regardless of how much students in poverty value education, they must overcome tremendous inequities to learn. Perhaps the greatest myth of all is the one that dubs education the 'great equalizer.' Without considerable change, it cannot be anything of the sort" (Gorski 34). It is vital therefore to teach students to reject the equal opportunity mindset and be honest about the fact that their unique circumstances will affect how hard they have to work relative to their wealthier peers in order to utilize education as the stepping-stone that it can become. As Gorski warns, "In our determination to 'fix' the mythical culture of poor students, we ignore the ways in which our society cheats them out of opportunities that their wealthier peers take for granted. We ignore the fact that poor people suffer disproportionately the effects of nearly every major social ill" (33).

Growth Mindset and Grit

Understanding that they are malleable and that the consequences of poverty on their academic potential, while impactful, are not static and can be overcome, leaves room for the promotion of growth mindset and the cultivation of grit in students from poverty. Carol Dweck, a Stanford University researcher, has gained recognition for her work on growth-mindset. In describing children who demonstrate it, she states, "They

understood that their abilities could be developed. They had what I call growth mindset.” This initiates a powerful transformation that leaves them prepared to continue utilizing their education as a means to leave the confines of poverty behind and instead continually grow and develop into successful students with boundless potential. Dweck continues: for “the students with the growth mindset, the idea that abilities can be developed, they engage deeply... They process the error. They learn from it and they correct it.” As Eric Jensen writes,

When both teachers and students believe that students have a fixed amount of ‘smarts’ that cannot be increased, students are far more likely to disengage. Conversely, when students have positive attitudes about their own learning capacity, and when teachers focus on growth and change rather than on having students reach arbitrary milestones—a strategy that leaves students more vulnerable to negative feedback and thus more likely to disengage from challenging learning opportunities—student engagement increases. (*Engaging* 13).

One way for educators to foster growth mindset in their students, Dweck suggests, is to “praise wisely, not praising intelligence or talent. That has failed. Don’t do that anymore. But praising the process that kids engage in: their effort, their strategies, their focus, their perseverance, and their improvement. This process creates kids who are hardy and resilient.” This concept could be applied to classroom feedback with significant benefits for the poor.

Another researcher, Dr. Angela Lee Duckworth, of the University of Pennsylvania, expands on the importance of growth mindset, by defining it in terms of the characteristic of grit. As she defines it, “Grit is passion and perseverance for very long-term goals. Grit is having stamina. Grit is living life like it’s a marathon, not a sprint.” Citing the work of Carol Dweck, Duckworth explains,

The best idea I've heard about building grit in kids is something called 'growth mindset.' This is...the belief that the ability to learn is not fixed, that it can change with your effort. When kids read and learn about the brain and how it changes and grows in response to challenge, they're much more likely to persevere when they fail because they don't believe that failure is a permanent condition.

The fostering of grit and growth mindset will be paramount in changing student self-conceptualization and promoting a growth-oriented mentality. As Eric Jensen puts it, "Teachers support is essential to the academic success of low-SES students, many of whom do not believe in their capacity to learn and grow. Teachers' positive, growth-oriented mind-sets can help compensate for students' negative mind-sets" (*Engaging* 14). Helping students to embrace and battle the hardships they face will make them better students, and produce a gritty outlook that will ultimately allow students to achieve far beyond their loftiest expectations. By encouraging growth-mindset and grit, educators have the opportunity to replace the feeling of helplessness and fatalism that students from poverty often feel, with the empowerment to overcome the challenges created by poverty.

By changing the paradigm through which students understand their poverty and its impact on their academic potential, they can begin to re-form their identities around other more positive, and healthier character traits, which will ultimately make them better students. They must be made aware of the forces of poverty working against them, and then helped to understand that those forces are coming from outside themselves rather than within, thus demonstrating that they possess the power to reject and overcome them. Students can build self-esteem by taking control of the role of poverty in their narrative and proactively working to redefine themselves as people for whom poverty is only something they experience but not necessarily central to their

identity. In encouraging this transition, educators can begin to help students see the way that their particular experience with poverty impacts their academic potential. That way they may overcome the damaged self-image that poverty encourages while promoting education as means for developing a new identity. Learning what deficiencies they may be up against because of their poverty will help students to hone in on them, and apply themselves to working consciously and proactively to change themselves and overcome those deficits.

Maximizing Strengths

Every student, upon entering school, brings with them markings, both good and bad, of the environment from which they come. While in school, both external circumstances and scholastic experiences continue to simultaneously mold and shape students, and exist either in tension or complementarily with each other. For students coming from poverty, these forces often exist in tension. Despite the adversity that impoverished students face, growing up in poverty also cultivates strengths. As Donna Beegle writes,

Every person and community has assets. It is important to first look at people's strengths, resources and assets, and help them define those they see within themselves. Then we need to help promote the assets they currently have in their lives as well as work with them on developing those that they had not had opportunities to develop (82).

Often overlooked are the assets of an oral culture, and an environment that often forces students to develop survival and leadership skills. Creating an academic environment that rewards those skills and tools could positively impact students' scholastic experience and increase the potential for their academic success.

In order for the academic setting to nurture and reward the strengths of poor students, educators must themselves seek to recognize and understand what those strengths are. These strengths tend not to be appreciated or validated in the education system as, “helping professionals, for example, often fail to show the people they serve that they are talented, creative, and worthwhile and that they are just as smart and motivated as middle class people” (Beegle 63). If, instead, educators change the way they see, address and treat those strengths, they can be utilized and maximized in the classroom setting in ways that turn them into academic advantages, thus increasing the potential of school to close the gap between low-SES students and high-SES students.

Once educators recognize that such poverty-fostered tools and talents exist, they must work to make students aware of them as well. This means rejecting the notion of poverty as an internal deficiency, and instead seeing it as an impactful external factor that creates unique characteristics, some of which are beneficial, and others that are detrimental, to academic achievement. Eric Jensen writes, “Gradually, with teacher support, students will begin to believe in themselves and in their capacity to reach their goals and thus increase their own learning success” (*Engaging* 14). Students must recognize not only that they do, in fact, have positive attributes and strengths, but that those can benefit them in a variety of contexts: in lower-class culture or middle- or upper-class cultures, including the education system.

In order to maximize those strengths within the education system, school and classroom environments must be designed to nurture and reward those strengths. This means blurring the dichotomy between home and school that often exists for impoverished students. The classroom environment must validate the tools, traits and

talents that poor students arrive with. Educators working with impoverished students must, for example, design curriculum and assessments that operate in cohesion with oral culture. School must be a place where students are exposed to, and learn how to navigate both print and oral culture. A balance must be struck between the two, and teachers must reward the proficiency in oral culture that students from poverty will find that they have. Furthermore, classrooms can put to use the survival skills and leadership attributes that many poor students will bring to school with them. An adolescent who has been the primary breadwinner for his family, or provided childcare to all of her siblings for years, can be given some responsibility in the classroom that might not be afforded to higher-class students with less “real life” experience. These adjustments will not lower the standards of schools, but rather have the potential to show students that they haven’t only grown up cultivating academic deficiencies but strengths as well, and strengths that the school system sees as worthy of being nurtured and further developed.

Increasing awareness of such strengths, and putting them to use in the academic setting has the potential to increase student buy-in and help students rethink their own identities and build self-esteem both within the scholastic context and outside of it.

Approaching Education Holistically

In order to realize the potential for education to be a liberator from the hardship of poverty, students must be adequately provided for so that they can focus on learning while they’re in school. It is not possible to set high expectations without assuring basic needs are met. As Eric Jensen explains, it is unreasonable to raise expectations without also raising levels of support:

School leaders who adopt the mantra of high expectations often demand that their students sit quietly, remain attentive, show motivation, stay out of trouble, work hard and act polite when those students are in fact hungry, unhealthy, stressed, and emotionally stretched to the edge. The high *expectations* policy makes sense only if your students are buttressed by high *support*" (*Teaching* 69).

In order to realistically set high goals, schools must work with their students to make sure basic needs are first met.

There is a limit to what schools can do to address the needs of poor students and prepare them to achieve in the classroom: "Some administrators may find it inconvenient or even crazy to be expected to provide a wide-ranging net of services that other schools don't have to provide" (*Teaching* 69). Indeed, it's difficult to conceive of how schools in low-income districts, which are chronically underfunded, can be expected to address the extreme needs of their students (Kozol 54). Jensen insists, however, that, "the secret is to provide the services that reduce their distractions and stressors and strengthen their ability to learn and succeed" (*Teaching* 70). He goes on to claim, "Schools that successfully educate low-SES students commonly incorporate a 360-degree wraparound student support system" (*Teaching* 70).

Jensen suggests two key ways for schools to address these needs. The first is simply to identify what they are. Each student will arrive with a unique combination of needs based on their family's particular circumstances. Gathering information that helps teachers to understand what basic needs aren't being met in their students' lives, and which of those needs are most critical, allows the school to work to serve those needs using its resources. Schools often simply don't have the resources to provide for all of their students' basic needs. There is a limit to what they can provide, learning what

those needs are is the first step to helping get them met, so that students can turn their attention to reaching their academic potential.

Secondly, the best support educators can provide for students in this regard is helping inform them of the resources available to them. Beegle encourages teachers to,

Help students become aware of resources such as tutoring, social services, scholarships, mentor programs, and housing. Make it a class assignment to find resources and report back...Don't ignore poverty realities. They won't go away. Address the real-life situations people are in...Develop programs to meet people's basic needs so they can focus on education and other possibilities (138-9).

The classroom can serve powerfully as a place for students to learn to access resources available to them to contribute to filling their basic needs.

According to Jensen this means assisting students in constructing a network of exterior support that includes parents, community partnerships, and public agencies amongst others (*Teaching* 73). These may include access to reduced-cost medical services, dental services, mental health services, charitable organizations, second-hand clothing stores, subsidized nutritional assistance (food stamps), food pantries, mentors, tutors, childcare, and so on. As Beegle writes, "While educators can and should better meet the needs of students living in poverty, they need the help and support from the entire community. Children will continue to be left behind unless they have access to adequate housing, food, health care, safe places to play, and a caring, supportive community" (29).

Even after garnering resources available to help provide for students in need, there will undoubtedly be days when students don't have enough. For such days, Jensen offers this encouragement: "Creating a highly engaging classroom can help compensate for behavioral and cognitive issues resulting from poor nutrition" (*Engaging* 11). To an

extent, educators will have to teach in spite of the unmet needs of their students. When this is the case, methods of engagement to help students forget their stress and hardship and learn in spite of it, must be employed. Teachers must create a safe space in the classroom so that students can function academically regardless of what may be happening outside of the classroom. One way that teachers can adapt to such circumstances is by limiting the homework they assign for completion outside of school, in favor of classwork. This keeps students whose circumstances prevent them from completing homework from falling behind in school. Of utmost importance is that educators empathize with the plight faced by students in poverty. Schools must represent a place that, rather than punishing students for the consequences of their poverty, help them to alleviate the pressures that poverty puts on them, in order to free them to become better students.

It is important that students understand the teacher's prioritization of their needs. Teachers must impart to students that while school is very important, there are other things that are more important than academic success, or more pressing than school responsibility. Without excusing students from academic effort, teachers can help students to understand their needs. In the case that students can't meet their basic needs, teachers become responsible for helping students locate and access resources to meet these needs. Students must come to understand that teachers want them to have basic needs met in order to raise their level of achievement in the classroom, and that teachers can be assets in helping find and take advantage of available resources.

As educators, helping students to recognize and utilize the support available to them, will give them the opportunity to better fill their basic needs. As students get their

basic needs met, they will be more capable of learning in school and thus can maximize the opportunity that their education affords. Teachers must understand the needs faced by their students, and give them grace for the hardship that those needs cause.

Meanwhile, school must continue to function academically, so educators must make the classroom an environment in which students might forget their poverty-related stress during the school day and then aid students in accessing support outside of school that will allow them to concentrate on being the best students that they can be.

Raising Expectations and Setting High Goals

High expectations reap high performance and positive results. Chapter two explored the way that those in poverty receive powerful messages from a variety of sources that identify them as inferior. It identified and analyzed barriers to academic success created by students' perception of their academic ability. For educators to help students overcome those barriers, both parties must reframe their beliefs in student potential and set goals and expectations that reflect those beliefs. First, it is imperative that educators see limitless potential in their students and school as a viable means to realize that potential. From these beliefs, educators must set aggressively high goals for which their students will strive. Next, educators must impart their own beliefs in the limitless potential of all students to the students themselves, so that students too buy into their capacity for academic achievement and the role that their effort in school will play in helping them reach full capacity. Students must understand and believe in the goals set for them by their teachers and then choose to subscribe to those goals themselves, or formulate their own. And thirdly, with high goals set by both students and teachers, both parties must measure those goals in order to assess progress and

make necessary adjustments along the way. Making these changes in the classroom lays the foundations for the urgency with which a high-achieving classroom functions. Students and teachers must buy into the goals and expectations set so that they can go about striving to achieve them.

Raising Teacher Expectations of Students

Changing low expectations for academic potential for students from poverty starts with their educators. Before students can believe in, and strive to realize, their educational potential, someone else must see it first. Eric Jensen points out, “We have expectations of all kids, but sometimes we expect too little—especially of children raised in poverty...Teacher beliefs and assumptions play a big part in the outcome, *especially* for students subjected to low expectations” (*Teaching* 113). He also writes, “For years, educators have been told to raise their expectations of students, and research supports raising this bar” (*Engaging* 37). It is therefore imperative that educators maintain high expectations for the potential of their impoverished students. As author Steven Farr explains,

The highly effective teachers we have studied expect the best of those they are leading. In our context, this means demanding and seeing that their students reach their full potential, holding high expectations that actually raise student performance. The best teachers, in our experience, refuse to accept and instead set out to disprove the myth that students in low-income communities are destined for lower achievement and fewer opportunities than children in higher-income communities. (18)

As Donna Beegle puts it, “Dreams, aspirations, and desires must be respected even if they appear to be set too high. It must be assumed that the upper limits of capacity are not known” (79). On the flip side, educators who pity the plight of their students do

more harm than good, as it leads to lowered expectations. Eric Jensen encourages empathy rather than pity as a solution (*Teaching* 12). Jensen further emphasizes the importance that teachers both “express high expectations and provide the support to go with them” (*Teaching* 95). He also writes,

Students keenly sense teachers’ attitudes toward them, so a positive, optimistic attitude is crucial...when teachers hold negative beliefs about their students, they not only undermine student engagement but also hurt students’ performance. Low-SES students in particular need you to believe in them so that they can believe in themselves (*Engaging* 22-3).

Informing Goal-Setting with Baseline Assessments

Once teachers believe in the potential of their students, they can go about creating an ambitious vision for what those students will be able to achieve in their classrooms. Believing in the potential of students is not enough. Educators must also design goals that will help their students to achieve said potential. Before doing so, however, teachers must determine where their students are starting from academically in order to develop a baseline from which to work. It is important, as Eric Jensen writes, to “Pre-assess to determine students’ background knowledge” (*Teaching* 111). As Beegle puts it, regarding a particular student, “It meant starting where she was and keeping the high expectation that she would become educated” (19). This requires knowing “where she was” and understanding the particular academic needs of one’s students: “Strong teachers are keenly aware of their constituents’ (in this case, their students’) needs and desires. These teachers not only seek to meet those inherent interests and motivations; they also find ways to build them into their vision of success to make it all the more inspiring to their students” (Farr 18). Teachers must measure the level at which students begin the school year in order to formulate goals based on

progress from that point forward. In order to do so they must understand the particular needs of their students.

As a teacher, raising expectations for the potential of students and assessing the point from which they're starting is the key first step to using goal-setting to improve academic achievement. Only after this step can teachers work to help their students' adopt the same high expectations for themselves, with school as the means to that end, and then set goals to help attain the ambitious vision that students have.

Imparting High Expectations to Students

For an educator to believe in the limitless potential of all students and understand the academic point from which they're starting is not enough, ultimately, to make goal-setting an effective tool for boosting achievement. In order for progress to be made, students have to be involved in the goal setting process as well, and must themselves buy into their high academic potential. Steven Farr writes that in classrooms where this is the case, "...every action is driven by the insight that high expectations cause high achievement...the 'self-fulfilling prophecy of high expectations' has been verified by researchers" (26). One teacher commented, " 'Too many students do not expect themselves to succeed, so they do not. When my students are expected to perform at high levels, they absolutely do' (Farr 27).

For many students coming from poverty, who are used to thinking of school as an additional stressor and as incapable of improving their prospects for better lives, the concept of success may be foreign. When it comes to setting goals, reforming student perception of school is a necessary first step towards believing in the hope it offers. Students must see their education as a viable vessel for improving the quality of their

lives. They must be taught to believe in the potential of scholastic learning to improve their lives. Otherwise, it will become nearly impossible to motivate them to make the necessary effort in the classroom required to fulfilling that potential. Students must then come to understand why getting an education is important, and what potential it holds to help them escape the hardship of poverty and self-determine who they want to be. Similarly, they must come to a healthy understanding in the role that their teachers play in realizing this potential. As expressed above, teachers must be viewed as student-advocates, who are working to help students achieve the maximum amount possible. A connection must be made between effort and academic success. If students have not experienced this in the past, it must be readdressed so that they come to believe that their hard work can lead to measurable academic improvement. In any case, imparting to students the high expectations that their educators hold for them, and getting students to believe in the validity and attainability of these expectations as well, is paramount to setting effective goals.

Setting Big Goals

With high teacher and student expectations for achievement potential, educators can then work with students to cast an ambitious vision for success and set meaningful, measurable goals in order to realize student potential over the course of a school year. Setting such goals must be a collaborative process in order to maximize student buy-in. If they have participated in setting their goals, they will be more likely to invest in achieving them.

Effective goals earn student buy-in because they are meaningful to the students:

“Setting academic goals in a meaningful context makes all the difference” (*Engaging*

25). This means goals must not revolve solely around getting certain grades, but rather must be structured as means to more relevant, meaningful ends. Good teachers, explains one author, have, “identified powerful motivating visions and goals that would make a meaningful difference for their students” (Kopp 31). Jensen adds, “Make good grades the by-product of success in your class, not the central goal” (*Engaging* 25). Only when students connect their goals to real positive outcomes that they believe in will they invest in achieving those goals. Farr writes,

The most effective big goals are those that build on students’ desires and motivations. They have meaning in students’ lives, even if the teacher has to do some work to ensure that every student appreciates that meaning. As [teacher] Mekia Love told us, ‘You have to really ask why those academic targets are so important to you and your kids, and the answers to that question will help shape how you articulate your big goals (36).

Meaningful goals must also be measurable, so that students and teachers can track their progress. This allows students to connect their hard work with success they experience in the classroom, thus motivating continued effort and engagement. Steven Farr writes, “That principle takes the form of ambitious standards—aligned and quantifiable goals—targets that help students see their progress and appreciate the benefits of their hard work” (18). A good teacher “ensures that her students’ growth toward the goal will be measurable and transparent” (Farr 39). Of effective teachers in this regard, Wendy Kopp writes, “By showing students exactly where they were in relation to their goals, and empowering them to track and manage their own progress, they instilled a new level of personal ownership for success among their students” (31-2). The ability to measure goals permits teachers to track their students’ progress as well as to increase

student buy-in by allowing them to see the benefits of their effort relative to the goals they set.

Setting measurable goals only works if educators and students keep track of their progress towards their goals by continually measuring successes. Eric Jensen explains the importance of gathering data to measure student progress in relation to their goals as follows:

Successful schools generate their own high-quality, useful data on an ongoing basis and provide immediate feedback to both students and teachers...With high-quality data on student performance, teachers can continually adjust their instructional decisions, and students can modify their learning strategies...This cycle of continual assessment and adjustment, known as formative assessment...show you exactly where your students stand at any given time. (*Teaching* 73-5)

Once goals are set, educators must work alongside students to measure their progress and make necessary adjustments. This student involvement in tracking progress towards their goals will increase student investment in reaching them and therefore student effort as well: “When students develop and use these analytical skills to assess their own progress, their effort will increase” (Jensen, *Engaging* 87). In providing feedback based on the data collected about a class’ goals, Jensen emphasizes the importance of providing “specific information that *directly* relates to three facets of learning: (1) the learning goal; (2) the amount of progress made toward the goal; and (3) where and how to proceed next” (Jensen, *Engaging* 86). The feedback that comes of measuring progress towards goals can be used to motivate student effort and adjust goals as needed.

Effective goals are also made collectively, so that accountability serves as a motivator. Goals that are set for the whole class rather than individually, create an atmosphere of collaboration and support for one another as each student is invested in seeing all students achieve class goals. For example, “By making clear the destination, big goals help focus and align the efforts of many individuals” (Farr 19). Teachers explain that this serves to, “ ‘keep us on the same page,’ ‘so everyone knows where we are headed,’ ‘so we can work as a team,’” (Farr 19). When students are invested not only in their own individual goals and independent progress but rather the achievement of goals collectively, as a class, it will hopefully encourage a classroom atmosphere of support and collaboration.

In goal setting, it is important that the vision for achievement is ambitious, but that the goals set are not so big that they become abstract. Students must have a big vision for achievement, but also a path consisting of smaller, more attainable goals in order to achieve those big goals step by step. This means that goals become more manageable, increasing student control and feasibility:

The feeling of control over their work as well as seeing *how* to reach their goals is very exciting and empowering...Students who won't make a huge effort will often make a micro-effort. That small effort might get them only 5 percent of the way toward the goal, but it could be just enough to jump-start a bigger effort (Jensen, *Engaging* 87-8).

This principle is partly related to oral culture as well. Donna Beegle explains, “Oral culture teaches a focus on the here and now and to pay attention to what is at hand. To really help people who are more oral culture, professionals will need to break things down into more manageable parts” (105). While developing big, ambitious goals is important, teachers must work with students to develop a framework of smaller, more

attainable goals that will show students precisely and realistically how they should expect to arrive at their big goals.

Finally, the function of this goal setting is to create an urgency that motivates students to increase their effort to learn, by having big goals to work towards. The purpose of setting, sharing, measuring and collectively seeking progress towards the achievement of ambitious goals is to create a classroom atmosphere that exudes an urgency to learn for the sake of achieving academic success, which is believed by all to potentially lead to a better future. “Passion”, writes Eric Jensen, “comes from feeling responsible and accountable for results, which means it’s the rigor, intensity and duration of the enriching education you provide that matters” (*Teaching* 82). As Steven Farr writes, “The timeline and deadline inherent in setting a measurable goal bring urgency to you and your team’s efforts” (19). These daily goals influence daily intensity and pace and create a classroom culture of collective determination and accountability for each other. As author Wendy Kopp writes, “Ambitious goals create a sense of urgency, shared focus and alignment of action that accelerates progress” (31). Setting big goals, and measuring progress towards them, creates an atmosphere of fervent effort that sparks a cycle of collective motivation towards achievement. This contagiously urgent atmosphere has the potential to lead to progress that will lead to the achievement of the big goals set by students and educators alike.

For education to serve as a force that overcomes the adversity of poverty in the lives of students raised in lower-class communities, schools must encourage student effort by redefining expectations and employing ambitious goals as tools for motivation. This process starts with the mindsets of educators, which must be changed so that all

teachers believe in the high academic potential of all students. Students raised in poverty bring a lot to their educational experiences that remains outside of the control of educators. Still, schools can help reform student perspectives so that all students believe in their own academic potential as limitless and see school as their best resource for tapping into that potential. Having established high teacher and student expectations for academic success, both teachers and students can work together to set ambitious, measurable, specific goals that will serve as motivation and inspire students to increase effort and accountability in order to realize success in the classroom. The achievement of such success, rooted in the goals that students and teachers set, has the potential to overcome the low academic expectations often carried by those in poverty and permit education to function as a liberator from that adversity.

Increasing Engagement

In order for students to better maximize their education and leverage it into a brighter future for themselves, classroom function must be improved so that students and teachers may work together to achieve academic success. The key to this process is creating a relevant curriculum and healthy class climate, and promoting student ownership in order to increase buy-in.

Relevance of Curriculum

Teachers must engage students early on in reflecting on their educational experience, and self-evaluating their perspective on education and specific subject-area content. This means encouraging students to express how they've experienced school, and given subject-area content, in the past. What they've liked or disliked about each,

what their families believe about the value of each, how their perspective has changed over time, and ultimately what they themselves believe about the potential for each to help them improve their lives. In addition to changing student perception of the broad relevance of education, students will also need to reform their perception of the relevance of specific curriculum. To do this, educators working with students in poverty must explicitly teach the reason that students are being asked to put forth effort in their classes, and establish the relevance that curriculum has on improving their futures. Eric Jensen writes, “Every high-performing teacher I’ve studied makes profound, authentic connections between the content and their students’ own lives” (*Engaging* 146). Steven Farr adds, “When students see the relevance of what they are learning, they are more inclined to want to learn—a critical element of investment” (98). Students must believe in the value of learning what they’re learning, if they are to be expected to engage with the content. Educators themselves must therefore study and prepare to articulate, with sincerity, the importance of the curriculum that they’re teaching. As one teacher put it: “‘Students need to recognize and find relevance to their own lives in what you are teaching. If students can make a connection to what they already know about in their lives and experiences, it is more likely they will be interested in what you have to say’” (99). Teachers must be able to impart the value of the skills that their class will develop and the relevance that it will have for students in their futures. If students and teachers share a belief in the importance of their given curriculum, then motivation, effort and achievement will all increase as a result.

Class Climate

Educators must also establish a healthy classroom climate, an atmosphere conducive to learning, which will serve to maximize student progress and achievement while they're in class. Establishing a controlled, fervent pace and sense of urgency attached to the goals that students have set for themselves is an important component of developing this class climate. Classrooms ought to exude an air of controlled chaos, harnessed energy and intensity that has been channeled into scholastic performance. Highly effective teachers, writes Eric Jensen, "use direct instruction in an engaging, well-paced, respectful but demanding format" (*Teaching* 95). In such classroom, time management is paramount and all members of the community must share the value of each minute of class time. This careful use of class time can contribute to more efficient pedagogy.

Classrooms must also promote a culture of safety and comfort and educators must create a climate of support. Having all students on the same page regarding norms, expectations and guiding operating principles of the classroom will allow classes to hold each other accountable for their collective growth. This familial atmosphere of collaboration and mutual respect permits significant growth and effort, especially if students feel that it is a safe place where they could fail and have the outcome be positive. Coming up with class procedure and operating principles¹ ought to be done collaboratively, as students will respond and adhere to rules better if they were involved in establishing them. The class can also develop daily rituals that give students an expectation for the routine and rhythm of each day. Such rituals can contribute to

¹ A list of suggested classroom operating principles can be found in Appendix 2.

maintaining adequate pace and urgency. As Steven Farr explains, “Highly effective teachers not only create an environment that diminishes the chances that students’ energy will be diverted in this way [so as to make them feel isolated or alone] but also create an environment that affirmatively strengthens students’ self-confidence and esteem” (73). In such a classroom all members must be treated with respect and bullying cannot be tolerated. Students must be encouraged to feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes in order to grow and improve from them. Eric Jensen suggests that teachers, “Avoid triggering students’ acute stress responses by keeping the classroom atmosphere emotionally safe” (*Engaging* 41). Conversely, when students achieve success, a high functioning classroom will celebrate those successes: “Affirm every little success early on,” suggests Jensen (*Engaging* 38). This will encourage students that their effort will pay off, that by working hard they can overcome the barriers to learning created by poverty and achieve academic success in spite of them.

Additionally, the class climate must be collaborative. Each student must see collective success as individual success and buy into a shared mindset of teamwork and communal growth. A good teacher, writes Steven Farr, “charts a path to a welcoming environment by purposefully planning for and creating a sense of community where students respect and support each other” (78). The class ought to be thought of as engaged in a journey, and mishaps and setbacks must be anticipated and faced together. “This community setting ensures that students do not feel isolated or alienated and that they have a sense of belonging that allows them to fully and unselfconsciously try, possibly fail, and thereby learn to master challenging concepts and skills” (Farr 78). Student support for one another is vital to mutual accountability, which will lead to

increased motivation, effort and thus achievement. The concept that they succeed and fail together will encourage accountability and increase student motivation: “Students’ sense that they are all in this together is often a critical driver of their hard work. Where students feel a sense of team, they are inclined to push, protect, and collaborate with their peers” (Farr 86). This climate of communal support is vital to creating an engaging classroom that can function so highly as to overcome the barriers to learning created by poverty.

Teachers can influence the mind-set and attitudes of their students as well. Educators are responsible for exercising their authority in the classroom in order to manipulate student attitudes, states-of-mind and capacity for understanding. This includes encouraging positivity, reducing lecture time, teaching appropriate behavior and modeling sound emotional responses, implementing variety, repeating content over and over again, and making class more compelling by appealing to student curiosity (Jensen, *Engaging* 42-3). Students must be taught the value of being positive: research shows that “Emotional positivity is essential to learning and productivity” (Jensen, *Engaging* 47). Using the classroom to manipulate the emotional mind-states of students will improve the class atmosphere, and make it more conducive to learning and academic achievement.

Part of increasing engagement via the improvement of the class climate includes the way that the educator themselves teaches. The clarity employed by the teacher, and the extent to which the teacher demonstrates their passion for teaching the material both have positive effects on student engagement. According to Eric Jensen, in order to more clearly express curriculum, educators would do well to concentrate first on mastering

the content: “Preparation is essential” (*Engaging* 29). Other solutions to improve teacher clarity include using fewer words, emphasizing directions or expectations in the positive rather than the negative, and making instructions simple and concise. Teaching with more clarity will increase student ability to perform at a high level and achieve academic success. Secondly, echoing the notion that “Research suggests that feelings are contagious” (Wild, Erb, & Bartels, qtd. in Jensen, *Engaging* 31), it is imperative that educators engage students by modeling the energy and urgency that they hope to see emulated by their students. Jensen writes, “Passion, is a very powerful classroom motivator (Brophy, 2004). Passion tells students that you care about what you do and that you’re connecting with them. Passion gets students curious, excited and even inspired. And passion cannot be faked” (*Engaging* 31). Expressing passion is accomplished via both verbal and non-verbal messages. Body language and tone of voice, in particular, play important roles in exuding contagious passion. Employing both increased clarity and expression of passion in the classroom are valuable tools that educators can utilize in order to improve the classroom atmosphere, making it more conducive to student engagement and thus learning.

This classroom environment must also be appropriately handled in its distinction from the norms of students’ home lives. It must be explicitly established that the classroom operates under certain norms, rules and expectations. Together, students and educators must be intentional about establishing what those ought to be. For students who live in poverty, school can be alienating because of how differently it operates when compared with their home environments. Classrooms would benefit from members being intentional and thoughtful about what norms and principles might guide

a high-functioning classroom. Insofar as those norms and principles resemble the home environment, students should be encouraged to apply elements of their home environments that do work well in the classroom. However, for students who come from home environments that function in a manner that would be detrimental to high performance in school, there must be an understanding that the classroom will operate by its own norms and that a dichotomy may exist between home and school.

Each of these aspects of the classroom atmosphere has the potential to create a space that is especially conducive to learning and academic performance. Creating a climate that supports progress and achievement, and a culture of collaboration and safety have the potential to improve student engagement in school and lead to better scholastic results, thus opening doors to a future outside of poverty.

Building Cognitive Capacity

As has been demonstrated at length in section one, students who grow up in poverty are left with cognitive deficiencies that increase the adversity that they face in schools, keeping them from realizing the potential that education has to liberate them from the cycle of poverty: “The true discrimination that comes out of poverty is the lack of cognitive strategies. The lack of these unseen attributes handicaps in every aspect of life the individual who does not have them” (Payne 107). The good news, as Eric Jensen explains, is that “a brain that is susceptible to adverse environmental effects is equally susceptible to positive, enriching effects” (*Engaging* 15). It has also been well established that part of an educator’s job involves teaching students that they are capable of improvement and that their cognitive ability is not fixed but rather can be improved, if treated by the correct methods. Furthermore, the educator is responsible for

fulfilling this duty, but building in curriculum that helps students catch up to their wealthier peers by overcoming lags in cognitive development created by living in poverty.

Eric Jensen writes, “Students with low cognitive capacity are ripe for an engaging teacher who is willing to teach the core cognitive skills that lead to academic success” (*Engaging* 15). There are many aspects to teaching such cognitive skills, but Jensen puts an emphasis on the following: building attention skills, teaching problem solving and critical thinking, training working memory, developing processing speed and fostering self-control. Focusing on boosting student abilities in these areas will equip them with the cognitive tools that students from middle or upper class households often learn at home. This use of the classroom as means to catching impoverished students up with their wealthier peers is one example of the sorts of pedagogical methods that this project seeks to illuminate and emphasize.

Ownership

The final component of encouraging student engagement in school, involves giving students a feeling of ownership and responsibility for their education. Students who grow up in poverty often feel like the circumstances of their lives are outside of their control. Life happens to them, and they have no agency in addressing the stressful crises of poverty that adversely affect their lives. The education system has a powerful opportunity to act as an exception to this hardship. Schools can operate so as to give students a feeling of control over their lives, by creating a space for them to see that their effort and energy can impact their own well being and lead to significant success within the walls of the classroom. Educators must, “Empower students to take greater

ownership of their learning. All students, especially those living in poverty or other adverse circumstances, crave relevant tasks and a sense of control” (Jensen, *Engaging* 133). This feeling of ownership has the potential to respond more positively to their education because it feels like a place where they have some control. This is important because “when perception of control is elevated, stress goes down and learning increases” (Jensen, *Engaging* 74). If such ownership can have the effect of increasing student engagement, it will likely lead to increased effort as well, and thus higher academic achievement leading to a more hopeful future.

This ownership can manifest itself in several ways in the classroom. The earlier subsection on the importance of setting high goals included the suggestion that involving students in setting and tracking their progress towards those goals would increase their investment in realizing them. Eric Jensen writes, “One of the most powerful ways to engage students is to let them take charge of their own learning...They are self-regulated and come up with learning goals and problems that are meaningful to them...These students are more likely to find passion, excitement, and pleasure in learning” (*Teaching* 139). This transparency and process of giving students responsibility and accountability for their academic progress will encourage participation and lead to a connection being made between their effort input and progress output.

Another way to use ownership to increase student engagement, involves giving students choice whenever possible: “Share the decision making in class...maintain expectations while offering choice and soliciting input” (Jensen, *Teaching* 21). Educators often tend to plan lessons and units in ways that limit student agency.

Students are told what to do and how to do it and must simply follow directions. Rather, by giving students a choice, or several options for how they want to learn will increase their investment in classroom activities, as well as will better cater to individual learning-style preferences. Jensen writes, “To increase your students’ locus of control and, by extension their engagement and learning, let them make more choices. When you give students a choice, they are more likely to give something a try” (*Engaging* 74). If students have collectively chosen the learning activity that best helps them prepare for an examination, for example, they will be more likely to engage in the activity. Giving this level of choice is not always possible for teachers, some curriculum requires that content is instructed in a specific way, but by building choice into the curriculum, educators have the potential to increase student buy-in and thus raise student performance.

Students will also respond well to being given authority in the classroom. Assigning class roles that rotate varying degrees of authority or responsibility to different class-members will likely lead to increased engagement as well. If students take responsibility for the efficacy of a lesson, and take pride in having that lesson work effectively, they will be more likely to engage in creating a healthy learning environment. Jensen encourages teachers to, “Share the power so that students feel some ownership of the class and its proceedings” (*Engaging* 76). One effective way of accomplishing this is to let students teach one another: “Peer teaching is a core engagement strategy used to build students’ comprehension of content” (Jensen, *Engaging* 100). Among the strengths previously discussed that students raised in poverty often develop, are leadership skills borne of their independence, and sometimes

the responsibility they take on for other siblings or family members at home. These leadership skills can be harnessed and applied in the class context in a healthy manner that helps students recognize and own the strengths that they have. Jensen points out,

Leadership and teamwork are powerful factors in automating student engagement. Taking leadership roles and collaborating in teams increase student responsibility and help students become more confident. The more self-reliant students become, the more control they feel over their learning, and the more likely they are to actively engage as a matter of routine (*Engaging* 140).

This concept can be applied to other unique strengths that students demonstrate. Putting those skills and attributes to work in the classroom will help students recognize those things in themselves, leading to improved self-esteem. Additionally, it will give students feelings of pride in utilizing that skill effectively, and thus they will engage in their effort to apply their strengths to the class context and increase their effort in order to turn those strengths into higher academic performance. Students must embrace the mentality of collective success or failure for this to work well and must work together to make sure that content is being understood by all class members.

It is important that educators apply these tactics moderately. Students who grow up in poverty, often operate under a different understanding of power and authority dynamics than their wealthier peers. Research demonstrates that in the home environment of low-income families, children are given less control, agency and authority than in the households of their higher-class peers. They may have more independence, but adhere to stricter rules and punishments. This means that in the classroom environment that encourages interdependence but offers higher individual agency and control, students who grow up in poverty may feel overwhelmed or unsure of how to respond. It is therefore important that educators are patient in building a

classroom culture that promotes student ownership. Initially, it will likely be necessary for teachers to use command-form, speaking to students from a more authoritarian perspective, in order to relate to the way students are spoken to outside of the classroom. However, as the class collectively determines the climate that they want to create for themselves, teachers can encourage them to feel comfortable taking more control and responsibility for themselves so that the culture of high effort and engagement is supported by the students, even if the teacher were to be absent.

Insofar as students are given appropriate amounts of control in the scholastic context, they will thus be able to combat the notion that they lack agency in their lives, as is often perpetuated by living in poverty. This ownership over their educational potential will increase buy-in and engagement. Each of the aspects of engagement explored in this subsection, including ownership, have the ability to do this, and increasing engagement will lead to increased effort, which will lead to improved academic performance, and open doors of opportunity out of poverty.

Building Relationships

In order to accomplish any of the aforementioned objectives, it is imperative that educators form healthy and meaningful relationships with their students. Students who grow up in poverty, as explored in section one, are often socially deprived. At worst, they may feel isolated and alone, and lack self-esteem and positive relationships. These social deficiencies make it difficult to achieve success not only in the school context but in the outside world as well. Fortunately, the education system provides students with the opportunity to overcome the social consequences of growing up in poverty and form

healthier relationships with others, which can ultimately lead to a healthier concept of self.

It is the urgent responsibility of educators to utilize their role in students' lives to see that the education system fulfills that potential and gives students the tools they need to achieve academic success as well as appropriate social function in their adult futures. Teachers can encourage the fostering of healthy relationships in four ways that will be beneficial to students academically: in their direct relationships with students; in their students' relationships with each other; in their relationships with the parents, or major influences in students' lives; and in helping students to make social connections and build social capital. Helping students build these relationships will be imperative to seeing them engage and invest in their education, and realize the potential it affords them.

The Student-Teacher Relationship

The relational dynamic perhaps most important for increasing student buy-in, and thus performance, is that between an educator and each student: "Developing strong teacher-student relationships helps counter the negative effects of these inappropriate emotional responses and has a profound effect on student engagement" (Jensen, *Engaging* 16). How students relate to their teachers has an enormous impact in determining the effort they put forth in school. As Eric Jensen puts it, according to research, "Students almost always work harder for teachers they like (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010)" (*Engaging* 23). Furthermore, "Students from poverty connect to people, rather than to abstract knowledge" (Beegle 101). Additionally, "Although relationships matter to all students, students with less stable home lives have a particular

need for strong relationships at school and are more likely to want to connect with you” (*Engaging* 24). Teachers have enormous potential to impact student growth and individual development, scholastic motivation, effort and thus achievement: “Strong, secure relationships help stabilize children’s behavior and provide the core guidance needed to build lifelong social skills...The relationships that teachers build with students form the single strongest access to student goals, socialization, motivation, an academic performance” (Jensen, *Teaching* 17, 20). As Donna Beegle writes, “People in poverty may follow through because of the relationship at first, not necessarily because they see the program or assignment as valuable” (88). The foundations of healthy student-teacher relationships are trust, authenticity, mutual respect, and genuine care. Effective teachers, “build strong, close, and purposeful relationships. They learn who their students are, what they believe, and where they come from. These teachers harness that emotional engagement and the knowledge it produces to drive student investment and, in turn, increase students’ academic achievement” (Farr 74). If students believe that their teachers care about their well-being, want the best for them, are prepared to themselves work hard to see students realize potential, and know how to help them achieve academically so as to improve their lives, then students will respond by working hard to meet the expectations and reach the goals that the teacher has laid out for them.

In order to build the rapport needed for this level of relationship, teachers must build a foundation for the relationship. They must first make an effort to get to know their students. Beegle writes, “When teachers, social workers, and helping professionals know something about the people they serve, they are much more likely to reach out

and do what is truly needed to help people move forward” (90). Teachers must impart that they are genuinely interested in their students and that student well-being is their primary concern. Teachers must furthermore convey that they are advocates for, and in a certain sense employees of, the students. Students must come to understand that their teacher will work in their self-interest, but that in order to do so students must let themselves be known.

Students should be encouraged to self-disclose and share of their own lives in the way the teacher does about his or her own. Activities to have students write or speak about themselves allow teachers to learn about students, while simultaneously getting a sense for the levels at which students perform skills necessary in language arts. If possible, teachers should seek to meet independently with each student during the first week of classes, even if for only a few moments, in order to establish a personal connection. Teachers must work hard to learn about the students in order to structure the class accordingly, catering to their particular strengths and needs².

There are a variety of ways that teachers can learn about their students, and they ought to creatively employ an array of tactics to gather the information that they need. Delivering surveys in which students answer questions about themselves is one, direct way, but having students tell about themselves in class discussions, or small groups, to write about themselves, or to speak with them independently, are all other, more abstract ways to gather information. Speaking with other teachers who have taught the student, the students’ guardians, or consulting the student’s personal file are other valuable ways to gain information.

² A list of questions based on information that would be beneficial for the teacher to learn about each student can be found in Appendix 1.

Furthermore, asking students to share of himself or herself with the teacher, will establish a foundation for the importance of self-reflection upon which the class will be founded. Students must be encouraged to consider their own strengths, weaknesses, histories, and values in order to better understand their own needs and how to maximize their educational experiences. Getting to know students early on will increase the potential that teachers have to cultivate relationships that will prove paramount in bolstering student effort and realizing academic success.

Finding out what their students care about, what motivates them, makes them tick, inspires them and so forth, will allow the teacher to design the class in ways that cater to those student desires, showing the students that the teacher cares for what they value.

Furthermore, it is important that teachers let students get to know them: “To identify with someone and find common ground, people must self-disclose information about who they are and their experiences” (Beegle 87). Initial contact with students should include self-disclosure in order to demonstrate honesty, authenticity, and vulnerability. This transparency will help them build trust. “Students living in poverty are practical about what motivates them. They want to know who the teacher really is...when a teacher cannot or will not connect personally, students are less likely to trust them” (Jensen, *Engaging* 12). Students are keenly capable of detecting when a teacher is being inauthentic or dishonest. If a teacher is willing to let his or her guard down, be vulnerable, and not take him or herself too seriously, it will model for students those same qualities. If students emulate that vulnerability, and release their defensiveness or guardedness, it will have a tremendously positive impact on the class climate. Being

known by students, and knowing them well in return, will build a foundation of trust between students and teachers that will permit teachers to ask a lot of effort and investment from their students in order to achieve previously improbable academic success. This trust will become the foundation for students believing in the power of education to open doors to them outside of poverty, as well as believing in the relevance and validity of a particular subject or curriculum. Research supports this: “According to Lee and Burkam (2003), students were less likely to drop out and more likely to graduate when they felt a positive bond with teachers and others at school” (Jensen, *Teaching* 87). Teachers ought to tell about themselves: how they came to be teaching there, what is important to them, what motivates, frustrates, or inspires them. As students are inclined, they should be encouraged to ask questions about the teacher, in order to get to know him or her better. Students from poverty are less likely than middle- or upper class students to have positive adult role models in their lives. The genre of mentorship provided by teachers has the potential to make a significant and lasting positive impact on such students, that they might otherwise never have access to.

This process of self-disclosure and letting oneself be known will, of course, be an ongoing process that will last beyond the initial weeks of school. Overlooking this step, however, could dangerously lead to students feeling removed from, or distrustful of, the teacher, which would make building rapport and developing the ability to motivate, exceedingly challenging. Demonstrating that the trust being asked of their students is reciprocated, teachers may then give control and increased authority to the students in the class, allowing them to take ownership of the classroom, thus further increasing engagement and buy-in.

In addition to mutual trust, mutual respect between teacher and students is equally important. “Successful relationship,” writes Ruby Payne, “occurs when emotional deposits are made to the student, emotional withdrawals are avoided, and students are respected” (111). Students must feel that they’re valued and respected and will then reciprocate that respect, transforming the negative perception of schools and teachers that students from poverty often adopt. Donna Beegle explains, “If you are judging someone’s behavior, you cannot build a relationship...everyone should be treated with respect. Those who are disrespectful to others likely have been treated disrespectfully themselves, and the vicious cycle may continue until it is broken by the recognition of the inherent worth of the individual” (viii). Jensen adds,

Students who respect you know you’re a professional who is looking out for their long-term best interests, and they will naturally be more engaged in learning...You don’t need to like your students’ world, but never disparage or criticize a student’s background, heritage or culture...You’ll gain respect from them by respecting them, respecting yourself, and being fair (*Engaging* 25).

The teacher must lead by example in establishing this pattern of mutual respect as the norm (*Teaching* 21). In summary, Jensen writes, “When you respect students and build positive relationships, they will be much more receptive to what you’re selling” (*Engaging* 27).

Student-Student Relationship

In order to create a positive classroom environment and thereby increase student engagement, fostering a community-oriented, supportive class climate is critical. For students to maximize the academic potential that their education affords them, they must nurture positive relationships with their peers, in addition to their educators. In

order for students to overcome the poverty-induced isolation and negative perception of school that hinders academic performance, they must be encouraged to cultivate healthy, positive relationships with their peers in the classroom. Teachers can catalyze the development of such relationships by establishing in the classroom a familial culture: “Treating your class as a family can reduce discipline issues and improve learning” (Jensen, *Engaging* 43). As Eric Jensen writes, “no curriculum, instruction or assessment, however high-quality, will succeed in a hostile social climate” (*Teaching* 87). If those living in poverty tend to see people as their possessions and value relationships, this is a vital component to convincing those students to invest in their education.

For students to develop this level of relationship requires that they know each other. Emphasis must be placed on letting oneself be known, and seeking to know others more deeply in order to increase the potential of peer-peer relationships to impact academic performance. Becoming vulnerable with each other early in the year will establish the classroom as a safe place where students aren’t afraid of being disparaged or bullied, but instead rally to support each other. This climate of support and collaboration will keep students from resisting participation out of fear of failure or embarrassment. “Students who know, trust, and cooperate with one another typically do better academically...Students will have a hard time bonding with peers and doing well academically unless they feel safe, appreciated, important and supported” (Jensen, *Teaching* 92). Recognizing the values and strengths that others have, and being secure in the fact that they recognize value in you, leads to mutual respect out of which supportive relationships can grow. Building a culture of vulnerability, teamwork and

support in the classroom will allow students to embrace the value of developing social capital and will be held accountable by the class for their scholastic effort. Students who know and respect each other will remain motivated to work hard for one another. If students believe that they succeed and fail together, they will hold each other accountable for effort and as they grow and progress, will see their relationships grow as well.

Teacher-Guardian Relationship

Because students who grow up in poverty see the people in their lives as their possessions, it would be foolish to attempt to engage and invest students in their education without also seeking to reach their support systems as well. Donna Beegle writes of the importance of,

Recognizing and valuing the strengths of an individual's family and friends. People from helping professions will often take an interest in an individual student or person that they are working with, yet they sometimes ignore or negatively judge that individual's family members. A person's sense of self is highly related to his or her family. Resiliency can only be built when there is trust. Valuing the people he or she cares about builds trust (85).

Showing a student that their educator values the people in their life, will demonstrate that the educator values them. These support systems, it must be understood, will vary from student to student. For some, it may be that one or both parents are their greatest influences. For others, a grandmother, older sibling, or neighbor may fill that role. As an educator, it is vital to learn who in students' lives makes the biggest impact and consider how to utilize those people to maximize students' academic potentials. . Teachers must learn who, in their students' lives, is most influential, who supports

them, and how best to open channels of communication with that person or those people. In many cases these will be parents, though in some circumstances it may be more effective to communicate with students' siblings, extended family members or other guardians. The purpose of investing in these relationships is to partner with the other important people in students' lives in order to motivate that student to put forth the scholastic effort necessary to achieve academic success. Secondly, it will be helpful for the teacher to know more about the home environment of the student. Because that environment is likely primarily dictated by the guardian present, getting to know the guardian will help the teacher better understand each student.

Highly effective teachers also recognize that changing students' beliefs about learning requires the help of other influential people in students' lives...To maximize students' learning, these teachers invest families and other influencers in helping students work toward the big goal. Collaborating with such partners, these teachers create a network of well-aligned messages that reinforce the benefits of hard work and the value of achieving the big goal (Farr 62).

Similarly, educators would do well to learn whether there are people in students' lives who act as significant hindrances to academic success. Older siblings or an abusive relative may make a negative impact. Teachers must find out as much as they can about the social support system surrounding a given student in order to unleash the potential that it has to help the student achieve in school. Research shows that parents want the best possible futures for their children, even if their actions do not always reflect those desires: "If you do not believe there are possibilities for you, your children often become your hope" (Beegle 66). Later, Beegle adds, "For many, a strong motivator is the desire to stop the poverty related suffering of people they love. Therefore, service

professionals need to show students and families in poverty how education can truly help them to move out of poverty” (71). An educator’s unwavering belief in student potential, and in education as means to unlocking that potential, will be contagious to those who care most about that student, even if the adult had contrary experiences. Teachers, therefore, must attempt to establish positive relationships with the caring adults in a students’ life in order to create a support system for that student that expresses consistent messages about the value of the student and their education both at home and at school.

Social Capital and Networking

For educators to help students overcome the deficit in social capital that growing up in poverty can create, they must actively support students in recognizing and utilizing the human resources available to them. Donna Beegle, who grew up in generational poverty, describes an impactful teacher that she had as follows, “Perhaps most important, he linked me to a network of professionals in the community who continued to widen my range of possibilities” (13). In school, students must learn the value of making social connections, and then be assisted in developing a supportive social network. Communities that are poor in tangible possessions are often rich in social resources. Beegle draws on social capital theory saying it,

...can help break poverty barriers if it is used to connect people to resources and networks of support...Isolation perpetuates poverty. To break the isolation of poverty, people need networks...The basic premise of social capital theory is that interaction enables people to build networks of support, to increase access, to commit themselves to each other, and to create opportunities for reaching potential (94-5).

The earlier students gain an appreciation for the importance of social capital, the better. Learning to value the extent of their social network and seek to proactively expand it has the potential to give students access to human resources equivalent to those that their wealthier peers tend to have. This can include having students brainstorm and list what their most urgent needs are, followed by brainstorming or researching what local resources might be helpful in addressing those needs. For example, a student might connect with someone who could provide childcare for the student's younger siblings, permitting him or her time to complete nightly homework. Or a student could ask a neighbor about using their computer periodically for writing assignments. Or, a student could find a professional working in their field of interest to job shadow or interview. Teachers could facilitate these sorts of social connections, empowering students to self-advocate and meet their particular needs. Learning what people may be at their disposal to advocate for them, and how to contact and invest in those resources, will give students from poverty ways to meet the extra needs, or erase the extra deficits, that poverty may have created in their lives. If students can learn in school what social resources are available to them, and the benefits, such as mentorship, that those resources might provide, students can work to develop beneficial relationships with figures in the community that would not have otherwise been an asset.

As a result of the social isolation caused by poverty, students often operate at a social-relational deficit. The classroom can play a vital role in overcoming that isolation and teaching students how to function according to healthy social norms. Establishing these norms and placing emphasis on the importance of relationships early in the school year will create a positive social environment within the classroom, which teachers can

use to improve student effort, engagement, and academic performance. Students who grow up in poverty will tend to be especially well adapted to responding to people. Too often, the education system does not provide people who are willing to maximize this strength of poor students. For educators, building and fostering relationships with students, among students, with the key figures in students life, and for students outside of school, is of incalculable importance to investing and engaging students. It will be because of these relationships that students from poverty will choose to believe in the potential of education as means to liberation from poverty, and will find the motivation to achieve success in school so as to access that potential. The importance of the cultivation of such relationships cannot be overstated.

Conclusion

This chapter proposes factors that can address barriers to education for impoverished students and emphasize the importance of externalizing students' poverty and contextualizing it as a result of systemic inequalities; maximizing the strengths that growing up in poverty cultivates; educating holistically, so that students' basic needs are met; raising student expectations and setting ambitious goals; increasing student engagement in the classroom; and cultivating various dynamics of healthy relationships for students. Each of these factors has the potential to level the playing field and permit students who come from poverty to achieve the same levels of academic success that their wealthier peers do. Educators can employ these elements in order to boost student academic achievement and let their education open doors to a brighter future. In the final chapter, I will take these theoretical concepts and explore how a teacher might apply them in order to increase student achievement. I lay out the groundwork for the function of these concepts explore how pedagogical methods can be formulated and applied based on the demonstrated impact of these factors.

IV. Applying the Enhanced Pedagogy

Introduction: Original Output

In this chapter, I apply the pedagogical principles established in the third chapter by producing sample lesson plans. The suggestions made here are neither exhaustive nor comprehensive, and only offer one example of how a teacher could practically implement the concepts explored in earlier chapters. Geared towards educators, who might benefit from practical ideas for how to accomplish the points of emphasis set forth by the third chapter, this chapter will explore the way that teachers can design their curricula in order to better help students overcome the academic deficits common among poor students, thereby allowing education to serve as a liberating force from the hardship of poverty.

Each class of students varies widely from any other, and must be treated accordingly. When implementing solutions, many specific factors must be considered in order to best maximize the potential of these solutions for closing the academic achievement gap. For the purposes of this section, because of its applicability to my future work, the hypothetical class will be a 10th grade English/Language Arts course in a public, rural school in a low income district. This hypothetical class will consist of 35 predominately white students, of which a significant majority can be assumed to come from generational poverty. Each class period lasts one hour. These factors will guide the implementation of concepts explored in chapter three, however such solutions would be effective and important for teachers teaching any subject, age, or demographic of student.

Getting Started: Laying the Foundation Early-on

First impressions matter. The way a teacher chooses to introduce themselves and their course to a given group of incoming students lays pivotal groundwork for the potential success that that class can achieve. How a teacher prioritizes objectives and demonstrates values will lay the foundation for the course. The strength or weakness of that foundation will have a tremendous impact on the extent to which learning follows. The following points of emphasis must be established in the initial days and weeks of the class, though they will undoubtedly take months to fully implement.

The lesson plans that follow are based on specific learning objectives for the first couple of weeks of school. Again, it is important to note that the implementation of these strategies will last throughout the school year and beyond. It would be impractical to assume that two weeks spent imparting these principles could suffice to completely undo any damage created by poverty. However, this section seeks to introduce a model for how a teacher could construct lesson plans early in the year that establish the foundation for work on all four of these objectives throughout the school year. The objectives, based on the ideas presented in chapter three, are as follows:

1. To build relationships
 - a. Between students and teachers
 - i. Self-disclosure on the part of the teacher, to let the students get to know them
 - ii. Learning about the students
 - b. Between students and other students
 - c. Between teachers and members of each students' significant support system (i.e. guardians, siblings, etc.)

- d. For students in the community: Helping students locate human resources and build social capital for themselves
- 2. For students to reflect on, and reshape in cases of negative perception, their perspective on education
 - a. On the role of education broadly in improving prospects for a better future
 - b. On the value of language arts content for personal development and relevant skill building
 - c. To cultivate growth-mindset, reject the notion that ability is fixed, and commit to the effort required to achieve success based on belief in the validity of the reward
- 3. To reflect on personal identity and explore:
 - a. The positive and negative impacts that each student's unique background has on their academic performance (i.e. strengths and weaknesses cultivated by growing up in poverty)
 - b. Any unmet basic needs that get in the way of achieving academic success
 - c. Developing an awareness of resources and assets available to students to meet their needs and make it easier to achieve in the classroom
 - d. An understanding of the ways that school norms and expectations may differ from those experienced by students at home
 - e. Setting personal, measurable goals for the school year based on elevated personal expectations and baseline assessments by the teacher to understand starting point
- 4. To create and cultivate a positive, engaging class climate and culture
 - a. By giving students ownership based in choice and responsibility
 - b. By fostering a familial, communal, collaborative environment based on
 - i. Safety
 - ii. Mutual Respect
 - iii. Growth-orientation

iv. Support

- c. By agreeing upon shared, collective goals
- d. By creating a positive physical ambiance

These four main points of emphasis, and all that accompany them, form the learning objectives for the first several class sessions. Spending time on these factors will take valuable class time, but it is an investment that is well worth it, as the framework established in the first few sessions will lay the foundation for the way the class operates throughout its course. Teachers must establish these truths in order to maximize their students' potential in the classroom; thereby permitting them to overcome the deficits created by poverty and achieve liberating academic success.

What follows are detailed lesson plans for the first ten class sessions of the hypothetical 10th grade English class described above. Lesson plans are written in the first person from the perspective of the teacher. They demonstrate how time can be spent in the initial class sessions to instill the values and priorities laid out above. In italics, following the lesson plan for each day, is an explanation for the learning objectives addressed by each activity that day. These lesson plans provide a framework for the practical application of those concepts and demonstrate how they ultimately all overlap and work together to lay a sturdy foundation on which the class can begin to achieve previously unthinkable academic success.

Annotated Lesson Plans

Format: 10 days, 1 hour/day. 35 students. 10th grade English/Language Arts.

Day 1:

5 minutes: Course Introduction and Welcome

5 minutes: Personal Introduction (PowerPoint presentation, with photographs)

Content: a) brief personal history b) what I love c) who I love

10 minutes: Quiz. In groups of 3-4, students will come up with a consensus to each question displayed on the board. Each group will elect a spokesman, eligible to be called upon to explain the reason for the group's answer to a given question. Content of questions will be trivia about my life. Students will have to guess the correct multiple-choice answer to each light-hearted question. 5-6 questions.

10 minutes: Explain Autobiography assignment:

Each class period will begin with a brief autobiographical presentation by a given student. With a class of 35 students this will take nearly the first two months of school, but in these first two weeks, the class will see the first ten. Their presentations will imitate my own, concisely introducing themselves and structuring the content to explain:

a brief personal history b) what they love c) who they love

Presentations will last no more than 5 minutes. Each autobiography could theoretically be "winged". Preparation need only consist of putting some thought into what students will say.

This lecture by me will include facilitation of a class-wide brainstorm-generated list of good presentation techniques (i.e. voice projection, eye contact, posture) as well as good audience participation techniques (i.e. silent attentiveness, asking relevant

questions, etc.). It will also include generating, or clarifying, definitions of biography and autobiography.

For 5 minutes following each presentation, I will call randomly on 3 consecutive students. The first student will deliver a concise biographical summary of the information given by the presenting student. The second student will be asked to come up with a question for the presenting student based on information given in either the autobiographical or biographical presentations. The third student will be asked to identify someone else in the class (including, possibly, themselves) who has something (anything) in common with the presenting student.

Schedule at least the first four student presenters (if not all).

(For each explanation of an assignment that follows, it should be assumed that students are hearing this information from me verbally and either seeing it written (or projected) on the board, or receiving a handout with a written description and prompt.)

5 minutes: Explain “Where I’m From” poetry assignment. Show examples. Students will construct a poem describing where they come from and what defines their lives. Each line of the poem will begin with the clause “I’m from” and be followed by a factually based, abstract personal statement such as “I’m from worn out Nikes pounding dusty forest trails” which describes my own affinity for running.

20 minutes: Students will work on “Where I’m From” poems, semi-independently. (Discussing ideas with neighbors is encouraged). Write a 10-line rough draft in those 20 minutes.

As students work, I will circulate and introduce myself personally to each one, learning something about each of them.

5 minutes: Wrap-up class, assign homework

Conclusion of each class will also take place in a standing circle, before students have packed up.

Homework: Revise “Where I’m From” poem worked on in class. Add an additional 5 lines to whatever you had. Remind student #1 that their short autobiography presentation will be tomorrow. (Should take no more than 20 minutes.)

[The activities of Day 1 revolve almost entirely around building relationships. The PowerPoint presentation and trivia quiz are ways of letting students get to know me. The initiation of the autobiography assignment will allow me, and the other students, to better get to know the members of the class, cultivating a communal culture. This assignment also allows students to practice public speaking skills and for me to get a basic assessment of where they stand in that regard. The Where I’m From poem allows students to get creative, do some self-reflection, and share more about themselves with me. It also gets students writing, and gives me a preliminary writing sample that will contribute to an initial assessment of each student’s level of writing proficiency. While they work, I’ll have the chance to meet each student personally in order to begin to build a healthy relationship with each class member, demonstrating that I care, respect and am interested in each student.]

Day 2:

2 minutes: Introduction and welcome. Collect “Where I’m From” poems

(Each class after the first will begin with students standing, in a circle around the outside of the classroom for my opening remarks, welcome, schedule overview and miscellaneous announcements. Each class will begin and end with music playing. And

I'll select and read a quote that applies to that day's work at the beginning of each class.)

10 minutes: "Autobiography, biography, question, connection" Student Presentation #1

3 minutes: Explain Nametag activity

10 minutes: Groups of 5-6 (Table groups). Make yourself a nametag. Decorate it. On the back, in less than 5 words, answer the following questions:

What would be your dream job?

How do you usually spend Saturdays?

What is the most important thing about you?

5 minutes: Share the answers to your questions with the other members of your group

As each person shares, each other group member should come up with one follow-up question to ask, or a suggestion of one other person in the class with a similar answer to one of the presenter's answers.

5 minutes: Rotate. Find a new completely new group. Share the answers to your questions with the other members of your new group. Same deal.

5 minutes: Rotate. Find a new completely new group. Share the answers to your questions with the other members of your new group. Same deal.

5 minutes: Distribute 10 "Get-to-know-you" Survey questions. Students have 5 minutes to begin answering them.

5 minutes: Wrap up, explain homework, dismiss

HW: Answer 10 survey questions (short answers). Student #2 should be ready to present autobiography first thing the next day. (10-15 minutes.)

[Day 2 will continue to build relationships. First the student Autobiography presentation will allow me and the other class members to get to know each student better. Next, the nametag activity will be a way to have students self-reflect and share information with me. The group format and rotations will allow students to work together, get to know each other, and discover similarities and commonalities. Having name tags will help us all get to know each other better, sooner, and demonstrate value and respect by using people's names. The survey questions that they will receive will be brief homework, but will give me a better sense for where students are at as writers and allow them to self-reflect and share more of themselves with me (See Appendix I for list of all information sought from students, to be accumulated via various mediums of disclosure).]

Day 3:

2 minutes: Welcome circle; collect HW surveys

10 minutes: “Autobiography, biography, question, connection”

5 minutes: I'll distribute a short, photocopied, well-known literary description of a hero or protagonist. I, or a student volunteer, will read it aloud as the class follows along. I'll define any tricky vocabulary. Then I'll explain the activity.

15 minutes: Independent free-write about some one (or a couple of people) in your life who you love. Could be parents, siblings, friends, extended family. This should be someone older than you, perhaps a role model or significant influence. Someone who cares about you, and who you trust and would go to if you were in trouble or needed something. Spend five minutes brainstorming who might fit that description and then ten minutes describing how the person you chose fits that description. Try to organize

thoughts as you write: introduce the person and explain your relationship with them.

Then explain how you're like them, or how you emulate them, and then why you would choose to go to them if you were in trouble.

10 minutes: Optional time to share what students have written with the entire class (practicing good presenter and audience behavior)

5 minutes: Have students write contact information for their guardian and/or the significant person they wrote about at the bottom of their page. Contact information includes what the best way, and time, to contact them would be.

3 minutes: Wrap up, assign homework, dismiss

HW: Short answers to 10 survey questions on school history. Student #3 be ready to give autobiography. (10-15 minutes.)

[The agenda on day 3 will continue to build relationships, especially with the routine activities such as the "Autobiography" assignment. Reading aloud as students follow along will help with reading comprehension. The content of that reading will introduce students to the type of writing they will be doing that day. Expanding vocabulary will help overcome the linguistic deficiency sometimes developed by students from poverty. The free write will give students a chance to reflect on the social capital available to them, and will help me learn more about their writing ability and lives outside of school, including who has the biggest influence on them. Learning this will help me learn who I ought to invest in, to improve student buy-in. Allowing students the opportunity to share this information with the class will give them another chance to practice public speaking and give me a sense for their ability in that domain, as well as to build our safe, supportive class atmosphere, by practicing good audience behavior.]

Having students explicitly write the contact information of those who have the biggest influence over them, as well as giving me information about how best and when best to contact those people will allow me to better take advantage of those relationships for the academic benefit of my students. The homework survey questions on school history will be brief but will get students thinking about their experience in school in anticipation of the following day's agenda.]

Day 4:

2 minutes: Welcome circle

10 minutes: “Autobiography...”

15 minutes: I (or a student volunteer) reads a journal entry from the diary of Anne Frank aloud. Students receive photocopies of diary entry and follow along. Before reading, I briefly cover the context into which the diary of Anne Frank fits. Following the reading, we define tricky vocabulary and I explain the next activity.

15 minutes: Students write journal entries about their school history, which will be based on their answers to last night's homework. These will cover in what subjects they've found success in school, what classes have been hard, what would make school better, what importance school holds for them, etc. etc.

3 minutes: Share journal entry content with one neighbor.

5 minutes: Wrap up, concluding thoughts on the importance of school and value of education and the importance of seeing the potential that education has optimistically. Collect journal entries, if finished. Assign homework.

HW: Finish journal entries if necessary. Answer 10 survey questions on personal experience with language arts content. Remind next student that their short autobiography presentation will be tomorrow. (15-20 minutes)

[Aside from relationship building, day 4's agenda will revolve around reflection and discussion of the importance of education, in an attempt to initiate dialogue that might begin to reframe any negative perception of the value of education that students might have. Reading the Diary of Anne Frank will give students a sense for the power of self-reflection and demonstrate the format in which they'll be writing. Vocabulary review accomplishes the same objective as on day 3. Their journal entry allows them to reflect on their own experiences in the education system and why they perceive it the way that they do (whether positively or negatively). It will allow students to share with me those thoughts and prepare students for my lecture, hopefully influencing them to believe in the importance, potential and value of education. Their survey questions on their experience with language arts content will get them thinking about that topic before we cover it the following day.]

Day 5:

2 minutes: Welcome circle. Collect all remaining journal entries.

10 minutes: "Autobiography..."

15 minutes: Read short, non-fiction persuasive argument for the value of language arts skills and appreciation. Go over tricky vocabulary. Explain activity.

15 minutes: In groups of 3, designate 2 scribes. Each group will receive an assigned component of language arts curriculum. In groups, have the first scribe record the results of 5 minutes of group brainstorming on the value of assigned language arts

subtopic (i.e. creative writing). Collectively respond to such questions as, “What makes it hard?” “What makes it interesting?” “How would practicing strengthen or improve identity?” The second scribe spends 10 minutes writing an organized paragraph (as dictated by other group members) summarizing the argument for that subtopic, persuasively. Argue why it’s important to learn and what practical application it could have later in life.

8 minutes: Wrap up, debrief, and assign homework

HW: Brainstorm and write a list of things that keep you from doing your best in school (i.e. you work a job, you babysit after school, you’re lazy, you don’t get enough sleep, etc.) List and explain at least 4. Then list some possible solutions to those challenges (i.e. if I could get a blanket, I’d be warm enough to get enough sleep at night, or if I didn’t have to close at work I could get homework done at night). Remind next student that their short autobiography presentation will be tomorrow. (25-30 minutes).

[In addition to the now routine relationship building exercises, day 5’s group work will allow further collaboration and community-building in the classroom. It will also help address, and hopefully abate, any negative perception of language arts curriculum that students have. Considering and discussing the value of language arts content will frame my proposal of its value, relevance, and importance. Writing persuasively will give me an introductory look at how well they’re able to do so. Their homework will prepare them for the following day’s content]

Day 6:

2 minutes: Welcome Circle

10 minutes: “Autobiography...”

5 minutes: Introduce activity

20 minutes: In groups of 4 (assigned by me), discuss some of the needs you generated for homework last night, and collectively brainstorm solutions to those needs (8 minutes).

Take the need assigned to your group by me and make a poster listing the need and some possible solutions. (I.e., NO INTERNET CONNECTION AT HOME. Solutions: public library, school computer lab, Wi-Fi at neighbor's house).

10 minutes: Lecture by me on the hierarchy of needs and importance of seeking resources, as well as externalization of poverty and how it comes with both negative and positive impacts, both of which are important to understand and self-identify.

Secondly, lecture on the norms and expectations with which school operates, and how that may vary from the home environment.

3 minutes: Wrap up. Assign homework

HW: Journal entry (one page) on personal strengths and weaknesses organized as follows:

Character trait strengths and weaknesses

Application or manifestation of strengths and weaknesses in the school setting

Application or manifestation of strengths and weaknesses outside of school
(extracurricular impact)

An exploration of ways that the norms, rules or expectations at school differ from those at home

Remind next student that their short autobiography presentation will be tomorrow. (30-40 minutes)

[The group work on day 6 will encourage collaboration and community. It will help cultivate relationships among the students. The information that comes out of the discussions will be helpful to me in aiding students to tap into the resources available to them, in order to meet their basic needs and prepare them to be better students. It will also inform me better about their home lives and the adversity they may face, and therefore how much to expect from them based on their lives' uncontrollable circumstances. Creating the posters will contribute to a positive physical transformation of the room so that the content that we create will serve as a reminder of what we discover. My lecture on the hierarchy of needs and my view of priorities ahead of school will demonstrate compassion and let students know that I'm their advocate and asset, not a hindrance; that I understand that certain circumstances exist beyond our control. This will help cultivate the mutual respect and trust beneficial to the class climate we'll be trying to create. Explicitly explaining the differences between the norms and expectations that schools and households may operate under will allow me to frame the expectations and norms that I hope to establish in our classroom. The journal entry that students will write for homework will give them a chance to reflect on, and share with me, their personal strengths and weaknesses and how those might affect their performance in school, both positively and negatively. This will set the foundation for my encouragement that they take ownership for the application of their strengths to the classroom, creating space for them to take on responsibilities that will cultivate engagement and participation.]

Day 7:

2 minutes: Welcome circle

10 minutes: “Autobiography...”

30 minutes: Watch and debrief 2 TED talks on Grit and Growth Mindset by Carol Dweck and Angela Lee Duckworth, respectively

8 minutes: Short lecture and discussion on the value of grit and growth mindset. Assign homework. Wrap up and dismiss.

HW: Journal Entry: Define “growth mindset” in your own words. How does it apply to you? How does it apply to school? List some ways that you hope to grow this year.

Bonus: List some ways that we, as a class, could grow this year.

[Watching these TED talks and responding to them, both collectively and independently, will build a foundational understanding of growth mindset that will be imperative to setting and working towards our goals for the year. Ensuring that students believe in their ability to achieve academic success and have high expectations for themselves, and realistic expectations for the effort they’ll have to put forth, will be important in establishing the desirable class culture.]

Day 8:

2 minutes: Welcome circle

10 minutes: “Autobiography...”

5 minutes: Explain poster activity

20 minutes: In groups of 4-5, discuss your assigned quotation, and how it applies to our class. (Quotations will be on effort, grit, growth, etc.) Together, make and decorate a poster displaying the quote.

10 minutes: Lecture on the importance of, different types of, and methods for, setting high, specific, measurable goals

3 minutes: Wrap up, assign homework.

HW: List 3-5 specific academic goals for yourself this year and how you'll (we'll) measure them. Also list whom in this class you'll share your goal with (an accountability partner). Remind next student that their short autobiography presentation will be tomorrow.

[Day 8's further response to growth mindset as a foundation for setting goals, and especially the work they'll do collaboratively in creating a poster, reflect the importance of communal effort and the class emphasis on each member's ability to change as well as the responsibility that the rest of the class has to hold each peer accountable to their high potential. Having them design their goals and their measurement mechanisms will give students a sense of ownership, that will hopefully create a sense of responsibility for their goals, which will ultimately hold them accountable for putting forth more effort towards achieving them. Creating posters with inspirational quotes will be useful in decorating the classroom with reminders of our class culture. The quotes will also serve to demonstrate the relevance and validity of this emphasis. The homework that they will do will get them ready for the following day's classwork.]

Day 9:

2 minutes: Welcome circle

10 minutes: "Autobiography..."

15 minutes: Working independently, make a goal poster for yourself that includes:

Your name

Your top 3 goals

Your measurement plan

Your accountability partner's name

20 minutes: Sitting in groups, each person will independently create and decorate a poster listing one of our operating principles. (See Appendix 2).

3 minutes: Wrap up and dismiss

HW: None. Remind next student that their short autobiography presentation will be tomorrow.

[The goal-setting that the class does collectively on day 9 will be tremendously important for casting an ambitious vision that will become, hopefully, a source of inspiration, motivation and accountability throughout the school year. Decorating the room with physical evidence of those goals will serve as a valuable reminder and motivator. Next, the discussion and agreement upon classroom operating principles will promote student ownership over the classroom culture and atmosphere, while ensuring that a safe, supportive climate is designed. Collectively understanding and agreeing upon these principles will provide the foundation for how the class will be successful throughout the year.]

Day 10:

2 minutes: Welcome circle

10 minutes: "Autobiography..."

10 minutes: I'll lecture on the operating principles. Origin, importance, collective ownership, etc.

20 minutes: Students will work in groups to create posters representing the principles

5 minutes: Unit 2 Preview

3 minutes: Wrap up and dismiss

HW: None. Remind next student that their short autobiography presentation will be tomorrow.

[My more explicit discussion of the purpose and origin of these operating principles on day 10 will further cement the role that they'll play in creating an ideal learning environment. Getting buy-in and student ownership over these principles, norms, and expectations will give them increased clout, I hope. This day will conclude our initial "unit" focused on the objectives described above. The final lecture will introduce, and provide a segue into, the following unit, which will be contain more traditional academic curriculum.]

[Daily activities: Starting class in a standing circle will incorporate physical movement and a community-oriented posture to the beginning of class. It will keep students from being distracted by other things during the welcome and overview. Having music playing before class starts and at the conclusion will promote engagement and raise energy. Beginning with a quotation will add relevance and context to that day's agenda. The autobiographical assignment is designed to help me and the other students get to know each member of the class better. Having another student repeat the information biographically, and a third ask a thoughtful question will encourage good listening. Drawing similarities between the presenting student's autobiography and something in another class members life will contribute to building rapport and community. Finishing with a closing circle before packing up will allow for better using the entirety

of class time, for being able to review key points emphasized that day, and placing them in the context of where the class is headed in the big picture and assigning homework while students are engaged and undistracted by the imminent end of the period. Abiding to such a careful time schedule, will establish the value of using our time intentionally and participating with a relatively fast pace in order to maintain student engagement and maximize performance.]

V. Conclusion to the Thesis

Let Hope Ring Eternal

America has a poverty problem. If only it lived up to its utopic ideal as a land where all people have an equal chance at success and live together with everything they need. Unfortunately this is not the case. Millions of Americans struggle simply to meet their basic needs and survive, and the complex cycle of forces that seems to keep the poor in hardship as the rich continue to get richer, does not appear to have a simple solution. Yet, in education there lies hope. If the public education system can overcome the inequalities into which children are born and give all children a chance to escape that cycle, there might be hope yet for our utopian democracy.

The hope that lies in education exists at the basic level of teachers using their platforms and classrooms more effectively. This means teaching with a better awareness of the academic adversity that their underprivileged students face, and using pedagogical methods that better serve the needs of their students from poverty. Doing so holds the potential to overcome the disadvantage that such students face in schools, so that their education can become the same force of opportunity that it operates as for the middle and upper classes. Achieving this equality of opportunity as a result of education can help schools realize their potential as liberating forces, which give students the necessary tools to create better lives for themselves.

As I prepare to begin my teaching career in rural, impoverished Appalachia, I am keenly interested in learning how I can most effectively make a positive impact on the lives of my students. In completing this project, I've strived to equip myself with

knowledge both theoretical and practical that I can apply in my future classroom, in order to maximize the potential that it has to be a place of hope and opportunity for high school students. This will include, I believe, the acquisition of academic skills that are prerequisites for further education. But beyond said acquisition, I hope that my classroom is a place of transformation for students in transition between childhood and adulthood. I strive to make it a place where students develop and nurture a more positive identity and elevated self-esteem. Those are the tools that I believe will carry them forward and help them to achieve their maximum potential in the world.

For teachers to effectively maximize the impact of their classrooms on their disadvantaged students, they must gain an understanding of the roots of this disadvantage. This way they may predict, and respond appropriately to, the impact, both positive and negative, that it will have made on their students' capacities for academic success. In chapter two, this paper explored and evaluated research done on the impacts of growing up in poverty on a student's educational experience. Specifically, this included the consequences chronic stress exerts on students living in poverty, as well as of the multi-faceted isolation experienced by those students. It examined the harmful impact on students of internalizing poverty as a personal deficiency, and the role that family adversity plays in impacting a student's education. Next it explored the detrimental impact of the negative perception of education, and the futility that impoverished students see in exerting academic effort. Lastly, it introduced some strengths cultivated by growing up in poverty, which work beneficially for students in the school setting, if taken proper advantage of. The way that living in poverty impacts student potential and performance are essential for teachers to understand, if they hope

to help students see their circumstances for what they are and overcome the barriers to learning that those circumstances may create.

The hopeful reality, as it turns out, is that the classroom provides an excellent platform from which to address the impacts that poverty has made on students. Teachers have the opportunity, if they execute their job effectively, to employ pedagogy that has the potential to overcome the negative consequences of poverty explored in chapter two, while maximizing the resulting strengths. By doing so, teachers can give students the tools to maximize their academic potential and thereby escape the cycle of poverty in favor of a better life. Chapter three examined research supporting the classroom factors that teachers ought to be emphasizing in order to maximize their positive impact on students.

Specifically, these included the importance of: helping students contextualize their poverty and see their circumstances, and themselves, through a more accurate lens; maximizing the strengths that students from poverty bring to the so-called academic ‘table’; teaching with a holistic approach to meeting all the needs of underprivileged students, so that they can maximize their academic capacity; re-framing students’ expectations of themselves in the classroom, and for what academic success might mean for their futures, as well as helping them to set meaningful goals to assist them in achieving their full capacity; improving student engagement by making subject-area content more relevant and imparting the value of learning given curriculum, and additionally by creating a class climate conducive to learning, and giving students ownership over their classroom experience; and finally, of building relationships with and among students, as well as with the people in their lives who care about them.

Designing curriculum that achieves each of these aspects will be the key to maximizing the liberating potential of education.

Armed with an awareness of the unique adversity faced by disadvantaged students in the classroom, and an appreciation for pedagogical methods for overcoming that adversity, educators must then apply this theoretical knowledge in its practical application, designing unit and lesson plans that seek to accomplish objectives rooted in the factors explored in section two. Chapter four exemplifies just that, demonstrating how teachers can apply the wisdom of this improved pedagogy to the classroom in practical concrete ways that will have the maximum positive impact on all students.

The guiding question of this thesis was whether there are specific pedagogical methods to consider when teaching students from poverty, which have the potential to maximize their educational experience and contribute to liberating them from that poverty. In the preceding sections, I hope that I have demonstrated the gravity of the deficit that disadvantaged students face in the classroom, as well as the cause for optimism that is found in enhanced pedagogical methods with the potential to overcome those deficits. There is indeed hope for all of this country's students and it lies in the hands, minds and hearts of our educators. Equipping teachers with the necessary tools to employ the methods explored in these pages will be the key to helping the education system realize its potential as an equalizing and liberating force, giving all students the opportunity to live better lives.

Appendix 1: Sample Student Survey

These are a series of questions to gather information about the students necessary for my own intel as the teacher, as well as to get them engaging in personal reflection and thinking in the way that I want them to. I will seek to get the answers to these questions through a variety of mediums over an extended period of time. But these represent information that I deem it vital to gather early on, especially from students from poverty, in order to set the groundwork for student success and academic achievement.

On Personality, Identity, and Self-Concept:

1. What do you prefer to be called?
2. What's the most important thing for someone to know about you?
3. What makes up your identity? (Who are you?)
4. What do you care most about?
5. Who has made the most significant impact on your life (positive or negative)?
6. Who *currently* has the biggest influence on your decision-making?
7. What are you especially good at?
8. What character traits do you value in yourself? (What do you like about yourself?)
9. Would you change anything about yourself?
10. What are some areas in your life with room for personal improvement?
11. Someone's writing a book about you. What will it be titled?
12. How have you changed the most in the past year? In the past five years?
13. What do you anticipate will be different in your life a year from now?

14. How do you spend your time outside of school? (extracurriculars, work, childcare, etc.)
15. What's your proudest accomplishment?
16. What's your dream job?
17. What drives your decision-making and behavior the most?
18. What's something surprising about you?
19. What motivates you to work hard at something?
20. What makes you angry or frustrated?
21. How smart would you consider yourself?
22. What, in your life have you worked the hardest at?
23. What's the last thing you learned?
24. What are you working on changing about yourself right now? Why?
25. What's the greatest cause of stress in your life?
26. How much control do you feel like you have over what happens in your life?
27. Are you more introverted or extroverted?
28. Are you pretty open and transparent with people? Or slower/more careful to reveal your true self?
29. Do you have any allergies or other medical conditions that I should know about?
30. If you could meet any famous person, dead or alive, who would it be and why?
31. What would you say to them, ask them, or choose to do with them?

On Home Life, Support System and Resources:

32. Who do you live with?
33. What are your parents'/guardians' names?
34. If you have siblings, how old are they?

35. What's the best way to contact your parents?
- a. Email
 - b. Text Message
 - c. Phone Call
 - d. Home Visit
 - e. Comments:
36. How long have you lived in this town?
37. How far away from school do you live?
38. How do you get to school?
39. What do your parents/guardians do for work?
40. What's the highest level of education that each of your parents/guardians received?
41. If you have older siblings, have they graduated high school? Gone to college?
42. Who do you go to when you need to talk?
43. Who do you trust most?
44. Who knows you the best?
45. Who are the role models or mentors in your life?
46. Do you have a cell-phone?
47. Does it have Internet access?
48. Do you have a computer at home?
49. Does it have Internet access?
50. Do you have a TV at home?
51. Do you have any access to a computer elsewhere?
52. How about Internet access?
53. Do you have a printer at home?

- 54. What school supplies are you most in need of?
- 55. How much sleep do you usually get each night?
- 56. Who are you a role model for?

On School Experience:

- 57. Have you always attended this school or it's feeders?
- 58. Who's been your favorite teacher at this school? Why?
- 59. What's been your favorite subject? (What do you like most?) Why?
- 60. What's been your strongest subject? (What are you best at?) Why?
- 61. Do you like school? Why or why not?
- 62. What effect do you believe your education will have on your future?
- 63. Do you like to read? Why or why not?
- 64. How often would you say you read a book that's not required for school?
- 65. In what other contexts do you read? (Online, newspapers, magazines, etc.)
- 66. Do you prefer reading print material (papers, books) or digital material (screens)? Why?
- 67. Do you keep a journal? Why or why not?
- 68. In what contexts, outside of school, do you write? (Letters, stories, poems etc.)
- 69. How do you feel about speaking in public?
- 70. What's the most frustrating aspect of school?
- 71. What's one thing you would change about school if you could?
- 72. Do you think that what we learn in Language Arts class is important? Interesting? Why or why not?
- 73. Have you liked or disliked Language Arts classes in the past? Why?

74. What do you think has made the biggest difference in whether or not you were successful in language arts classes in the past?
75. What do you feel is the most important factor in achieving success in school?
76. How good are you about doing your homework? What factors affect this?
77. If you got to choose, how much homework would you have in this class each night?
78. Do you expect to go to college? Why/why not?
79. If it were free, would you go to college?
80. What do you hope to gain from this class?
81. What apprehensions do you have about this class?
82. List 3 specific goals that you have for yourself in this class:
- a.
 - b.
 - c.
83. What is it going to take to achieve those goals?
84. What obstacles do you anticipate
85. How can I help you achieve those goals?
86. List one specific goal that our class could share collectively for this year:
- a.
87. What would you like to know about me?

Appendix 2: Guiding Operating Principles

The following norms and values are an extended list of ideas that, if internalized by each member of a given class, have the potential to foster a healthy, productive, highly achieving classroom environment and culture. They are divided into several subcategories, and while they do not form an exhaustive list, they provide a helpful framework for considering necessary components of an effective classroom.

On Building a Community:

1. We are a family
2. Hold each other accountable
3. We achieve success or failure *together*
4. Help each other: support your brothers and sisters
5. Let yourself be known. Be vulnerable
6. Always consider the example you're setting to others
7. There will be no tolerance for bullying or disrespect
8. If you disagree, express it with kindness or not at all
9. Graciously accept feedback and constructive criticism. We are all trying to make each other better
10. Be selfless
11. Seek to serve others
12. Learn to apologize (Even if it's not your fault)
13. Be willing to forgive
14. This must be a safe place and a sacred space. We are all responsible for creating a supportive climate. Take pride in our environment.
15. Learn to function cooperatively. There will be group work.

16. Honesty builds trust. Trust builds family.
17. Learn to listen well
18. One voice speaking at a time. Think before you speak.
19. Honor our differences
20. We're all in this together. We go through both the ups and the downs *together*. There will be both. We'll get through them together.
21. Let's make sure to celebrate each others' successes

On Strengths and Weaknesses:

22. Everyone is good at something
23. Recognize, cultivate and maximize your own strengths
24. Recognize and encourage others' strengths
25. Be a leader in your strength area(s)
26. Nobody is perfect; Everyone has weaknesses, everyone makes mistakes

On our Commitment to Growth and Self-improvement:

27. We operate from a growth mindset: You are not fixed. You are changing. Make the change positive.
28. We're always seeking to improve ourselves and grow *together*
29. Be open to seeing yourself change
30. We make sure to recognize, learn from and correct our mistakes
31. You're always allowed to decide to be a better version of yourself today, on a whim, without any excuses or explanation
32. Commit to making yourself the best version of yourself that you can be
33. Take care of your whole selves: care for your body, mind and soul by paying attention to how you treat each. Nourish and nurture what you've been given.
34. Be patient: change won't happen over night

- 35. This is a long haul; a journey: Take baby steps, but always be making some progress
- 36. Don't get complacent: Always be open to starting fresh
- 37. Learn to value and give yourselves quiet, calm and rest
- 38. It's always a good time to start re-forming and practicing healthier habits
- 39. Somewhere within each of us, lies the potential for a better life

On the Importance of Taking Ownership:

- 40. This is *OUR* classroom: Own it; take responsibility for it; lead
- 41. Take control of your identity. Decide who you are and let your actions reflect it
- 42. Recognize what you can control and what you can't control. Then take control of what you can and let go of what you can't
- 43. Be proactive and take initiative: it won't happen unless you make it happen

On Healthy Perspectives Regarding Education and Curriculum:

- 44. Education has the potential to change our lives, if it's done right. Believe in education as the ticket to a better life. Maximize its potential by trusting that your hard work will pay off. Take pride in engaging and participating as means to taking advantage of the opportunity that education provides
- 45. I care about you
- 46. I believe in you
- 47. I am interested in you
- 48. I am on your team. I work for you. I am here for you, and believe in your potential and want to see you believe it, realize it and achieve success. Help me help you
- 49. Keep curriculum in perspective: remember the bigger picture. Seek to understand the context in which what we learn exists. There are always larger patterns into which curriculum fits.

- 50. Be able to tell me why what we're learning is important to you
- 51. You are not at home. Different norms guide our lives and behavior at school
- 52. Learning to communicate effectively by writing and speaking will be paramount to improving your life and achieving success
- 53. Literature and narrative teach us valuable, relevant messages. Be open to learning via reading
- 54. Characters in books can tell us a lot about who we are and who we want to be
- 55. Education must be holistic, seeking to meet all the needs of each students
- 56. Language arts curriculum is not disconnected from, or irrelevant to, your lives. You are just like the people we'll read about. Always seek parallels between what we read and your lives. Let what we read change you.

On Courage:

- 57. Be brave, be bold, have courage
- 58. Take Risks
- 59. Let your effort make you uncomfortable
- 60. Be aware of your fear, but don't let it hold you back

On Goals:

- 61. Set high goals for yourself
- 62. Always tell someone else when you set a personal goal
- 63. Develop ways to measure your progress
- 64. Always be aware of your position relative to your goals and make necessary adjustments in trajectory
- 65. You will never exceed expectations that you don't set
- 66. Ask these questions:

- a. Where are you going?
- b. How will you get there?
- c. How do my goals reflect my priorities?
- d. Where am I on the journey?

67. Visualize where you want to be and why

68. Make a plan for how to get there

69. You are moving and changing no matter what, pick a direction in which to move

70. Choosing to seek a given goal requires an awareness of what pursuing and achieving that goal will force you to give up or say no to

71. Act purposefully

72. Don't settle

On Time:

73. Every minute is precious. We can't afford to waste any time. We must work urgently to use our time well, and in doing so keep in mind our goals and priorities

74. *Carpe Diem*: "Seize the Day." Maximize each moment.

75. Be present: When you're here, be here. Eliminate outside distraction. Compartmentalize.

76. Time heals

On Hope, Justice and Potential:

77. Believe in your potential

78. Be positive

79. Life isn't always fair. But you can contribute to making it fair for someone else

80. Do the right thing simply because it's right, even when no one is watching. This is called integrity.

On Communication:

- 81. If you don't know, ask questions!
- 82. It is impossible to over-communicate with me. The more the better.
- 83. Use appropriate channels for communication
- 84. If something is wrong, *please* tell me about it so that we can work together to find a solution

On Admirable Qualities and Identity:

- 85. We decide what defines our identity
- 86. Our actions and behavior reflect our values and beliefs
- 87. Be humble
- 88. Be honest
- 89. "You are what you repeatedly do": behavior forms identity
- 90. Be secure in your strengths and form your identity around them
- 91. Let go of insecurity and defensiveness

On Responding to Adversity and Working Hard:

- 92. Find a healthy channel or outlet for releasing stress and frustration
- 93. You're allowed to have bad days (if you communicate with me), just don't bring others down too
- 94. Every day is a new day
- 95. Our success is fully dependent on how we respond to adversity
- 96. Be gritty. Be resilient. Persevere.
- 97. Learn to value commitment for the sake of commitment and following through for the sake of following through
- 98. Take a deep breath
- 99. Stand up for yourself, (even to me!) but without being disrespectful

100. Rather than giving up when you encounter frustration or difficulty, do three things:

- a. Identify the obstacles causing the issue
- b. Identify their solutions
- c. Identify resources available to you for solving the issue

101. Don't get stuck in unhealthy habits just because 'that's how it has always been'. Don't get complacent. Make necessary changes

102. Be patient. Change won't happen overnight.

103. Do hard things simply *because* they're hard. It's good for us

104. Sometimes we simply have to buck up and do things that we don't want to do. Keep such things in perspective

105. Expect setbacks and anticipate challenges. Be prepared for them so that you can respond to them and overcome them when they do arise

106. We're going to have to work hard here. Start practicing. Build the habit.

107. We don't have time for the "bare-minimum mindset". Other students have that luxury, and it's not fair that they do and you do not, but that is the case. We must achieve maximum effort in order to overcome unequal adversity.

On the Value of Self-Reflection:

108. Always ask "why?" Cultivate your beliefs in what is important to you. Ask yourself:

- a. Why are you who you are?
- b. How did you get here?
- c. What makes you tick?
- d. What gives you inspiration?
- e. What are your highest priorities?

109. "The un-examined life is not worth living" –Socrates. So self-examine. Be reflective

On the importance of recognizing and maximizing resources:

- 110. Be aware of the resources available to you.
- 111. Create a network.
- 112. Seek mentorship.
- 113. Get creative in order to get the support you need
- 114. Use technology appropriately
 - a. When the time is right, make use of our modern resources
 - b. When the time is wrong, devices had best be put away

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