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Children living in poverty

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Abstract

Although many books and articles have been written regarding poverty and its effects among children, there is an increasing need for school counselors to provide programs and support to empower children of poverty. Research indicates that poverty is increasing among Americans (Payne, 2003). Nutrition and health are a major concern among families of poverty, and approximately thirteen million children experience hunger on a daily basis (Prince & Howard, 2002).

Children who have not met their basic needs come to school with a different agenda: survival. Although health is itself an outcome, it can also be viewed as a pathway by which poverty influences other child development such as cognitive ability and school achievement (Abernathy, Webster, & Vermeulen, 2002). With the cooperation and collaboration with parents and teachers, school counselors can begin to make a difference by providing support, psycho-educational consultation, and programs to help empower children of poverty.

CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY

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Although many books and articles have been written regarding poverty and its effects among children, there is an increasing need for school counselors to provide programs and support to empower children of poverty. Research indicates that poverty is increasing among Americans (Payne, 2003). Nutrition and health are a major concern among families of poverty, and approximately thirteen million children experience hunger on a daily basis (Prince & Howard, 2002). Children who have not met their basic needs come to school with a different agenda: survival. Although health is itself an outcome, it can also be viewed as a pathway by which poverty influences other child development such as cognitive ability and school achievement (Abernathy, Webster, & Vermeulen, 2002). With the cooperation and collaboration with parents and teachers, school counselors can begin to make a difference by providing support, psycho-educational consultation, and programs to help empower children of poverty.

Poverty is one of America's most persistent and serious problems. The gap between the wealthiest and the rest of the population continues to be one of the most challenging economic trends facing this nation. Despite our country's efforts to reduce economic inequality, poverty is more of a prevalent issue in the United States than in other industrialized countries (Rarick, 2000).

According to the research by Ruby Payne (2003) poverty is "the extent to which an individual does without resources" (p.16) such as financial, emotional, and physical resources. Poverty is not just about limited financial resources; it is about limited emotional and physical resources, which significantly impact children. Adequate emotional resources allow individuals to deal with emotional situations, and physical resources help individuals be self-sufficient and capable of working (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2001).

Each socio-economic class contains a set of hidden rules, which regulate social norms. Hidden rules "are the unspoken cues and habits of a group" (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2001, p. 19). When financial resources are broken down by each class (lower class, middle class, and upper class), the lower class spend money, the middle class manage money, and the upper class invest money. Another hidden rule among socio-economic classes is education. The lower class view education as something people with financial resources do; it is not a reality for them. The middle class view education as an essential way to earn an

adequate living. The upper class view education as a tradition and a way to make connections (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2001).

Poverty is an issue which more and more of our nation's children are facing, and the price these children must pay is unbelievably high. Each year, increasing numbers of children are entering schools with many disadvantages, such as poverty, and schools are not prepared to meet the needs of these students. The purpose of this research paper is to examine poverty as a risk factor and a challenge and how school counselors can better empower and support this population.

Implications for Children Living In Poverty

Health and Nutrition

Health and nutrition are among the many barriers which children living in poverty face. For people living "at the bottom of the economic distribution, the decline in physical functioning occurs twice the rate as it does for the wealthy, and that the gap in mortality between the economically advantaged and disadvantage is larger" (Mirowsky & Ross, 2000, p. 135). Especially for people living in poverty, health is also a significantly important economic asset. When a member of the family becomes ill or injured, the family is affected directly due to a decrease in income and the increase of health care costs (OECD Publications Services, 2003). An individual may have to spend time away from work or school to help care for a family member due to an illness.

Poverty is associated with higher rates of poor health and chronic health conditions. There are increased life threatening events and conditions such as disease and mortality (Belle, Doucet, Harris, Miller, & Tan 2000). Impoverished children have high rates of hospital admissions, absenteeism from school, and death rates. They have inadequate access to emergency care and are affected more frequently by poor nutrition.

Self-Esteem

One of the problems facing children living in poverty is emotional trauma. Emotional traumatic experiences can create feelings of anxiety and worries about safety for self and others. Emotional security and self-esteem are often lacking for children living in poverty, and the emotional environment can be stressful for children. Children from low socio-economic status live in environments with social conditions over which they have little control. It is not their choice where they live or to have parent(s) who are unemployed or disabled. It is not their choice to be born into poverty. They often want or need to escape from their environment.

When children living in poverty face difficult challenges, they engage in negative self-talk and perceive failure as a challenge they cannot overcome. The characteristics which enable academic success are often lacking in children living in poverty because of the negative self-esteem. These children feel hopeless, because for them, failure means they are inadequate. Because of the culture they

live in, they may also feel inferior and respond in a hostile manner (Breeva, 2005).

According to *Self-Theories* by Carol Dweck (2000), there are two different types of student motivation; the “helpless pattern” and the “mastery-oriented pattern” (p. 9). A student who would be considered a mastery-oriented student is one who is intrinsically motivated and takes on an activity for its own sake, for the enjoyment of learning and the feeling of accomplishment. Mastery-oriented students apply themselves. For example, these students find things to be difficult but “nothing in their words or actions indicated that they thought this was anything more than a problem to be tackled” (Dweck, 2000, p. 9). The other type of student, the helpless type, tends to lose faith in his or her intellect. According to Dweck (2000), “the students showing the helpless response quickly began to doubt their ability to perform the task” (p. 13). These students quickly give up before the task becomes too difficult to complete.

Education

Although health is itself an outcome, it can also be viewed as an avenue by which poverty influences other outcomes, such as cognitive ability and academic achievement. School attendance is often irregular, and transferring to a new school becomes the norm. Aside from all the other developmental issues children face, transitions add to the difficulty for children living in poverty. Walls (2003) found that over one-half million third graders attended more than three

schools between first and third grade. “Thirty percent of children in low-income families changed schools versus eight percent of children well above the poverty line” (p. 2).

Children living in poverty experience many academic challenges due to a higher rate high mobility. Consequently, it may take four to six months for students to catch up academically because teachers, counselors, and administrators have a difficult time knowing exactly what the students have learned from their previous school. It is a challenge for schools to adequately place students in classrooms and get them the services they may need. Students who transfer to many different schools are half as likely to graduate (Walls, 2003).

Another complication is the children living in poverty tend to have sporadic living arrangements. For example, they may live in places which are rented by the week or even by the day. They may move from town to town as their parent(s) search for work or run from problems, such as an abusive spouse, criminal record, or financial responsibilities. They may live in homeless shelters or battered women’s shelters, which only allow brief stays. The conditions they live in and their day-to-day life experiences can have a significant effect on their education and achievement (Leroy & Symes, 2001). Transitions such as moving can be very overwhelming (Stover, 2000). The difference in academic performance among children from different social-economic classes is referred to

as the achievement gap (Marlowe & Page, 1999). Education is often the only means of breaking the cycle of children living in poverty (Payne, 2003).

Children living in poverty experience many academic challenges. They are more likely to attend lower quality schools with few resources such as technology and current textbooks which may affect their level of academic achievement. “In terms of achievement, the risk for poor relative to non-poor children is 2 times as high for grade repetition and dropping out of high school and 1.4 times as high for having a learning disability” (Duncun & Brooks-Gunn, 2000, p.188).

These conditions such as school facilities and resources have, in turn, been associated with reduced IQ as well as other measures of cognitive functioning. Duncun and Brooks-Gunn (2000) noted that poverty has been associated with about a nine-point difference in the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPSSI) IQ test scores when compared with children from middle class and upper class. “Depth of poverty also appears to contribute to child cognitive outcomes. Children who reside in households with incomes below the poverty threshold have test scores that are substantially lower than those of children living in families with income above the poverty threshold” (Duncun & Brooks-Gunn, 2000, p. 189).

Social Development

Children become aware of social and economic status differences as well as developing class-related attitudes during their years in elementary school (Guest & Biasini, 2001). Compared to children from the upper and middle class, children living in poverty are more likely to experience problems with their peers, such as rejection and conflicts. Due to limited financial resources, providing acceptable clothing or participating in extracurricular activities may not be available. Children who are perceived as different may be stigmatized and isolated. They are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities, which decreases opportunities for social interactions and developing relationships among their peers. Children who are isolated from mainstream peer groups also may establish peer relations based on alternative values, which can encourage behaviors such as aggression (Eamon, 2001).

Emotional Development

Children's emotional and social development are linked to early success in school (Wentzel & Asher, 1995 as cited in Raver, 2003). The lack of emotional stability may lead to feelings of isolation, depression, or anxiety. Living in an environment lacking in emotional stability can affect a student's academic performance. Raver (2003) stated that children's relationships with teachers and peers are based on their ways of handling emotions. Emotions are a significant aspect of development for children because they have a connection to memory,

which helps store information and affects the actual capacity of children to grasp ideas (Moir & Jessel, 1991).

Sloboda, Davidson, & Howe (1999) indicated that students become motivated because of the emotion tied to an event and can develop positive, encouraging emotions tied to learning. Therefore, they are more apt to be intrinsically motivated to continue pursuing their interest. On the other hand, if there is a negative emotion tied to an event, they will not be motivated to continue pursuing the task (Sloboda et al., 1999).

One of the most prominent emotions for children living in poverty is fear, which has a negative effect on learning (Moir & Jessell, 1991). Additionally, a person's physical and emotional well-being is related to his or her ability to learn. Raver (2003) stated that "one caveat is that children's early academic skills and emotional adjustment may be bi-directionally related, so that young children who struggle with early reading and learning difficulties may grow increasingly frustrated and more disruptive" (Arnold, Ortiz, Curry, Stowe, Goldstein, Fisher, Zeljo, & Yershova; 1999, Hinshaw, 1992, as cited in Raver, 2003, p.1).

Emotional adjustment is an important indicator of a child's academic success in school (Raver, 2003, p.2). Classroom environments, which are safe and trusting, can enhance learning. Environments should be high in challenge and low in threat. The living environment of many children living in poverty is emotional. Children living in poverty experience feelings of anxiety and worries

about sporadic living environments, so an immediate concern for teachers and school counselors is the environment of the classroom.

As mentioned earlier, emotions have an impact on memory. If content has no emotional relevance to students, they will not recall it. Thus, when developing classroom guidance lessons and units, school counselors need to find topics which are relevant to student's lives and address student's emotional development.

Cognitive Development

"Family income and poverty status are powerful determinants of the cognitive development and behavior of children" (Duncun, Books-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994 p. 316). Family environment is a significant factor in determining a child's rate of cognitive development. According to the research conducted by Guo (1998), poverty has a significant impact on the cognitive development and achievement of children and adolescents. The way in which a family manages a stressful economic situation can have an affect on a child's functioning on the classroom. If a family handles a situation negatively, these students are more at risk for delays in cognitive development, and as they get older, they have more difficulties in school (Barnette, Vondra, & Shonk, 1996).

Differences in academic performance of children appear early (Renchler, 1993). Renchler (2003) found strong links between economic status and cognitive ability by examining samples of 900 children living in poverty born with low birth weight. During the children's first five years their IQ score was 9.1 points

lower scores than those of children from middle class and upper class. The achievement gap between low social economic status, compared with middle and upper social economic status, indicated that performance on tests of cognitive development are significantly broad. Datcher-Loury (1989) studied the differences among reading and math tests among children living in poverty and concluded that differences in family attitudes did have long-term effects on their academic performance in school. Early childhood, then, is a critical time for intervention in the school for at-risk students if the school systems expect to change outcomes.

The Role of the Counselor

The rise in the number of children living in poverty has contributed to making the nations classrooms more economically diverse, which presents school counselors with a chance to enhance the quality of education for all students and provide them with a variety of opportunities to develop. As schools and the nation become more diverse, the need for understanding and acceptance of differences becomes more important. It is important for school counselors and teachers to focus on student learning as opposed to teaching. Counselors need to be educated about the culture of poverty and be sensitive to the needs children living in poverty bring to the classroom. Environments have a significant impact on the development of children. The school operates differently from the environments these children live in. Poverty in itself is a sub culture. Focus

should be placed on finding a relationship between the sub-cultural values of students and the values emphasized in school. Considering so many different cultures are represented in our society, school counselors must remember that students belong to more than one cultural group, poverty being one of them (Marlowe & Page, 1999).

By providing emotional support, school counselors can help students use their strengths, skills, and knowledge to develop and learn (Marlowe & Page, 1999). Learning, experiences, and problem solving skills based on real-life problems can help students deal with some of the issues they may be faced with (Payne, DeVol, & Smith, 2001).

What occurs in classrooms has a significant impact on student achievement. School counselors can use classroom guidance to teach students about identifying and labeling feelings. Teaching students to communicate with others about their emotions appropriately is important (Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford, & Forness, 1999, as cited in Raver, 2003).

School counselors need to develop good relationships with students. Students who feel they have not developed a relationship with their school counselor, teacher, and classmates lose interest in being a part of the classroom (Kovalik & Olsen, 1998). School counselors cannot guess what the students find interesting or what is relevant to their emotional needs, so they need to have strong relationships with students in order to find ways to relate content to their

lives so learning can transfer from the classroom to life situations (Kovalik & Olsen, 1998).

Classroom guidance lessons should be culturally relevant. School counselors should be knowledgeable of the cultures in which their students live so they can plan and develop effective and engaging guidance lessons. Additionally, instructional and classroom management techniques which work well with some students do not necessarily work well with all students, so it is important to use an appropriate approach. The perspective and experiences of the children need to be considered (Goodwin, 2000).

School counselors need to enhance the desire to learn or motivate students by not only helping to restore the child's self-image but also by encouraging students to see the demands and rewards of education. Children will work hard for intrinsic rewards if they have a very good reason (Ciaccio, 2000). School counselors need to help students feel they are important and acceptable human beings by helping them feel secure about themselves and by building trusting, respectful relationships with them (Bassey, 1996). Positive and respectful relationships are essential for "at-risk" students (Hixson & Tinsmann, 1990; Ciaccio, 2000).

Parental Involvement

In order to address this challenge, it is first necessary to understand the dynamics of parenting in the context of poverty. Living in impoverished

conditions and the emotional and psychological stress associated with poverty can weaken parenting ability (Kaiser & Delaney, 1996). Developing positive, consistent relationships with parents and families of low socio-economic status and getting them involved with their children's education and school activities is a challenge. Parents play a key role in their child's emotional adjustment so by increasing the positive interactions between child and parent, some of these emotional difficulties can be reduced. (Raver, 2003).

School counselors can inform parents of simple, time-efficient ways to help their children at home. Activities involving parents with their children can be scheduled such as family math, science, reading, or technology nights. School counselors can provide parents with articles about parenting techniques. They should keep parents informed of what is going on in the classroom and encourage parents to talk to their children about school. For example, a monthly calendar or a news letter regarding topics and activities can help parent(s) discuss school subjects with their children and help communication (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999). School counselors and teachers can schedule conferences and activities at school during convenient times for parents. McGee (1996) mentioned the importance of providing food at meetings and activities when homeless families are involved.

Parents should know they are welcome to observe the class and spend time helping out in the classroom, lunchroom, or during activities. Parents should be encouraged to view student work, accomplishments, and portfolios when they

come to school so they can become more aware of their child's abilities and talents (Kaiser & Delaney, 1996). Parental involvement has many benefits and sends a message to all children that school is important.

Individual Counseling

Individual counseling can be a medium in which school counselors can support students from impoverished homes. School counselors meet with students on a weekly basis to help them develop healthy relationships, build a support network, and develop skills such as how to handle peer and school pressures, and how to cope with changing families. It is the responsibility of the counselor to establish an environment in which the student feels safe and protected. The physical setting is important. A student does not want to talk about things which embarrasses or upsets him or her where others might hear. Having an office or a place and time where you will not be interrupted or disturbed is critical (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999).

The heart of the counseling process is unconditional positive regard. There are no judgmental statements, no criticisms, and no evaluation. Empathy is a vital; putting themselves in the student's position. This is important for students because children living in poverty automatically are labeled. The school counselor must have empathy for their students to build rapport. School counselors can use a variety of creative techniques such as using expressive art techniques to enhance the counseling process with children, establish rapport,

help them to better understand their world, and to enhance their perspective about how they interact with others (Nugent, 2000).

Group Counseling

After completing a needs assessment, the school counselor can develop and organize small groups for the students living in poverty. It is important to group students with similar issues and problems to build the cohesiveness of the group. Getting input from the teacher(s) is helpful when selecting members of the group to guarantee the right dynamics of the students. Usually the counselor will meet with a group of students for about four to six weeks (Nugent, 2000).

Group counseling can be useful for children who are having conflicts with family or peers. Group counseling allows them to express feelings, while the progress of other members may serve as a model for growth. For example, when a group member attains a goal, he or she serves as an inspiration to those in the group who has witnessed such growth and has thus vicariously enjoyed their success. The group provides an environment which is safe for members to share and express their feelings and stories confidentially. In addition, Nugent (2000) emphasized the advantages of group counseling with children living in poverty because of the process of the group. Students feel they can make strong connections with other members of the group. Given the difficulty the impoverished child's experiences in perceiving other individuals, the group has the ability to give the member an opportunity to experience a complete view of

the world. A student's support network in the school system is beneficial because children living in poverty have fewer social networks than children from middle and upper classes (Hashima & Amato, 1994 as cited in Eamon, 2001). By combining individual counseling with group counseling, improvements are a result of the group's ability to provide structure, support, honesty, encouragement, and feed-back conducive to individual growth.

Classroom Guidance

School counselors must consider their students when developing guidance curriculum in schools or classrooms. The curriculum must provide students with high expectations and make students responsible for their own learning (Goodwin, 2000). Developing relationships with students to identify their emotional and cognitive needs and their individual learning style helps emphasize each student's uniqueness, talents, and abilities. School counselors need to promote awareness and acceptance of diversity by encouraging students to recognize similarities as well as differences. Using principles of constructivism to make learning interesting, valuable, and relevant to students help teach for meaning. School counselors need to provide developmentally appropriate, meaningful learning activities and use integrated instruction, cooperative learning, and authentic learning environments (Goodwin, 2000).

Classroom guidance lessons should help students understand themselves and others and appreciate similarities and differences among peers. Topics such

as the similarities and differences among people, values and interests, and understanding differences among cultural and ethnic diversity are included in classroom guidance lessons (Nicoll, 1994). Increasing students' abilities to listen effectively and to express their own feelings and thoughts clearly and directly is an important component in classroom guidance. "Activities would assist children to become aware of, and attendant to, both verbal and nonverbal messages in interpersonal relationships" (Nicoll, 1994, p. 364). Teaching cooperative skills helps students learn to work in noncompetitive situations. Classroom guidance is another counseling avenue which gives students an opportunity to develop skills in a safe environment.

Conclusion

Poverty is an issue more and more children are experiencing. The price children living in poverty must pay is very high. Each year, increasing numbers of children are entering schools with needs from circumstances such as poverty, that schools are not prepared to meet. Children living in poverty are likely to fail in school or in life because of their social circumstances (Guest & Biasini, 2001). It does not appear any one single factor places a child living in poverty at-risk. When more than one factor is present, such as single or low educational level parents, unemployment, abuse and neglect, substance abuse, dangerous neighborhoods, mobility, and exposure to inadequate or inappropriate educational experiences, there is a compounding effect and the likelihood for failure increases

significantly. Poverty is considered a major at-risk factor (Leroy & Symes, 2001).

Poverty is a persistent problem which is drastically affecting our educational system. It is imperative that school counselors educate teachers and staff personnel who may not understand the hidden rules of socio-economic status. Our nation's children are at high risk, and as school counselors our job is to advocate for equal education.

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