Understanding and Working with Students and Adults from Poverty

The hidden rules of the middle class govern schools and work; students from generational poverty come with a completely different set of hidden rules.

by Ruby Payne, Baytown, Texas

"I had to hit him, Miss! He was messin' with me!"

"What did he say?"

"Nothin'! He was lookin' at me, Miss!"

If this incident is familiar to you, then you have encountered the hidden rules of generational poverty. Quite simply, one rule is that non-verbal communication is much more important than verbal communication. A second rule is that physical fighting is often necessary for survival.

To understand and work with students and adults from generational poverty, a framework is needed. This analytical framework is shaped around these basic ideas:

- Each individual has resources that greatly influence achievement; money is only one.
- Poverty is the extent to which an individual is without these resources.
- The hidden rules of the middle class govern schools and work; students from generational poverty come with a completely different set of hidden rules and do not know the hidden rules of the middle class.
- Language issues cause many students from generational poverty not to fully develop the cognitive structures needed to learn at the levels required by state tests.
- Teaching is what happens outside the head; learning is what happens inside the head. For these students to learn, direct teaching must occur to build these cognitive structures.
- Relationships are the key motivators for learning for students from generational poverty.

Key Points

Some key points about poverty need to be addressed prior to discussing the ways to work with those affected by it.

1. Poverty is relative. If everyone around you has similar circumstances, the notion of poverty and wealth is vague. Poverty or wealth only exists in relationship to known quantities or expectation
2. Poverty occurs in all races and in all countries. The notion of a middle class as a large segment of society is a phenomenon of this century. The percentage of the population that is poor is subject to definition and circumstance. In the 1990 census data, 11.5 million of America's children (individuals under the age of 18) lived in poverty. Of that number, the largest group was white. However, by percentage of ethnic groups, the highest percentages are minority.
3. Economic class is a continuous line, not a clear-cut distinction. In 1994, the poverty line was considered $14,340 for a family of four. In 1994, seven percent of the population made more than $100,000 per year as indicated on U.S. tax returns. Individuals move and are stationed all along the continuum of income.

4. Generational poverty and situational poverty are different. Generational poverty is defined as being in poverty for two generations or longer. Situational poverty involves a shorter time and is caused by circumstance, i.e. death, illness, divorce.
5. Thses points are based on patterns. All patterns have exceptions.
6. An individual brings with him or her the hidden rules of the class in which he or she was raised. Even though the income of the individual may rise significantly, many of the patterns of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies, remain with the individual.
7. Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of the middle class. These norms and hidden rules are never directly taught in schools or in businesses.
8. For our students to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and at work. We can neither excuse them nor scold them for not knowing; as educators, we must teach them and provide support, assistance, and high expectations.
9. To move from poverty to middle class or middle class to wealth, an individual must give up relationships for achievement.

Resources

To better understand students and adults from poverty, the definition of poverty will be the "extent to which an individual does without resources" including:

- *Financial*--Having the money to purchase goods and services.

- *Emotional*--Being able to choose and control emotional responses, particularly to negative situations, without engaging in self-destructive behavior. This is an internal resource and shows itself through stamina, perseverance and choices.

- *Mental*--Having the mental abilities and acquired skills (reading, writing, computing) to deal with daily life.

- *Physical*--Having physical health and mobility.

- *Support Systems*--Having friends, family, backup resources and knowledge bases available to access in times of need. These are external resources.

- *Role Models*--Having frequent access to appropriate adults who are nurturing to the child and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior.

- *Knowledge of Hidden Rules*--Knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group.

In working with students and parents, it is important to analyze the resources that are available. For example, if a parent is illiterate, then tasks that can be requested of that parent are much different from those requested of a parent who is highly educated. Likewise, a student may have financial wealth but not have many of the other resources, particularly a nurturing role model. This lack may greatly affect his achievement.

Language and Story Structure

To further understand why achievement and discipline are such issues for students from generational poverty, awareness of the registers of language is particularly helpful (Jobs, 1967). There are five

registers of language: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate. Formal register is standard business and educational language. Formal register features complete sentences and specific word choice. Casual register is characterized by a 400- to 500-word vocabulary, broken sentences, and many non-verbal assists.

A California researcher, Maria Montano-Harmon, has found that many low-income students do not speak formal register and only know casual register. State assessments test at the formal register level. Most of the discipline referrals occur because the student has spoken in casual register.

For example, if a student tells the teacher that an assignment "sucks," the teacher most probably will issue a reprimand. Yet, if a student tells the teacher that the assignment is not congruous with her earlier purpose, the student will most probably not be reprimanded. Yet, both students expressed the same notion. Because the structure and specificity of language is not available to those students who only know casual register, their achievement lags. This is complicated by the story structure used in casual register. In formal register, the story structure focuses on plot: it has a beginning and ending, and it weaves sequence, cause and effect, characters, and consequences into the plot. In casual register, the focus of the story is characterization.

Typically, the story starts at the end (Joey busted his nose) and proceeds with short vignettes interspersed with participatory comments from the audience (He hit him hard. BAM-BAM. You shouda seen the blood on him.) and finishes with a comment about the character. To see this in action, watch a TV talk show where many of the participants use this structure. The parts of the story have emotional significance for the teller. It is an episodic, random approach with many omissions and does not have sequence, cause and effect, or consequence.

Cognitive Issues

Cognitive research indicates that early memory is linked to the predominant story structure that an individual knows. Furthermore, stories are retained in the mind longer than many other memory patterns for adults.

Consequently, if a student has not had access to a story structure with cause and effect, consequence and sequence, and is in an environment with no routine and structure, then the student cannot plan. According to Feuerstein (1980):

- If an individual cannot plan, he or she cannot predict.
- If an individual cannot predict, he or she cannot identify cause and effect.
- If an individual cannot identify cause and effect, he or she cannot identify consequence.
- If an individual cannot identify consequence, he or she cannot control impulsivity.
- If an individual cannot control impulsivity, he or she has an inclination to criminal behavior.

Mediation

Feuerstein, an Israeli educator, worked for 50 years with students who came to school with no experience with formal story structure and referred to them as "unmediated." He worked with

students who at 12 and 13 years of age drew pictures of themselves with their arms coming out of their heads. With his interventions, they successfully completed school. Some went on to receive doctorates. Non-mediation is reversible.

A simplified definition of mediation would be that an adult makes a deliberate intervention and does three things: points out the stimulus (what is to be paid attention to), gives it meaning, and then provides a strategy or way to deal with the stimulus. For example, we might say to a child:

- Don't cross the street without looking. (stimulus)
- You could be killed. (meaning)
- Look twice both ways before you cross the street. (strategy)

Mediation builds cognitive strategies for the mind. The strategies are analogous to the infrastructure of a house-the plumbing, electrical and cooling/heating systems that make the house livable. When cognitive strategies are only partially in place, the mind can only partially accept the teaching. Feuerstein indicates that these students miss as much as 50 percent of what is on a page.

Why are so many students coming to school with a need for mediation? Poverty forces more time to be spent on survival. Many of the students from poverty are in single parent situations. If there is only one parent, regardless of the gender, there is not time and energy to both mediate the children and work to put food on the table. Additionally, if the parent is still a child or was non-mediated, the ability to mediate his/her own children will be significantly lessened as well.

For students from this situation, more time in school will need to be spent addressing the cognitive structures necessary for learning. Remember that teaching occurs outside the head; learning occurs inside the head.

To facilitate the learning of students who are only partially mediated, four learning structures must be built as a part of direct teaching:

1. the structure of each discipline;
2. cognitive strategies;
3. conceptual frameworks, and
4. models for sorting the important from the unimportant in text.

Hidden Rules

One of the key resources for success in school and at work is an understanding of the hidden rules. Hidden rules are the unspoken clues that individuals use to indicate membership in a group. The <u>chart on hidden rules</u> (see p. 5) provides details, but generally, in middle class, work and achievement tend to be the driving forces in decision-making. In wealth, the driving forces are the political, social, and financial connections. In generational poverty, the driving forces are survival, entertainment, and relationships. That is why you will have a student whose Halloween costume cost $30 but the textbook bill is not paid. Relationships and entertainment are more important than achievement.

Hidden Rules

Generational Poverty	Middle Class	Wealth
The driving forces for decision making are survival, relationships, and entertainment.	The driving forces for decision making are work and achievement.	The driving forces for decision making are social, financial, and political connections.
People are possessions. It is worse to steal someone's girlfriend than a thing. A relationship is valued over achievement. That is why you must defend your child no matter what he or she has done. Too much education is feared because the individual might leave.	Things are possessions. If material security is threatened, often the relationship is broken.	Legacies, one-of-a-kind objects, and pedigrees are possessions.
The "world" is defined in local terms.	The "world" is defined in national terms. The national news is watched; travel tends to be in the nation.	The "world" is defined in international terms.
Physical fighting is how conflict is resolved. If you only know casual register, you do not have the words to negotiate a resolution. Respect is accorded to those who can physically defend themselves.	Fighting is done verbally. Physical fighting is viewed with distaste.	Fighting is done through social inclusion or exclusion and through lawyers.
Food is valued for its quantity.	Food is valued for its quality.	Food is valued for its presentation.

Note: Material on this page is from the work of Ruby Payne and others. All items are generalizations, based on large populations. As such, we should remember that individuals within each group may have different experiences and values.

Other Rules

Generational Poverty	Middle Class	Wealth
You laugh when you are disciplined; it is a way to save face. Your mother is the most important person in your life. Many times, the mother is the keeper of the soul. An insult against your mother is unforgivable. The noise level is higher, non-verbal information is more important than the verbal, emotions are openly displayed, and the value of your personality to the group is your ability to entertain. Destiny and fate govern. The notion of having choices is foreign. Discipline is about penance and forgiveness, not change. Tools are often not available. Therefore, the concept of repair and fixing may not be present.	Formal register is always used in an interview and is often an expected part of social interaction. Work is a daily part of life. Discipline is about changing behavior. To stay in the middle class, one must be self-governing and self-supporting. A reprimand is taken seriously (at least the pretense is there), without smiling, and with some deference to authority. Choice is a key concept in the lifestyle. The future is very important. Formal education is seen as crucial for future success.	The artistic and aesthetic are key to the lifestyle and include clothing, art, interior design, seasonal decorating, food, music, and social activities. For reasons of security and safety, virtually all contacts are dependent upon introductions (connections). Education is for the purpose of social, financial and political connections, as well as to enhance the artistic and aesthetic. One of the key differences between the well-to-do and the wealthy is that the wealthy almost always are patrons to the arts and often have an individual artist to whom they are patrons as well.

Note: Material on this page is from the work of Ruby Payne and others. All items are generalizations, based on large populations. As such, we should remember that individuals within each group may have different experiences and values.

Please remember that these hidden rules are patterns that one sees in the collective group; however, individuals within that group may or may not exhibit these patterns.

Hidden rules shape what happens at school. Many of the greatest frustrations teachers and administrators have with students from poverty is related to knowledge of the hidden rules. These students simply do not know middle-class hidden rules nor do most educators know the hidden rules of generational poverty.

For example, if the rule a student brings to school is to laugh when disciplined and he does so, the teacher is most probably going to be offended. Yet, laughing is to him the appropriate way to deal with the situation. At the same time, we know that if an employee laughs at a boss when being disciplined, he will most probably be fired. So the student needs to know that this response does not bring success.

The recommended approach is simply to teach the student that he needs a set of rules that brings success in school and work and a set that brings success outside of school. If the student learns the rules, but chooses not to use them, that is an individual choice. However, how can the choice be made if the student has no knowledge of the rules?

Relationships Are the Key Motivators for Learning

For students from generational poverty to learn, a significant relationship must be present. When individuals who made it out of poverty are interviewed, virtually all cite an individual who made a significant difference for them. Not only must the relationships be present, but academic tasks need to be referenced in terms of relationships.

For example, rather than talk to students from generational poverty about the future and going to college, which has little motivation (although it is beneficial for them to hear), the conversation needs to be about how the learning will impact relationships.

One of the teachers I work with had the following conversation with a 17-year-old student in an alternative school who did not do his math homework on positive and negative numbers. She said, "Well, I guess it will be all right with you when your friends cheat you at cards."

He was furious at that idea.

She continued, "Well, you won't know whether they are cheating you or not because you don't know positive and negative numbers, and they aren't going to let you keep score, either."

He told her he could keep score and then proved it with a deck of cards.

She said, "Then you know positive and negative numbers. I expect you to do your homework."

Interestingly, he did his homework from that time on and kept an A average. The teacher simply couched the importance of the task according to the relationships the student would have.

Conclusion

First of all, students from generational poverty are going to need direct teaching to build cognitive structures necessary for learning. Secondly, the relationships that will motivate them to learn need to be established. Third, hidden rules must be taught so they can choose the appropriate response if they so desire.

This is a beginning to address their learning. Are they less capable or less intelligent? No. They simply have not been mediated in the strategies or hidden rules that contribute so much to success in school and then at work.

Will we save all children from generational poverty? No. However, if we would make a difference for an additional 10 to 20 percent of the students, it would make a significant impact for those children and for our future as a country. As playwright Noel Coward stated, "Our children are a living legacy to a time we will not see."

Ruby K. Payne, founder and president of aha! Process, Inc., is author of more than a dozen books for educators and social service professionals. She started her career as an educator in 1972, serving as a secondary teacher and department chairperson, an elementary principal, and central-office administrator.

This article is a reprint from Instructional Leader (Volume IX, No. 2, March 1996), a publication of the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association.

References

Feuerstein, Reuven, et al. (1980). *Instrumental Enrichment: An Intervention Program for Cognitive Modifiability*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co..

Joos, Martin. (1967). The Styles of the Five Clocks. In Abrahams, R. D. and Troike, R. C., Eds. (1972). *Language and Cultural Diversity in American Education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ. Prentice-Hall.

AASA, (1992). *Making Schools Work for Children in Poverty: A New Framework*. Prepared by the Commission on Chapter 1. Washington, DC: Author.

Montano-Hannon, Maria Rosario. (1991). Discourse Features of Written Mexican Spanish: Current Research in Contrastive Rhetoric and Its Implications. *Hispania*. 74(2), 417-425.

Montano-Harmon, Maria Rosario. (1994). Presentation given to Harris County Texas, Department of Education on the topic of her research findings.

Wheatley, Margaret J. (1992). *Leadership and the New Science*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.