

# The 10 Dynamics of Poverty

*By understanding the barriers created by poverty, schools can help overcome them.*

Ruby K. Payne

Much discussion centers around the barriers that are created by poverty and their impact on school success. Arguments span the spectrum from “it’s a system problem” to “it’s a school problem” to “it’s an individual problem.” Although it would be myopic to assign blame solely to one cause, there are many things schools can do to make a difference in achievement by recognizing and acting on the following 10 dynamics:

## 1. Household Resources

Poor children are often defined almost exclusively by family income. Actually, poverty is about access, or lack of access, to nine resources:

- Financial resources;
- Emotional resources;
- Mental resources;
- Spiritual resources;
- Support systems;
- Relationships/role models;
- Knowledge of hidden rules;
- Physical resources; and
- Language.

Resource analysis is important because it suggests where to make interventions, which work only if they’re based on resources to which the student has access. For example, if the parent cannot read, there is no point in asking the parent to read to the child.

*Schools will be much more successful if they know the resources of students and base their interventions on the available resources.*

## 2. Vocabulary/Second-Language Learners

Hart and Risley (1995) found that the average 4-year-old in a professional household has heard 45 million words while a 4-year-old in a welfare household has heard 13 million words. In fact, they found that a 3-year-old in a professional household has more vocabulary than an adult in a welfare household. Furthermore, Montano-Harmon (1991), a Latina linguist in California, found that the issue for many bilingual children is that they know only casual usage in both languages and do not know the formal usage needed for school and work in either language.

*Schools will be much more successful if they teach students to draw the meaning of vocabulary words and use discipline as an opportunity to teach formal language. (The student who says something “sucks” needs to find other, more appropriate ways to convey the meaning.)*

## 3. Executive Function Processing

In a 2008 study that used EEG (brain) scans with poor and middle-class children, researchers found that the prefrontal cortex of the brain (executive function) in poor children was undeveloped and resembled the brains of adults who have had strokes (Kishiyama, Boyce, Jimenez, Perry, & Knight (2009). The executive function of the brain handles impulse control, planning, and working memory. The researchers went on to state that it is remediable, but that there must be direct intervention.

*Schools should use direct-teach planning methods and procedural steps and systematic processes (e.g., writing and problem-solving).*

#### 4. Intergenerational Transfer of Knowledge

Knowledge bases are a form of privilege, like social access and money, and can be passed on intergenerationally. In an Australian study that followed more than 8,500 children for 14 years, the researchers found they could predict with reasonable accuracy the verbal reasoning scores of 14-year-olds based on the maternal grandfather's occupation (Najman et al., 2004).

*Schools should teach knowledge bases to students because knowledge is a form of power.*

#### 5. Abstract Representational World of School

Lave and Wenger (1991) indicate that learning begins in an environment that has people, relationships, context, tasks, and language, but that when an individual makes the transition to formal schooling, the context is taken away, relationships are seldom considered, and reasoning is not with stories but with laws and symbols (abstract representational systems). Research indicates that to make the transition between those two environments, one needs relationships and support systems.

*Schools should use mental models (e.g., stories, analogies, and drawings) to translate between the sensory abstract representational worlds.*

#### 6. Relationships of Mutual Respect

Because learning is always double-coded (Greenspan & Benderly, 1997), both cognitively (based on the content) and emotionally (based on the relationship), relationships enhance or detract from learning. Goleman (2006), reports the findings of a study of 910 first graders, all of whom had teachers who practiced excellent pedagogy. Even when teachers used excellent pedagogy, however, at-risk students did not learn at high levels if they perceived the teachers as cold or controlling; they essentially refused to learn from them.

*Schools should establish relationships of mutual respect for teachers and students, and monitor those relationships through observation and student surveys.*

#### 7. Differences Between School and Outside Rules

Different environments require different responses. In *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, I referred to these responses as "hidden rules." Because the worlds of work and school tend to use similar rules, we must teach school rules for students who do not know them. For example, if you are going to survive in a poverty-stricken neighborhood, you must know how to physically fight. But if you bring fighting into school, you are going to be suspended or expelled.

*Schools should teach the hidden rules of school to students so that they can negotiate the different environments of school and work.*

#### 8. Chaotic Learning Environment

Research indicates that the more chaotic (and dangerous) the environment, the less capable is the brain's working memory (McEwen, 2000). The more unstable the environment, the less learning occurs because time must be given to surviving the current crisis as opposed to devoting time to learning.

*For students' brains to function well, schools must provide a strong classroom management approach, clear guidelines for behaviors, and a climate of safety.*

#### 9. Staff and Student Mobility

One of the characteristics of generational poverty is the amount of instability it creates, especially in high-poverty schools that have both high staff and student mobility.

*To combat high staff mobility, some school districts are offering an additional pay differential. To combat high student mobility, it is imperative that schools use a formative assessment for students and immediately provide needed interventions and safety nets (Payne, 2008).*

#### 10. Realities of Generational Poverty

There are many realities of generational poverty that impact children, including gangs, violence, poor or no health and dental care, substandard housing, greater environmental pollution, and drugs. While middle-class families may deal with some of these issues, children of generational poverty deal with a disproportionate amount—and at the same time fewer resources to address them.

*Schools should provide access to community agencies that can also help students and their families address these issues. (See Collaboration for Kids (Conway, 2006), which provides a process.)*

While schools certainly cannot mitigate all the issues in poverty, they can provide for many students the key tools to begin making the transition out of poverty. Those tools include education, relationships with individuals different from themselves, and eventual employment. Such tools impact not just the generation being taught but also their children and grandchildren. For transient children, education is a gift for life.

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### On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. Which household resources, as defined by the author, do students of poverty at our school lack?
2. Which of the 10 dynamics of poverty does our school effectively address? Which dynamics could we better address?
3. What strategies can we use to establish relationships of mutual respect between teachers and students?
4. How can we make the "hidden rules" of school clear to our students and to parents?