

Changing the Poverty to Prison Paradigm



Educational leaders must examine the needs of students through multiple lenses, including race, gender, and socio-economic status. A critical component of effective schools is the acknowledgment that students are different and face various challenges to meet success. This understanding begins to establish a strong infrastructure that places student needs at the center of learning. The Children's Defense Fund's 2007 *Cradle to Prison Pipeline Report* shows that an African American young man has a 1 in 3 chance of spending time in prison during his lifetime; a Hispanic young man has a 1 in 6 chance. A white young man, meanwhile, has a 1 in 17 likelihood of incarceration throughout his lifetime. Black children are three times more likely to be born into poverty than their white counterparts, and four times more likely to be born into extreme poverty where average daily funds are less than \$1.25 per day, according to The World Bank. Success becomes more and more unobtainable due to disparate educational opportunities, systemic neglect and abuse, and the difficulty of breaking the cycle of poverty, which unfortunately often results in future incarceration.

Students in poverty are plagued by complications that impact their learning. Sometimes the most basic of needs—food, shelter, and clothing—are not “givens” in their lives. Students in poverty do not have the same access as their age-alike peers to healthy meals, adequate health care, and supportive family environments. Students in poverty are also plagued with higher levels of absenteeism and come to school less prepared to learn because they often lack access to basic school supplies and adequate preschool preparation, causing knowledge defi-

cits and gaps from the start of their formal education. The emotional work that must be done by children in poverty to adapt for survival in their environment can manifest as children who appear disengaged, unruly, and ill-equipped for school. By examining approaches to teaching and learning that meet the unique needs of students in poverty and extending beyond traditional methodologies, educators can begin to support student success and challenge the seemingly predestined fate of many young men and women.

Educators also must acknowledge

that positive relationships are the foundation to all learning, especially for children and families in poverty. Before a student will want to demonstrate their learning and knowledge, they must first know that care and concern exist for them as a learner and as an individual. When one examines the critical aspects of successful schools and classrooms for students in poverty, three areas emerge: empathy, expectations, and engagement.

Empathy

Empathy, demonstrating an understanding of the experiences of others, is deeply rooted in successful school-based relationships. Teachers who demonstrate empathetic behavior toward their students and their families allow feelings of value and self-worth to exist within the walls of the classroom, Christine and Mark Boynton explain in *Educator's Guide to Preventing and Solving Discipline Problems* (2005). Educators can demonstrate empathy through actions as basic as taking notice of students. Do they appear angry, sad, or tired? Have they worn the same clothes for multiple days? Is he withdrawn from other students or does she constantly seek your attention through misbehavior? Noticing and acknowledging emotions and outward signs of distress in students help them to understand that they are not invisible in the world of school.

When considering student success, educators must acknowledge the importance of parents as partners. Demonstrating this understanding requires a similar level of empathy to parents that can manifest as open, honest communication that articu-

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The author argues that the “poverty to prison” paradigm can be addressed through empathy, expectations, and engagement.

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lates a clear message of support for their child and his or her progress in school. Many parents of students in poverty have a fear or hatred of school because of their negative past experiences. By communicating through nontraditional avenues such as home visits, meeting at times convenient to parents, and emphasizing the positive aspects the teacher sees in a child, educators send a message to the family that no matter their current circumstance, student success is paramount.

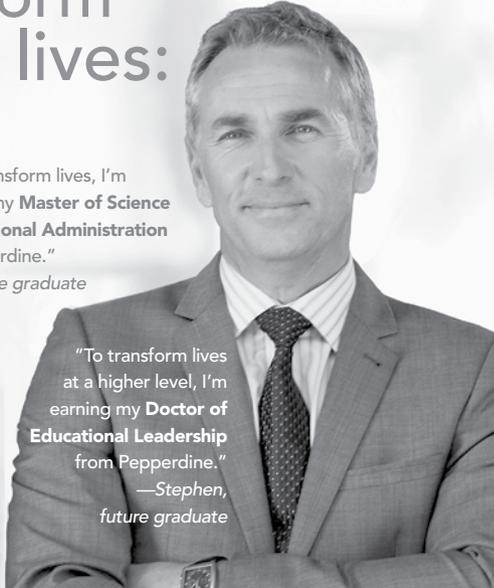
Expectations

Allowing children to engage in activities that further withdraw them from learning such as sleeping in class, misbehaving, and not completing assignments, is allowing and accepting complacency with their world and their state within it. Consistently offering students in poverty the same high expectations is critical for success. These high expectations send a message that students are capable of learning, important to positive dynamics of a classroom, and worthy of the teacher's time and attention as all other students.

Being consistent with high expectations can be a point of frustration for even the best teachers and school leaders. But continuing to tie empathetic behaviors with high expectations will eventually allow the emotional wall to crack and break. Standing firm in words and actions by teaching students to understand acceptable alternatives to inappropriate behaviors creates a relationship based in trust and accountability. This, in turn, allows students to succeed in an environment ripe with consistently lofty expectations.

High expectations for learning for all students can also be demonstrated through the use of nontraditional grading systems such as rubrics and performance-based portfolio learning. Transitioning from grading systems that value letter grades on a piece of paper to systems that are defined by student understanding and demonstration of knowledge will lead to learning that is much more deeply ingrained.

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Engagement

Traditional “stand and deliver” classroom models of instruction do not meet the needs of most students anymore, especially those in poverty. Many off-task and defiant behaviors occur because students simply can’t connect with the material being presented. They are not invited to engage in their learning to develop a deep understanding of how the material is pertinent to the “real world” as it exists for them or how it connects to their life as a productive college- and career-ready student.

Engaging students in the learning process means acknowledging, planning for, and acting upon their various learning styles. Today’s students have access to data and statistics, historical information, and the world as a whole at their fingertips. They communicate through text and social media rather than telephones and hand-written notes. Methodologies that engage students in creative, rigorous work that is thought-provoking and steeped in reality is a necessity.

Altering and eventually abolishing the poverty to prison paradigm is no small feat; it is not one for the weak in spirit or character, nor one for those who do not believe that all students can achieve. One of the most important decisions a school principal makes is hiring and supporting culturally competent teachers who are capable of providing high levels of instruction. Breaking the pipeline requires a commitment to changing the face of school so that no students’ future or expectations for success are ever again defined by the color of their skin or the zip code within which they reside. Making courageous decisions and believing that all children can learn are the tasks for today’s forward-thinking leaders who see a future defined by equal opportunities for all. 

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