Defining Poverty


Have you ever wondered how a family can afford a new television set with a built-in DVD player when they cannot afford proper school supplies for their children? Or been shocked by parents’ unwillingness to support the school’s discipline of their child? If so, Ruby Payne’s book, A Framework for Understanding Poverty, will help you develop a better understanding of these choices. The book describes the “hidden rules” of various socioeconomic groups and offers classroom management and instructional techniques to assist schools in working with students from poverty. Payne defines poverty as “the extent to which an individual does without resources.” These include not only financial resources but also emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical resources.

After providing extensive information on the characteristics of generational poverty and the needs of the impoverished, Payne suggests that while many of the behaviors students from poverty bring to school are necessary for them to survive in the outside world, they are not behaviors that help them in school. She provides a number of suggestions for improving discipline, instruction, and achievement.

Though the ideas are practical and clearly outlined, I’m not sure I could use many of them without further training. For example, while Payne supplies a great deal of information on strategies related to language and story structure, it would have been helpful if she had provided step-by-step procedures. Also, while the book focuses on poverty, I would like to know more about the relationship of race and ethnicity to poverty.

Overall, Payne’s book is a quick read filled with well-documented and practical information for educators with students who come from an environment of poverty.

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Picking Your Words


In Choice Words: How Our Language Affects Children’s Learning, author Peter Johnston delivers a few choice words of his own. He argues that the language teachers use in the classroom dictates how children make sense of learning, literacy, and themselves. Reading the book made me revisit some of the conversations I have had with my teachers and students—and wonder how my choice of words had affected them.

Johnston acknowledges that the drive for writing this short, 120-page book is his interest in the ability of successful teachers to use language to dictate literacy success. He believes that the words and phrases teachers use in the classroom exert considerable influence in a child’s literacy development.

For example, he cites this familiar scenario: A teacher asks a question, a child answers it, and the teacher announces whether the answer is correct or incorrect. Language in this instance positions the teacher as the judge and the student as a competitor.

Johnston has structured his book around the types of language teachers use—and should use. Although he admits to making some assumptions about the implications that language choices have on children, he invites readers to consider how the conversations teachers have with children influence the children’s literacy.

In order to help teachers focus their attention on the language they use daily, Johnston includes sample language teachers can use to enhance literacy:

“Did anyone notice...?”
“What kind of text is this?”
“Write down a line you wish you had written.”
“How did you figure that out?”

This book is a useful tool for educators in considering how we use language and the implication that our “choice words” have on student learning and success.

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