

Action Plan: Addressing Poverty in Our School in Two Steps

Payne (2013) identifies the following major components impacting children of poverty in schools across the country:

- Poverty as Resource Management vs Money Management
- Four Aspects of Language
- Situational vs Generational Poverty.

As I stated, in my first reflective essay, I can see each of these forces at work in my rural, northern Minnesota school. Likewise, Payne's chart detailing the hidden rules of various economic classes sheds light on the disconnect that exists between our mostly middle-class teaching staff and our large number of students living in poverty.

Some of those hidden rules, if addressed in our school, could lead to a better understanding of our student body, clearer communication throughout the building and community, and a shift in teaching methods that may positively affect student achievement across the curriculum. All of the "hidden rules" should be discussed by teachers, at the very least, to raise awareness of the barriers to authentic student-teacher relationships. The hidden rules that I believe, if addressed, would have the most immediate impact on our school are Personality, Time, and Language. The most important of which, in my opinion, is language.

If "the ability to use formal register," as Payne suggests, "is a hidden rule of the middle class" then we need to recognize that a measureable language gap exists and begin addressing it in an open, honest way in our classrooms, hallways, and offices. Access to the language of academic success is the first obstacle we need to tackle.

Once we begin that dialogue our focus can then shift to some of the "primary risk factors affecting our families in poverty" as outlined by Jensen (2009). The most glaring of which, again in my opinion, is the way in which our students deal with "Emotional and Social Challenges" and the way teachers interpret the manifestation of that struggle. The sooner we as educators can see our students' emotional and social responses as coping mechanisms

rather than “attitude” or “empathy” or “poor upbringing” the better we will be equipped to put into motion Jensen suggested action steps. We must, he says, do the following:

- Embody respect
- Embed social skills
- Be inclusive

Just over 53% of our student body is eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. That’s slightly higher than the national average but is a bit of a misnomer as many of the families that do not qualify for that program are barely keeping their heads above water financially. We met our Annual Yearly Progress mark in math and graduation last year but fell short in reading. Historically we fluctuate on the AYP chart; passing in certain categories some years, failing to meet the standard in others.

I am unaware of any attempts our school has made to address poverty specifically. We seem to be addressing the symptoms of poverty all the time. Symptoms like low test scores, retention, discipline issues, and truancy are a constant focus schoolwide. But a comprehensive plan that addresses the root causes of these symptoms has not, to my knowledge, been attempted. I truly believe the staff we have are more than willing to take that step. They are a bright, compassionate, and dedicated group who strive to form the kind of “significant relationships” that Payne (2013) says are necessary to bridge the discourse divide that keeps many of our students from realizing academic, as well as social and emotional, success.

What then is the plan moving forward? How do we begin to address Payne’s (2013) “language” barrier and Jensen’s (2009) “emotional and social challenges”? Fortunately both authors offer advice on how to answer those very questions.

Payne outlines the following six items that must be included when developing a plan to reduce the language gap that exists between our staff and students:

- Formal register needs to be direct-taught.
- Casual register needs to be recognized as the primary discourse pattern for many students, particularly those from poverty.

- Discourse patterns need to be direct-taught.
- Both story structures need to be used as part of classroom instruction.
- Discipline that occurs when a student uses inappropriate register should be a time for instruction in the appropriate register.
- Students need to be told how much formal register affects their ability to get a well-paying job.

So, with language in mind, the first step in my schoolwide plan to address poverty in our school and close the achievement gap is to ensure our teachers understand the following:

- Formal register and the discourse patterns of power must be directly taught while affirming the student voice (casual register and story structure).
- Classroom behavior issues that arise due to the disparity between discourse patterns must be handled in a way that allows for reinforcement of the appropriate register.
- Reinforcing the use of appropriate register, must be made relevant to our students by explaining how such language acquisition helps them increase their odds of getting a decent job and supporting their family.

The second step in my two-part, schoolwide initiative to address poverty and the achievement gap in our school would follow closely Jensen's (2009) "actions steps", highlighted above. In an effort to help our students overcome some of their social and emotional challenges I would ensure that our staff worked toward the following goals:

- Model respect- treat students like young adults, show them what appropriate adult interaction looks like, make them a part of the process
- Model social skills- allow for several opportunities each day to show our students what being polite, poised, cooperative, collaborative looks, sounds, and feels like
- Model inclusion- use and encourage the use of an inclusive vocabulary. Openly discuss words that work against this goal, allow students to come up with alternative phrases that empower all members of our learning community

I am confident that this multifaceted, two-step plan will put us on the path toward addressing the poverty and achievement factors prevalent in our learning community. No plan, no matter how many steps, can erase the divide completely. But an honest assessment of where we are and an honest effort toward where we hope to be as educators are two steps in the right direction. We have been marching in place long enough and it is getting us nowhere. The journey starts with two steps.