



WHAT WE ARE LEARNING ABOUT POVERTY AND LEARNING

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Meet the Beyond School strand

This journal is organized around four key strands: Reengaging Learners, Knowledge, Vocabulary, and Equity, Beyond School, and Embrace Biliteracy. The following article aligns to the Beyond School strand. Articles in this strand address factors outside of school that impact learning. Poverty and trauma, for example, bring substantial and negative challenges to learning, and both originate beyond school. From another perspective, parent and community advocacy groups, such as Parents Requiring Our Public Education system to Lead (PROPEL) in TN, likewise originate outside of school; however, their advocacy brings positive challenges that highlight areas for needed reform. Decoding Dyslexia, a parent-led grassroots movement across the country, brings another example of a positive challenge originating beyond school. This group has shed substantial light on our nation's need for evidence-based interventions to support students learning through the lens of dyslexia. As you read What we are Learning about Poverty and Learning, we hope that you find the information compelling, and that you respond to our call for submissions for additional articles in this the Beyond School strand.

Request for articles for the Beyond School strand

Request for articles within this theme, Beyond School, should focus on specific instructional practices and resources that support At-Promise learners who may be learning via the lens of poverty and trauma. See the Journal Submission Form to access submissions guidelines and submit your article for consideration.

8 Million More

At the end of 2020, the United States reported its largest increase in poverty in the past 50 years with a poverty rate increase of 2.4%. (see Tanzi & Saraiva, 2021). Certainly, COVID-19, and its ongoing economic impact, is at the root of this increase; even so, an additional 8 million more Americans are now considered as living below the poverty line. Horacio Sanchez, President and CEO of Resiliency Inc., and a key resource for this article, states in his most recent book, *The Poverty Problem*, that education is the institution most distressed by poverty. While this is well established, Sanchez takes the poverty discussion to the next level, clarifying what causes the distress, which is the brain's response to poverty. Further, he outlines how educators enact practices that alleviate the distress to make room for learning academically, emotionally, and socially. Sanchez's work is critical, as among these 8 million who are now identified as living in poverty, are thousands of At-Promise Students, and among them are those whose promise will lead this nation to address the impact of poverty in school and in our day-to-day lives. At-Promise Students will lead the way because we are beginning to understand the brain's response to poverty and the exact correlation between poverty and learning. Further, we are learning instructional protocols and practices that redirect attention, provide for engagement, and the joy found in learning.

Poverty and Learning

President Johnson, in accordance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 commissioned James Coleman, and a team of researchers, to quantify differences in experiences in school based on poverty and race. Published in 1966, the Equality of Educational Opportunities report, often called the Coleman Report, garnered both intrigue and criticism. There is certainly room to continue the debate regarding Coleman's findings, as those findings remain relevant. The disparity in educational opportunity based on poverty and race noted in the report may still be at work. Coleman, however, also found that the quality of teachers "shows a stronger relationship to pupil achievement than race or poverty." Further, Coleman explains, the impact is "progressively greater at higher grades indicating a cumulative impact of the qualities of teachers in a school on the pupil's achievements" (Goldhaber, 2016).

These findings about teacher quality, which were observed in multiple schools regardless of poverty or race, have been confirmed in varied studies over the 50+ years since Coleman's work. Educational researcher and author Dylan Wiliam, in his studies of factors impacting student achievement, echoes Coleman's findings related to the power of a teacher. Wiliam (2011 p 16-17) noted that in American schools, the classroom effect (teacher quality) is far more predictive of achievement than the school effect (race and poverty). In other words, teachers play a pivotal role in establishing equitable opportunity among all learners. In the following section, we explore this most pivotal role.

The Classroom Effect

Sanchez focuses intently on what teachers can do in the classroom to fully engage students learning through the impact of poverty. He begins with three critical skills for learning: focus, social ability, and self-control. The scope of this article only offers few selected protocols and strategies from Sanchez and others. I invite you to explore the references listed at the end of this article, find the protocols and strategies that resonate with you and share with colleagues.

Within the context of this article, we explore the critical skill of focus, and for this we turn to noted resiliency expert, Dr. Amit Sood. Our brains operate in two general modes: default and focused. In the default mode, your brain attends to everything (e.g., hunger, sleepiness, anger, sounds outside the window, respiration, balance, and volume just to name a few). To focus, you must mute that dialogue. Sood suggests a one or two-minute guided meditation prior to engaging in highly focused task. In the classroom setting, teachers would explain the learning target and expectations for success while students visualize the learning target, make a sketch of the target and what success looks like. To retain focus, Sood suggests you think about student choice. We tend to think choice is always positive, giving students more autonomy over their learning. Sood writes, however that when presented with too many choices, the brain confuses a choice with its importance, and will likely lose focus on the learning at hand.

Rituals, mnemonics, and imagery are other effective focusing techniques. One particularly timely ritual helps students to begin the day with grace and appreciation for one another. Based upon pre-pandemic protocols, the nine justices of the Supreme Court of the United States begin the day with a decades-old ritual (see CASEL, 2019). All nine justices gather to shake the hands of, and say a personal greeting of appreciation to, one another. Following the ritual, the justices spend the rest of the day arguing. Their debates are rigorous but grounded in a cordial relationship and respect for one another. Even in virtual settings—especially with platforms that allow for breakout spaces—beginning the day with respect signals your default brain to mute the stress dialogue and focus on the learning at hand.

The School Effect

In addition to rituals, mnemonics, and imagery, Sanchez leads a fascinating discussion about musical training and the impact on the language center of the brain. Sanchez is clear that he is sharing the impact of formal musical training, ideally delivered by professional musicians. Schools must be fully equipped to engage learners in this training. Instruments, teachers, space learn, and time to practice must be addressed. The return is worth the investment. Musical training strengthens the brain's language center, improves auditory processing and the ability to head discrete letter sounds. As Sanchez notes, "musical training, especially in schools with a concentration of students coming from poverty, might be one the most effective and well-researched strategies for improving not only the immediate performance of students but also the long-term capacity of their brains by improving underdeveloped structures" (see p 59-60).

Further, practice is especially beneficial to students from poverty. School leaders must dedicate time for students to practice, not only their instruments (which could be part of the formal musical training), but also practice math and reading. As our nation looks to mitigate COVID-19 unfinished learning, we are finding that continued practice is having a significant impact on math achievement. A 2021 study from Renaissance, focused on the efficacy of math practice showed that students in 2nd – 8th grades who engaged in practice via Freckle™ adaptive math did not suffer math learning loss. Further, students with a history of math struggle, who engaged in at least 100+ days of practice, entered school in the fall of 2020 ahead of expectations. The evidence related to reading practice is equally compelling, explaining that once students have mastered the mechanics of reading, they engage in self-teaching; particularly they gain vocabulary and acquire background knowledge without awareness that they are doing so. (See Willingham, 2017 p 68-69).

The Reaching At-Promise Students Association Effect

The ravages of poverty have plagued this nation for generations. President Johnson's efforts, however controversial, were born of a heart for children in poverty. Prior to his role in Congress and his presidency, Johnson was a 5th grade teacher in south Texas. He taught low-income Mexican immigrant children, who, he said, he never forgot. As part of the Civil Rights Act, Johnson crafted the nation's first federal education law with those children as his motivation. He referred to the bill as the bridge between hopelessness and hope for more than five million educationally deprived children. Today that number hovers around 11 million. The bridge is ready for reinforcements and expansion. At-Promise Students will lead the way.

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