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EDITORIAL

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Poverty Matters

Recently, some state department of education bureaucrats such as commissioners, deputy commissioners, and state governors made remarks to the effect that poverty does not matter in terms of the achievement gap or student results on state mandated standardized tests.

These types of statements are, in part, because of the longstanding (e.g., Colman, et al., 1966) and large scientific knowledge dynamic that suggests otherwise.

The proclamations are also attention-grabbing because of the cavalier way some of the education bureaucrats and governors make them; as if scientific evidence has no place in education policymaking.

Poverty matters. However, poverty matters in different ways on different measures. Education bureaucrats who say poverty should not be an excuse for children "not learning" are technically correct.

Poverty is not an excuse, but it is part of an explanation for ultimate student achievement. In this article I provide a general overview of some of the research on the relationship between poverty and student achievement and I attempt to explain where comments like "poverty does not matter" originate.

All Students Can Learn

The results from several large studies suggest that students from environments of poverty do learn as much during a school year as their middle-class peers. But, that is different from stating that all students end in the same academic place in terms of achievement on a state mandated standardized test: They do not.

The influence of poverty on student learning appears to have the greatest influence on students at the highest and lowest achievement levels, especially during the summer months (Borman & Dowling, 2006). It is similar to the Matthew Effect: The rich get academically richer and poorer get poorer during the summer.

Wealthier students maintain or even gain a month of achievement during the summer recess from school whereas students from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds can lose up to two or three months of knowledge and skills (Cooper, et al., 2000).

When everyone returns to school in the fall, students from poverty can be up to three months behind their wealthier peers. Simple math dictates that if this happens for three or four consecutive years, some students will be one grade level ahead academically when they enter Grade 3 for example, whereas other students will be "behind" almost a full school year.

Of course the above calculation presupposes that all students were academically "equal" when they started kindergarten. Once again, they were not, due in part to poverty. Therefore the "gap" in achievement can be even greater by the end of Grade 3.

Science Matters

Scientists have known for some time that all students do not enter kindergarten or preschool with the same skills, knowledge, or academic background experiences (Hart & Risley, 1995). For example, children from middle and upper class environments who enter preschool at age 4 have heard approximately 45 million words compared to a child from a family on welfare who has heard only16 million words during his first four years of life. Hart and Risely (1995) coined the difference between the language exposure of rich and poor children the *30 million word gap*.

It is well documented that the "summer slide" (Borman & Dowling, 2006) affects students from poverty the most in the area of reading (Cooper et al., 1996). This is due in part to the word gap and life opportunity gap. The words and sentence structures spoken in wealthier homes are often more elaborate when compared to those used in homes of students whose families rely on welfare. This is known as the difference between speaking and hearing elaborate code and restricted code (Bernstein, 1971). So not only do children from poverty hear less words, the words they do hear can be less complex in nature and less academically stimulating.

When children hear 30 million less words and have fewer opportunities to engage in a wide range of out-of-school learning experiences they enter kindergarten with limited sight vocabularies. Sight vocabulary is one of the precursors to reading at an early age, albeit not the only factor. The 30-million word difference equates to approximately a 2.5 year difference in language exposure and that difference influences achievement.

The lack of language exposure and fewer out-of-school learning opportunities are two reasons the public schools receive students who do not know their letters or the sounds the letters make upon entering kindergarten.

Power of Poverty

Although results from scientific studies suggest that students from poverty will make one year or one-and-a-half year's worth of growth during the school year, so will their working and middle class peers. Thus, the "achievement gap" will never close without a sustained national commitment to close the societal gap. While middle class peers spend their summers in more academically enriched environments and gain an extra month of summer learning, children from poverty lose up to three months of achievement. Thus, the gap can actually grow with time.

So, should anyone be surprised when students from poverty, as a group, do not score higher in terms of mean scale score, or in terms of percent proficient than their wealthier peers on any state tests, at any grade level in the country (Tienken, 2011)?

That's the power of poverty.

It strikes me as a bit ironic when a commissioner of education or other state education bureaucrat proclaims that he or she is not convinced that poverty matters in terms of ultimate student achievement on state-mandated tests, or that he or she needs to commission a study to determine if poverty matters in ultimate achievement. There is no need to go through the charade and waste

taxpayer money on such a study because those studies already exist.

For example, Sirin (2005) reviewed 58 studies published between 1990 and 2000 about the influence of poverty on student achievement. The final sample of students was over 101,000 from more than 6,800 schools in 128 school districts. The average effect size difference in achievement at the individual student level between students from poverty and those not in that category was 0.28: Students from poverty scored lower.

At the group level, the level at which the quality of school administrators and teachers is determined, the effect of poverty was greater, 0.60, but as high as 1.25. Consider that an effect size of 1.00 is like the difference between students scoring at the 50th percentile on a norm-referenced test and a group scoring at the 84th percentile.

Why Poverty Does Not Matter

If there exists at least 45 years of empirical research that documents the connection between poverty and ultimate student achievement as measured by standardized tests then how can the latest crop of education bureaucrats declare otherwise? Relativism might play a role in the suppression of the truth about poverty and in the creation of the fairy tale known as *Poverty Is Not the Problem*.

Relativism is a set of beliefs that espouses that *all truths are local* (Baghramian, 2004). Similar to the idea that all politics is local, or it only matters if it happens here, relativists subscribe to the idea that there exist no absolute truths. Everything is open to interpretation: Everything is "relative" if you will. Meaning is made based on the maker's worldview; it comes from how the maker of the meaning sees things.

Therefore, if an education bureaucrat does not want to acknowledge poverty as an inhibiting factor on student achievement, he does not have to acknowledge it because it is not true to him. If instead the bureaucrat feels that the public school system is the cause of the achievement gap, he need only say that and then it is true, to him. If the bureaucrat is the lead education policy maker in the state, then state policy might also reflect that worldview. Admittedly, this is a very shallow explanation of relativism, but I think it captures the general idea in terms of the current education policy debates about poverty.

Linguistic Relativism

When bureaucrats make public statements like "poverty does not matter" they engage in linguistic relativisim (Niemeier & Dirvin, 2000). The bureaucrats know that language influences thoughts and they know from history that if they say something enough times, for a long enough period of time, they have a chance that a growing number of people will think it is true. Consider the 55-year mantra "public schools are failing."

Although the data suggest otherwise, it is commonly accepted that the entire public school system needs to be restructured or even dismantled. This acceptance was not achieved because of scientific research, but more from the coordinated use of linguistic relativism. One can hear the statements about dismantling public education made regularly and they go unchallenged by from the public and even some educators agree with the statement.

Through the eyes of a relativist, poverty only matters if it matters to the relativist, not whether science demonstrated that it influences student achievement. It seems as if the sun revolves around the Earth once again although the evidence suggests otherwise.

The relativist view has advantages for policy makers. For example, if poverty does not matter to the policy makers, then policy makers no longer have to target funds for poverty, give special assistance to students because of poverty, or even consider poverty in their deliberations.

Poverty simply disappears and all references and discussions about it are suppressed. If people attempt to bring it up, the relativist need only state that the dissenter is making excuses or has low expectations for children.

Gentle Reminders

Perhaps school administrators should demand their education bureaucrats provide evidence that their reform ideas actually address the root causes of underachievement—poverty—before demonstrating willingness to engage in a discussion about implementing reforms.

Maybe school administrators should stop attending state bureaucratic meetings unless honest discussions about the root causes of underachievement will take place. Perhaps some school administrators should not be so zealous in their compliance with state and federal mandates that do not have empirical evidence. At the very least they can feign compliance but do what it empirically based for students.

Children do not have a voice in the policy development process. Policy is thrust upon them and school administrators might consider acting as their voice.

School administrators already have enough work and do not have time to sit at meetings and listen to folk tales about how Superman defeated poverty.

Maybe it is time to stop listening and start talking, or at least start asking many more questions of the bureaucrats. Maybe school administrators need to take to the bully pulpit and begin to control the message.

The sun does not revolve around the Earth and school administrators do not have to accept that it does. We are engaged in a scientific profession.

Let us start using more science to inform our decisions and hold policy makers accountable to do the same.

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