

Understanding and Working with Students and Adults from Poverty

by Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D.



The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted inequities in our communities, schools, and businesses. Many who live on the edge of stability have slid into daily instability, increasing stress for our communities. This article examines the economic realities that we are seeing more of because of COVID-19, realities that aha! Process has been addressing for 26 years.

Poverty creates barriers, but people don't understand barriers they don't face. To better understand and work with people from generational poverty, a framework is needed. This framework has shaped the following basic ideas:

- Each individual has eight resources which greatly influence achievement; money is only one.
- Poverty is the extent to which an individual is without these eight resources.
- The hidden rules of the middle class govern schools and work; students from generational poverty come with a completely different set of hidden rules and do not know middle-class hidden rules.
- Language issues and the story structure of casual register cause many students from generational poverty to be unmediated, and

therefore, the cognitive structures needed inside the mind to learn at the levels required by state tests have not been fully developed.

- Teaching is what happens outside the head; learning is what happens inside the head. For these students to learn, direct teaching must occur to build these cognitive structures.
- Relationships are the key motivators for learning for students from generational poverty.

Key Points

Here are some key points that need to be addressed before discussing the framework:

Poverty is relative. If everyone around you has similar circumstances, the notion of poverty and wealth is vague. Poverty or wealth only exists in relationship to the known quantities or expectation.

Poverty occurs among people of all ethnic backgrounds and in all countries. The notion of a middle class as a large segment of society is a phenomenon of this century. The percentage of the population that is poor is subject to definition and circumstance.

Economic class is a continuous line, not a clear-cut distinction.

Individuals move and are stationed all along the continuum of income.

Generational poverty and situational poverty are different. Generational poverty is defined as being in poverty for two generations or longer. Situational poverty exists for a shorter time and is caused by circumstances like death, illness, or divorce.

This framework is based on patterns. All patterns have exceptions.

An individual brings with them the hidden rules of the class in which they were raised. Even though the income of the individual may rise significantly, many patterns of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies, and so on remain with the individual.

School and businesses operate from middle class norms and use the hidden rules of the middle class. These norms and hidden rules are never directly taught in schools or in businesses.

We must understand our students' hidden rules and teach them the hidden middle class rules that will make them successful at school and work. We can neither excuse them nor scold them for not knowing; we must teach them and provide support, insistence, and expectations.

To move from poverty to middle class or from middle class to wealth, an individual must give up relationships for achievement.

Resources

Poverty is defined as the “extent to which an individual does without resources.” These are the resources that influence achievement:

Financial: the money to purchase goods and services.

Emotional: the ability to choose and control emotional responses, particularly to negative situations, without engaging in self-destructive behavior. This is an internal resource and

shows itself through stamina, perseverance, and choices.

Mental: the necessary intellectual ability and acquired skills, such as reading, writing, and computing, to deal with everyday life.

Spiritual: a belief in divine purpose and guidance.

Physical: health and mobility.

Support systems: friends, family, backup resources, and knowledge bases one can rely on in times of need. These are external resources.

Role models: frequent access to adults who are appropriate and nurturing to the child and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior.

Knowledge of hidden rules: knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group.

Individuals who made it out of poverty usually cite an individual who made a significant difference for them.

Language and Story Structure

To understand students and adults who come from a background of generational poverty, it's helpful to be acquainted with the five registers of language. These are frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate.

Formal register is standard business and educational language. Formal register is characterized by complete sentences and specific word choice. Casual register is characterized by a 400- to 500-word vocabulary, broken sentences, and many nonverbal assists.

Maria Montañó-Harmon, a California researcher, has found that many low-income students know only casual register. Many discipline referrals occur because the student has spoken in casual register. When individuals have no access to the structure and specificity of formal register, their achievement lags. This is complicated by the story structure used in casual register.

In formal register, the story structure focuses on plot, has a beginning and end, and weaves sequence, cause and effect, characters, and consequences into the plot. In casual register, the focus of the story is characterization.

Typically, the story starts at the end (Joey busted his nose), proceeds with short vignettes interspersed with participatory comments from the audience (*He hit him hard. BAM-BAM. You shoulda' seen the blood on him*), and finishes with a comment about the character. (To see this in action, watch a TV talk show where many of the participants use this structure.) The story elements that are included are those with emotional significance for the teller. This is an episodic, random approach with many omissions. It does not include sequence, cause and effect, or consequence.

Cognitive Issues

The cognitive research indicates that early memory is linked to the predominant story structure that an individual knows. Furthermore, stories are retained in the mind longer than many other memory patterns for adults. Consequently, if a person has not had access to a story structure with cause and effect, consequence, and sequence, and if he or she lives in an environment where routine and structure are not available, he or she cannot plan.

According to Reuven Feuerstein, an Israeli educator:

- Individuals who cannot plan cannot predict.
- If they cannot predict, they cannot identify cause and effect.

- If they cannot identify cause and effect, they cannot identify consequence.
- If they cannot identify consequence, they cannot control impulsivity.
- If they cannot control impulsivity, they have an inclination toward criminal behavior.

Mediation

Feuerstein refers to these students as “unmediated.” Simply explained, mediation happens when an adult makes a deliberate intervention and does three things:

- Points out the stimulus (what needs to be paid attention to)
- Gives the stimulus meaning
- Provides a strategy to deal with the stimulus

For example: Don't cross the street without looking (stimulus). You could be killed (meaning). Look twice both ways before crossing (strategy).

Mediation builds cognitive strategies for the mind. The strategies are analogous to the infrastructure of a house—that is, the plumbing, electrical, and heating systems. When cognitive strategies are only partially in place, the mind can only partially accept the teaching. According to Feuerstein, unmediated students may miss as much as 50% of text on a page.

Why are so many students unmediated? Poverty forces one's time to be spent on survival. Many students from poverty live in single-parent families. When there is only one parent, he or she does not have time and energy to both mediate the children and work to put food on the table. And if the parent is non-mediated, his or her ability to mediate the children will be significantly lessened.

Hidden Rules of Class

Generational Poverty	Middle Class	Wealth
The driving forces for decision-making are survival, relationships, and entertainment.	The driving forces for decision-making are work and achievement.	The driving forces for decision-making are social, financial, and political connections.
People are possessions. It is worse to steal someone's girlfriend than a thing. A relationship is valued over achievement. That's why you must defend your child no matter what he or she has done. Too much education is feared because the individual might leave.	Things are possessions. If material security is threatened, often the relationship is broken.	Legacies, one-of-a-kind objects, and pedigrees are possessions.
The "world" is defined in local terms.	The "world" is defined in national terms.	The "world" is defined in international terms.
Physical fighting is how conflict is resolved. If you only know casual register, you don't have the words to negotiate a resolution. Respect is accorded to those who can physically defend themselves.	Fighting is done verbally. Physical fighting is viewed with distaste.	Fighting is done through social inclusion/exclusion and through lawyers.
Food is valued for its quantity.	Food is valued for its quality.	Food is valued for its presentation.

Other Rules

Generational Poverty	Middle Class	Wealth
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ You laugh when you are disciplined; it is a way to save face. ▪ The noise level is higher; nonverbal information is more important than verbal. Emotions are openly displayed, and the value of personality to the group is your ability to entertain. ▪ Destiny and fate govern. The notion of having choices is foreign. Discipline is about penance and forgiveness, not change. ▪ Tools are often not available. Therefore, the concepts of repair and fixing may not be present. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formal register is always used in an interview and is often an expected part of social interaction. ▪ Work is a daily part of life. ▪ Discipline is about changing behavior. To stay in the middle class, one must be self-governing and self-supporting. ▪ A reprimand is taken seriously (at least the pretense is there), without smiling and with some deference to authority. ▪ Choice is a key concept in the lifestyle. The future is very important. Formal education is seen as crucial for future success. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The artistic and aesthetic are key to the lifestyle and include clothing, art, interior design, seasonal decorating, food, music, social activities, etc.* ▪ For reasons of security and safety, virtually all are contacts dependent on connection and introductions. ▪ Education is for the purpose of social, financial, and political connections, as well as to enhance the artistic and aesthetic. <p>* One of the key differences between the well-to-do and the wealthy is that the wealthy almost always are patrons to the arts and often have an individual artist(s) to whom they are patrons as well.</p>

To help students learn when they are only partially mediated, four structures must be built as part of direct teaching:

- the structure of the discipline,
- cognitive strategies,
- conceptual frameworks, and
- models for sorting out what is important from what is unimportant in text.

Hidden Rules

One key resource for success in school and at work is an understanding of the hidden rules. Hidden rules are the unspoken cueing system that individuals use to indicate membership in a group. One of the most important middle class rules is that work and achievement tend to be the driving forces in decision-making. In generational poverty, the driving forces are survival, entertainment, and relationships. This is why a student may have a \$30 Halloween costume but an unpaid book bill.

Hidden rules shape what happens at school. For example, if the rule a student brings to school is to laugh when disciplined and he does so, the teacher is probably going to be offended. Yet for the student, this is the appropriate way to deal with the situation. The recommended approach is simply to teach the student that he needs a set of rules that brings success in school and at work and a different set that brings success outside of school. So, for example, if an employee laughs at a boss when being disciplined, he will probably be fired.

Many of the greatest frustrations teachers and administrators have with students from poverty is related to knowledge of the hidden rules. These students simply do not know middle class hidden rules, nor do most educators know the hidden rules of generational poverty.

The hidden rules of the middle class must be taught so students can choose to follow them if they wish.

To be successful, students must be given the opportunity to learn these rules. If they choose not to use them, that is their choice. But how can they make the choice if they don't know the rules exist?

Relationships Are Key

When individuals who made it out of poverty are interviewed, virtually all cite an individual who made a significant difference for them. Not only must the relationship be present, but tasks need to be referenced in terms of relationships.

For example, rather than talk about going to college, the conversation needs to be about how the learning will impact relationships. One teacher had this conversation with a 17-year-old student who didn't do his math homework on positive and negative numbers.

“Well,” she said, “I guess it will be all right with you when your friends cheat you at cards. You won't know whether they're cheating you or not because you don't know positive and negative numbers, and they aren't going to let you keep score, either.” He then used a deck of cards to show her that he knew how to keep score. So she told him, “Then you know positive and negative numbers. I expect you to do your homework.”

From that time on, he did his homework and kept an A average. The teacher simply couched the importance of the task according to the student's relationships.

Conclusion

Students from generational poverty need direct teaching to build cognitive structures necessary for learning. The relationships that will motivate them need to be established. The hidden rules must be taught so they can choose the appropriate responses if they desire.

Students from poverty are no less capable or intelligent. They simply have not been mediated in the strategies or hidden rules that contribute to success in school and at work.

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- Previously printed in *Instructional Leader* and *Focus* magazines.
- Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D., founder and president of aha! Process (1994), with more than 30 years experience as a professional educator, has been sharing her insights about the impact of poverty and how to help educators and other professionals work effectively with individuals from poverty in more than a thousand workshop settings throughout North America, Canada, and Australia.
- A Framework for Understanding Poverty* was written years ago by Ruby Payne for teachers. We learned the information also helped those who are working with persons making the transition from instability to stability. That led to *Bridges Out of Poverty*, a book that addresses poverty from the individual, organization, community, and policy lenses. Bridges initiatives help people, organizations, and communities successfully address the challenges of poverty. More information on her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, can be found at ahaprocess.com.



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