

THE CULTURE OF POVERTY AND ADULT EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

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Abstract

Abstract: This study explored the experiences of adult education students from poverty in a grant-funded project designed to train them in a quality early childhood education curriculum and the barriers and lessons learned from project beginning to implementation of the curriculum in their classrooms.

Introduction

The topic of the culture of poverty became a passion of mine when I became involved in a grant project three and a half years ago. This project which is called a CAPE (Community Alliances to Promote Education) grant was a project funded by the Lilly Foundation. County community foundations in Indiana were given the opportunity to apply for \$5 million in funding for education. The county I reside in and work, St. Joseph County, formed workgroups to talk about early childhood education. Since that is an area that I am very involved in due to my work at Indiana University South Bend (IUSB), I was asked to participate in the workgroups.

As a result of those workgroups, three initiatives were written into the grant proposal. The project I became involved in was a training program called High/Scope. The High/Scope approach blends the knowledge of Jean Piaget with practical teaching experience in the classroom and other educational settings. (Jean Piaget was a Swiss psychologist who studied how infants and children learn and develop.) Long-term studies show the High/Scope approach promotes the healthy development of children, and provides long-lasting benefits throughout adulthood incorporating active learning, adult/child interaction, the learning environment, a daily routine and consistent assessment of children's progress through the use of anecdotal notes.

The Head Start teacher training was primarily focused on Head Start teachers due to the many problems around our local Head Start classrooms and the number of Head Start children (900) that were affected by the lack of quality of the teaching and classroom environments. The training was 120 hours of classroom training by a certified High/Scope trainer. In addition to that training, I created a hands on mentoring program designed to implement the High/Scope approach in all of the Head Start classrooms that would be conducted by myself, a mentor coordinator and selected teachers that had gone through the initial training.

Challenges included ringing cell phones during class, cross talk and sleeping during the first week of class.

I became aware that that I was judging and evaluating students based on my middle class Caucasian value system and that I needed to educate myself on the culture of poverty so that I could be a more effective mentor to the Head Start teachers.

So began my journey which started with reading A Framework For Understanding Poverty by Dr. Ruby K. Payne.

Poverty Defined

Prior to discussing Dr. Payne's or other's work, it is useful to define poverty as it exists in the United States. While certainly there is poverty worldwide, I felt it was too much of an arduous task for this project to examine the culture of poverty in other countries.

For a family of 4 in the United States, the 2003 HHS Poverty Guidelines indicates poverty is defined as total earnings of \$18,400. The median rate of an early childhood teacher in St. Joseph County, Indiana in 2003 was \$6.50/hour. If an individual was working 40 hours per week, the annual salary would be a gross salary of \$13,520.

(Federal Register, Vol. 68, No. 26, February 7, 2003, pp. 6456-6458.)

Poverty can be defined in numbers, but also by "the extent to which an individual does without resources". Financial resources are important but just as important are resources that have very little to do with money. I learned more about that by reading A Framework for Understanding Poverty.

Understanding Poverty From A New Perspective

Dr. Payne's work explores poverty from more than just the numbers. To start with, she contends that the middle class thinks that everyone is alike in the U.S. – that we all have the same shared values and goals. After reading her book and looking at the Head Start teachers through new eyes, I saw that such is not the case. There are hidden rules among the wealthy, the middle class and the poor.

Before going into the hidden rules, it's important to see poverty as a lack of resources, not only financial as I stated above, but also emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models and knowledge of those hidden rules.

The resources can be defined as follows:

Emotional

Having the ability to control emotions outwardly, especially in what is considered a negative situation; without exhibiting self-destructive behavior. This is an internal resource. This resource is usually derived in part from positive role models.

Mental

Having the basic resources of literacy – being able to deal with information and use it in day to day life. Examples would be reading, writing and mathematical/computing skills.

Spiritual

Holding a belief that help can come from a Higher Power. This resource can play into self-esteem, given that the individual sees her/himself as valued and worthy.

Physical

Being physically healthy.

Support Systems

Having friends/family that can be relied on in times of emergency and/or life changes. Who will take me to work when my car breaks down? Who takes care of my child when she/he is ill and I have to go to work or lose my job? Who supports me by helping me fill out a scholarship application?, etc.

Relationships/role models

Everyone has role models, be they parents, a minister/priest, a friend or a teacher. What becomes important is if those role models are appropriate for the individual's personal and professional development.

Knowledge of hidden rules

The hidden rules can be summarized as follows – in the wealthy class, expertise is valued; in the middle class, achievement is valued and in the poverty class, you're admired for your physical strength. To be able to move from one class to the other or communicate with another class, knowledge of the hidden rules is crucial.

What does this mean for adult educators? After an exploration of reading and digesting Dr. Payne's book, an obvious conclusion is that it is all about forming relationships. If you have a relationship with that adult student, you can even explain the hidden rules. They don't even have to totally accept them – perhaps they will have different behaviors for home and at school/work, so they don't feel they are abandoning their culture. In the end, having information is power for the student. But first, as adult educators, we have to know their rules, appreciate the value of the rules rather than dismissing them from a middle class, Caucasian perspective (mine).

Particularly revealing in Dr. Payne's book were the short quizzes as to whether you could survive in the different classes, which was quite illuminating. The value of taking the quizzes was, for me, an appreciation of the skills that the poor have to survive – skills that I do not have and therefore, start a relationship with a student of poverty with respect.

I believe it is vital that adult educators are aware of the cultural issues of poverty be they white, Hispanic, African American, Native American, Asian American, etc. If we, as educators, do not build relationships with our students, seek to understand, we cannot assist them to move to the next level of educational attainment and hopefully eventually empowerment.

Talmadge Guy in the series of essays, *Providing Culturally Relevant Adult Education: A Challenge for the Twenty-First Century*, asserts that much adult education theory and practice "is based on white middle class experience". The key to provide culturally relevant education to students who come from a culture of poverty is to as Professor Guy suggests, "find a way to learn who their learners are". How is this accomplished? By spending time on a personal level with students, become informed and active within their communities and as a result become "culturally comfortable" in a culture not their own. This is the first step towards constructing engagement.

To do this, a construct is important. I found Saville Troike's series of questions to ask about culture a useful guide.

Questions to Ask About Culture

Family Structure

- Who is considered to belong in the family?
- What are the rights, roles and responsibilities of the members?

Life Cycle

- What are the important stages, periods and transitions in life?
- What behaviors are inappropriate or unacceptable for children at various ages?

Roles

- What roles are available to whom?
- How are roles acquired?

Interpersonal Relationships

- How do people greet each other?
- Who may disagree with whom?
- How are insults expressed?

Communication

- What languages and dialects are spoken?
- What are the characteristics of speaking "well"?
- What roles, attitudes and personality traits are associated with particular aspects of verbal and nonverbal behavior?

Decorum and Discipline

- How do people behave at home and in public?
- What means of discipline are used?

Religion

- What religious roles and authority are recognized?
- What should an outsider not know or acknowledge knowing?

Health and Hygiene

- How are illness and death explained?
- How are specific illnesses treated?

Dress and Personal Appearance

- What significance does dress have for social identity?
- What is the concept and value of beauty and attractiveness?

Values

- What traits and attributes in oneself or others are important? Undesirable?
- What attributes in the world are important? Undesirable?

History and Traditions

- How are history and tradition passed on to the young?
- How do cultural understandings of history differ from "scientific" facts or literate history?

Education

- What are the purposes of education? What kinds of learning are favored?
- What teaching and learning methods are used in the home?
- What are parental expectations for boys versus girls?

Work and Play

- What behaviors are considered "work"? "Play"?
- What kinds of work are prestigious? Why?

Time and Space

- What is considered "on time"?
- What is the importance of punctuality?
- How important is speed of performance?
- How are groups organized spatially by age, gender and role?

Expectations and Aspirations

- Do parents expect and desire assimilation of children to the dominant culture, language or dialect?
- What cultural values are expected to be maintained despite the degree of formal education?

(Saville Troike, M. A Guide to Culture in the Classroom. Rosslyn, VA: National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education, 1978.)

Lessons Learned

The primary lesson learned is that I, as an adult educator, had a lot to learn about my students. I entered the High/Scope training, I must admit, with pre-conceived values and ideas that were of my own culture. I saw my beliefs as superior to those who were in the training because I saw them as being “negative” or “disruptive”.

The lessons learned from the reading of Dr. Payne’s book opened my eyes to the gifts and the barriers that students who come from a culture of poverty possess. First, I admitted my own prejudices to myself and began a journey to better appreciate the students I wanted to empower and engage. That process is still ongoing.

Education can be an agent of change. It can be the key to getting out of poverty if the student can learn that there are choices. It is our responsibility as educators to build relationships, be the role models that many students from the culture of poverty do not have, become a support system to assist with positive self-talk, goal setting and coping strategies.

One of the most heart warming moments I have had as a part of the High/Scope training is when formerly resistant students came up to myself, our mentor coordinator and the trainer in tears and said “you are the first people who made me feel like I was important”.

If I have done nothing else, I feel that moment was a reason to do what I do every day even amidst frustrations, roadblocks and tension.

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