POVERTY AND EDUCATION

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BACKGROUND EXPLANATION

*Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery.*  
—Horace Mann, 1848

*Civilization is a race between education and catastrophe.*  
—H.G. Wells (1866-1946)

Understanding poverty and helping impoverished people has long been my personal passion. As a high school senior, I traveled to Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and experienced firsthand the impact of abject poverty on human life. I literally touched children who were dead the next day because of the effects of starvation and disease. I saw that even a little could do so much. Presently, I operate a non-profit organization that operates in Haiti.

I’ve also struggled to understand domestic poverty—how the cycle is perpetuated from one generation to the next, how to move beyond superficial public statements, and what solutions empower people beyond to move beyond this cycle.

In the study of cultural and learning diversity, poverty cuts through all races, ethnic and cultural groups, classes, and genders. Poverty in many ways is a form of class warfare. Education has been confirmed to be the only proven path for people move out of poverty. The purpose this paper is to analyze the extent poverty and how it impacts education, both internationally and domestically; and to search for applicable solutions.

RESEARCH GOVERNING THE MAJOR THEME
World Statistics

The reality of poverty in the Third World is that human beings, adults and children, are living on the edge of death, every day, and seeking to carve out an existence of basic survival. Anyway one calculates and analyzes the statistics; world poverty is grim and shocking.

Today, the world population is over six billion people and of that number 852 million are hungry. Approximately five billion people live in the developing world. This world is made up of about 125 low and middle-income countries in which people generally have a lower standard of living with little access to fewer goods and services than people in high-income countries (Bread for the World, 2006). Calculating poverty levels is always controversial and draws considerable criticism from numerous sources. The primary standard of measure for calculating statistics on world economics is The World Bank. According to their measurements, the international poverty line is drawn at one dollar a day.

The economic distance between the richest and poorest countries was 72 to 1 in 1992, an increase from 44 to 1 in 1973. Today, in developing countries, 1.3 billion people live on less than one dollar a day and three billion live on fewer than two dollars a day. Economic growth and almost all of the other indicators, the last 20 years have shown a clear decline in progress in the areas of life expectancy, infant and child mortality, and education and literacy. Of the over two billion children in the world, one billion or every second child lives in poverty and 121 million children are out of education (Global Issues, 2006).

In these developing countries, 134 million children between the ages of seven and eighteen have never been to school. (Note: there appears to be a discrepancy in the numbers cited by CARE and Global Issues. The sample cited by Global Issues, which is lower than CARE’s numbers, is
based upon UNICEF statistics which have a smaller age range, although I have not been able to ascertain that age range.) Girls are more likely to go without schooling than boys (CARE, 2006).

Education has long been the only reliable factor to break the cycle of poverty. Studies have shown that “for every year of education, wages increase by a worldwide average of ten percent” (CARE, 2006).

(Table 1:1) Education Expenditures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES</th>
<th>MIDDLE INCOME COUNTRIES</th>
<th>UPPER MIDDLE INCOME COUNTRIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expenditure per student, primary (% of GDP per capita)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>98.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence to grade 5, total (% of cohort)</td>
<td>64.9</td>
<td>93.2</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil-teacher ratio, primary</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Economic standards of living illustrate a great discrepancy on the educational levels between the least developed countries compared to the most developed countries of the world (Table 1:1). In the least developed countries, expenditures per student in the primary grades and the adult literacy rates are negligible. As expected, persistence rates are low and pupil-teacher ratios are very high. The middle income countries and the upper middle income countries are very comparable in most categories of expenditures, adult literacy, persistency, and pupil-teacher ratios. While the expenditures per students are comparable in percentages between them, the Gross Domestic Product per Capita is widely different. The amount of financing for education is not comparable. Some middle income countries are estimated at two dollars a day. The educational expenditure gap between the wealthiest countries and the poorest is very acute.

**United States Statistics**

As with world statistics, the way poverty levels are calculated in the United States is open to criticism and controversy. One reason for the controversy is that Federal tax dollars are allocated according to the statistics. The US Census Bureau is the primary standard of measurement for poverty levels in this country. They use a formula of money thresholds that vary by family size and composition. If a family’s threshold is lower than its income, then they are considered to be living in poverty. There are a possible 48 different thresholds used in the calculations (US Census Bureau, 2006).

In 2004, the last year data is available, the official poverty rate is 12.7 percent rate with 37 million people living in poverty. Rates remained unchanged for Blacks and Hispanics, but rose for Whites, and decreased for Asians (US Census, 2005).
Locally, in Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, poverty rates are increasing in every major school district, even when population decreases (Table 1.2).

### (Table 1.2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL DISTRICTS</th>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>POPULATION</th>
<th>AGES 5-17</th>
<th>FAMILIES IN POVERTY</th>
<th>INCREASE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Campbell County Schools</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>37,220</td>
<td>6,735</td>
<td>280</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>36,645</td>
<td>6,651</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenton County Schools</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>87,114</td>
<td>16,611</td>
<td>813</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>87,632</td>
<td>17,025</td>
<td>1,079</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boone County Schools</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>85,338</td>
<td>16,802</td>
<td>1,083</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>96,030</td>
<td>18,898</td>
<td>1,514</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covington Independent Schools</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>36,515</td>
<td>6,046</td>
<td>1,508</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>36,732</td>
<td>6,196</td>
<td>1,963</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newport Independent Schools</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>17,352</td>
<td>3,079</td>
<td>767</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>17,085</td>
<td>3,042</td>
<td>885</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cincinnati City Schools</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>353,309</td>
<td>60,338</td>
<td>14,014</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>353,034</td>
<td>57,181</td>
<td>14,418</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princeton City Schools</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>42,283</td>
<td>7,579</td>
<td>685</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>41,453</td>
<td>7,071</td>
<td>713</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


For a diverse and more pragmatic understanding of poverty and its impact on education, a very valuable resource is Ruby Payne’s book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. She states, “Typically, poverty is thought of in terms of financial resources only. However, the reality is that financial resources, while extremely important, do not explain the differences in the success with which individuals leave poverty nor the reasons that many stay in poverty. The ability to leave poverty is more dependent upon other resources than it is upon financial resources” (Payne, 1996, pp.16-17).

Payne asserts her own working definition of poverty—“the extent to which an individual does without resources.” These resources are the following:

- **Financial**—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**—having the mental abilities and acquired skills to deal with daily life.
- **Spiritual**—believing in divine purpose and guidance.
• **Physical**—having physical health and mobility.

• **Support Systems**—having friends, family, and backup resources available to access in times of need. These are external resources.

• **Relationship/Role Models**—having frequent access to adults who are appropriate, who are nurturing to the child, and do not engage in self-destructive behavior.

• **Knowledge of Hidden Rules**—knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group (Payne, 1996, p. 16).

To further comprehend poverty in the United States, Payne makes a further distinction between **generational poverty** and **situational poverty**. “**Generational poverty** is defined as having been in poverty for at least two generations; however, the characteristics begin to surface much sooner than two generations if the family lives with others who are from generational poverty. **Situational poverty** is defined as the lack of resources due to a particular event (i.e. a death, chronic illness, divorce, etc)” (Payne, 1996, p.64).

**HOW POVERTY IMPACTS EDUCATION**

**World Impact**

On the world stage, the **major impact of poverty on education is the lack of opportunity for education**. First, **education is a luxury**. The opportunity to attend school is not available to many of the children in two-thirds of the world for a couple of basic reasons. (1) Since the least developed countries spend nearly nothing on education, families must either pay for it or rely on privately funded institutions, such as church supported schools. Therefore, the cost of education is financially out of reach for most families. (2) It is essential to consider that the income of one dollar a day reflects a family’s income, not an individual. As a result, children are part of the wage earning formula. They must work to support the family or find a source of income for their own survival, therefore robbing them of the ability to attend school. While it is important to note that children and
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parents in the least developed countries place great value on learning and see it as an opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty, the opportunities are not widely available.

Secondly, poverty impacts the learning process. The by-products of poverty are—hunger, sickness, and violence. All of these impact a child’s ability to learn by—distracting student’s ability to effectively concentrate because you haven’t consumed a decent meal for the day, lingering disturbance of a common illnesses and diseases left untreated due to lack of ordinary medical care, and disruptions from violence and aggression.

Thirdly, poverty minimizes the types of learning opportunities. Developing countries classrooms feature very primitive learning environments, resources, curriculums, and instructional methods. Their structures are minimal, usually without electricity, facilities, and teaching and learning tools. Lecture and memory are the primary teaching methods. I would watch Haitian students go to remote locations after school to memorize their daily lessons because they did not have books or paper.

United States Impact

In most of the world, poverty creates minimal opportunities for education. In the United States, poverty limits the opportunities for advancement. “High poverty rates have been linked to low levels of educational attainment. Low levels of formal education have been linked to employment in low wage earning jobs. Low wages have been linked to subsistence living. As can be seen, the links create a cycle from poverty to poverty. . . . poverty rates of high school dropouts is three times higher than the poverty rate of high school graduates. . . a gap narrows when people go up the educational ladder” (Miller, 1998).
“Regardless of race or ethnicity, poor children are much more likely than non-poor children to suffer developmental delay and damage, to drop out of high school, and to give birth in teen years” (Miranda, 1991).

There are numerous ways that the cycle of poverty impacts education, the classroom, and the labor market. Here are two of the major ones:

**First, poverty impacts student attainment.** The U.S. Department of Education has a long standing concern with the gap in achievement between students in high-poverty schools and their more advantaged peers. In a 1996 report, they reported, “The gap in math and reading achievement for nine-year-old students in high and low-poverty schools is significant. . . . The gap in average math scores between nine-year-olds in high and low-poverty schools was 22 points. . . . The achievement gap in reading between nine-year-old students in high and low-poverty schools is substantially larger than the gap in math: 38 points” (Department of Education 1996). Repeatedly, studies report alarming rates of achievement among students in poverty.

**Secondly, poverty impacts student drop-out rates and the labor market.** Students in poverty have a higher drop-out rate and perpetuate the cycle. Research also shows that students who complete a high school education have better opportunities in the labor market than students who don’t. Graduates are more likely to go onto further study and training, more likely to enter full-time employment, more likely to earn higher wages, than drop-outs. Drop-outs increasingly find themselves in and out of the labor market while working in part-time or casual jobs. They are less likely to enter into post-school study or training. And, even more concerning, they are more likely to engage in activities that marginalize them from the rest of society: activities like long-term unemployment, teenage
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pregnancy, drugs, and problems with the law. And, of course, they are more likely to end up living in poverty. But the problem is not just one of drop-outs ending up in poverty after school. It’s that they come from poor families in the first place (Considine, 2004).

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

The World

When I travel around the country speaking to groups and individuals about my work in Haiti, I describe the Haitian child in the following way, “When a Haitian child wakes up in the morning, he has one mission for the day—how can I find food to eat, clean water to drink, clothes to wear, and not get myself killed today.” That’s the reality in the least developed countries of the world where the average wage is one dollar a day. It severely affects a child’s learning process.

Upon further reflection, it’s obvious that the lack of economic resources is the main cause of the problem. Money from a variety of sources, both public and private, must be directed at the problem. At the risk of sounding simplistic, here are some recommendations (some of my own personal recommendations are mixed with ideas gathered from The World Bank Group and I want to give them proper credit, World Bank, 2001):

1. **Education must be made a priority.** Governments must understand that education is necessary for the overall economic development and prosperity of a country’s future.
2. **Provide education and training that is linked to income-generating activities,** with recovery costs explored. Education needs to be understood as an investment for a viable and stable economic future.
3. **Build partnerships** between governments and civil society. Identify and capitalize organizations in the private sector that are effectively educating and training the poor.
4. **Fund organizations that work directly with schools and communities.** Sending money to many developing nation’s governments is often risky because it never reaches its intended purpose. Private organizations tend to be more effective in reaching poor people directly, more accountable with the donated resources, and able to demonstrate the results.
5. **Invest in teacher and leadership training.** In my work in Haiti, we intend to model other educational methods of learning with both children and adults. I hope to minimize the lecture/memory methodology and utilize more cooperative and hands-on learning experiences. Since we are supplying schools and organizations with educational materials, we hope to diversify the types of curriculum and methods available for their future.

**The United States**

According to information supplied by my former building principal, 33 percent of the students are identified as living in poverty (based upon the total number of students enrolled in free lunch programs). The question I always struggle to answer is—how can I be an effective teacher to help empower my students to move beyond present circumstances toward a future of possibilities and independence? These are my personal goals and patterns:

1. **Be a role model**—“Locate a resilient kid and you will also find a caring adult- or several- who has guided him” (U.S. News & World Report, *Invincible Kids*). Most students in poverty have very few adults that model appropriate behavior, provide nurturing guidance, and positive discipline; I try to do this.

2. **Expand their vision**—one of the advantages that I feel I bring to the classroom is my background in the business world prior to teaching. I was involved in hiring, firing, motivating, and managing people. Occasionally, I am asked if I’m getting my middle school students ready for high school. I reply, “No, that’s too short-sighted. I’m getting them ready for life.” I try to help my students understand the implications of their decisions and actions beyond the classroom, and to see that they can go beyond current circumstances.

3. **Build relationships**—“The key to achievement for students from poverty is in creating relationships with them. Because poverty is all about relationships . . . the most significant motivator for these students is relationships . . . When students who have been in poverty (and have successfully made it into middle class) are asked how they made the journey, the answer nine out of ten has to do with a relationship—a teacher, counselor, or coach who made a suggestion or took an interest in them as individuals” (Payne, 1996, pp. 142-143). I try to get to know them on a personal level and to be very approachable. I also try to involve their parents in the educational process and to give them responsibilities to help their child mature.

4. **Establish goals and responsibilities**—I try to be very clear on what I expect from my students. Instead of setting low standards, I attempt to establish goals that are attainable and to define paths towards accountable responsibility. They have a role in defining their goals, as well. I want them to know that they have choices and that these choices yield rewards and consequences. The results of these choices are used as learning opportunities to establish new patterns of behavior and learning. Sometimes this will involve coping strategies and social skills.
5. **Be creative**—I’m never afraid to try new ideas to motivate or help students achieve. Sometimes these fail and sometimes these succeed. When they do succeed, the rewards are great. I believe the risks are minimal when the alternatives for a student are so bleak.
RESEARCH


