

Poverty & Literacy Learning: Pedagogical Considerations for Responsive Literacy Practitioners

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### Abstract

Poverty is a widespread issue that has a significant impact on the lives of many children. In order to develop students' proficiency with 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies, literacy practitioners must develop an understanding about poverty and how it affects literacy learning. Moreover, literacy practitioners must be responsive to the literacy learning needs of all students and augment their pedagogy with supportive measures that accommodate students who live in poverty. By doing so, literacy practitioners emphasize equity and empathy in literacy. The purpose of this article is to delineate three pedagogical considerations for responsive literacy practitioners: (1) implementation of adaptive instruction, (2) adoption of a contextually-based literacy curriculum, and (3) the establishment of strong partnerships with families, literacy professionals, and community members. This article also includes resources to assist educators with their journey in becoming responsive literacy practitioners.

*Keywords:* poverty, literacy, literacy practitioners, pedagogy, responsive practitioners

### Poverty & Literacy Learning: Pedagogical Considerations for Responsive Literacy Practitioners

Children who live in poverty face overwhelming challenges that greatly affect literacy learning. Teachers who work with students from high-poverty households have shared countless poignant stories of daily struggles that their students experience (Mann, 2013). For example, one teacher shared how poverty-related issues, such as physical abuse, financial stresses, and the absence of supportive parenting, significantly affect academic achievement among her first- and second-grade students. Another teacher recalled a specific situation when one of her second-grade students was not completing his homework assignments. After visiting with the student, the teacher discovered that he and his family were displaced and living with relatives in rat-infested housing. The mother, a single parent, worked in the evenings and was unavailable for her children at night. Stories such as these demonstrate the considerable influence that poverty has on literacy learning.

Recently, the International Literacy Association (2018) reported that equity in literacy education was a significant topic that required immediate attention. Equity in literacy was defined as “ensuring all children get what they need not only in situations of poverty and limited resources but also regardless of academic proficiency, geographic remoteness, and any other barrier to school success” (p. 11). With literacy being one of the bridges out of poverty, it is imperative for literacy practitioners to become familiar with the “background experiences and cultural practices of their students” and inform their pedagogy with response practices tailored to specific learning needs (Wamba, 2010). Moreover, literacy practitioners must re-envision the relationship between school and home by promoting strong home-school partnerships that involve the families of their students in meaningful ways (Bhattacharya, 2010). This approach abandons a one-size-fits-all approach to literacy instruction and empowers literacy practitioners

to be responsive professionals who individualize instruction, “help students recognize the cultural contestations and mismatches in their lives and learn how to reconcile them” (Li, 2010), and enhance equity and empathy in literacy within their classrooms.

### **Prevalence of Poverty**

Poverty has become a widespread issue throughout the United States. Although recent findings showed that the number of people who live in poverty has decreased from 2014 to 2015, the official poverty rate for the nation was reported as 13.5 percent (Proctor, Semega, & Kollar, 2016). According to this same report, 23.1 percent of people who live in poverty are children under the age of 18. With these statistics in mind, it is highly probable that literacy practitioners in today’s classrooms will likely encounter students who possess a wide variety of cultural and linguistic differences and a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2014). In order to develop students’ knowledge and skills with 21<sup>st</sup> century literacies, literacy practitioners must be responsive and empathetic professionals who support equitable literacy learning.

### **How Poverty Affects Literacy Learning**

Several studies have shown the great effect that poverty has on students’ academic achievement with early literacy skills (Boyce, Gillam, Innocenti, Cook, & Ortiz, 2013; Chatterji, 2006; Kaplan & Walpole, 2005; Lee & Al Otaiba, 2015; Lundberg, Larsman, & Strid, 2012; Roberts, Mohammed, & Vaughn, 2010). These studies have revealed startling findings that consistently demonstrate students from high-poverty households underperform when compared to their peers from low-poverty households in early literacy areas, such as alphabetic knowledge, oral language development, phonological awareness, and spelling. Moreover, students from high-poverty households typically make smaller gains in their reading levels during their early

years of school (i.e., kindergarten through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade) than their peers from low-poverty households (Judge, 2013).

With this in mind, much literature has emphasized the importance of literacy-rich home environments to foster the development of early literacy skills (Evans et al., 2016; Tichnor-Wagner, Garwood, Bratsch-Hines, & Vernon-Feagans, 2015). Students who live in high-poverty households are less likely to be exposed to quality literacy materials, positive literacy attitudes, as well as impactful language- and literacy-building activities. As a result, these students typically experience delayed development of early literacy skills, which places them at a disadvantage with respect to school readiness. Similarly, disorganized high-poverty households that are excessively noisy, cluttered, crowded, or lack structure, have been shown to have an adverse effect on student's early literacy academic achievement (Garrett-Peters, Mokrova, Vernon-Feagans, Willoughby, & Pan, 2016). Although poverty itself is not an indicator of low literacy learning, a significant number of students who live in high-poverty conditions are less likely to make appropriate gains in their literacy levels, take rigorous courses during K-12 school experiences, obtain a high school diploma, or aspire to engage with career training after high school (Compton-Lilly, 2014).

### **Pedagogical Considerations**

As literacy practitioners develop a greater awareness about poverty and literacy learning, they are more apt to augment their pedagogical practices with research-based, supportive measures that are responsive to students' individualized needs. A key aspect to becoming a responsive literacy practitioner requires the implementation of adaptive instruction (Athanases, Bennett, & Wahleithner, 2015). Athanases et al. described adaptive instruction as a pedagogical approach where the teacher "collects and analyzes classroom data about learning and responds

with new directions and pedagogical actions” (p. 84). For example, a literacy practitioner may decide to tweak a lesson, differentiate instruction, employ scaffolding, redesign curriculum, or try a new teaching strategy based upon formal and informal analyses of collected classroom data. Because children from low socioeconomic homes tend to have more issues affecting school performance than their more affluent peers, adaptive instruction is an effective way for literacy practitioners to influence students who may have non-traditional views of school behavior and performance (Jensen, 2009). Responsive literacy practitioners who use adaptive instruction are innovators who view their classrooms as laboratories. Within these laboratories, literacy practitioners engage in a continuous process of experimentation and reflection in order to identify what best promotes their students’ success with literacy.

Responsive literacy practitioners must also ensure that their literacy curriculum has an “ecological or context-based solution” versus “an externally imposed, prescribed course of action” (Peterson, 2014, p. 236). As articulated in Gay’s (2013) principles of culturally responsive teaching, a literacy curriculum must incorporate instructional practices that teachers design themselves with their respective setting and students in mind. Thus, culturally responsive teaching practices must become the foundation for the pedagogy of a literacy practitioner.

Literacy practitioners who are culturally responsive:

- understand cultural characteristics of ethnically diverse students,
- identify and address multicultural weaknesses in literacy curricula and materials,
- establish a welcoming classroom climate that promotes learning among ethnically diverse students,
- utilize communication styles that are sensitive to the linguistic structures of ethnically diverse students, and

- employ instructional strategies that are compatible with the learning styles of ethnically diverse students (Gay, 2002).

Students who interact with culturally responsive literacy practitioners are more likely to connect with the established literacy curriculum personally and recognize the connectedness of the curriculum to the world beyond the classroom (Peterson, 2016). These pedagogical components also serve as cognitive and social-emotional supports that foster students' engagement and motivation to learn, which potentially leads to improved academic performance, attendance, and conduct (Keifer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015).

Building strong partnerships with families, literacy professionals, and community members is another component required among responsive literacy practitioners. School-wide events, such as Open House or Meet the Teacher events, are widely used as mechanisms to establish family-teacher partnerships. Rather than occasional events, however, providing families with ongoing opportunities throughout the school year are much more effective ways to develop partnerships that support students' literacy learning (Stein, 2014). Examples of such events include trainings that deepen understandings of research-based literacy practices and how families may support these practices within their homes.

Similarly, collaborating with other school-based professionals is another effective way for responsive literacy practitioners to reinforce equitable literacy learning within the classroom. Collaborative partnerships with other school professionals provide literacy practitioners with increased access to a wealth of expertise and resources (Hunsinger, 2015). These resources may include books, technology, and external sources beyond the school campus. Collaborative partnerships also foster a strong sense of collegiality, community, and trust among school-based professionals as they share their expertise and experiences with each other (Kennedy, 2014).

Additionally, collaborative partnerships with community members have the potential to significantly extend literacy learning among students by incorporating other disciplines. For example, literacy professionals may collaborate with community-based arts specialists, such as musicians, photographers, and visual artists, to implement an arts-integrated approach to literacy learning (Cunnington, Kantrowitz, Harnett, & Hill-Ries, 2014). As literacy professionals and community-based arts specialists work together to create arts-based literacy lessons, “the integrity, depth, and rigor of instruction” in both areas is enhanced and preserved (p. 2). An arts-based literacy lesson intertwines literacy elements (e.g., vocabulary exercises, written reflections, peer interactions, class discussions) with artistic elements (e.g., modeling of art processes, guided practice with artistic craft) to support literacy learning among students through dance, drama, music, and visual arts. Literacy learning through the arts has demonstrated positive effects on students’ academic performance, particular among students who live in poverty (Ingram & Reidel, 2003). Examples of arts-based literacy practices supported through research include:

- creating self-authored storybook texts that merge visual images with written text (Bernhard, Winsler, Bleiker, Ginieniewicz, Madigan, 2008);
- exploring social justice issues through dance, music, theatrical performance, or the visual arts (Dunkerly-Bean, Bean, Sunday, & Summers, 2017; Scholes & Nagel, 2012);
- using popular culture, such as well-known television, movie, and web characters, trendy toys, and well-liked books, to teach literacy concepts and skills (Vera, 2011); and
- creating photo-interviews by combining verbal communication, writing, and visual images (Packard, Ellison, & Sequenzia, 2004).

### **Final Thoughts and Resources**

Poverty is a real issue that many students experience every day of their lives. Preservice literacy practitioners must be prepared to work effectively with students who live in poverty and receive continued support through ongoing professional learning experiences once they become literacy practitioners within the schools. In order to make a significant impact, these efforts must be systemic throughout educator preparation programs, as well as throughout school campuses and districts. Poverty can no longer be one topic that is covered in a teacher education course or a single training that educators attend. Cultivating responsive literacy practitioners who are knowledgeable about poverty supports the development of empathetic professionals who strengthen their pedagogy with equitable literacy teaching practices that enrich the lives of their students.

Although this list of resources is not exhaustive, we recommend the following resources as tools for literacy practitioners who strive to address equity and empathy in literacy within their classrooms (see Table 1). Again, we want to emphasize the importance of continuous professional learning, so we encourage the consultation of multiple resources. Moreover, we urge literacy practitioners to consider working with these resources individually, in small groups, and as a unified unit in order to maximize benefits among the students they serve.

Table 1

*Poverty Resources for Literacy Practitioners*

<u>Books</u> Culturally Responsive Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice</i> (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) – Geneva Gay (ISBN 0807750786)</li> <li>• <i>The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children</i> (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) – Gloria Ladson-Billings (ISBN 0470408154)</li> </ul>
<u>Books</u> Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>See Poverty . . . Be the Difference!</i> - Donna M. Beegle (ISBN 1934085014)</li> <li>• <i>Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It</i> – Eric Jensen (ISBN 1416608842)</li> </ul>
<u>Books</u> Poverty and Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Giving our Children a Fighting Chance: Poverty, Literacy, and the Development of Information Capital</i> – Susan B. Neuman &amp; Donna C. Celano (ISBN 0807753580)</li> <li>• <i>Narrowing the Literacy Gap: What Works in High-Poverty Schools</i> – Diane M. Barone (ISBN 1593852762)</li> </ul>
<u>Multimedia</u> Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Poor Kids</i> – PBS  <a href="http://www.pbs.org/video/2306814133/">http://www.pbs.org/video/2306814133/</a></li> <li>• <i>Geography of Poverty: A Journey through Forgotten America</i>” – Matt Black &amp; Trymaine Lee  <a href="http://www.msnbc.com/interactives/geography-of-poverty/index.html">http://www.msnbc.com/interactives/geography-of-poverty/index.html</a></li> </ul>
<u>Multimedia</u> Poverty and Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Why Most Students are Getting the Least Out of School” – Dan Cardinali  <a href="https://youtu.be/qzALINivYNQ">https://youtu.be/qzALINivYNQ</a></li> <li>• “Fix Poverty, Fix Education or Fix Nothing” – Tony Allen  <a href="https://youtu.be/zONB5wcMkug">https://youtu.be/zONB5wcMkug</a></li> </ul>
<u>Trainings &amp; Speakers</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Teaching and Engaging with Poverty in Mind”  <a href="http://www.jensenlearning.com/workshop-teaching-with-poverty-in-mind.php">http://www.jensenlearning.com/workshop-teaching-with-poverty-in-mind.php</a></li> <li>• Communication Across Barriers  <a href="http://www.combarriers.com/">http://www.combarriers.com/</a></li> </ul>

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