Poverty Does Not Restrict a Student’s Ability to Learn

Oft-criticized educator responds that her work emphasizes a belief in each individual’s cognitive ability to succeed, regardless of background in poverty.

BY RUBY K. PAYNE

In the early 1800s, the prevalent theoretical construct in the U.S. was genetic determinism, that is, who you were and what you could become were determined by what you had inherited. With the socialist movements in government came the theoretical construct of social determinism, that is, who you are and what you can become are determined by systems and social access. Social determinism also became the underlying theoretical construct for many social justice and multicultural studies.

In the late 1980s, state assessments and school accountability began to surface, leading to the federal No Child Left Behind Act in January 2002. In essence, what NCLB said was this: We don’t care whether you believe in genetic determinism or social determinism. Every child will learn and will learn to a level of proficiency against a standard knowledge and skills set. Period. The underlying theoretical construct became cognitive determinism (my terminology) — that is, everyone has a mind, and we will develop every mind. This development was being driven by the knowledge-based economy focusing on the development of intellectual capital (Stewart 1997), the new form of economic currency.

Many educators grieved at the onset of rigorous state assessments and accountability. A number of the educators I worked with were either leaving teaching or becoming depressed. They said things like “There’s nothing I can do. It’s hopeless.”

In the mid-1990s, I wrote A Framework for Understanding Poverty to help educators better address the issues in poverty. The underlying theoretical construct for the book is situated learning, a concept advanced by Lave and Wenger of Columbia University (1991). In essence, this theoretical approach says that virtually all initial learning occurs in “situated learning” environments that have context, language, relationships, and tasks where you reason with stories and act on situations. When a person goes from a situated-learning environment to formalized schooling, learning becomes decontextualized; the relationships and context are largely taken away. In formalized schooling, students reason with laws and act on symbols (numbers, letters, drawings, etc.). The purpose of Framework was to explain the situated-learning environment of generational (not situational) poverty and the bridges and strategies needed for students to make successful transitions to the decontextualized environment of school.

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Then the criticism of the book started. Virtually all of the criticism comes from nontenured professors of
higher education and a few practitioners who are firmly wedded to social determinism. "Social determinism has gained much ideological purchase, especially among liberal academics. Indeed, it has largely become a political doctrine that has given up any pretense of being scientific" (Levite 1996).

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“Deficit model” is one of the phrases used by critics. It is a theoretical model that doesn’t have a statistical research base. In other words, you can say the glass is half full of water or half empty. Regardless of which terminology you use, the level of water doesn’t change. “Deficit model” tends to be assigned to any model developed by a person of the dominant culture (I am white) that looks at what a student cannot do. To prepare students for state assessment, a teacher must know what they can and cannot do. The 2005 edition of Framework includes an “additive model.” The very first point states that the model “honors internal assets of people from all economic classes,” including poverty. I have always done that.

A related critique is that poverty is really about race. An African-American participant said to me in a workshop, “You should not be allowed to talk about poverty. You are white. Poverty belongs to minorities.” According to the most recent U.S. Census data, 38.8 million Americans are in poverty; 22.7 million, or 58%, of those in poverty are white. Several of the comments in this criticism are about “whiteness.” My work looks at poverty primarily through the lens of class, not race, ethnicity, gender, disability, age, or other criteria.

Another criticism has to do with “stereotyping” and negative depictions of poverty, i.e., “violent, depraved, criminal.” Well, poverty often is violent. Every year for the last five years, 30,000 people died of gun violence in the cities; most of the victims were from poverty (Diaz 2008). Sixty to 70% of prisoners come from poverty. A child in poverty is seven times more likely to be abused than a child not in poverty (Payne 1996, 2005). Twelve million poor children report “food insecurity,” according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Feeding America 2008). To frame the facts simply as stereotypes is to trivialize and dismiss the brutal reality of generational poverty. Yet in Framework and other books, I always state up front: “This work is based on patterns. All patterns have exceptions” (p. 3).

If the authors of this criticism had been more familiar with our work at aha! Process, they would know that for several years, we already have been implementing many of the techniques and approaches they recommend, including seeking out giftedness in children from poverty (Slocumb and Payne 2000), bringing the poor to the decision-making table as co-investigators (DeVol 2006), and building relationships with students and their parents (Payne 2005).

Furthermore, we have peer-reviewed research that our approaches make a statistically significant difference in achievement for students in poverty. These are posted on our web site, www.ahaprocess.com. In addition, Standard & Poor’s gave the Hutchinson, Kansas, school district (with which we worked for three years) an award as one of 100 school districts in the U.S. that made statistically significant gains for all children, including minorities and poor.

It is my fervent hope that in 20 years I will never hear again, “This child cannot learn because he or she is poor.”

REFERENCES