Behavioral Classroom Management for Impoverished At-Risk Youth

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Abstract. In the USA, millions continue to live in poverty and a significant portion is students under 18 years of age. These at-risk students exhibit behaviors that need to be understood and managed correctly to improve their odds of academic success. Employing effective behavioral classroom management strategies to account for these students is critical to increasing their academic performance and ultimately laying the foundation for them to reach their full potential. The aim of this article was to exam the literature for common themes of impoverished students, highlight links between behaviors and academic performance, and provide recommendations on how to effectively manage these students when they enter a classroom setting. Conclusion: The top areas educators working with impoverished at-risk youth should be cognizant of are the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance policies, the role of parental involvement, and stressors these students experience.

Keywords: Classroom Management; Poverty; At-risk youth; Behavior.

1. Introduction

Impoverished at-risk youth are dispersed throughout the USA and comprise a significant portion of the population. Approximately 15 million children in the US are living in families with incomes below the poverty threshold (National Center for Children in Poverty [NCCP], 2016a). There are numerous disadvantages from this living condition, but the relationship between this at-risk status and behavior in a classroom and ultimately academic performance cannot be understated. Children who are raised in poverty have delayed brain development and this contributes to lower performance in a school setting (Hair, *et al.*, 2015).

In 2013, the majority (51%) of public school students in the US were categorized as low-income (The National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2103). Examining the specific role socio-economic status has on student behavior and academic success is warranted. Children living in low socio-economic

communities develop academic skills at a slower rate compared to their higher socio-economic counterparts (Morgan *et al.*, 2009). It is imperative to account for the needs of this group or else an educator runs the risk of these students not performing at their best and thus, not reaching their highest potential.

Many impoverished at-risk youths are less successful, have higher rates of behavioral issues, and more health problems than students from affluent families (Duncan *et al.*, 2012). Understanding the reasons why poverty status and low achievement are correlated is crucial to curbing this public health crisis. Children living in poverty experience high rates of chronic stress that have a major impact on brain function into adulthood (Kim *et al.*, 2013). Stress correlated with health issues have been well documented, but the role stress plays in classroom behavior for impoverished at-risk youth and ultimately academic performance warrant further examination.

The disparity between students coming from low-income homes versus high-income ones continues to increase (Reardon, 2013) and this can be categorized as a moral issue with severe consequences that will continue to plague families unless the cycle is broken. The focus of this review was on the link between impoverished status and student behavior and its impact on academic performance. In addition, matching best practices regarding behavioral classroom management strategies for this at-risk group will be explored and suggestions for new directions will be highlighted.

2. Literature Review

This review was limited to scholarly journals, books, and websites in US public schools, over the last ten years (2009-2018). Numerous factors contribute to a student's at-risk label, but this review was limited to the role poverty plays. Student behavior and academic performance can also result in at-risk status, but the function poverty has on these specific areas was the focus of this investigation. An additional objective of this review was to spotlight effective behavioral classroom management strategies, in order to provide suggestions for those working with impoverished at-risk youth in public schools.

2a. Impoverished Youth Behavior

For decades, educators have addressed student behaviors in various ways in the public-school system. Discipline for "inappropriate" behavior has taken the form of in and out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and alternative school placements (Teske, 2011). Many of these strategies have evolved due to zero tolerance policies. However, evidence suggests that zero tolerance policies are ineffective both are curbing insubordination and with improving academic performance (Teske, 2011). An examination of students living in poverty and the classroom behaviors they may exhibit is critical if schools continue to adhere to these ineffective types of policies and procedures. Students most in need of educational support (such as impoverished at-risk youth) will continue to be marginalized if zero tolerance policies are not reformed (Irby, 2014).

Approximately two million students are suspended each year from secondary schools while nearly 43 percent are suspended for at least one week or longer due to insubordination (Kang-Brown *et al.*, 2013). This is one result of zero tolerance policies being employed by schools. While initially touted to improve student attendance, these policies have had the direct opposite result as students end up becoming discouraged from attending class and consequently dropout (Fuentes, 2012). Due to behavioral characteristics that impoverished at-risk youth exhibit, these types of policies put them in jeopardy of academic success.

Calarco (2014) discussed how social class impacts student's behavior in a classroom; for example, middle-class parents were more likely to instruct their children to seek out the teacher and ask questions compared to working-class parents who viewed this as disrespectful and instead advised their children to work out problems on their own. However, with low-income families the narrative is often on the opposite end of the spectrum altogether. Parents of impoverished families may be less engaged in academic activities and thus, children in these homes tend to have lower aspirations compared to students from higher-income families (Berzin, 2010).

There are numerous outside factors that contribute to student behavior in a classroom setting. Crosnoe and Cooper (2010) discussed how negative behaviors and academic outcomes for impoverished youth are due to the multiple stressors they are exposed to and mainly can be attributed to lack of resources. There are several compounding factors that may contribute to these stressors. Children living in poverty are often exposed to more family turmoil, instability, violence, separation from loved ones, and less social support (Hanson *et al.*, 2013). It is critical to identify and understand the stressors in impoverished students' lives to proactively develop strategies to prevent and deescalate negative behaviors when in a classroom.

Children growing up in poverty may have different perceptions when it comes to their school environment and this may well have an impact on behavior. Hopson and Lee (2011) discussed how impoverished youth who perceive a positive school climate demonstrate behaviors similar to students from higher-income families. While this research suggests setting up a positive school environment would be effective at improving behavior for all youth, understanding the perceptions of impoverished at-risk students (especially as it relates to positive school environment) is critical to curbing negative classroom behaviors.

Role-models have an impact on student behavior throughout developmental years. Poverty stricken neighborhoods have higher rates of crime, physical and social unrest and substandard role-models compared to higher income neighborhoods, and thus impacts youth developing positive social networks, their behavior, and can lead to poor developmental outcomes (Murry *et al.*, 2011). The community in which impoverished youth inhabit plays a significant role in their development and shapes their behavior. Children raised in poverty are more likely to have lower quality of lives and fewer opportunities compared

to higher socio-economic youth and this directly or indirectly affects their behavior and development (Murry *et al.,* 2011).

Blair and Raver (2012) discussed how substantial literature demonstrates the affect socio-economic status (specifically poverty) has on child development, learning, behavior, and overall health. A deeper examination at the link between impoverished status and student behavior in a classroom is telling. Among families living in high-risk situations (such as those that poverty presents), harsh and inconsistent behavior management techniques are employed at home and conduct problems are highly prevalent (Dawson-McClure *et al.,* 2015). This foundation sets the tone and runs the risk of carrying over in the classroom setting.

2b. Socio-Economic Status and Academic Performance
The relationship between poverty and low academic performance has been cited for decades (Hopson & Lee, 2011). Researchers have used various criteria and labels to establish this link. For example, low test scores are found among lower socio-economic groups (Arthur *et al.,* 2015). In addition, researchers have used other indicators to measure poverty and academic performance. Students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch have shown to perform at a lower level than students who do not fall under this designation (Arthur *et al.,* 2015). It is important for educators to be cognizant of these types of correlations to identify and meet these students' needs when they enter a classroom.

There is a direct correlation between student behavior and academic performance, and high school students who are not academically successful are more likely to become unemployed, engage in substance abuse, and partake in crime as adults (Chase *et al.,* 2014). Therefore, the role impoverished status has on behavior and ultimately academic success justifies further attention and resources. To break current family cycles of poverty, low academic performance, unemployment, crime, and so on, educators should proactively target one of these links in the chain.

There are many factors that impact academic success but understanding the role socio-economic status plays is crucial. Morsy and Rothstein (2015) discussed how social and economic characteristics shape students behavioral and academic outcomes. The authors examined specific characteristics regarding social class that hinder academic success. While there were several factors that played a role, the following characteristics were cited that lowered student achievement: ineffective parenting practices that hinder children's behavioral and intellectual development, irregular parent work schedules, insufficient access to primary and preventative health care, low wages, unemployment, housing instability, and concentrations of disadvantaged neighborhoods (Morsy & Rothstein, 2015). These characteristics are associated with impoverished at-risk youth and illustrate the cumulative impact they have on academic performance for students growing up in that environment.

Parental involvement is another area for exploration when it comes to all youth, but especially those living in poverty. Parental educational involvement is strongly associated with academic success (Benner *et al.,* 2016). There are several potential reasons for this outcome, but this extends beyond simply sitting down and helping one's child complete their homework. Parents who are active and engaged with their child's educational experience have shown to not only improve academic performance, but mental health as well (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2013). However, when it comes to children growing up in poor households, the situation presents a different outcome.

Low-income parents and parents with minimal education are more likely to convey lower educational expectations for their children compared to higher income parents (Carolan & Wasserman, 2015). In addition, time spent during their children's educational experience is critical to academic performance. Low socio-economic parents are less involved in their adolescents' education compared to high socio-economic parents (Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2013). While there are various potential reasons why this occurs, targeting this area appears justified for educators trying to improve academic performance for impoverished at-risk youth.

Parenting, poverty, and child behavior are intertwined and effective parenting in a child's early years is a key predictor of lifelong health and productivity (Shonkoff *et al.,* 2012). There are many crucial components to parenting that impact academic success. Positive impact on three major crucial areas of parenting (positive behavior support, involvement in learning early on, and behavior management) has a direct bearing on academic achievement for all children (Dawson-McClure *et al.,* 2015). Actively engaged parents have the ability to positively affect their children's academic success, however, impoverished status presents a potential barrier from this occurring.

While parenting and academic achievement for students living in poverty has been discussed, the role communities play in parenting is another avenue to consider. Gordon and Cui (2014) discussed how examining parental involvement linked to student performance is limited without addressing macro level community influences, as the researchers argued that community poverty prevents parents from effectively influencing youth to reach their milestones. Some schools focus on involving parents in student's school activities. However, if the quality of the student's community is not taken into consideration and accounted for, this approach may not fully yield the intended results, such as improving academic performance (Gordon & Cui, 2014).

3. Main Findings
Several common themes emerged from this review regarding impoverished youth, behavior, and academic success. Impoverished students are more likely to exhibit insubordination and other inappropriate classroom behaviors, and this has an impact on their academic performance (Hair *et al.,* 2015). There are several disadvantages that are correlated with living in poverty, but many of those same factors are also impacting student behavior and academic success for

these at-risk students. Three recurring areas during this review that directly influence behavior and academic performance for impoverished at-risk youth were the impact of zero tolerance policies, parental involvement, and stressors that impoverished at-risk youth experience because of their living environment.

Due to lack of active parental involvement, students living in poverty may need additional attention, support, mentoring, and resources to keep them on a positive path toward success. A variety of reasons were revealed from this review that illustrate the struggles parents living in poverty must overcome daily. This presents a domino effect as it impacts their ability to parent in an effective way to improve their children's behavior and ultimately academic performance.

Kennedy-Lewis (2015) discussed the prevalence of zero tolerance policies to manage non-compliant students and the ineffective results it has had at improving classroom behavior and academic success. Frequently, impoverished students go through the system, end up being expelled, and consequently are left to fend for themselves and running freely in their local community. From a procedural and policy standpoint it seems we can do better for these students and changing the culture and mentality is paramount. Zero tolerance policies have not made schools more orderly or safe (Kang-Brown *et al.*, 2013) and directly places impoverished youth in further risk of not reaching their fullest potential.

Impoverished youth are more prone to act out, display less patience, act impulsively at times, and exhibit inappropriate responses (Duncan *et al.*, 2012). Student perceptions of a positive environment are skewed due to their socio-economic status. The literature demonstrated that as income goes down, parents tend to discipline in a more severe manner (Dawson-McClure *et al.*, 2015). This authoritarian approach can lead to students exhibiting behavior that can send mixed signals for educators working with these students (for example, rude behavior may be a call for help).

There are different labels used to identify socio-economic status and academic performance. It is crucial for educators to recognize these distinctions to identify impoverished at-risk students early in the educational process. Timeliness is critical as strategies and support can be employed to proactively curb potential inappropriate classroom behaviors and ultimately improve academic performance.

4. Practical Implications
Students living in poverty have unique dispositions that need to be identified and accounted for when attempting to address in-class behavior and academic performance. The use of zero tolerance disciplinary policies has led to a discipline gape (Kennedy-Lewis, 2014) and impoverished at-risk youth continue to be plagued by this ineffective approach. Educators cannot change the immediate financial crisis that at-risk youth are experiencing, but they have the power to impact them in other ways. Policies that take into consideration the

needs of impoverished at-risk youth are ones that understand the environment in which these students reside and offer a positive educational climate for them to reach their full potential. Some effective methods of managing behavior have been to reinforce positive behavior, treat each behavioral situation on a case-by-case basis, and consider student's individual circumstances and needs (Kang-Brown *et al.,* 2013).

Impoverished at-risk youth suffer from high levels of stress due to their living conditions and this has a major impact on behavior and academic performance. Chronic stress in poverty-stricken homes is linked to over 50% of all absences, affects the student's ability to concentrate, reduces the ability to create and remember material, lowers social skills, reduces effort and motivation, and increases depression (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). As educators continue to develop new strategies to manage and redirect inappropriate behavior in a classroom setting, a specific assessment and understanding of the stressors children living in poverty are coping with is crucial.

While the role parents' play in the development of impoverished at-risk youth has been highlighted, it is important for educators to be cognizant of the function neighborhoods and the overall community have as well. Often time's low socio-economic students are left at home to fend for themselves and their role models and supervisors are other individuals living in close proximity. This is significant and is one potential cause of children in poor communities developing academic skills at a slower rate compared to affluent households (Morgan *et al.,* 2009). Targeting and utilizing partners in the community may be an effective approach at building a stronger support system for these at-risk students.

5. Recommendations

Programs that focus on at-risk student's readiness to change their behavior may be worth exploring when attempting to improve classroom behavior. Ratanavivan and Ricard (2018) discussed how students who participate in "change talk" and signal a readiness to change, translates when in a classroom setting. While being able to manage at-risk youth behavior in class may be an educator's objective, a comprehensive approach that explores all direct and indirect positive and negative factors is worth considering.

Conducting formative assessments to understand behavior is advised when working with any students but is especially critical when teaching impoverished at-risk youth. Children living in poverty have specific needs and understanding stressors in their day-to-day lives is crucial when developing tailored behavioral classroom management strategies. Common tactics that have been employed by educators to manage impoverished youth behavior in a classroom setting are to lay out clear behavior expectations, avoid sarcasm, avoid labeling and demeaning, demonstrate appropriate responses instead of telling them what to do, build relationships, give respect to students first, using inclusive language, acknowledge positive behavior, and celebrate effort (Jenson, 2009). Regardless of the strategy that is employed, specific attention to reduce stress for the

student is recommended. Jenson (2009) discussed how changing the school environment can reduce stress for impoverished youth and suggests incorporating active learning projects and hands on activities in class. In addition, stress management techniques should be taught to help students cope with stressors both in and out of the classroom.

The use of zero tolerance policies that lead to expulsion for disruptive students have not shown to be effective at managing behavior or improving academic performance (Fuentes, 2012; Kennedy-Lewis, 2015). When a student is asked to leave class, they are now becoming "at-risk" because of their absence, are being "left behind", and are no longer "racing to the top." With this scenario, everyone loses (the student, teacher, principal, school, parents, community, and society). Surely, we can do better. Some may argue that the rest of the class has a right to learn and if one or two students are removed for inappropriate behavior, it drastically improves the odds of academic success for the remaining students. However, this philosophy contradicts federal, state, and local US policies that advocate that all students matter and can be successful. To improve attendance, retention, and graduation rates, these types of students are the ones that need to be accounted for. Therefore, strategies that allow for an educator to manage individual behavior while the rest of the class is working on achieving lesson objectives should be utilized. Strategies such as differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2013), cooperative learning (Kagan, 2016), and active learning (Cornell University Center for Teaching Excellence, 2016) can aid in this endeavor. A common theme with these strategies is that the educator is free to move around the room to manage behaviors without holding up the rest of the class from learning.

Due to parental involvement concerns for impoverished at-risk youth that came to light during this review, strategies that address and support this issue are recommended. Community outreach strategies come in a variety of forms, but the objective is to have students learn material in class under the teacher's supervision and then allow for them to disseminate, teach, observe and research out in their community. Community outreach strategies are an effective approach to improve academic performance, engagement, self-esteem, behavior, and other important aspects of wellness (International Baccalaureate, 2015; Mayhew & Engberg, 2011; Mucedola, 2015; Nelson & Sneller, 2011; Newman *et al.,* 2015; Wasburn-Moses *et al.,* 2014; Wofford *et al.,* 2013; Zandee *et al.,* 2013). This approach has the potential for students to gain a support system, role-models, and mentors that may be absent in their home environment due to the impoverished status of their parent(s). An additional area to consider are program that identify at-risk youth early in their developmental years. Shaw and Gilliam (2017) discussed the importance of engaging families early in their children's growth to determine at-risk status and acquaint parents with existing programs in the health care setting that may be contributing to at-risk status.

6. Conclusion

Approximately 23 percent of the US population consists of children under the age of 18, but they account for 32 percent of all individuals living in poverty (NCCP, 2016b). This has a major impact on attendance, performance, retention, and graduation rates as these students are more likely to exhibit inappropriate behavior that leads to expulsion or dropping out of school. Three major areas educators should be cognizant of when working with impoverished at-risk youth are the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance policies, the role of parental involvement, and stressors these students are coping with.

This review was limited to research on US public schools from 2009 through 2018 and thus, generalizing to private school at-risk student's behavior may be incomplete. Poverty was the main indicator that designated the at-risk label. However, there are numerous reasons for at-risk status (low academic performance, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, poor attendance, etc.) and thus, each specific at-risk reason may be a better predictor of classroom behavior and the strategies that should be utilized. Additional limitations and future areas for exploration include but are not limited to more in-depth investigation based on gender, rural versus urban living environment, age, ethnicity, and number of siblings.

Strategies that allow for educators to manage and redirect inappropriate behavior in class have the potential to reduce the negative results that zero tolerance polices ultimately lead to. Three best practice approaches that were suggested to manage behaviors of impoverished at-risk youth are differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and other active learning techniques.

Community outreach strategies have the potential to address the educational gap that is created from parents of impoverished youth that are not actively involved in their children's academic experience. There are several ways to utilize this approach, but a key theme is having students learn material in class and then allowing for them to interact out in the local community. Not only has this been shown to empower students, improve behavior and academic performance, but can create partnerships and connects students with role-models, mentors, and provide a support system as well (Mucedola, 2016).

Teaching at-risk youth to be resilient by utilizing a mentoring program has been shown to be effective (Wesley *et al.*, 2017). This may lead to improved classroom behavior and thus, may be an additional avenue worth exploring. This study (Wesley *et al.*, 2017) focused on conflict resolution, self-management of emotions, positive future outlook, and active listening.

Students living in poverty have numerous stressors they are coping with on a regular basis that contributes to inappropriate behavior and impact their ability to perform in school. Conducting assessments before, during, and after the school year is critical to understanding these students and developing behavioral classroom management strategies to meet their needs. Setting up a positive classroom environment is that conducive to learning and accounts for

the stressors being experienced by improvised at-risk youth, is crucial to improving behavior and ultimately academic success.

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