Poverty and School Readiness Skills

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Everyone can agree that education is important. Time and time again, it is emphasized that education is the key to getting a good job, being self-sufficient, and being an active member in society (Weight, Diener, & Ka, 2000, p. 100). Children who enter school without the skills for success start with a disadvantage. While there is not one exact definition for the school readiness skills a child needs going into kindergarten, there is a pattern. The various dimensions include physical and motor development, physical health and well being, social and emotional developments, approaches to learning, and cognitive capabilities (Joe & Davis, 2009, P. 261). Others include social skills such as language, literary experience, and general knowledge (Dotterer, Iruka, & Pungello, 2012, pp. 257). All in all, there are many different aptitudes a child needs to do well in school to assist them for accomplishments later in life.

However, poverty and lower socioeconomic status have a negative effect on school readiness skills (Wright et al., 2000). Poverty has a profound influence on a child’s life and the lack of school readiness is one that is less apparent at first glance. Socioeconomic status includes more than just income, but also can include parental education, occupation, being a welfare recipient or a combination of the few (Dotterer et al., 2012). The 2011 Census Bauru (2012) reported that 15 percent of Americans live in poverty including 9.5 million families (pp. 13). This is a large number of adults and children living in poverty. The following studies in this essay will answer the question more in depth on how socioeconomic status effects school readiness skills and the major factors that contributes to inequality.

Living in Poverty prevents students from having experiences that would foster their future studies. In a study teachers and principals of over 800 students from the 11 neighborhoods with the highest level of poverty in the Salt Lake City school district were able to give their perspective on the needs of the students and their strengths. The teachers focused on the need for exposure to books and practice reading. One teacher spoke of an experience of a home visit of a family living in poverty. “When I asked if they had read any fairytale books with their child, the parents were happy to show me their extensive video collection. They did not have any children’s books in their home” (Wright et al., 2000, p. 103). The teachers concerns about reading experiences prove true in the Pre-Kindergarten assessment. It showed:

“24% could not identify the front of a book, 68% of children did not know where to start or which direction to go when reading, 48% of children had been read to rarely or not at all and had visited the library only one time or not at all, 58% of children had difficulty identifying which words began with the same sound or which words rhymed, 37% could not recognize any letters of the alphabet” (Wright et al., 2000, pp. 111)

It is quite apparent that if a child does not have literature exposure and experience with letters in early childhood than the results are as such in kindergarten. A basic skill, such as reading and recognizing letters is very important for school and for everyday life. Every day people read signs, notices, the news, documents, and more. A literacy test scored on a scale of one to five, one being below and five being advanced, found that about 25 % of American adults are reading and comprehending at a level one (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 2002). This is below satisfactory. Reading is an important factor to being an active citizen and children entering school while living in poverty are struggling.

Parents who live in poverty similarly leave a lasting impression on their children. The principals in the same study noticed a lack of knowledge in language skills from lower-income student due to the lack of full and complete sentences spoken by the parents (Wright et al., 2000, pp. 108). Another study focusing on immigrants and children’s school readiness skills adds to the theory of how parents living in poverty can have a negative affect Han and Waldfogel (2011) compared the school readiness skills of children from non-immigrant parents and children of immigrants. This study discovered that while socioeconomic status does affect the child’s reading skills, the language spoken in the home and the parent’s English proficiency are also major factors (pp.775). Therefore, the more exposure to English and the more a child practices speaking English the more success he or she will have in school. The study shows that there is a clear connection from the language spoken in the home and the skills a student has coming into school. The school system in the United States is one that is spoken and written completely in English.

There is an advantage for families that speak English and teach English to their kids. While the United State census does not consider immigration status, it does account for race and ethnicity among the poor. In 2011, 10.9 million people living in poverty were Black, 2 million were Asian, 13.2 million were Hispanic, and 20.1 million were non-Hispanic white (DeNavas-Walt & Smith, pp. 13). While a part of these people were born in the United States, a part also emigrated from other countries. Over 55 million people speak another language in their home other than English therefore, English is not the only language spoken in the United States. That is about 20% of the population that speaks another language such as Spanish, Creole, or various others (Shin & Koninski, 2010, p. 2). Children who do speak a language other than English are going to struggle from a language barrier on top of a lack of resources from living in poverty. Going back to the study in Salt Lake City, “22% of the children could not express themselves in understandable words or sentences…29% did not know their full name and could not write the first letter of their first name” (Wright at al., 2000, p. 112). This all related back to the resources a family has or does not have. If a family has the resources to learn English and provide tools for their children to practice the same, then they will be more prepared for school. A family that does not have these resources, their kids will labor down a harder path.

According to Han & Waldfogel (2011), “by 2040, the U.S. Census projects that children with foreign-born parents will comprise about 50% of America's youth, and the majority of these will be Hispanic and Asian” (p. 771). This will lead to a major change in policy for education. In a study done on Hispanic families and school readiness skills, Crosnoe found that Hispanic families had the lowest level of socioeconomic status and their children were far more likely to be taken care of by their parents than any other race in informal childcare before entering school. Also, English was often not the language spoken at home. These differences account for the significant different in readiness skills between Hispanics and other ethnicities. Mexican children scored seven points lower on achievement test than white children (p. 173). Children of all races who attended pre-school scored higher on the math placement test than those who did not. However, pre-school can be costly. In 2002, Child Care in American gave a report on the average cost of full-time childcare. The costs ranged from $1,800 all the way up to $20,000 and beyond depending on which state you were in (Child Care in America, 2012). For a family of three living off of $19,900.00, which is the poverty line for a family of three, $1,800 or more is a large chunk (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Families in poverty are more likely not to have the resources to pay for early childhood education. This is yet another disadvantage for children coming from poverty stricken homes.

Parents and their parenting styles clearly have an impact on their student. A study by Dotterer, Iruka, & Pungello, (2012) looked at the correlations between financial stress, parenting styles, socioeconomic status, race, and school readiness skills. Comparing both African American and European American children, socioeconomic status was a key predictor on the type of parenting style the parents used when interacting with their child. Families of either ethnicity, when had a higher socioeconomic status, were more likely to engage in sensitive parent-child interaction. This means the parents responded quickly to the physical and emotional needs of their child. An example would be replying warming to their child questions and endeavors while anticipating their needs for the future. This type of parenting style was a strong predictor to pre-academic knowledge or school readiness skills for European Americans.

On the other end of the scale, when the socioeconomic status was low, parents were more likely to respond to their child’s needs with a negative and intrusive style. This style indicates that the parent will dominate the interaction with excess verbal direction and express disapproval rather than explaining the punishment. With both African and European Americans, when this parenting style was displayed, it resulted in a significantly lower score on the pre-knowledge academic test (Dotterer et al., 2012, p. 664). The teachers in Salt Lake City noticed, “that children do not know verbal social skills, such as how to show respect or how to talk kindly to someone” (Wright et al., 2000, p. 114). Kids learn by watching and the main people in their lives have a major affect on their behavior. When parents are living with the stress that goes along with living in poverty, it shows through the child’s behavior and knowledge. Surprisingly, this study proved that financial stress does not have correlation with either parenting styles. While pre-school is expensive, it does not effect children through the stress of their parents, it just limits them from attending. On the other hand, it is possible that all the factors that lead to socioeconomic status, like parent education and occupation, also have an impact of a child’s school readiness skills than family finical stress.

According to a study done in Ireland by Doyle McEntee, & McNamara (2010), it is the parental education that is the greatest protective factor against poverty and living in a disadvantaged community. This study looks at a community with one third of the members on welfare. The overall deduction indicates that a disadvantaged community has a major effect on the children despite the family’s socioeconomic status. Families with a higher economic status were not protected from the community and it showed in the children’s pre-school academic tests. While all members of the community are affected, it is not all to the same extent. “Children of more highly educated parents experience better academics and behavioral outcomes” (Doyle et al., 2010, p. 148). Parents with higher education are more likely to have higher expectations for their children, more likely to talk to their kids and ask more questions. These parents are more likely to show those positive and sensitive parenting styles that lead to higher score for European Americans in the study done by Dotterer et al. This may be an explanation for why parental education is the leading factor for better academic results. Otherwise, teachers tended to score students with parents who had lower levels of education lower than students with parents of higher levels of education (Doyle et al, 2010, p. 147). For a family with lower economic status, parental education is not going to be an advantage, rather a disadvantage.

All of the articles are, in general, agreeing with the idea that poverty and lower socioeconomic status lead to lower skills needed for school. The home environment and the skills of the parents have the most affect on the types of skills a child has or lacks going into school. There is no argument that poverty is a problem. The government has recognized that poverty exists and is all across the United States. Some believe that education is a tool that people living in poverty can use to bring themselves out of that situation. However, children who lack the skills to perform and excel in early education will already be behind on getting ahead.

Schools today expect a lot from their students. Each year they are expected to know more at an earlier age. It would be interesting to see how these kids who scored low on the pre-kindergarten knowledge assessment test preform later in school and eventually as adults. There are a few longitude studies that are working on addressing this interest but it is a slow process. In the mean time, there are a few programs in place to help children from disadvantaged families. Head Start and Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP) are two examples for federal and state government funded programs. These programs are available to families that live at and under the poverty line. It is a program that lasts as long as a typical school year for three and half hours, four days a week. The children receive a meal, such as breakfast or lunch depending on when the day starts, they are taught to brush their teeth, wash their hands, practice the letters of the alphabet and how to write their names, and at the end of the day they receive a snack. The kids are not required to be potty trained and there are no other requirements for the children other than the fact they need to be three or four years old. These programs are trying to level the playing field and give children from poverty-stricken homes a chance to learn the skills they need for their future.

However, in the last study done on disadvantaged communities, interventions are needed to the whole community rather than just one group of the population. The income of a family never tells the whole story. The poverty line and the programs those are exclusive to families making under the poverty line, excluding families that make more but might still be struggling. Poverty is a very complex subject, but it is clear that it effects a child’s education in a negative way.

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