The Questions and Answers in the Correlation of Socioeconomic Status and Education

Jennifer Horton
St. John Fisher College

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Document Type
Thesis

Degree Name
MS in Special Education

Department
Education

Subject Categories
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There are a large amount of diverse factors that contribute to a student’s academic success. Things such as basic needs, a student’s culture, the teacher’s culture, parent involvement, school and classroom environment, and actual instructional strategies all play a role in a student’s daily academic experience. When students are living in an area of poverty, or come from families of a low socio-economic status, one or all of these factors can become compromised. As a result teachers, parents, administrators and community leaders are faced with the challenge of providing a holistic approach to education with limited resources. Many times these obstacles are remedied with preventative planning, taking time to understand differences, and the adults in a child’s life working together to reach a common goal.
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All students are required to have equal access to free public education; however, it seems in today’s educational circumstances some have more equal access than others. Students from households of low socio-economic status are increasingly at risk for a number of educational challenges before they ever reach the front door. Currently there are “more than 12 million American children are living below the federal poverty threshold” (Cooper & Crosnoe, 2007, p. 373). Without providing these children with the support need to succeed, they continue to face adversity after schooling in their attempt to find employment without a high school diploma. Too much time, effort and resources have continued to be spent to prove an already well known concept true. Instead these resources need to be spent on finding new ways to change the educational spectrum to support the needs of these children beyond providing them with a free lunch. In order to implement change, however, one must understand where to begin.

There are many factors within the parameters of socio-economic status that affect a student’s chances of academic success. Many studies have been done to attempt to breakdown these variables to pinpoint which ones have a more direct affect than others; however, the outcomes are generally all the same. While the studies are able to depict a correlation between low socio-economic status and low academic achievement researches are still unable to locate the reasons why this association exists. One such study was done in the state of Florida in 2002 by Clancy Blair and Keith G. Scott. Blair and Scott focused upon the population of students who were born between 1979 and 1980 in the United States. Variables taken from information on these student’s birth certificates were used to breakdown possible factors correlating with low socio-economic status. They were researched individually to determine which ones had the greatest affect on academic achievement. These factors included gender, age, maternal
education, and maternal age at delivery, marital status, birth weight, and trimester of prenatal care initiation (p. 16). All this data was collected to create predictors for a diagnosis of a specific learning disability by the ages of twelve to fourteen. The study found an increased risk as the student possessed more variables, however, no one single variable considerably increase risk independently (p. 18). As a result this study supports the theories stating while low socio-economic status increases the risk of academic challenges, no single factor is the exact cause of this phenomenon. Therefore, multiple factors must be addressed if there is hope of having a lasting reversal of the correlation between low socio-economic status and low academic achievement. Within a classroom, a student’s basic needs, culture, parent involvement, classroom environment and instruction are all affected by low socio-economic status and need to be evaluated in order to create a supportive and successful academic experience.

Before implementing change, it is important to understand what the current educational practices are. How many teachers are aware of the dynamic and multifaceted affect socio-economic status has on their students’ academic success? Of those teachers, how many actually actively incorporate the strategies and tools backed by literature and case studies to create an opportunistic environment for all students? The purpose of this research is to determine an answer to these questions in focusing on the educational climate of Monroe County. Many times, teachers are doing the best they know how to work with students, and are aware of the general consensus of what needs to be done, but are lacking the support and resources needed to create a process of change.

Basic Needs

One of the first and most devastating challenges students from low socio-economic status face is their constant struggle to obtain the basic needs most middle-class teachers never had to
consider. This isn’t necessarily a result of arrogance, many teachers who have lived within the middle class their whole lives never had to worry about such needs as nutrition, health care or a suitable and safe shelter. Dr. Jacqueline J. Irvine (1999), a professor at Emory University calls these obstacles and hardships “daymares.” “Daymares have no scary faces, just scary effects: poverty, violence, poor health, drug addiction, poor school performance, [and] insensitive policies” (p. 245). Once these needs are taken into consideration, however, it seems outrageous for a teacher to argue the importance of meticulously analyzing *Macbeth* for cultural understanding to student who has trouble focusing as a result of their internal concentration of where they are going to find food for their family for the night. When Dr. Jacqueline J. Irvine spoke to a nine-year old African-American boy on the stoop of her church she asked him “What do you want to be when you grow up?” He replied “I don’t wanna be nothing” (p. 244). Dismayed by his answer, she prompted him to close his eyes and tell her what he saw. “Lady, I don’t see nothing, and I don’t have no dreams” (p. 245). While educators themselves may not have the individual power to provide the basic needs some students struggle to obtain, they can work together to create programs and promote awareness of these harsh realities. In addition, classrooms should be safe-havens from such conditions, not a continuation of daymares.

Many times these inequalities follow students from their home lives into their classrooms. Paul C. Gorski (2007), a professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia observes high-poverty schools have dirty conditions, insufficient materials, teachers working outside their certification area, overcrowded classrooms and often houses rats or cockroaches (p. 30). Students should be able to come into a safe, clean and healthy learning environment, however, inevitably schools from communities living below the poverty line are lacking the funds and support needed to keep up with schools from communities where donations can be
made, and taxes are supported by businesses. As a result Gorski reminds teachers not to jump to conclusions about a student, his values or state of mind upon entering a classroom, due to our inability to understand what circumstances they may be coming from. “So when we see hopelessness in some of our students’ eyes, when we sense a reluctance to engage, a distrust of our intentions, we must recognize that these reactions arise, if they arise at all, from lifetimes of oppression and not from a failure to value education or from an inherent moral deficiency” (p. 32). If our students’ basic needs are not met, how can we expect them to succeed within the classroom? Although teachers alone cannot change the despairing conditions of these children’s schools and environments, they can attempt to control the atmosphere of their own rooms, and ban together to increase responsiveness and apply pressure to begin change.

Culture

Before exploring the role of culture within the classroom, it is important to define what “culture” actually means. According to Dr. Jacqueline J. Irvine (1999) culture is “a group’s history, language, values, norms, rituals and symbols” (p. 247). Culture is not just one single aspect or ideal, but instead all of the traditions and beliefs of a group of people combined. A majority of teachers and administrators come from a Euro-American middle class background, and as a result their classroom traditions and organization is shaped by this upbringing. This is not necessarily the issue, as one can only function in the values they know. However, when these classrooms are set up solely within these parameters, they alienate any and all students who happen to be of a different culture. There are three main points in which Dr. Jacqueline J. Irvine feels these conflicts of culture collide within the classroom: verbal language, nonverbal language, and co-verbal behaviors (p. 247). Simply speaking, in the way one communicates orally, in social cues and body language, and in eye contact. Different cultures have different
expectations in all three of these areas, and when teachers are unaware of any differences they might have from their students, a communication barrier is formed and instruction stops. What ensues is frustration, misunderstanding and often times the student being alienated from the classroom. The solution is strikingly simple, create a classroom culture that incorporates and celebrates differences. Before taking behaviors personally, one must analyze the situation to understand why the student is choosing to act this way. Is it to fill a need such as to act up as a result of not understanding material that needs to be addressed, or is not looking the teacher in the eye a result of what they believe is respectful and expected of them? By creating this understanding, communication lines are able to remain open and instruction can continue.

Some academic minds, however, feel culture is often used as a politically correct term for race. Gloria Ladson-Billings, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, compiles interviews and student journals of her teacher candidates to depict the disturbing misunderstanding of her students, and her worry of the lack of guidance new educators receive before entering the classroom. In the assignment, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) asks her teacher candidates to write about a student they feel was difficult for them to handle (p. 105). A majority of the children the candidates chose were from the opposite gender as well as from a different race or ethnic decent. One student wrote

My students are so surprised that I am 25 years old and don’t have any children of my own. I try to explain that I am not married but they say, “You don’t have to be married to have children.” I know that having children out of wedlock is part of their culture. (p. 105)

This teacher candidate’s unfortunate choice to judge children quickly based on what she believes to be a result of “culture” supports the concern of the lack of diversity and social justice classes
educators are receiving before entering the classroom. The children within this classroom most likely never heard any encouragement at home that having children “out of wedlock” was a great idea. It just happens to occur in their lives for a variety of reasons. In addition, when faced with questions of their own culture, the teacher candidates felt they had none. “When I try to get them to think about their culture, they are stymied. They describe themselves as having “no culture” or being “just regular” or “just normal” (p. 107). In order to understand how a classroom environment can be shaped by traditions and beliefs, the educator must be aware of his or her own culture. One can only exist within the parameters of what one knows and understands, and by acknowledging this the educator is more likely to be aware of the differences within her classroom and have the tools to create open communication within the classroom.

Gloria Ladson-Billings believes the assumptions of her teacher candidates can be changed through adding three new lessons to pre-service education. First, teacher candidates need time to interact with students outside of the classroom, in clubs, community centers and other after-school activities (p. 108). This addresses the long time conundrum of needing experience before one can be employed, but needing employment in order to gain experience. Second, teacher candidates need to become comfortable and aware of their own culture, as well as become “careful observers of culture” in general (p. 109). The more teacher candidates understand about culture, the less likely they are to misinterpret it as race, or as only to describe others different than them. Third, students need to have the opportunity to have a broader understanding of the world. The more experiences and observations of classrooms other than the ones teacher candidates are familiar with will foster a greater understanding of all the different forms instruction can hold.
There are other researchers who believe culture can be used as a tool to guide the planning and implementation of instruction in order to meet the numerous and individual needs of children within the classroom. Francis Bailey, an associate professor at the School for International Training; and Ken Pransky (2005), an elementary ESL instructor; explored the faulty promises of popular "universal" teaching approaches meant to work for all students. Most of Bailey and Pransky’s data is based upon students born outside of the United States; however, it is easily connected to the obstacles faced by students of low socio-economic status. In their analysis of how culture shapes the learning process, Bailey and Pransky state "pedagogy in the United States flows out of middle class and affluent, mainly European-American ideology (p. 21). As a result assumptions are made about the types of living situations students enjoy and references are made which may alienate students whose families cannot afford such things. Many times educators are unaware of the barriers they have created in their classroom, especially when these walls are only affecting a small portion of the classroom population. Bailey and Pransky suggest educators to break down their teaching style and ask themselves what their daily decisions are based upon. Such questions include decisions about learning, curriculum, and empowerment, learning environment, how they explain learning expectations as well as social and behavioral expectations. In addition teachers need to get to know their students, using parents and community centers as resources as well as being an advocate for students (p. 24). The more educators understand about the roots of their own educational choices as well as the backgrounds and expectations of their students the more successful instruction will become.

Parent Involvement

Parents have an enormous impact on their children’s education, perhaps even greater than the educator. A parent or guardian’s statements and attitude toward education can greatly
influence a child's expectations and understandings of academia. In addition, the amount of academic assistance the parent is able to provide at home can affect a student’s academic achievement as well. Carey E Cooper (2007), who finished her Doctorate at the University of Texas, and Robert Crosnoe, a professor there, did a study with 489 inner city families from Philadelphia. They focused on the academic and social psychological connections between students from families of low socio-economic status and parent involvement on academic orientation and achievement. Carey E. Cooper and Robert Crosnoe highlight the benefits of parent involvement on academic achievement. “Parent involvement conveys the importance of education to children, facilitates parent-advocacy of their children, and leads teachers to pay closer attention to and expend greater energy on these children” (p. 375). Parents are the best resources teachers have when it comes to talking to an expert about a student; someone who knows the student’s strengths and needs and every day routines outside of the classroom. At the same time, if parents feel students are not going to be given an equal opportunity due to the negative connotations of educational opportunities students from low socio-economic status receive, they might not see the positive attributes of becoming involved. “If these parents are less optimistic about their children’s chances of entering higher education, are less confident about intervening on behalf of their children, and believe they are less knowledgeable about the education system, such beliefs likely decrease their motivation to become and stay involved” (p. 376). As a result it is imperative for teachers to reach out to parents in positive and collaborative ways to promote interaction within the classroom. Whether it is through keeping a parent updated on their child’s progress, creating activities that require parent involvement, or looking for opportunities for parents to volunteer or somehow add their own gifts to the classroom, the more teachers reach out to parents, the greater success their children will achieve. There are
parents, however, who need guidance, support, and sometimes even instruction of their own to have the tools and skills needed to become an active participant in their children’s academic success.

When students come from low socio-economic households, or from culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds parent involvement can create a myriad of obstacles. Parent teacher communications can be hindered by conflicts in working schedules and even language barriers. As a result, teachers working with such students can feel intimidated or even ill-equipped to take the first step in the communication process. This hesitation, however, can have long standing negative effects on a child’s education, especially in terms of the referral process for special education. As a result Kai Yung Tam and Mary Anne Heng suggest educators turn to pre-referral intervention (PRI). Pre-referral intervention involves all of a student’s teachers, support staff, administrators and parents working together to determine the roots of his struggles, as well as provide comprehensive support at home as well as at school. When working with students with diverse backgrounds, it is important to rule out socio and environmental factors before assuming academic frustration is the result of a disability. Kai Yung Tam and Mary Anne Heng (2005) insist “in the pre-referral intervention program, the critical driving force [is] the singular commitment and unwavering belief in the important role of the parent in the program” (p.224). In order for this to work, however, the parents need to learn how to administer the same academic and behavioral strategies at home. This can become a problem with parents struggling to support their children. “Very often, parents who are willing to be more involved in their children’s education are unable to do so because of time and scheduling constraints, as well as lack of autonomy and flexibility in their work environments” (p. 228). As a result, school administration and educators need to reach out to parents, and sometimes even parent employers
to come up with a successful plan for all. Only when parents are provided the tools and understanding needed to provide continued support for students at home, will students be able to succeed on a steady and continual basis.

Classroom Environment

Every school building emits a certain atmosphere or mood from the moment one enters through its front doors. It can take new visitors only a few fleeting moments to create lasting conclusions about the success and vision of a district. Unfortunately, many schools located in communities ruled by poverty are dirty, falling apart and are located in unsafe neighborhoods. As a result, the entire community of the school, from educators to administrators, from extracurricular activities to disciplinary boards, all need to work together to decide the goals they all wish to collectively achieve. Dr. Jacqueline Ancess (1997), a co-director of NCREST, gave a speech outlining the necessary steps required to opening a new school. These observations, nevertheless, can be applied to any school or district wishing to transform their academic atmosphere. Each school needs a vision, a plan to follow the vision; enthusiastic staff, students and parents; an understanding of educational bureaucracy and financial support (p. 2). These changes are made slowly, over a long period of time, and through long hours of hard work and dedication. The first step to initiating change is in the vision. “The vision is a statement that embodies and unfolds the school’s beliefs about teaching and learning and how they occur” (p. 2). It unites the school community and can create a basis for school customs. The next step involves building community: which begins internally within the building and expands outside the district and moves out into the neighborhood and surrounding community. Teachers need to feel invested in the school they work in. When teachers speak pessimistically about the school, live outside of the community and do not show pride for the district, this negativity will instill
the same pessimistic feelings within the student population. Positive relationships, team building activities, and planning cross-curricular units are all ways to strengthen ties within the building. Within the district, creating clubs and organizations which interact with other buildings, creating tutoring or big brother/sister opportunities through different age groups as well as district wide initiatives are ways to bring separate buildings together. Dr. Jacqueline Ancess suggests connecting with other “stake holders in public education [like] neighborhood organizations, businesses, social agencies, local colleges and universities” (p. 10). The more people who show an interest or investment in a child’s education, the more likely the child will take an interest themselves.

Furthermore, the actions and expectations of individual educators can significantly change the environment the classroom, and by extension the learning habits of their students. In working with students living below the poverty line, both student and teacher are well aware of the negative and at times overbearing odds against the chances of academic success. As a result it is the responsibility of the educator to create an environment where success is not only reached for, it is the constant expectation. Elizabeth Bondy and Dorene D. Ross (2008) call such educational tactics those of a “warm demander.” “Warm demanders care enough to relentlessly insist on two things: that students treat the teacher and one another respectfully and that they complete the academic tasks necessary for successful futures” (p. 55). It is not enough for students to feel teachers believe in them, but instead know the teacher actually expects them to succeed and anything less is unacceptable. In addition, it is important teachers know their students on an individual level and are able to create lessons and an environment that meets all their unique needs. “Warm demanders observe students closely to learn more about their idiosyncrasies, interests, experiences, and talents” (p. 56). Consequently, the teacher is better
able to monitor behavior and progress based on the make-up of each student and can better understand the basis of either action. Elizabeth Bondy and Dorene D. Ross stress the importance of consistency in behavior management and high expectation to be mixed with understanding and respect. “Warm demanders reach out to students for help in understanding behavior problems, which many well intentioned teachers neglect to do” (p. 57). The more invested students feel in their own actions and successes, the more apt they will be to play an active role in the learning process. Teachers who create classrooms based on respect, high expectations, and consistency while incorporating opportunities for students to take claim on their experience will have great success within the classroom.

Instruction

Many experienced teachers develop a rhythm, a routine and a method to their lesson plans and daily routines. Generally, they keep what has had continued success in the classroom and weed out or evaluate lessons not yielding results. Martin Haberman (19991, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, believes a similar occurrence has happened with the teachers of urban school districts, except he worries these routines have limited actual teaching and instead are rooted in classroom management. Martin Haberman asserts the staples to current urban teaching are giving information, asking questions, and assessing understanding (p. 291). This system is based on control and structure; giving the teachers the ability to quickly get through content while still maintaining authority within the classroom. In order to create a new form of pedagogy, teachers need to begin to create a system of give and take. Teachers need to encourage students to take responsibility for the classroom and their education. This includes creating academic opportunities for students to make individual decisions and explore the consequences of those actions. Instead of focusing on the basics, “reformers of urban schools are now raising
their expectations beyond an emphasis on basic skills to the teaching of critical thinking, problem solving, and even creativity” (p. 293). The location of the school should not change the expectations of the students; instead the individual needs and strengths of each student should be taken into consideration and be used as a tool to shape instruction. Martin Haberman emphasizes the keys to good teaching involve knowing each student individually, creating a supportive and caring environment, and challenging each student to their greatest potential (p. 295).

Implementing change is a slow and tedious process, which requires planning and patience, nonetheless the results are invaluable to all those involved.

Often teachers working with students from low socio-economic status are required to return back to the basics, especially in literacy. Students miss out on the basics in earlier grades due to a number of factors; from familial obligations to a lack of health care, both causing increased days out of school. As a result students wind up struggling later on as coursework begins to build and go beyond understanding and summarizing material. Katherine J. Barr (2001), who has her doctorate degree in English, taught a summer class of tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders, who were at least a grade level behind in their reading ability. During this time, she used a whole language approach and included strategies that encourage students to use their own lives and experiences to create an individual understanding of the text, as well as activities such as drawing pictures and diagrams to allow students to visually explore the ideas they had learned from the literature (p. 86). While these strategies facilitated a greater appreciation for the literature, the students would not always use them during times of independent practice. As a result Katherine J. Barr implemented a class workshop to attempt to demonstrate how these strategies could be used on an individual level to foster understanding and de-mystify the reading process. She chose a text slightly above the student’s instructional level in order to challenge
their thinking, but yet not impossible for them to work through. Once again the strategies were applied to the text; and, although it was a struggle, the class made it through the selection and came to an agreement on the main points of the story. When students are struggling in reading, many times the process can seem to be a mystery. They observe other students who are able to pick up a book, read, and recite the information easily and wonder what makes this reader’s experience different their own. Even more so, students from low socio-economic status, who already sense an expectation of failure by those around them, face even greater struggles and challenges in the classroom. One of the most moving moments in a student’s experience is in the instant they realize they can understand the material; when they can visually see that they are capable of the expectation and are going to be able to move forward. Teachers need to take the time to take a step back in instruction, assess which grade level students are actually performing, and implement instruction to bring them forward.

Conclusion

If education is to be the great equalizer, there are many changes that need to be made before all students have a fair opportunity to succeed and graduate. Many factors need to be taken into consideration, some of which are slightly outside of educational control; nevertheless there are many programs and advocacies whose service could provide support for student’s basic needs. Teachers need to begin with self-evaluation and understand the basis and foundations of their daily decisions and analyze if any of these actions are alienating a student from truly being an equal citizen in the classroom. Furthermore, classrooms and schools need to create safe environments in which students and staff are invested and expect success. Teachers need to reach out to parents to encourage positive interaction and relationships built on working together for a common goal, instead of only in times of conflict. Instruction needs to venture away from a
question and answer format and delve into higher levels of understanding and critical thinking in order to provide students with the ability to question and evaluate situations in order to make informed decisions.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were teachers, or administrators with teaching experience, who anonymously took the survey. These teachers were from all educational levels; from elementary to secondary, as well as various experience levels; from first year educators to those with decades of experience. Five different districts participated; one public suburban, one public located in a suburban area with a diverse student population, one public urban, one public rural and one private located in an urban area with a diverse student population. Participants were initially chosen through personal contacts; peer educators, current and past co-workers, family contacts, and my past educators who are still teaching. These contacts then sent the survey on to their co-workers and educator contacts. Overall 90 educators participated in the survey.

Materials & Procedure

All participants were asked to answer a ten question survey about their perceptions and procedures within the classroom. They were contacted through e-mail correspondence. The survey was broken down into five subsections; basic needs, culture, parent involvement, classroom environment and instruction. Each section had two questions; one inquiring the educator’s views on the topic and the other inquiring the educator’s practices in the classroom regarding each topic. All answers were given on a rating scale, with the option of leaving a comment for each question. The rating scale varied depending on the content of each question;
some ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree,” while others ranged from “always” to “never.”

Answers were submitted electronically through an on-line database anonymously. The on-line database analyzed the data, created percentages and organized the comments given. Due to the anonymity of the survey, and the inability of the database to track where each answer came from, it is impossible to break each answer into individual districts. In addition, although the survey was only accessible through a private e-mail Uniform Resource Locator (URL,) the e-mail could have been forwarded to an outside party having nothing to do with the topic at hand. However, given the distribution of the information, and the number of initial contacts, it is highly probable this is not the case.

Findings

There were definite trends in the answers of the participants. The first subsection tackles the controversy of the role of the educator in meeting basic needs of their students as reflected in Table I. Of the 90 participants who answered the first question 50 or 56.2% of them strongly agreed a student’s ability to have their basic needs met has a direct correlation on their academic success. When asked if it is an educator’s responsibility to reach out to help provide the missing basic needs, the response was split into thirds. There were 25 or 27.8% who agreed it was an educator’s responsibility, 26 or 28.9% were neutral, and 27 or 30% disagreed.

The second subsection was based on the role of culture in the classroom as reflected in Table II. When asked if an educator’s own culture plays a role in the way she teaches 54 or 60% said they agreed it did play a role. The second half of this section took the question a step further to see if educators consciously plan lessons and activities that incorporate the various cultures and backgrounds of their students. Of the 90 who answered this question, 27 or 30%
placed their answer in between always and sometimes, and 36, or 40% said they did this sometimes.

The third subsection took a look at the role of a parent and their level of involvement in their children’s education as reflected in Table III. A majority of the 89 participants who answered the first question agreed to varying degrees with the statement: Parent involvement is a key factor in a student’s academic success. Of the 89 participants 66, or 74.2% strongly agreed with this statement and 20 or 22.5% agreed. When asked if they have a program or means of promoting parent involvement within their classroom 39 or 43.3% of the 90 participants who answered said somewhat, and 27 or 30.0% said yes.

The fourth subsection asked participants to think about the environment they facilitated within their classroom as reflected in Table IV. The first statement presented the notion of how comfortable or active a student is within the classroom environment plays a large role in their academic success. Forty-three or 47.8% strongly agreed with this statement, and 38 or 42.2% agreed. In the second part of this section, educators were asked what they do within their classrooms according to their level of agreement with the statement: I spend time discussing the importance of student responsibility and finding ways for every student to have a unique and active role in the classroom. Of the 90 who answered 32 or 35.6 reported they always did this, 33 or 36.7 placed their answer between always and sometimes and 19 or 21.2% said they sometimes did this.

The final subsection focused on the actual instruction the educators initiate on a daily basis as reflected in Table V. In terms of instruction, the statement asked participants to determine which techniques they thought were most important: having a diverse curriculum based on critical thinking will create better academic success than focusing on basic skills. The
success, but it is a requirement before they can even begin the path to active learning. On the flip side, however, many educators feel helpless in their ability to nurture their students. In the comments left for this section, participants' cite outside familial and instructional responsibilities as deterrents. In addition teachers feel there are other professionals as social workers, counselors, and psychologists who are more qualified and able to provide such support. Based on these findings, we need to find a better way to meet students' needs. The answer is not necessarily for individual teachers to start to try to carry the load themselves, but instead improve the process. Professionals need an easier way to refer students for support and increase communication between professionals within a district or building to be able to better reach and provide students who are struggling with having their basic needs met.

Culture

Participants were concrete in their understanding of how their own culture played a role in their everyday teaching process, however, were less confident when it came to planning lessons around the student's individual backgrounds. Unlike Gloria Ladson-Billings claims that teachers are unaware of how their culture plays a role in the way they teach and perceive interactions with students, 74 out of 90 participants felt that their own culture played a part in the way they taught. In fact one participant commented "We cannot separate ourselves from our teaching... first and foremost we teach ourselves and then our content." The inconsistency, however, could come from the difference in ages of the participants. In Gloria Ladson-Billings' case study, she referred mostly to her students who were training to become teachers, where those who participated in the study were already teaching, and a majority for more than two years. That being said, it is important to note the continued confusion in what educators are to do with this information. While it is difficult and time consuming task, it is important for educators
to take the cultures and backgrounds of their students into consideration when planning a lesson. Smaller instances of when this comes into play are in using pop culture references or making generalized statements about a larger group of individuals. This can also affect any activity surrounding a specific race, religion or tradition, in ensuring all information is presented in an unbiased, objective manner.

Parent Involvement

There was an overwhelming response to the importance and influential role parents and guardians play in student’s academic success. A parent’s attitude, ability and ambition towards education lay the foundation for the student’s mindset long before an educator ever greets them. A paramount 86 out of 89 participants agreed with the statement: parent involvement is a key factor in a student’s academic success. This follows suit with Carey E. Cooper and Robert Crosnoe studies, and how monumentally essential it is for teachers to reach out to parents as equal partners in a student’s success. As one participant explained “Three-way street: Parents, teachers, students.” This is another aspect where participants agreed with the importance of the concept, but felt there was not an efficient or effective program or process for them to reach out and connect with parents. Many participants felt that their best resources were electronic; websites, e-mails, and the occasional phone call home when necessary. The biggest obstacle to this approach, especially when focusing on students who come from low socio-economic households is the inconsistency of their access to a computer with a reliable Internet connection. Or, in some cases, parents are unfamiliar with school websites and do not know how to navigate them or are unable to check e-mail on a regular basis. As a result it is important for schools to implement programs to help promote communication, as well as create a well designed process where teachers and parents develop a positive connection in the beginning of the school year in
order to feel more comfortable in working together to create the best plan for the student to reach his or her individual level of academic success.

Classroom Environment

The statements from the survey for this section of focus attempted to cover two different concepts of classroom environment; student responsibility and citizenship. Neither is possible if a student does not feel comfortable or safe within the classroom; which a majority of the participants agreed with. Elizabeth Bondy and Dorene D. Ross (2008) speak of the “warm demander,” educators who provide genuine support and understanding, but have high expectations and will not accept anything less. Such an environment provides a safe environment, but demands every student take their role and responsibilities seriously. Student responsibility is important, because it puts the student in the spotlight in successes as well as shortcomings. Participants were adamant about student responsibility, but were less certain about what it meant to create an individual role for each student within the classroom, two participants’ commented on the ambiguous definition of a “unique” role. This is certainly easier to achieve in an elementary setting, where chores or classroom activities can be assigned throughout the day, however, it is still possible in a secondary setting. It is a matter of implementing instruction which facilitates a determination of each student’s strengths and utilize them within a lesson. If a student is eager to be vocal and take a leadership role, allow them to create their own activity to facilitate; whereas if another student is more reserved, but a diligent worker they can be in charge of looking up resources for a project. Overall, teachers need to be aware of each student’s gifts and talents and incorporate into the classroom to give each student the opportunity to play a vital role in the community.
Instruction

Much of the literature written about the struggle of schools located within low socio-economic communities focus on the need to go beyond basic skills and promote critical thinking within the classroom. Martin Haberman explained many teachers feel burned out or that as a result of such a large number of students falling behind, many need so much extra support and review of prerequisite information, there is little time for critical thinking. The participants believed, like Katherine Barr (2001), we need to reach towards a happy medium. One participant commented “The key is balance. Students need basic skills and practice with critical thinking. Giving students critical thinking activities that require the use of basic skills to solve a problem reinforces the skill and gives meaning to the material that is being taught.” This was one of the two most commented topics within the survey; participants clearly feel this is a topic worth talking about. If students have not mastered the building blocks of a concept, it is a futile attempt at taking them to the next level before they are ready. The emphasis, however, is to actually push towards critical thinking as the goal. To help create and support students to become individuals who can explain why; individuals who can explicate the meanings and themes behind greater theories and ideas and how they affect our everyday lives. As a result districts need to work towards creating curriculums that support a great deal of practice and repetition of basic skills, but also include and require projects and activities to promote critical thinking.

Conclusion

Overall, educators are aware of the needs and supports students of low socio-economic status need to achieve academic success. Their ability to have their basic needs met; the ability of the school or community to celebrate the diversity of culture; the level of parent or guardian involvement; how secure they feel in their classroom environment and the level of responsibility
they take for their own education and the instructional methods of their teachers all play distinctive and imperative roles in any child’s education. Through research and communication with peer educators, is it apparent we are missing the mark. Despite our attentiveness to these needs, we feel there are not enough recourses, developed programs, or even hours within a day to meet all of these demands. As a result, it is imperative educators within a school district, building and department need to evaluate their own individual needs and take action.
Table I

Basic Needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>N/A</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Answered Question</th>
<th>Skipped Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>56.2%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
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<td>0.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Without question... without having basic needs met, students cannot begin to focus on academic learning.”

“Students who are well-nourished, well-rested and respected and loved are much better poised for academic success”

“When a human being is well fed, clothed and loved academic success is NOT a given, but it sure is an asset to learning.”

“If a person is just surviving then their attention to higher levels of thinking or reflective thought is muted”

It is an educator’s responsibility to reach out into the community to help provide the missing basic needs in a student’s life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>N/A</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Answered Question</th>
<th>Skipped Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>27</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“We need to become a greater part of a student’s frame of reference. By sharing another way of seeing and being in the world, they have a chance of altering their perceptions, interests and goals.”

“to some extent--we can only do so much--time wise--with so many needy kids--i think there needs to be a person in the school that we can go to.”

“In theory it would be great to do this, but in reality most teachers do not have the time to do this. Teachers are people with other responsibilities outside of the school setting, like family.”

“In a perfect society, all elements will work together to procure basic needs for all humans - as Nel Noddings so aptly noted, our first job as educators is to care for your students.”
**Table II**

**Culture**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My own culture plays a role in the way I teach.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree:</td>
<td>22.2% 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree:</td>
<td><strong>60.0%</strong> 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral:</td>
<td>13.3% 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree:</td>
<td>2.2% 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree:</td>
<td>1.1% 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A:</td>
<td>1.1% 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comments**: 9

**Answered Question**: 90

**Skipped Question**: 0

"We cannot separate ourselves from our teaching... first and foremost we teach ourselves and then our content"""

"Perhaps only in the reference I use, though attempts are made to make sure they are all references to local knowledge students may have rather than esoteric cultural knowledge.""

"My Dad is a minister and that has often impacted how I am as a teacher. In terms of my ethnicity, I am not sure that this impacts my teaching as much.”"

"This is a rather vague question. I think that my values play a part in my teaching, but I'm not sure that my religious or ethnic culture informs my teaching”"

**I consciously plan lessons and activities that incorporate the various cultures and backgrounds of my students.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I consciously plan lessons and activities that incorporate the various cultures and backgrounds of my students.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always:</td>
<td>17.8% 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes:</td>
<td><strong>40.0%</strong> 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes:</td>
<td>1.1% 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never:</td>
<td>4.4% 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A:</td>
<td>6.7% 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comments**: 8

**Answered Question**: 90

**Skipped Question**: 0

"However, I think it's insulting to someone to tell them they cannot learn because of their culture. Imagine telling someone that their culture limits them from understanding math or science concepts. On the other hand, if a teacher was teaching about the Holocaust and he/she had a class of Islamists, I think one would have to adjust the lesson.”"

"As much as possible, cultural influences and diversity are emphasized, explored, and included... this is a lot more difficult than it sounds on the surface when teaching a full load with other responsibilities... excuse or explanation? Not sure which...”"

"Sometimes - but honestly, barely ever - If their cultures and backgrounds in part of their interests... now we're talking”"

"We are so focused on what NYS wants us to teach for the Regents. In our district, we have curriculum maps that we are supposed to follow.”"
Table III
Parent Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>74.2%</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments

“Parent's make a huge difference in student's motivation, performance, and success... even in students who wish their parents were not involved... the support for our students needs to come from all parties involved.”

“Parent involvement can be both positive and negative. Open minded - parent and teacher are both wanting the best for the student - recently more parents are enabling their kids - not helping them to become independent and responsible”

“Three-way street: Parents, teachers, students”

“Just look at the kids who have the most problems--most of them come from one parent families or families where parents just can’t, don’t, won't or don’t know how.”

I have a program or means of promoting parent involvement within my classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>43.3%</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments

“Would like too. But I do not have the time or background to set up such a program and the school does not give teachers support for such endeavors”

“I don’t have parents come into my classroom, but I keep them informed of what we are doing in my classroom and what they can do at home to support their child.”

“Not within classroom, but parents may check web page to know what is going on currently in class and if assignments are due.”

“I do call home to relate problems, and make sure my report card comments cover the child as a whole, not just pertaining to subject matter.”

“Again, not as much as I probably should . . .”
Questions and Answers

Table IV
Classroom Environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How comfortable or active a student is within the classroom environment plays a large role in their academic success.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree: 47.8%</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree: 42.2%</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral: 6.7%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree 3.3%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree 0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A 0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments 9

Answered Question 90

Skipped Question 0

“A sense of safety, belonging, and community goes a long way toward allowing a student to openly express him or herself and thus grow from the experience of sharing and receiving feedback in a safe environment.”

“However some students can be reserved in class, but still do well academically.”

“There should be avenues for expression for multiple learning styles. Utilizing a child's strengths encourages more contribution.”

“Feeling comfortable is probably the most important factor!”

I spend time discussing the importance of student responsibility and finding ways for every student to have a unique and active role in the classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I spend time discussing the importance of student responsibility and finding ways for every student to have a unique and active role in the classroom.</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A 4.4%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments 8

Answered Question 90

Skipped Question 0

“Unfortunately, in our district, it seems like everything is becoming the teacher's responsibility. For example, we aren't even allowed to give a zero for homework or for a test. It is the teacher's job to make arrangements or find some way to get a student to do an assignment or test, even if they are refusing to do so. I personally believe it should be a student's responsibility.”

“Teaching seniors, I feel most students work habits will not change unless they have a life altering experience. That being said, I spend class time talking about study skills and time management the first day of school and before big projects. I talk privately to student who are struggling and offer advice and help.”

“I try to emphasize to the student that the learning is their responsibility and their grades will reflect their work.”
Table V
Instruction

Having a diverse curriculum based on critical thinking will create better academic success than focusing on basic skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
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<td>38</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments 17
Answered Question 88
Skipped Question 2

"The key is balance. Students need basic skills and practice with critical thinking. Giving students critical thinking activities that require the use of basic skills to solve a problem reinforces the skill and gives meaning to the material that is being taught."

"Many kids are sorely lacking in basic skills in math, making higher level thinking extremely difficult. Basic skills and basic facts have to be right at their fingertips!"

"This doesn't mean to ignore basic skills, but teaching only skills (or to a test) limits the possible levels of achievement for the students... critical thinking (and going from concrete to abstract reasoning, etc.) is the key to real education, far beyond times tables or diagramming sentences. This is not to discount the value of said skills, of course."

"I just don't like this question--it has to be both ways--kids have to have basics or they can't think critically. Basics are the building blocks."

I include real-life scenarios and comprehensive strategies to ensure all students are learning on their own individual levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
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<td>15.7%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Comments 8
Answered Question 89
Skipped Question 1

"My lessons are one real life scenario after another, its inherent to biology. However, comprehensive strategies that ensure all students are learning on their own level is very difficult to achieve. There is a limit to the range of intellectual ability that can successfully addressed by a curriculum especially at the high school level. Some homogenous grouping is needed. The question is how much."

"Definitely... students need to be able to relate to the material being discussed or it is just so much babble."

"Learning for the sake of learning is great, but sometimes connecting the learning to the real world is essential"

"At least I try!"
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