

The Impact of Poverty and Homelessness on Children's Oral and Literate Language: Practical Implications for Service Delivery

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I. Key Points

- Statistics regarding poverty in the U.S.
- Factors that impact low-SES students' linguistic and academic achievement
- Effects of poverty on oral and literate language development
- Suggestions for supporting low-SES parents in increasing their children's language skills
- Strategies for professionals for increasing the oral and written language skills of low-SES students
- Executive functioning deficits in students and summary of remediation strategies

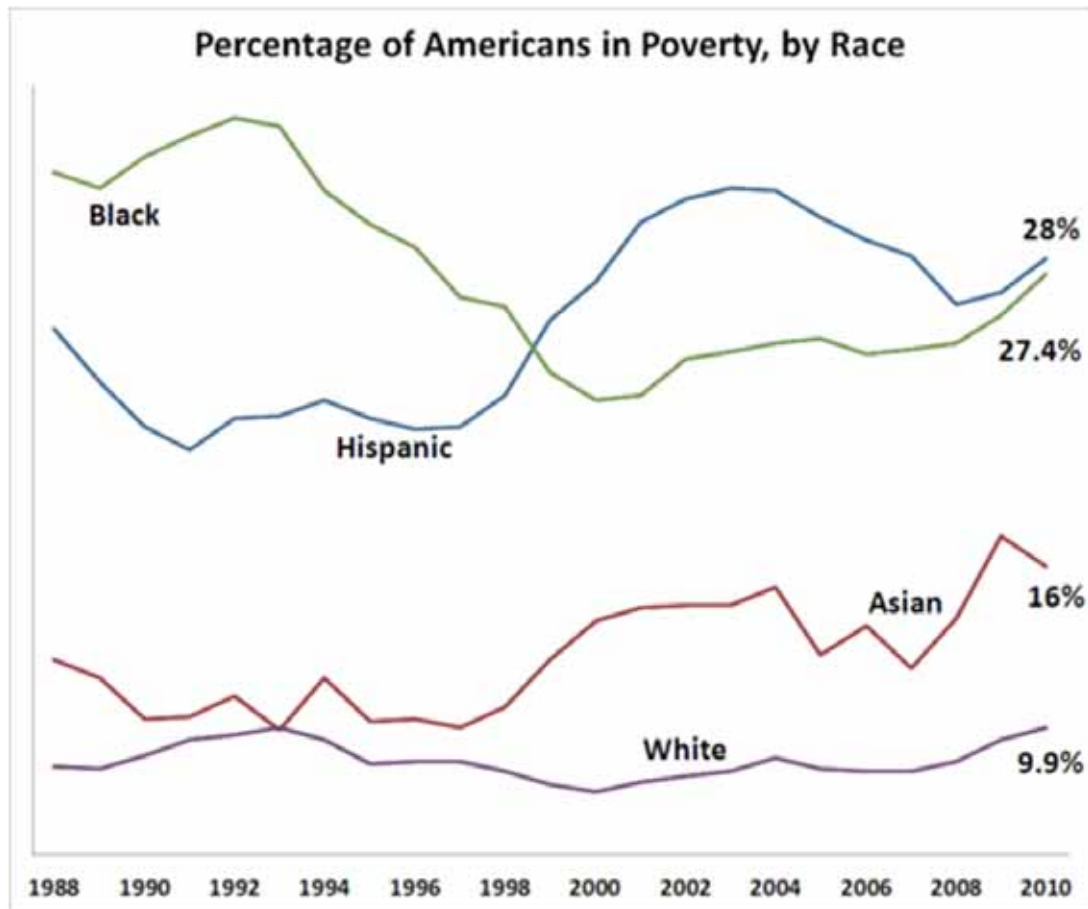
II. Understanding Variables Affecting Low-SES Students' Performance

Background

- Never equate poverty with dysfunction.
- The term, poverty, often brings to mind the cultural differences that arise from race, ethnicity, religion, country of origin, and ability or disability. However, in many countries, substantial cultural differences exist between people who are economically disadvantaged and those who are advantaged (Turnbull & Justice, 2012).

Variables

- The standard of living for those in the bottom 10% is lower in the United States than in any other developed nation, except the United Kingdom.
- Poor families with three or more people spend about one third of their income on food.
- Last year, 7.7% of African American women and 8.5% of Hispanic women worked in jobs that paid at or below minimum wage, as compared to 4.3% of White men (www.nwlc.org, 2011).
- African American and Hispanic women are more likely than white women to be heads of households.
- Married households' median annual 2011 income was \$71,830, while female-headed households earned \$32,597.



Effects of Homelessness

- Homeless children and youth lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.
- These children often live in cars, parks, public places, abandoned buildings, or bus or train stations.
- The cause is the inability of people to pay for housing; thus, homelessness is impacted by both income and the affordability of available housing (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2012).

Potential Psychological and Physical Effects

- Malnutrition
- Illness
- Hearing and vision problems
- Housing problems (e.g., lead poisoning, homelessness, frequent moving, crowded conditions, no place to play outside)
- Neighborhood problems (e.g., violence)
- Family stress
- Fewer learning resources
- Lack of cognitive and linguistic stimulation

Observations

- When financial resources are stressed, there are higher rates of maternal depression.
- Compared with higher-income mothers, who tend to be more warm and verbal with their children, low-income mothers often show lower levels of warmth, responsiveness, and sensitivity when interacting with young children. (Barrett & Turner, 2005; La Paro, Justice, Skibbe, & Plante, 2004; Neuman, 2009)

- The overall warmth and effect of a home, which promote caregiver-child bonding, form the very foundation of language development.

III. Definition of Situational vs. Generational Poverty (Payne, 2003; Roseberry-McKibbin, 2013)

Characteristics of Situational Poverty

- Common for immigrants
- Occurs for a shorter period of time
- Usually the result of circumstances (divorce, illness, death)
- People have a sense of pride and a belief in their ability to rise above their circumstances through hard work.
- They may refuse to accept offers of help as “charity.”

Characteristics of Generational Poverty

- Affects a family for two generations or longer
- Usually involves welfare
- A common attitude is “I am stuck, and the world owes me.”
- There is a short-term value system, which emphasizes survival in the present—not planning for the future (e.g., long-range educational plans).

Comparison of Situational and Generational Poverty

The values of persons in situational and generational poverty may differ in a number of areas.

SITUATIONAL

- **Life priorities** include achievement, possessions, status.
- **Money** is to be saved, managed, invested.
- **Religion** is one of the accoutrements of life; fits into the person's schedule.
- **Time** is to be valued; punctuality is critical; the future is important.
- **Destiny** is in our hands; we all have choices; there is an internal locus of control.
- **Education** is crucial for getting ahead in life, making good \$\$, being respected.
- **Entertainment** is a reward for hard work; money is used for education and life comforts; leftover \$\$ is used for entertainment after other priorities are met.
- **Discipline** is important; punishment/negative consequences are about change; "don't be sorry, be different."
- **Organization and planning** are very important. Life is carefully scheduled into structured time slots. Structure is crucial: Calendars, iPhones, and other organizational devices proliferate.
- With **language**, formal register is used; language is used to meet needs, get ahead in life.
- **Interaction style** values quiet; conversational partners do not interrupt, but politely wait their turn.

Home Language

- "Those shoes suck."
- "Gimme that apple."
- "Dude, that was totally stupid."

GENERATIONAL

- Survival, entertainment, relationships are important; it's all about the PRESENT.
- Money is to be spent, especially on things that bring pleasure in the moment.
- Religion may be the center of much of life; a great deal of time may be spent at the church.
- "You get there when you get there"; the present is most important;
- "You can't fight city hall"; there can be learned helplessness; there is an external locus of control.
- Education is valued in the abstract, not emphasized as a real or attainable goal.
- Entertainment plays a crucial role and is highly valued; it may take precedence over education; the present is all we have (e.g., Why not enjoy life right now?); live in the moment.
- Punishment is not about change; it is about penance and forgiveness; the person's behavior continues as before.
- Organizational/planning devices are virtually nonexistent. Clutter is common; structure is not valued. Planning ahead is not common; "living by the seat of your pants" is typical.
- Casual register is used; language is used for entertainment and for survival.
- There is constant background noise; interruptions during conversation are common and expected.

School Language

- "Those shoes are different than your usual."
- "I'm hungry—that apple looks good."
- "Interesting idea—hadn't thought of it that way."

IV. Factors Impacting Oral Language

Language Characteristics Correlated With Low SES

- Being poor does not cause children to have language and behavioral impairments.
- Never equate poverty with dysfunction.
- However, certain language and behavioral characteristics are associated with being from a low-SES background (Nelson, 2010).

Limited Access to Health Care

- This issue can impact language skills.
- If the mother is malnourished during pregnancy, the child's brain development can be impacted.
- Children who are often sick miss school.
- If children are sick or hungry, they have difficulty learning; it is hard for them to concentrate.
- Middle ear infections can impact listening and even written language (e.g., reading, spelling).

Observations

- There is a strong correlation between adults' education and their income levels.
- Long-term welfare dependency is associated with low literacy skills and lack of a high school diploma.
- In terms of educational level of caregivers, research has found that SES is more critical to a child's language development than ethnic background.
- The factor most highly related to SES is the mother's educational level.

Caretakers Who Have Little Formal Education

- They may not provide adequate oral language stimulation for children.
- They may not believe that it is important to talk with babies and young children (who are not treated as conversational partners).

Research

Pruitt & Oetting (2009)

- Children from low-income families have been shown to have limited input, in terms of volubility and quality, when compared to children from wealthier families, and these differences have been linked to delayed language abilities.

Nelson (2010)

- Children in low-income families are engaged more in talk about immediate daily living concerns—for example, what to eat, wear, and do or not do.
- Conversations in low-SES homes often do not extend beyond practical concerns.
- One consequence of this is that low-SES children often have very concrete language.
- They have difficulty understanding the abstract, decontextualized language of school.

Hart & Risley (1995)

- The researchers conducted longitudinal studies of families from various ethnic and SES backgrounds.
- Over several years, they observed behavior in the homes of 1- to 2-year-old children from three groups: welfare, working class, and professional.
- Hart and Risley concluded that SES made an "overwhelming difference" in how much talking went on in a family.
- The family factor most strongly associated with the amount of talking in the home was not ethnicity, but SES.
- In a 365-day year, children from professional families would have heard 4 million utterances.

- Children from welfare families would have heard 250,000 utterances.
- The number of utterances in working class families fell somewhere in between.
- Even by 3 years of age, the difference in vocabulary knowledge between children from welfare homes and those from middle class homes was so great that—in order for the welfare children to gain a vocabulary equivalent to that of children from working class homes—the welfare children would need to attend a preschool program for 40 hours per week where they heard language at a level used in the homes of professional families.

IV. Strategies to Enhance Language Stimulation in Infants

- Research shows that high-quality preschool programs portend the best short- and long-term results for at-risk children from low-SES homes.
- It is especially ideal if these programs can begin in infancy (The Carolina Abecedarian Project, 2006; Hart & Risley, 1995; Fowler, Ogston, Roberts-Fiati, & Swenson, 1995; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Chang, 2004).

Strategies include the following:

- Read to babies (simple books with colorful pictures are best).
- Talk to the baby; face-to-face contact is ideal.
- Label common objects.
- Introduce music and singing
- Let the baby have a safe-glass mirror to look in.
- Point out and label body parts during activities such as dressing and bathing.
- Use short utterances with simple syntax.
- Heighten facial expressions, gestures, and intonation.
- Play turn-taking games such as patty cake and peek-a-boo.
- In very early infancy, introduce black-and-white objects.
- Imitate sounds the baby makes, and make new sounds.
- Make a habit of using greetings and leave takings ("Bye bye, Allison!").
- Provide many opportunities for babies to put simple objects into containers and then take them out.
- While doing household chores and errands, bring the baby along and describe what is happening.
- Introduce two languages from birth if possible.

Research

Tamis-LeMonda (2001)

- Caregivers' *responsiveness* is a major key to language growth.
- The extent to which mothers imitated their 13-month-old children predicted the timing of the children's later language milestones.
 - For example, if the child said "Ba!" the mother said "Ball!"
 - This predicted the timing of things like the child's development of her first 50 words and the use of two-word combinations.
- We can even imitate non-speech movements (e.g., smiling, yawning).
- Mother's rapid response correlated highly with the child's vocalizations.
 - The toddlers of high responders were 6 months ahead, language-wise, of toddlers of low responders; they were saying their first word at age 10 months and reaching other milestones by age 14 months.
 - How often a mother initiated a conversation with her child was not predictive of language outcomes; **the most significant factor was—if the child initiated—whether the mother responded.**

- The most powerful mechanism for moving a baby from babbling to fluent speech was how a parent responded (or not) to a child's vocalizations in the moment.

V. Strategies for Preschool Children

- Qi and Kaiser (2004) showed that some preschool children had emotional-behavioral issues that impacted their social interactions with other children.
- Kimochis can be used as a tool for supporting social skills (Dodge, Rice, & Grimm, 2010).
 - Kimochis are plush toys that designate feelings.
 - They are accompanied by a program that teaches the seven keys to successful communication (e.g., "Choose words that help instead of hurt.").

To Increase Expressive Language Skills

- It is important to talk with the child as much as possible.
- Extensions are quite powerful:
 - *Child*: "Kitty!"
 - *Adult*: "Yes, there is a black kitty sitting on the sidewalk."
- We add new grammatic and semantic information to the child's utterances, for example:
 - *Child*: "I see bus!"
 - *Adult*: "Yes, look at that big yellow bus going down the road."
- Working with parents as little as once a week can provide benefits (Roberts & Kaiser, 2011).
- Extensions are very useful; they can be easily taught to parents, and they increase children's morpho-syntactic skills.

Research

Lovelace & Stewart (2009)

- Children from low-SES backgrounds are often limited in experiences needed to build background knowledge for vocabulary growth because individual choices and experiences provided to these children overall are more limited than for groups with greater economic resources...Because experiences are limited, the potential for gaining word knowledge from a variety of opportunities is predictably reduced for these children. These early differences in children's vocabulary knowledge have shown that even a small disadvantage grows into a larger one and becomes difficult to ameliorate without intervention.
- It is important to build low-SES children's conceptual bases and then move into oral and literate language from there.

Justice (2010) and Roseberry-McKibbin (2007, 2013)

- Phonological awareness is the ability to consciously reflect on and manipulate the sound system of a language.
- It is foundational to success in reading, writing, and spelling.
- Low-SES preschoolers especially need to develop phonological awareness skills.

Koutsoftas, Harmon, & Gray (2009)

- The researchers studied the effect of Tier 2 intervention for phonemic awareness in a response-to-intervention (RtI) model in low-income preschool children.
- Tier 1 instruction is high-quality, evidence-based classroom instruction.
- Children who are not making adequate progress with this model are provided with Tier 2 intervention. Tier 2 intervention typically consists of short-term, high quality explicit instruction that is carried out in small groups by reading specialists, teachers, SLPs, and others.

- In this study, Tier 2 intervention for beginning sound awareness was provided twice a week (in 20-minute sessions) for 6 weeks by trained teachers and SLPs. The intervention was successful for 71% of the children.
- The authors concluded that the intervention was efficient and effective.

Ukrainetz, Ross, & Harm (2009)

- The researchers studied schedules of phonemic awareness treatment for kindergarteners.
- In one schedule, the students were seen three times a week from September through December.
- In another schedule, children were seen once a week from September through March.
- There were large, maintained gains for children seen in both schedules.
- It was found that the gains made from short, intense treatment were similar to those made from continuous weekly treatment.

Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka, & Hunt (2009)

- The researchers studied accelerating low-SES preschoolers' literacy development through classroom-based teacher-child storybook reading and explicit print-referencing.
- They found that children whose teachers used print-referencing strategies showed larger gains on three standardized measures of print knowledge than children whose teachers did not use the strategies.
- Examples of print referencing strategies used by teachers include the following:
 - "This M in the red block is an uppercase letter. See how this uppercase letter is different than these lowercase letters?"
 - "This word is *the*. This word is in this book all the time—can you help me find it?"

Gillam (2011)

- Some low-SES (some bilingual) parents were given wordless books to read with their children; others were given books with print.
- The wordless books generated richer language during reading than print books.
- Parents were more animated and discussed the wordless books more creatively.

Hernandez (2011)

- We need to model to parents the way that they should be reading to their children at home.
- Research and results at family literacy centers throughout the United States show that working with multiple generations is the best way to lift up the entire family.
- Families need to be empowered.
- Dr. Hortencia Kayser has stated that many parents are uncomfortable reading to their children, so modeling is critical.

Other Strategies

Use Intervention Hierarchy

- Count the number of words in a sentence.
- Count the number of syllables in a word.
- Count the number of sounds in a word.
- Identify rhyming words.
- Use sound blending skills (e.g., "What word is this? S-u-n").
- Identify the first sound in a word.
- Identify the last sound in a word.

Encourage Pre-literacy Skills

- Display interest in reading and sharing books.
- Hold a book right side up.

- Identify the front and back of the book.
- Identify the top and bottom of a page.
- Look at text from left to right and turn pages in sequential order.
- Identify the title on a book cover.
- Identify titles of favorite books.
- Distinguish between pictures and print on a page.
- Know where the story begins in the book.
- Identify letters in the book that occur in the child's name.
- Print the first letter of the child's name.
- Recite the first 10 letters of the alphabet.
- Point to the first letter in a word.
- Differentiate uppercase from lowercase letters.
- Use terms such as *letter*, *word*, *alphabet*.
- Point to each word individually as you read.
- Respond to signs in the classroom.
- Recognize common signs in the environment (e.g., stop sign).

Strategies

- Use stories with Rebus-style pictures and ask students to "read" the pictures.
- Read a familiar story or poem and have students fill in missing words.
- If books are read many times, children obtain more vocabulary and information each time they read the story.
- When they are familiar with a story, children can be encouraged to "read" it to peers and family members. This increases their confidence with reading.
- Researchers such as Fey, Windsor, and Warren (1995) and Kaderavek and Boucher (2006) caution that some children may not be motivated to read. This can be due to lack of exposure to books in the home, lack of desire to sit still and focus, and other variables.
- Thus, it is extremely important for professionals to make reading books motivating and enjoyable.
- Keep book-reading time short.
- Use predictable books; they have simplified and repetitive text that engage children's interest.

Desirable Characteristics of Books

- Highly exciting or dramatic story themes
- Manipulative parts like flaps and movable tabs to engage children
- Buttons to press that make noises (e.g., a choo-choo noise for a train) or play music
- Many colorful pictures in addition to words—often, children who have limited exposure to books will lose interest in books that have many words on each page.

VI. General Practical Strategies

Use Visualization to Increase Overall Comprehension for Note Taking, General Listening, and Reading

- Tell students that they can picture a TV in their brain/mind/head; when they hear or read things, they can make pictures on this TV.
- Help students with this process by beginning with familiar items/people/etc. in the home (pet, sibling, living room). For example, I will ask a student to tell me about his dog. When he has done so, I will tell him that his dog is not present; he was able to describe the dog by using a picture in his brain.

VII. Developing Vocabulary Skills

- It is important for students of all ages to build their content knowledge/conceptual foundation within meaningful contexts. Drill without context is usually ineffective (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2013).
- Develop knowledge of classroom/ curriculum vocabulary. We can ask teachers to tell us what vocabulary they are teaching in the classroom.
- Choose words that give children more sophisticated ways to talk about what they already know (Biemiller, 2003).

Known Word

Search, hunt
Have to
Keep going
Lucky

New Word

Explore
Required
Maintain
Fortunate

- It is helpful for students to write out vocabulary words.
- Some students struggle greatly with writing—especially spelling; in order to save time, I have them verbally tell me the sentence they want to write. I write the sentence on an erasable white board and they copy it.
- In this way, they “cement” the vocabulary word more firmly into their minds. They also get to practice writing words correctly. In addition, they practice the important skill of sentence formulation.
- If students can draw pictures of new words they are learning, the drawing cements the word more firmly in their minds.
- Students love the iPad—a good tool for students between the ages of 3 and 18 years.

Research

Turnbull & Justice (2012)

- Merely exposing children to new words through reading is not enough.
- Students benefit from learning words “deeply” and retain the words better when
 - professionals provide elaborated discussions about meanings of words in context;
 - professionals prime words in discussion BEFORE reading a passage;
 - students actively practice using new words in sentences, rather than just read sentences containing the new words.

Lovelace & Stewart (2009)

- The researchers found that, with culturally diverse young low-SES children, vocabulary instruction was most effective when children used the words meaningfully in multiple contexts.
- The words were “learned deeply” through various games and activities in which the words were repeated often.
- It was also helpful to connect new words to the children’s prior experiences.
- We can use context-embedded strategies to teach vocabulary.

VIII. Elementary-Aged and Adolescent Students: Enhancing Literacy Skills

Research

Moran (2010)

- A child growing up in a middle-class neighborhood will own an average of 13 books.
- Low-income communities average about one book for every 300 children.
- For children in such communities, reading and writing skills are often low—very basic and concrete.
- These children have difficulty with **decontextualized language**.
- Having reading difficulties increases the odds that a child will drop out of school and have a criminal record.
- In planning future jail construction, states like California and Indiana factor in the number of 3rd graders who are not reading at grade level.

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