

IMPACTING TWO GENERATIONS AT ONCE: REFOCUSING PARENT TRAINING TO DEVELOP HUMAN CAPACITY AND COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY

By Ruby Payne, Ph.D. and Philip E. DeVol

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Always the debate in schools is what to do about parent training and involvement. Title I requires parent training and involvement.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSFER OF KNOWLEDGE

Increasingly research is looking at the intergenerational transfer of knowledge. A study done in Australia—which followed the children of 8,556 women (mostly from poverty) from their first clinic visit for pregnancy, again at age 5, and again at age 14 (Najman et al., 2004)—found that the child’s maternal grandfather’s occupational status independently predicted the child’s verbal comprehension levels at age 5 and the non-verbal reasoning scores at age 14.

Why would the maternal grandfather’s *occupation* be so predictive? The occupation would tell you the level of stability in the household and be a predictor of the level of education. Because the mother is so instrumental in the early nurturing of the child and the vocabulary the child hears, it would follow that the mother’s access to knowledge and vocabulary would be based on her own childhood experiences. Therefore, the maternal grandfather’s occupation would be instrumental in predicting achievement. The Hart and Risley study (1995) found that a 3-year-old in a professional household has more vocabulary than an adult in a welfare household.

It would be very easy for educators to now dismiss attempts to educate children by saying it all depends on what their grandfather did. But someone taught the grandfather, and someone taught the mother. Therefore, current educators can impact two generations through the students they have in their classrooms *and* changing the focus of parent training.

IMPACT OF POVERTY ON BRAIN FUNCTIONING

The key issues here are language acquisition and the development of the prefrontal/executive functions of the brain.

Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley did research using electroencephalography (EEG) to compare the brains of poor children with those of middle class children. The subjects ranged in age from 7 to

12. Mark Kishiyama, lead researcher, indicated that the patterns in poor children's brains were very similar to adults who have had strokes and therefore have lesions in their prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex (executive function) controls working memory, behavioral self-regulation, cognitive control, reward processing, and problem-solving ability. "There are a number of factors associated with LSES rearing conditions that may have contributed to these results such as greater levels of stress and lack of access to cognitively stimulating materials and experiences" (Kishiyama, Boyce, Jimenez, Perry, & Knight, in press, p. 1). It follows that if the parent came from poverty, the executive functions would not be as well developed so they could not be passed on to the children. You cannot teach what you do not know.

IMPACT OF POVERTY ON INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS

What we know about poverty is that its instability forces people into the tyranny of the moment. It requires that people must be able to use their reactive skills to solve immediate concrete problems. The more a person's attention is drawn to the present moment, the harder it is to maintain a future orientation. It follows that it's also harder then for kids to concentrate on achievement. In fact, Cornell University did research with poor children and found that the more stressful the environment, the less effective working memory/executive function was (Schamberg, 2008).

When times get tough and money runs short, organizations tend to focus down on their core mission, limit extraneous activities, and tighten the grip on the budget to ensure the organization's immediate survival. Like individuals impacted by poverty, an organization spends time and energy solving the same old problems over and over. In essence the organization has moved from an abstract world to a concrete world.

In the work we do with adults in poverty, the first rule for making the transition out of poverty is to think about the future, to think abstractly, even when you are living in the midst of concrete problems. That should be the first rule for organizations too. To do that, you have to develop and use executive functions, as well as language.

IMPACT OF EDUCATION ACROSS GENERATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

What we know as educators is that we have a tremendous amount of influence on the lives of children and their parents. We also know that if children in the K-6 years have language experience, brain development, and cognitive learning structures, then they will be more successful through Grade 12. Miller and DeVol (2009) have created a continuum [link to continuum http://ahaprocess.com/files/Bridges_Continuum.pdf] that shows the importance of education upon the entire community. When we successfully educate and graduate our students, we as educators have a huge impact on job retention, careers, post-secondary success, wellness, and community prosperity.

Why the emphasis on a sustainable community? As communities lose their resources, their ability to develop future resources—i.e., employment, education of children, care for natural resources, being healthy, etc.—is diminished. Schools and institutions become poorer, whereupon the people with the resources leave,

lessening the ability to develop new resources. To have sustainable communities requires human capacity development. Historically, that was done by parents and the community.

A MODEL THAT CAN BE USED TO IMPACT TWO GENERATIONS AT ONCE

The continuum (link to continuum http://ahaprocess.com/files/Bridges_Continuum.pdf) was created for communities involved in developing human capital and community sustainability. The use of the continuum brings all sectors to the decision-making table to build a comprehensive approach for addressing poverty. Our ideas are being applied in numerous communities (including those that are largely African American, Appalachian, Native American, rural, and urban), such as South Bend, Indiana; Youngstown, Ohio; Boulder, Colorado; Battle Creek, Michigan; Pensacola, Florida; and Keshena, Wisconsin ... to name a few.

To use the continuum, the columns across the top illustrate these points:

Comprehensive strategies to address poverty and build prosperous communities must stretch from cradle to grave.

Every section of the continuum benefits from the preceding section and can contribute to the success of the following sections. For example, K–12 schools benefit when the parents of preschool children and the early-childhood providers do a good job of brain development. Children come to school ready to learn. In turn, the post-secondary field benefits when K–12 graduates more students who are proficient in math and science and have the skills to compete with students from Asia.

Wellness, high resources, and a balanced, healthy life are the goal. Remember our definition of poverty is “the extent which an individual does without resources.” Therefore, the more resources the better. Community action is needed to help build the good life. Many communities—especially in recent months—are in survival mode themselves and cannot guarantee their citizens a stable, wealth-creating environment ... thus the column for community prosperity. As educators we know how this affects us in the classroom.

The success that one has at work ultimately folds back to provide a benefit to the children of the worker—the children you teach.

Employers benefit too. This includes you, because the retention rate improves and the employees who complete a post-secondary certificate or degree have the skill sets needed by the employer.

The rows illustrate these points:

Metrics: A community must have simple but meaningful measures.

Fallout costs: The community must address poverty from both “heart” and “head.” To have one in five U.S. children living in the high-stress environment of poverty is not acceptable from the social justice point of view (the heart). But poverty is too costly in economic terms (the head) too. Thus the fallout costs in terms of outcomes and dollars.

Family of strategies: At aha! Process we offer information that changes mindsets, models that provide structure for change, strategies that cover all causes of poverty, and tools for doing the work. We are developing partnerships with organizations like Move the Mountain, which provides the Circles Initiative with us (www.movethemountain.org). We also have champions in many sectors: schools, business, healthcare, etc., that are learning centers for others in their fields.

Responsibility: To address poverty effectively we must engage the whole community: all classes, all races, all sectors, and all political persuasions. This row gives every organization that encounters people in poverty—or that is responsible for wealth creation or building a prosperous community—a role to play.

WHY WOULD A SCHOOL WANT TO DEVELOP TWO GENERATIONS AT ONCE?

Many schools are now realizing that they cannot educate “in a silo.” The children come to school only about one-fourth of the hours in a day. Parents and the community play a huge role in educating the child as well. Since Title I requires parent training, why not play a larger role in the well-being of the community? For many communities, the school is the center of the community. It is only with a critical mass of resourced individuals that communities become more sustainable. Furthermore, the adults are then more active in the development of their own children.

WHAT DOES DEVELOPING HUMAN CAPACITY IN PARENTS MEAN?

Parent training for parents in poverty includes giving adults language to talk about their own experience, having adults develop their own future story, teaching adults to plan and ask questions, teaching them how to analyze and leverage their own resources, and building their own literacy base by recording their personal stories. It teaches them how to develop and leverage the resources in their communities and how to do it for their children. It builds bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) in adults, i.e., meeting people who are different from you, which is critical for getting new ideas and building stronger communities.

COMMUNITY SUSTAINABILITY AND P-20 INVOLVEMENT

Across the United States we find the development of P-20 initiatives, which are Education Commission for the States and Federal Reserve Board initiatives to integrate the workforce development/skills with the educational development/skills of all individuals from preschool to age 20. This is part of a larger U.S. economic development push and will closely involve school districts. By using this model, your community can begin your P-20 efforts early, as well as impact the well-being of the community.

CONCLUSION

We may be weary and feel that our influence is minimal, but it is not. When we are able to keep industry in our home community, when college graduates come back to live and work in our town, when graduation rates are high, and when we have a community where everyone is doing well, then we can know that as educators we’ve done our piece of supporting the success of the life continuum.

I encourage you to respond to the economic downturn by reviewing this continuum. The future of our schools and communities rests in part on how well we as school people work with all sectors in the community for the success of all. To contact aha! Process for more detail around this document and the sphere of influence you can have on your kids—children who *become* your community—please call (800) 424-9484.

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