

# Chapter One



## The Threats and Implications of Poverty: Painful, Powerful, and Pervasive

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*The mother's battle for her child with sickness, with poverty, with war, with all the forces of exploitation and callousness that cheapen human life needs to become a common human battle, waged in love and in the passion for survival.*

– Adrienne Rich

How pervasive is poverty in America today? The latest U.S. census data tells the sad story in numbers too powerful to ignore:

*In 2013, approximately 21 percent of school-age children were in families living in poverty. The percentage of school-age children living in poverty ranged across the United States from 9 percent in New Hampshire to 33 percent in Mississippi.* – U.S. Census Bureau

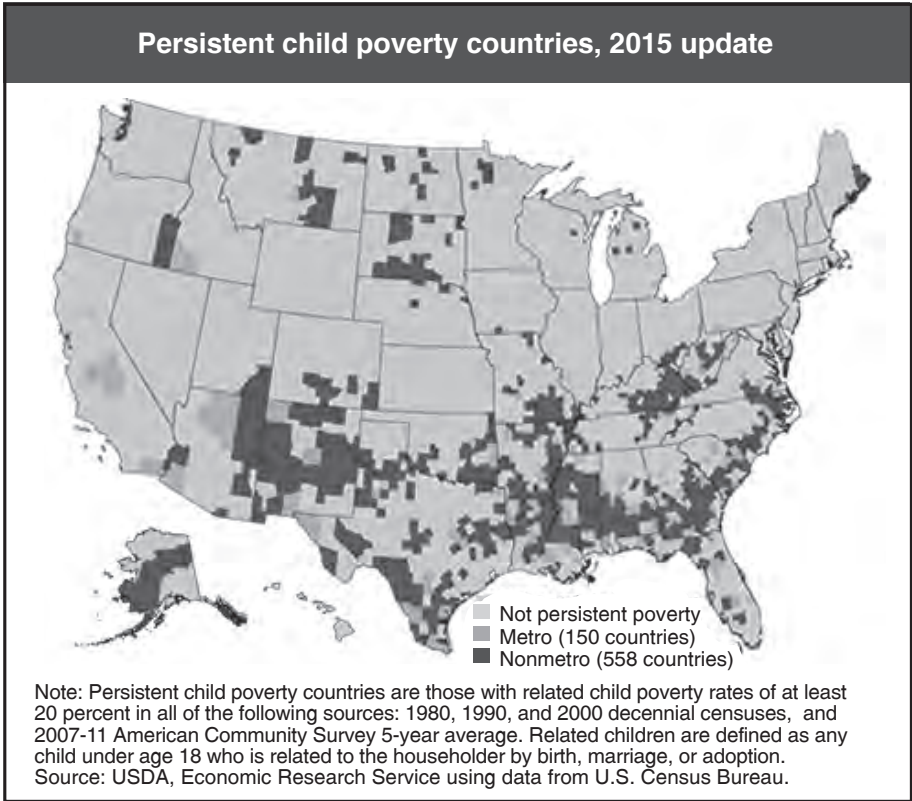
Roughly one in five children under the age of 18 lives in poverty, a situation defined by the U.S. Census Bureau using economic data to determine the amount of income needed to maintain basic needs. To give you an idea of what this means, the chart below shows poverty thresholds as of September 2015.

Persons In Household	Poverty Threshold in Dollars
1	\$11,770
2	\$15,930
3	\$20,090
4	\$24,250
5	\$28,410
6	\$32,570
7	\$36,730

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Poverty is certainly everywhere, especially when one factors in the working poor, that enormous and rapidly growing group of American families who do not meet federal guidelines for assistance but who can barely make it on what they earn. Recently, I volunteered with my university students at a food distribution project in a suburban community. Amid the pastoral, seemingly healthy setting, we met hundreds lining up for monthly help with food staples. Nearly everyone was working, more than one job in fact, but trends in employment that preclude full-time wages and accompanying benefits have left millions of families on the edge of disaster any given month. The strategies in this book will be especially useful in sites that serve populations of the working poor with few extra resources for programming and interventions.

And poverty is persistent. It is generational. It will neither give in nor give up as it gnaws away at families and the schools that their children and grandchildren attend. The image below depicts clusters of counties in the United States that have held stubbornly to high child poverty rates for decades.



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service

**IF** teachers in high-poverty schools believe that their students cannot be expected to do much;

**AND** students and parents in high-poverty zones believe in a destiny where they cannot expect much;

**THEN** it follows that expectations will be low on all sides and little change will occur among any of the stakeholders.

## Expectations are Everything

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In this paradigm, someone has to call foul and break the cycle. Because, by virtue of their educations and their missions, teachers hold more power than most parents and students. I suggest that teachers make the first move.

Dirk Bedford is the principal of the Meeting Street Academy in Charleston, South Carolina, a unique private school that serves an exclusive population of high-poverty students. Mr. Bedford relies heavily on a model in which highly motivated teachers consistently teach both behavior and academics. During a recent tour of his site in the inner city, Principal Bedford explained the 4 Pillars of the MSA model, with special emphasis on how a “transformational school experience” is constructed. In this model, Bedford shares his respect for the role of an excellent, highly qualified, fully empowered teacher.

### A Four-Piece Puzzle



**1**

#### Early Education

Students begin their schooling with us as three and four year olds in a program that encourages the development of social, emotional, intellectual, and physical skills.

**2**

#### Family Partnership

MSA families commit to supporting their children's education through collaborating with teachers, volunteering in the school and attending numerous family education workshops and events. MSA is dedicated to fostering the education of the entire family.

**3**

#### Holistic Approach

To meet the needs of the whole student, we operate on an extended day and a year-round calendar; provide medical and dental screening; and provide healthy meals and ample time for exercise.

**4**

#### Teacher Excellence

We hire exceptional teachers and support them through embedded professional development that includes specialized training, dynamic coaching, leadership opportunities, and rewards for excellence.

Moving forward into chapters 3-7, look for some of the ways that high expectations will be embedded in the *Rich Brain, Poor Brain* strategies.

### Language

- Students can be expected to use words as currency.
- Teachers can be expected to demand rich, detailed language in the classroom.

### Experiences

- Students can be expected to choose high-value coursework.
- Teachers can be expected to teach to the gifted in all classes.

### Attitude

- Students can learn when they feel affirmed and capable.
- Teachers can train brains to be proactive, not reactive.

### Performance

- Students can be expected to work hard.
- Teachers can shape performance through brain-friendly praise.

Let's pause to remember that many high-poverty or Title I sites are doing amazing work. I am writing this book to honor their work and to spread the word that an excellent education can be offered to all students when creativity and commitment to high expectations are set free. Still, there are places where change is needed.

Teachers who want to bring about change must believe first that they have the power within and without to do so. Our next Voice from the Field grew up in a rural area of the South and went on to become a recognized educator and school leader, both in the U.S. and in Ghana, West Africa. Let's hear what she has to say about empowering teachers, setting high expectations for children, and involving the community.

I do not typically see these things in poor-brain sites. Not often. Not usually. So what can be done?

Clearly these are huge and complex issues, and it is not the intent of this small book to solve them. However, it is my intention to replicate experiences that rich brains rely on to build language with inexpensive knockoffs, such as the three strategies that follow.

## Strategy One: School Read-Aloud Model

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### Rationale

Students come to school with fewer words and with fewer opportunities to make up that word gap. Reading aloud daily and targeting high-value language that is tied to high-stakes assessments is a free and powerful way to bridge social and synaptic gaps. This model is designed for maximum language growth with minimal financial output. Moreover, it is seamless, designed to embed into the daily schedule with only a 10-minute commitment that is tied to science and social studies vocabulary and schema. Reading aloud is free, fun, fair, accessible, and available.

### Purpose of the Initiative

- To increase students' vocabulary and fluency through an embedded read-aloud model
- Use classical and vetted children's literature tied to high-stakes science and social studies standards
- Focus on reading so that students can hear and absorb more words

### Why does it work so well?

- Chunking standards and themes with language builds vocabulary and fluency.
- Framing literacy levels the playing field, taps the affective domain, and encourages visualization.
- By the time a student leaves elementary school, he or she would have experienced many of the best pieces of children's literature which are tied to important standards. Students therefore build schema and vocabulary for some of the toughest to teach concepts and ideas.

How do we make it happen?

Using the template on the following pages, create a schoolwide literacy model to match your school's interests, the curriculum, and teachers' styles. I have included a list of resources to help select books, as well as a sample matrix that has been used successfully in multiple sites. This works when it is consistently done every day, in every grade, and using specific books tied to high-value vocabulary.



## **Voices from the Field:**

Johnnie Boatwright

*Title I Leader, South Carolina*

“I have spent 30 years in the field, most of them in Title I settings, and few things have been as exciting to implement as the Read-Aloud Model. It is organic, simple, realistic, and it works. We have seen teachers become excited about the joys of literature and students want to read more and more often. Although the model is tied to current brain research, which is important to me as a leader, I am most satisfied with the simplicity and joy that we bring to classrooms with 10 minutes of reading aloud daily from high quality children’s literature.”

I'd like to establish my intentions toward *performance* in this context:

**The action or process of carrying out or accomplishing an action, task, or function.**

*Performance* is an action word. We want students to be able to independently and consistently perform tasks such as critical thinking, problem-solving, group projects, independent research, work completion, following directions, persevering through challenges, and contributing to the good of the group. These may seem like ordinary behaviors to expect from students and future workers, but they become daunting when a brain is operating under the threats described and outlined in the first few chapters of this book.

In affluent schools, performance is built into the program, with students routinely engaged in:

- Coaching and feedback across disciplines that enables what we call *growth praise*
- Long-term projects and team building
- Opportunities for team and individual sports, or well-equipped gyms and fitness classes to enhance brain-body connectivity
- Models and examples for work ethic that reject cultural and gender bias and reflect diversity



Teachers in high-poverty or average-performance sites must reconfigure their roles to teach and model the three Ws for rich-brain performance.

## **W**ords that feed the brain

Feedback and praise that are brain friendly, as defined by  
Dr. Carol Dweck's model

## **W**orking the brain-body connection

The value of exercise to release stress and increase performance

## **W**ork ethic

Perseverance, persistence, performing day in and day out whether  
you think you can or not

### **Where Do We Go Wrong?**

A common error that seems to daunt many teachers who are trying very hard to challenge students with rigorous curriculum is the fact that they are not concurrently teaching the performance skills necessary for all students to engage with that kind of curriculum. Remember *mother wit*, that inborn intelligence that our students bring to the classroom? It is lovely, but it will burn out like a fire under glass if it is not nurtured and fed.

Again, we speak of the haves and have nots. For students who come from affluence and abundance, there is typically not one person, but an entire family, community, even legacy behind them fanning that fire. We must replicate experiences for our students who may not have the benefits at home or in their immediate community. There are many, many factors that contribute to performance. However, my goal is to showcase three big ideas that 1) have value added, 2) are valuable but do not cost a great deal, and 3) can be implemented at any site.

Performance is shaped by practice, experience, and feedback. It cannot simply be expected. It must be developed.



## Closing Remarks

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It has never been more important to bridge social and synaptic gaps between schools. This is because more and more children are falling into these gaps. For the first time in a hundred years, the tacit rules for working hard and getting ahead are simply not working. Families are not getting ahead, and it hurts all of us.

Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam's new book, *Our Students: The American Dream in Crisis*, argues that the United States is losing its status as a land of opportunity for all. Here's the central idea: in the American Dream, upward mobility is available to all, limited only by ability and effort, not class. But Putnam assembles data to show that an "opportunity gap" has emerged here, making an upward climb much tougher in the 21st century compared with the mid-20th century.

Paychecks are getting smaller, even after the recession has retreated, if that is actually the case. Families are struggling. This is one outcome:

Without steady factory paychecks, "there's such instability in the families of poor students that 60 to 70 percent of them — of all races — are living in single-parent families," Putnam said, versus 6 percent for the wealthiest fifth of families. Those students have fewer adults at the kitchen table, sharing conversation over dinner and pulling together. If you have two educated parents, "you'll have a larger vocabulary, you'll know more about the world," he said, and such children will have "a lot of adults in their life that are reaching out to help them. They tell them about what it means to go to college." (Putnam, 2015)

With families under attack and our culture trying to reconfigure the rules for getting ahead, it is often up to schools to find a remedy, or in the case here, a toolbox of remedies, to heal our academic wounds. Join me as we bridge the gaps, one book, one lesson, one teacher at a time.