

Exploring educational material needs and resources for children living in poverty
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In this qualitative study, I explored the needs for educational materials for children living in poverty in the United States. The purpose of this study was two-fold. It was first to find out what the educational materials needs were for children living in poverty, and second, to learn of the challenges, obstacles, and strengths of the programs already in place that were supplying educational materials to these children.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I drew from the Invitational Model, based on Purkey's (1992) rule of five C's (Concern, Confer, Consult, Confront, and Combat). Even though no conflict was involved, the first two steps were applied in this study. It was during an exploratory trip to Mizoram, India, that I saw first-hand the inequity of education in that part of the world compared to the United States. While thinking of an action plan to funnel educational materials to that part of the world, I realized that those same inequities existed in my own back yard, Philadelphia. This self-reflecting and ponderance of the problem is the first rule of Purkey's, the concern, followed by confer. I began talking with educators and found out that this was the situation in many parts of the United States. A formal consultation with professors and the writing of a concept paper served as a prelude to this study. A visit to schools in Philadelphia and interviews with program leaders to confront the issue gave me better insights into the problems and possible solutions. Although the problem still exists, and will for many years to come, attention has been raised to combat this important issue of lack of educational materials and resources for children living in poverty.

Invitational Theory examines quandaries that educators and schools face within their communities. What type of learning environment is more inviting to students—one in which the students do not have the basic materials for learning, or a rich environment in which they have what they need to learn? According to Purkey and Novak (1996), “invitational education practitioners work toward developing caring behaviors, nurturing environments, person-centered policies, engaging programs, and democratic processes” (p. 5). By providing the materials that children of poverty need in order to learn, educators are providing “nurturing environments” and demonstrating “caring behaviors” (p. 5). Children of poverty deserve for their teachers to be “intentionally inviting” (Purkey & Novak, p. 58) by providing them with the materials that they need. In discussing what is in the best interests of the children, Purkey and Novak (1984) cautioned educators against being intentionally disinviting through their own prejudices. Hilliard (1991) questioned whether or not educators had the will to educate all poor children. Through invitational theory, educators can overcome prejudices that will help them to provide the best education to all children (Reed, 1996).

Invitational teachers treat students with “trust” (Purkey & Novak, 1996, p. 50), “respect” (p. 51), “optimism” (p. 52), and “intentionality” (p. 53), and as a result, students learn to trust teachers who provide what they need in order to learn. Teachers act intentionally as they demonstrate optimism and respect by searching and providing materials that students need. Some schools have gone a step further by inviting parents into schools by giving them access to washers and dryers in the basement (Dryfoos, 2002). Relationships began to build while clothes were being washed and dried, thus furthering the development of commitment and success for their students. Invitational theory focuses on the care and respect in the lives of others.

Children Living in Poverty

Children living in poverty tend to continue in a cycle of poverty. Almost 50 million American adults do not have adequate reading skills to read to a child or fill out a job application (Cooter, 2006). The children’s low status in school mirrors their family’s status in the community. They “happen” to live in an impoverished ghetto (Conley, 1999; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). They attend schools and classes with the fewest resources (Anyon, 1997; Kozol, 1991) and the least academic push (Chazan, 2000). Schools with the fewest resources end up with even less, including loss of funds because of the inability of these impoverished schools to show test scores that the government demands (Kozol, 2008).

Research has shown that poverty is one of the contributing factors to illiteracy (Chall, 1990; Cook, 1996, Kozol, 1991; Newman & Newman, 1995), which results in few reading resources for children in poorer areas. First grade students who fall behind in reading diminish their opportunities to catch up or advance (Chall, 1990). If students do not develop linguistic skills early in their education, they may never develop proficient reading skills. As a result, according to Cavazos (1989), students in these poorer communities fall behind their more affluent counterparts. They have a higher dropout rate and get involved with crimes, while some become teenage parents. Kids Count Data (2008) reported that 7% of teens 16- to 19-years-old were high school dropouts in 2007.

Bursuck et al. (2010) discussed what rural high schools in the southeastern United States face in trying to meet the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act, when so many high school students living in poverty in rural areas do not have adequate reading skills. These rural high schoolers who had difficulties with their reading also found problems in keeping up with their fluent counterparts in class. Although they were willing to do anything to read better, they wanted an after-school hours reading class, where they could learn discreetly and avoid being labeled.

Rural schools that did not offer reading programs explained that they could neither afford them, nor were they able to find qualified reading teachers. Some department chairs said that reading was the responsibility of elementary schools, not high schools. Bursuck et al. (2010) suggested that doing nothing to help struggling readers in high school is too great a cost, as the impact of being low in basic literacy skills affects many

aspects of adult life. Lastly, this study found that there seemed to be a lack of collaboration between teachers, parents, and students.

Schools that are funded by low tax revenues (such as urban areas) have relatively few resources, while more affluent areas (such as wealthy suburbs) have access to higher tax revenue and, therefore, more available resources (Hess, 1991). The wealthier the community, the more tax dollars are available to schools. In a report prepared by 17 Chicago-based nonprofit organizations, the level of funding available to support public schools varied significantly across Illinois (Hess). The ability of some school districts to spend five times as much on each student as other districts is primarily related to differences in the value of property located within those districts, since school districts' local revenues come primarily from local property taxes (Hess). A third-grader from the Bronx, New York, wrote the following to Kozol (2005):

It is not fair that other kids have a garden and new things.
But we don't have that. I wish that this school was the
most beautiful school in the whole why [sic] world. (para. 21)

Health, education, and literacy are closely interrelated; when children receive a basic education, it leads to healthier families (Greaney, 1996). Children living in poverty come to school hungry, often sick with low energy, with no motivation or confidence, and are thus ill-prepared for learning (Cavazos, 1989). From a psychological perspective, Vygotsky (1978), a cognitive developmentalist, believed that when parents spend time with their young ones, they serve as a greater resource for their children's increased knowledge and ways of thinking. He theorized that children and infants adopt ways of thinking and solving problems by watching others and by being taught formally. Many kindergartners come to school not knowing how to hold a book or never having been read to at home (Wheaton & Kay, 1999). In an effort to study the traits of gifted children, Terman (1926) engaged 1400 children, ages 8 through 15, in an unprecedented study. In this study, only 1.1% of the gifted children said they had no books at home, while 33% reported having over 500 books in the home. He also found that all of the parents of gifted children had finished high school, a little more than one-fourth of them had a college degree, and some had post-graduate degrees.

Methods and Data Sources

This study employed interviews and surveys as data gathering methods to gain interactions with people about their thoughts on what educational materials were needed for children living in poverty. The two research questions addressed in this study were: 1) What educational materials are needed for children living in poverty in the United States? and 2) What can be learned from existing programs that are providing educational materials to children living in poverty?

The participants in this exploratory study consisted of 32 educators from eight states in the United States. Seventeen educators participated in the electronic survey, and 15 education leaders and program directors were interviewed by telephone.

A survey of 10 questions was sent electronically to 244 educators who were in a geographically dispersed doctoral program in educational leadership and change. Questions included the kinds of educational materials that were needed at their schools, and whether or not they had excess materials to donate to schools in need. Interview and survey data were collected from participants California, Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Mexico, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Of the 244 surveys sent, 17 survey responses were returned.

In addition, 15 key informants were chosen because of their personal and professional knowledge about the specific needs for educational materials when working with children living in poverty. These key informants were asked, based on what they knew and had seen, to identify some of the needed educational materials for children living in poverty, and to provide their thoughts on how these materials could be sought. Because of the various geographic locations of the interviewees, most of the interviews were conducted over the telephone. They ranged from 15 minutes to one hour.

Implementing a naturalistic inquiry is not an easy task (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A naturalistic researcher must make initial contacts, as well as gain, build, and maintain trust with persons being interviewed before accurate data can be collected. Because this naturalistic inquiry was a small study, educators who had knowledge about the needs for educational materials were selected from a convenience sample. According to Creswell, (1994), a convenience sample saves time, money, and effort. Lincoln and Guba have suggested that by virtue of their positions, key informants can provide an “inside” view of the processes and culture to the inquirer who is not able to do it herself.

After each interview was completed, member checks were performed by providing excerpts of the interview to the interviewees, along with a copy of the transcribed data. This ensured the accuracy of the transcripts by allowing the parties interviewed to agree or disagree with what was recorded. “It gives the respondent an immediate opportunity to correct errors of fact, and challenge what are perceived to be wrong interpretations” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). The data were analyzed based on my perceptions as a researcher. Dey (1995) said that qualitative data analysts use insight, intuition, and impressions when analyzing data, as people learn by doing. Agar (1980) suggested reading the transcripts in their entirety several times before dividing them into segments. This was essential in order to situate each person’s point of view before dissecting the interview transcript for the grouping of common themes.

Results

Results are presented for the two research questions.

Research Question #1: What Educational Materials are Needed for Children Living in Poverty in the United States?

As shown in Figure 1, books were the most needed item in both classrooms and in homes. More specific needs were bilingual books, magazines, newspapers, pens, pencils, paper, current maps and globes, art supplies, educational videotapes, and computers. All of the participants stated that any books or reading materials would be of help to the children. In addition, books, newspapers, sport magazines, technical magazines, computer magazines, and other reading materials were essential to children from homes where families could not afford to buy a daily newspaper. Participants reported that children living in poverty seemed to have no magazines in the home that would spark their interest because no extra money is available when both parents are working in order to pay the bills.

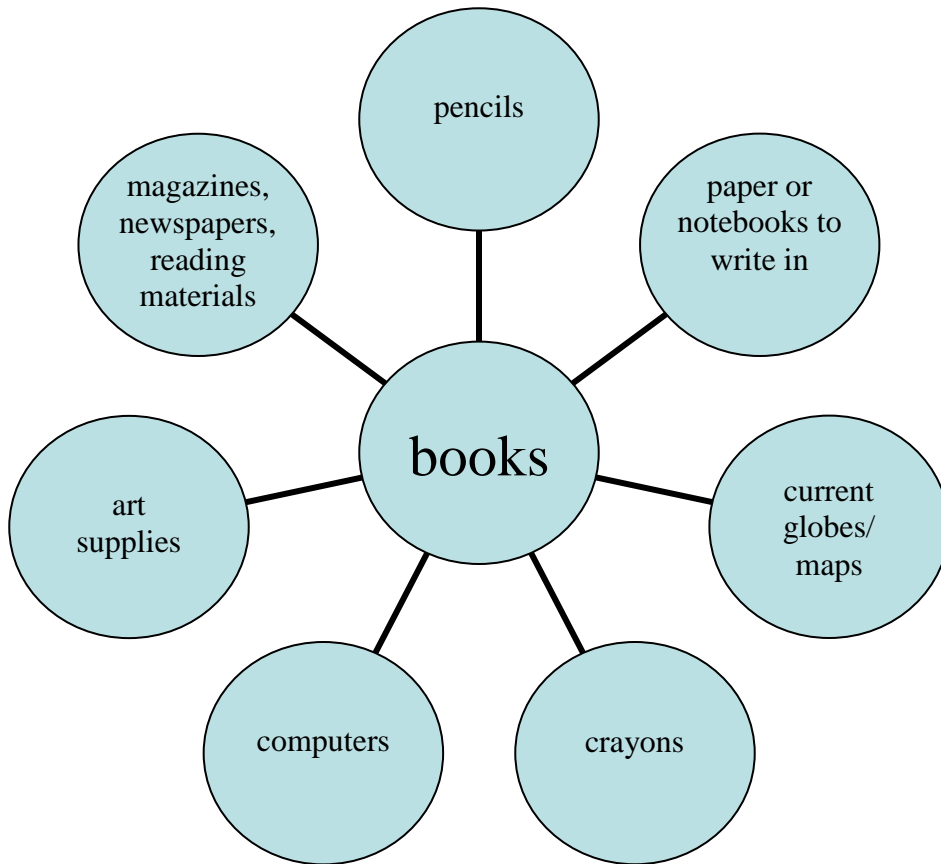


Figure 1. *Educational materials that are needed for children living in poverty.*

Interviewees stressed the need for educational materials in the homes of children living in poverty. They said that children who are not in a learning environment at home are at a disadvantage because they lack basic information and skills necessary to be on the same level with other children entering school who are their same age. When family priorities dictate that they choose food and clothes over the purchase of books, parents and caregivers must next rely on public schools to provide a good education for their children.

Invitational educators care about students' academic growth and what they can achieve. In the findings of this study, teachers sometimes used their own personal funds to buy books for children in their classrooms. Instead of birthday presents for their children, some parents had donated books in their child's name. These books helped to increase the library count. One participant spoke of the relationship between the giver and receiver of books or other items. She reiterated what Comer (1995) stated that unless the educational materials are accompanied by a significant relationship of mutual respect, not much will be done with them.

Role of the teachers.

From the data, it is evident that the teachers were the ones who take an active role in soliciting the educational materials that were needed in their classrooms. Of the 17 educators (teachers and principals) who participated in the survey, only one teacher reported that she did not know how to disseminate unused books in her school. She wrote the following:

At the end of the year, stuff piles up. They get thrown away if none of the kids take them. There's no place to deploy them—no system within the school district to trade these books among schools.

All of the other teachers reported that they continually sought aid from anyone in their community who was willing to donate school supplies, books, and educational games for their classrooms. Some teachers wrote:

They could donate materials, school supplies, scissors, colors, colored pens, crayons—you give them a pack of 32, and they are like, "Wow", and 64 are overwhelming!

The needs are very deep, and people just don't seem to have the time needed to really do what is necessary to assist the children in higher levels of achievement.

Go through and ask [other schools] how many books they have from first and second grade that are not being used and donate them.

Teachers felt fortunate when they found bargains for school supplies, or when they received money or book donations for their schools. They also appreciated the general benevolence of businesses and people in their community. Teachers reported that they continually sought aid from anyone who was willing to donate school supplies, books, and educational games for their classrooms.

Research Question #2: What Can be Learned From Existing Programs That are Providing Educational Materials to Children Living in Poverty?

Very few programs or organizations could be found that specifically supplied educational materials to children living in poverty. Representatives from the organizations who supplied educational materials said in their interviews that the children they serve came from (a) low-income families, based on census bureau information, (b) schools in urban areas that are high-poverty and under-resourced communities, (c) schools' at-risk urban children, (d) early intervention programs in local school districts, and (e) specifically, children living below the federal poverty level found through public clinics and hospitals.

Eighty-three percent of the organizations interviewed said that they did not personally conduct ongoing evaluations of the children they served. A lack of funding and resources prevented the organizations from assessing their programs. Program leaders who provided books and educational materials unintentionally disinvited the commitment and success of the students by not evaluating the students, just the performance of their staff.

Here are some excerpts from some of the program leaders who did not conduct evaluations:

We are so young; we haven't had time to [evaluate].

The children that are school age are evaluated using their school grades, and the other programs, I know that they do evaluations.

A big piece for us that we have learned is that it's hard for a very small clinic, a small rural clinic, to raise the money to sustain the program after we give them money for the first year.

The organizations that conducted evaluations of the children found that most children improved in their vocabulary and in their school grades as a result of the educational materials they received, while some made the honor roll for the first time.

Scholarly Significance of the Study

While some authors have written from their personal experiences about the poor conditions of the schools in the U.S., no studies have reported what schools in poverty need in their classrooms or what educational materials children living in poverty need, from the point of view of an equal education for all children. Kozol (2000) observed that textbooks were scarce in inner city schools, and that teachers often had to buy books using their own salaries. Educators in this study reported that the very basic necessities, such as pencils, paper, and teaching aids, were bought using their own personal funds. Participants expressed concern about children entering public school without having prior exposure to books and reading materials. This finding supports Cook's (1996) theory that children who live in poor areas may not know how to read because of probable lack of educational materials at home or in schools.

Legal Cases on Equality of Education

Residents of poorer districts have filed lawsuits against their school districts charging that they violated the constitutional rights of children in poorer districts to an “equal education.” In New Jersey, parents claimed that their children were not receiving the same educational opportunities as students in school districts with greater tax revenues. This lawsuit was brought against state officials who were responsible for administering the finance provisions of the public education laws and assuring that a thorough and efficient education was provided in all public school districts (Abbott v Burke, 1984).

In another case in San Antonio, Texas, Mexican Americans claimed that each independent school district was collecting taxes for use exclusively within their school district, thus allowing little or no tax dollars to be spent on poorer schools (Rodriguez v. San Antonio, 1969). In Washington, DC, parents on behalf of their minority children charged the school superintendent and school board members with racial discrimination because they deprived their children of educational opportunities equal to those provided to White students in the public schools in Washington (Hobson v. Hansen, 1966).

Recommendations

The following recommendations evolved from interviews with key informants and program directors during this research study. First, a website could be created for teachers to communicate with one another. Teachers in low-income schools share a universal struggle to gather educational materials for their classrooms. This website could be established for the sole purpose of teachers in the U.S. or possibly around the world sharing ideas and communicating with one another about their classroom needs, and the availability of excess materials for children living in poverty.

Next, teachers should be encouraged to solicit books and other materials from their communities. The data indicated that some teachers have been successful in doing this by posting their classroom needs in heavily frequented shopping areas. Teachers said that people are willing to donate, and sometimes, for a little recognition, books can be donated to a school’s library in a child’s name in lieu of giving birthday presents. Third, principals and teachers should be encouraged to connect or work with their city to create a Reads organization through a federally funded program called America Reads Challenge. Fourth, principals and teachers could build communication with other schools. At the end of each school year, school districts could host a book fair at a school or township building and invite neighboring schools to participate in the sharing of books and materials.

Until the federal government can provide adequate instructional resources in order to have fully functional schools to produce well-educated children, teachers have no choice but to continue to depend on private citizens, businesses, networking among themselves, and connecting with programs such as America Reads Challenge for the educational materials that they need.

According to Capra (1996),

The behavior of every living member of the ecosystem depends on the behavior of many others. The success of the whole community depends on the success of its individual members, while the success of each member depends on the success of the community as a whole. (p. 298)

Bursuck et al. (2010) found little collaboration among parents, teachers, and students, in rural schools where students were struggling to read. In order to ensure the educational success of a student, it is important that parents and teachers work collaboratively to meet mutual goals (Musti-Rao & Cartledge, 2004). While solutions exist to major problems, they require a radical change in the way people think and how they perceive their values (Capra, 1996). School lessons can be taught outside the classrooms in innovative and interesting ways, while providing for life's basic needs.

In seeking to understand the connection between humans and the environment, Torrise (2010), a library media specialist, used a community-based approach to teaching today's needed skills on the streets of Chicago, on rooftops, and in community gardens. Lessons included identifying critical resources that were needed, engaging disconnected youth through community-based learning, designing opportunities for inquiry-based learning, and responding to issues around a disconnect between life experiences and what was being taught in schools. A curriculum was designed in which the youth connected with their community in a problem-solving manner, resulting in learning about growing local foods that allowed them to stay healthy. This program created sustainability while bringing about meaningful changes in their lives and community. Students received lifelong lessons such as critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and collaboration.

Conclusion

This study first explored the needs for educational materials for children living in poverty. Findings indicated that books and reading materials, new and used, are needed both in the classroom and in the home. Teachers are continually finding ways to acquire materials they need. According to the respondents, some children did not mind receiving free, used items; however, some did not like the idea that books came to them already used. Quality books, as well as new books, were suggested as better reading materials, yet those were dependent on funding. In the second part of this study, interviews were conducted with directors of programs that provided educational materials to children in need. Based on the data, it is recommended that directors of existing programs conduct research on how the children benefit from their services in order to match what is required with what is provided. The data suggested a huge need for program evaluation. Most of the organizations did not have measures in place to assess the children in relation to the services they provided to the children, due to lack of funding.

A larger study could have provided more compelling results by gaining more perspectives from a larger cross-section of the U.S. or by seeking a better representation of low-income schools in the nation.

This study completed the “look” and “think” sections of Stringer’s (1996) action research cycle. These were done by conducting interviews and collecting surveys to gather data on the needs for educational materials for children in poverty. The discovery was made that books and other learning materials are necessary in classrooms and homes of children living in poverty. The next step is to implement the “act” component to complete Stringer’s cycle of “look,” “think,” “act” (p. 19). This will involve finding and providing the needed educational materials and placing them in the hands of the children who need them with a follow-up study and evaluation.

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