How socioeconomic status affects language arts learners

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Second Annual
WELS and ELS
Undergraduate Research Symposium
CHARIS Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran College
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53226

April 27 and 28, 2002
Introduction
Teachers assume many roles in the school environment. While their job is obviously to push their students intellectually, in some cases they are challenged by the outside circumstances that children mentally drag with them to school. The most compelling problem in American education is how to provide adequately for disadvantaged students. Usually, school was the key when desiring to move from poverty to success. Horace Mann referred to school as “man’s greatest invention – the balance wheel of the social machinery” (Heidenreich, 1972). The socioeconomic status of children becomes an issue when it begins to impede their learning. While schools strive to provide the same opportunities for all children, each child learns in a specific way and may cognitively develop at varying rates. The neighborhood in which a child is raised and returns to every night, along with the family and home environment, play significant roles in developing certain learning skills and progression of the levels of cognition. Children from financially sound families and children from poverty together learn the same lesson and are expected to compete at the same level. The advantage is for the upper class child. No worries interfere with the homework concentration and no focus is directed towards a growling stomach. Therefore, it is fair to say that the socioeconomic status of learners plays a significant role in learning.

Labels
Low-income families have been labeled differently in every decade. It is important to understand exactly what these labels are in order to effectively analyze the significance for education. In the 1950’s, children who came from poor families were named “culturally deprived.” The term graduated in the mid-1960’s to having “low socioeconomic status.” In the 1980’s, the National Assessment of Educational Progress Council (NAEP) coined the terms “inner-city children” and “urban disadvantaged.” Finally, in the 1990’s “at risk” students were
labeled, which some experts deem confusing, as this term is also frequented with reading and learning disabilities (Chall, 1990). No matter what label is preferred, children who fall under these headings are below the educational standards in literacy on national, state, and school assessments (Chall, 1990).

**Meeting Standards**

The children at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale generally achieve far below the normal levels. Several factors are suggested as to why students fail to meet the standard requirements. At times, young people see no relationship between the day-to-day activities of the school and the opportunities open to them in the future. The longer they remain in school, the farther below the average grade level they fall, finally drop out, become delinquent, and perhaps join the mass of unemployed youth (Heidenreich, 1972). This inability of the disadvantaged to integrate easily with middle class schoolmates led to the need for urban education. The assumption behind this approach to teaching is a familiarity of the teacher with the culture of those they teach, especially the degree to which it differs. This approach includes developing a knowledge base of family background and traditions, self-concept, value systems, and expectations (Heidenreich, 1972).

**Theory**

In order for this approach to work, schools must be equipped with teachers who are able to perform and insist on these expectations. Middle class educators implementing their form of instruction on lower class students is not a form of capable teaching (Heidenreich, 1972). One prominent researcher in the area of special instruction for new teaching methods was Maria Montessori. She developed methods to prevent problems in reading, writing, and language for poor children who had not yet attended school. Her hope was to give disadvantaged students a chance to enter school at the same level as their peers (Chall, 1990). However, the greatest
impact on approaches to educating low-income children came in 1966 with the Coleman report. This large-scale survey of schools and children questioned the capacity of schools to equalize social class differences in cognitive achievement (Heidenreich, 1972). It stated that family background was the greatest contributing factor in children’s verbal achievement and that home background, not school, is the primary influence on school achievement (Chall, 1990). Years later, a study reported that 17-year-old, disadvantaged students in 1986 scored at about the same level as 13 year old advantaged urban students (Chall, 1990).

**Family Influence**

Economically disadvantaged children have difficulty in the school system because of family circumstances. At times, the family environment limits students’ perceptual, conceptual, and linguistic experience in their early years, poorly preparing them for school (Heidenreich, 1972). A rough measure of the social class climate among a student body is derived based on parent income, student race, average school achievement, and truancy rates (Goodwin, 1977). Disadvantaged students often see less purpose in skills-based learning tasks than advantaged students because of frequent disparities between school and home. Therefore, poverty children are more likely to fall behind and never move past repetitive practice of basic skills (Knapp, 1990). In fact, most of the problems teachers find and the manner they anticipate those problems is linked to the socioeconomic status of the children and their parents (Heidenreich, 1972).

Historically, individual differences are attributed to intelligence or maturity. Today, social and cultural factors limit or extend the opportunities available to children. Most children talk and act like their parents and do things they see done in their homes (Clay, 1998). Along with this, low-income children are now referred to as the children of “poor families” and “children at risk” (Chall, 1990). Surveys on children’s reading and vocabulary development consistently found that literacy was correlated with the professional, educational, and economic
status of children’s parents. The children from low-income families did generally less well than those from middle class families. In addition, Chall found that older student’s literacy development was based on parental expectations and the higher level of the mother’s literacy and education (1990). Research also suggests that malnutrition and other effects of poverty perpetuate a cycle of illness, educational failure, and more poverty. By becoming aware of the negative impacts of malnutrition, educators aim to break the cycle of failure in children (Heidenreich, 1972). In addition to family, students whose friends discourage study and performance find it hard to work at school priorities (Lapp, 1996).

**Learning Styles**

Modern teaching methods have not been adequately adapted to meet the needs and learning styles of economically disadvantaged children. Reading goes through qualitative changes as it develops. Likewise, the task of learning to read is qualitative at its different stages of development. Therefore, the home and school factors that facilitate reading development differ by stages as well (Chall, 1990). Culturally disadvantaged students may not receive an adequate education due to speaking a different language or because of limited experiences with what the teacher is saying. These school experiences that reinforce inadequacy hinder self-esteem and provide little motivation as to what the real world provides. Finally, values may conflict such as honesty, responsibility, and loyalty (Heidenreich, 1972). These language and culture-based theories have tended to explain the lag in literacy achievement of low-income minorities.

Significant family and school collaborations have been instrumental in achieving the goals of urban schools. Parent involvement, contacts with the teacher, and regular attendance aid in this mission (Chall, 1990). Creating parent scholars increased the number of parents who visited the schools regularly and fostered better communication among teachers and parents.
Children who participate in frequent activities with adults, visit adults frequently, and are part of extended families are proven to be more advanced readers. Low income children who achieve well are provided with many books at home, get homework help from a parent or someone at home, and their parents expected them to go to college (Heidenreich, 1972).

**Solutions**

Teachers need to recognize that all students arrive at school with ways of speaking and interacting with adults and peers and with ideas about the purpose of schooling and the likelihood of success. Understanding these issues can help educators interpret and react to what takes place in the classroom (Knapp, 1990). Schools must reduce the inequity caused by the fact that a child is born into a certain status. This is not done by accommodating low motivation and interests, but by helping them to overcome the educational deficiencies forced upon them. They then move into the mainstream to gain the skills needed for the workplace (Heidenreich, 1972).

In addition, schools can help meet the self-image needs of children. Minority groups have had poor treatment in history and literature. When children study topics such as American Indians or Mexican-Americans, their self-esteem is undermined when classmates are insensitive (Heidenreich, 1972). Educators must be aware of this and strive to teach equality.

The American public school system has demonstrated for more than 300 years that poor people can learn and become productive members of society. The question is how educators can begin and continue this process. A key goal is help for teachers and the public to understand the social, psychological, economical, political, and cultural factors which may account for deprivation (Heidenreich, 1972). Recently, the most widely accepted theory of what and how to teach emphasized the basics. Skills-based, sequentially ordered curricula maximize the teacher’s direct control over the learning opportunity. For example, breaking lessons into small,
manageable tasks such as how to begin a sentence with a capital letter and end with a period allows children to stay on task, provide few opportunities for distraction, and help teachers monitor progress while continually making adjustments. This, however, does not allow for analytical skills or nurture the ability of the learner to express themselves orally or in writing (Knapp, 1990). Other theories say to slow down the pace of learning, simplify the context, and invent ways to teach complex things to diverse learners (Clay, 1998). For example, when students are having trouble learning to spell, word games or pictures that correspond may help them remember.

Conclusion

While many theories may be offered, teaching the disadvantaged requires a unique method of instruction. Matching the language and culture of a child along with the curriculum and organization of the classroom help to set the personal expectations teachers perceive for their students. In addition, teachers should work to maximize on-task time and strive to establish a climate that supports academic learning. Parent involvement must be strengthened to support instruction. Only then can schools establish a foundation for academic learning (Knapp, 1990). In addition, a reading program that is goal directed offers students a structured, challenging environment while teaching them to appreciate the value of literature (Chall, 1990).

Students undoubtedly come from a variety of socioeconomic home lives. Educators must work to keep these students on task while accommodating for their exceptional circumstances. By setting high expectations, that all students can and will achieve, sets the standard for success. Frequent assessments of reading, writing, and language skills display the rate of development over time. Parent involvement is essential to the achievement of disadvantaged children, if only present for moral support. While effective schools push for these critical traits, the goal of all
education for children, rich or poor, is the same: to help a child become a competent, happy person contributing positively as a productive citizen (Heidenreich, 1972).
Recommendation

Background

Many children are the victims of circumstances they can’t control. Where they live, how they are raised, and the amount of money their family has impacts the extent to which they can learn. Children are handed a position in the social status of life and in some cases, must struggle to keep up with their friends and classmates in order to fit in socially. The last thing on their mind is how their education compares to those friends. Educators need to make sure that children from low-income families are receiving the same educational opportunities as other children their age.

Proposal

As teachers, we need to understand where our students come from. If teachers are aware of the home life circumstances, they will be able to know their students on a more personal level and therefore understand what the students need to succeed. Understanding where students come from and adapting lessons does not mean that teachers should not set high expectations for their students. It is encouraging for some students to see that the teacher knows they can succeed. By understanding students and what they need, I propose we can reach them effectively.

Benefits

In many cases, students feel alone in their educational endeavors. Without the help or interests of parents at home, teachers have the unique opportunity to fill the role of educational care-giver. If students see that some is helping them and actually caring about where they end up, students will be more likely to stick with it, to try and finish school. In return, our schools have students who care about learning and show respect to their teacher as the instrument for their future.
Feasibility

In order for this personal system to work, teachers must connect with students early in the school year. Students want to know that the teacher is with them from the very beginning and not just during the rough times. It may start with asking simple questions when the teacher notices something, such as “Did you get enough sleep last night?” The key is to start noticing how students act around each other and in class so it is extremely evident when something is wrong.

Implementation

Every teacher in every room must know the students he or she teaches. In some schools, a support staff, such as social workers, may be available to talk with children when something is wrong. Guidance counselors may also serve as the confidant for students who feel the need to discuss problems at home. In any case, the most important aspect is to have numerous outlets for students to find a person they trust and can speak with.
References


Appendix A

Frayer Model
# Frayer Model

## Components
- Classroom Integration of:
  - Reading and writing
  - Word recognition
  - Assessment
  - Vocabulary
  - Syntax
  - Pronunciations
  - Speaking and listening
- Lessons designed to include the multiple intelligences
- Independent learning such as following written directions
- Active communication with parents

## Non-components
- The belief in the isolation of skills
- Unreasonable expectations
- Permitting classroom distractions
  - By other students
  - By visual representations
- Children in misplaced reading levels
- Lack of positive reinforcement
- Lessons designed to include limited multiple intelligences

## Activities
- Computer literacy games
- Reading groups
- Art projects (Drawing pictures of a story)
- Being read to aloud
- Creating story walls
- Science projects

## Non-Activities
- Art projects not integrated with core curriculum
- Retelling stories
- Kinesthetic learning games
- Picture and color recognition
- Numerical problems
- Verbal directions

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## Balanced Literacy Approach

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Appendix B

Literacy Terms
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**“Basics”:** Sight vocabulary, isolated phonics exercises, “comprehension” exercises that involve identifying the main idea, finding details, and pointing out cause and effect (“skill, drill, and kill” method) (Routman 1996, 77-78).

**Benchmarks:** A scoring process administered to students to test their proficiency level and comprehension in areas such as reading and spelling (Routman, 1996, 6).

**Collaborative learning:** Students collaborating in order to set schedules, discuss their readings, and develop responses. (Tompkins, 2001, 388). It may be in the form of peer editing, partner reading, peer testing of spelling words, collaborative research and writing, or small group work (Routman, 1996, 45).

**Cognitive Process:** The intellectual process through which information is obtained, transformed, stored, retrieved, and used (Lahey, 1998, 244).

**Consensus Building:** A process of seeking unanimous agreement, involving a good-faith effort to meet the interests of all stakeholders. Someone frames a proposal after listening carefully to every concern (Susskind, 1999, 6).

**Critical/Analytical Thinking:** Grasping the deeper meaning of problems, keeping an open mind about different approaches and perspectives, and thinking reflectively rather than accepting statements and carrying out procedures without significant understanding and evaluation (Santrock, 1997, 300).

**Direct Instruction:** (a.k.a. Distar Program) A type of reading instruction technique that “focuses on sounds and words in isolation” through the use of “repetitive, military-like, whole-class drills with scripted teacher materials” (Routman, 1996, 12-13). It has also been referred to negatively as the “skill and drill” method.

**Discrete Skills:** Superficial learning practices that do not involve teaching students how to interpret, evaluate, analyze, or apply knowledge for information (Routman, 1996, 6).

**Holistic Process:** A curriculum that addresses the needs of the whole child (the integration of cognitive, physical, affective, moral, and spiritual dimensions) and offering a curriculum that provides the context in which new knowledge makes sense (Fogarty, 1993, 112).

**Integrated Teaching:** The linking of academic skills instruction to vocational applications to enhance student learning. An example is when culinary arts students study percentages in their mathematics class (Fogarty, 1993, 5).

**Invented Spelling:** A technique used by children in the primary grades to phonologically create invented spellings. An example is *hom* for *home* (Tompkins, 2001, 17).
**Literal Level:** The level of comprehension that asks students for simple responses, ignoring the higher level thinking processes. It is characterized by discrete skills and superficial learning (Routman, 1996, 5-6).

**Performance Indicators:** The ability to formally demonstrate and apply what is learned; showing real-life understanding of the curriculum (Routman, 1996, 26).

**Phonics:** The set of relationships between phonology (the sounds in speech) and orthography (the spelling patterns of written language) (Tompkins, 2001, 172).

**Portfolio:** Systematic and meaningful collections of artifacts documenting student’s literacy development over a period of time. Students select pieces to be placed in the portfolio and also establish criteria for their selection. Portfolios help educators see patterns of growth from one literacy milestone to another (Tompkins, 2001, 103). They can be folders, large envelopes, or boxes.

**Predictable Text:** Repeated words, sentences, patterns, and sequences that enable children to predict the next sentence or episode in the story or book (Tompkins, 2001, 103).

**Reading Recovery:** A gradient developed to match children to books that are neither too hard nor too easy for them based on five criteria: placement of text, repetition, language structures, content, and illustrations (Tompkins, 2001, 452).

**Role Playing:** Students reenact events to bring an experience to life. It allows students to discover and shape ideas they will use in their writing (Tompkins, 2001, 65).

**Rubric:** Scoring guides that have four, five, or six levels, with descriptors related to ideas, organization, language, and mechanics at each level. They can be general for any writing assignment or designed for a specific writing assignment (Tompkins, 2001, 95).

**School Climate:** Perceptions of the physical and psychological school environment, including relationships among and between administration, teachers, parents, students, and the community at large; instructional and extracurricular management; the condition of the school building and grounds; and the encouragement of the development of academic and social values among students (Kelley, et al., 1986, 3)

**Six Trait Writing:** The traits of writing including ideas and content, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions (Tonjes, 1999, 174).

**Teachable Moments:** Informal techniques used by teachers to share their knowledge as expert readers and writers. These give students the opportunity to apply what they are learning in authentic reading and writing activities (Tompkins, 2001, 297).

**Teacher-Researcher:** The architect of the intellect, designing curriculum and instruction that invite the learner to make connections. Teachers look for simple structure and viable models to help them manipulate their subject matter (Fogarty, 1993, 99). It involves wondering, posing questions, problem solving, trying out new procedures, working out our thoughts through
writing, and ultimately acting on our new insights by changing our practices (Routman, 1996, 167).

**Temporary Spelling**: Allowing students to invent spellings based on their current knowledge of written language (Tompkins, 2001, 149).

**Writing Process**: A tool for learning that allows children to brainstorm ideas, make connections among ideas, and explore their comprehension (Tompkins, 2000, 461).
Appendix C

Personal Belief Statement
Personal Belief Statement

Literacy is an integral part of the learning process. Children who are unable to read or do not possess the ability to express themselves through writing are disadvantaged members of society; they will not be able to fulfill their potential in the workplace or for their own children. Literacy must occur in every classroom and be integrated into every subject in order for students to achieve the maximum benefits of learning.

By promoting literacy learning in the social studies classroom, I hope to guide students towards new perspectives of the issues they deal with and the people they study. For example, writing letters to students in foreign countries provides an alternative method to merely studying life in a foreign county. Through letters, students are able to directly ask other students their age about home life, school, and society. This learning would be more profitable information than any textbook could provide. In addition, writing journals with prompts affords the teacher an assessment of how the class comprehended a particular lesson and also displays the level of critical thinking skills present in the classroom. Finally, providing the students with interesting stories and literature to read regarding the topic being studied opens up new interests towards social studies by allowing students to enjoy what they are learning. Teachers should also include reading aloud to their students in order to show them that learning through reading is a continual, life-long process.

Learning through literacy is a key factor for the middle school level. In some cases, students perceive that reading is outdated and only for homework purposes. It is my job to show students that learning social studies can occur by methods other than merely reading a textbook. In addition to their books, many perspectives can be found using other resources, such as interviews and writing plays. Attending to these resources will provide a full literacy awareness environment in the social studies classroom.