

South Lewis “Tip of the Month”

POWERFUL Instruction



Students from Poverty

Oct. '17

I thought I knew about poverty and trauma until we began our Student Poverty/Trauma Initiative. In the past three years, I have learned how much I hadn't known; and I continue to learn. (from Don Mesibov www.learningcentered.org)

Most significantly, I am learning that **there are many easy-to-do things classroom teachers and building administrators can do** to support students raised in concentrated poverty and students experiencing trauma; yet most of us, in our formal education or professional development, have not been exposed to what we should or should not do to support such students.

Here is some of what I am learning:

- The single most important thing an educator can do is **to demonstrate that we truly care about the student**. This is not easy. These children have discovered that adults they thought they could trust often will let them down. Therefore, if they even start to believe you may care, **they have a need to test: “Can you still care about me if I misbehave?”**
- **Threatening students with consequences for their actions is not only useless; it is counter-productive**. When I asked April Charleson how students in poverty react to being threatened she offered a two-part response: 1) It becomes a challenge to do what you have been threatened not to do; 2) the reaction, also, will be “Do what yah gotta do.” This is logical, isn't it? Many of these children have been threatened on a regular basis and they've learned to let threats roll off their backs.
- At the same time that threats are ineffective, it is important to hold students in poverty accountable for meeting your stated expectations. There have to be consequences for their actions. **How do you let them know the consequences for their actions, in advance, without it coming across as a threat?** This can be a thin line to walk.
- **Those students in poverty and/or experiencing trauma who are disruptive in school are much more often the boys**, according to April. She was an example of how girls often react – she didn't want to do anything to draw attention to herself. Although a good student, she rarely raised her hand or volunteered in any way. The significance of this is that teachers need to be aware that the quiet female student may not just be among the quieter students we expect to have in any class. She may be feeling shame because of wearing the same clothes to school most days and standing out in other ways. If so, she may need extra attention from the teacher, but in ways that aren't evident to the rest of the class. But the bottom line is that if we are to support students in poverty and/or experiencing trauma, we have to have the ability to communicate effectively with them. And this cannot happen unless we recognize that, as Eric Jensen has written, **“These students don't care what we know, they want to know that we care.”**

Particular credit for what I am learning about poverty and trauma goes to April Charleson (“Rain. Falling on Sunshine”), Marlene Pickering, Susan E. Craig (“[Reaching and Teaching Children Who Hurt: Strategies for Your Classroom](#)”), Regenia Rawlinson (“A Mind Shaped By Poverty”), and the participants in our one-year Student-Poverty/Trauma Initiative.