



Educating Children of Poverty

An Excerpt of Key Points from *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* by Ruby Payne

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The Culture of Poverty: What do educators need to know about families and children who live in poverty to better educate them and involve their families in their children's education?

Some key definitions and points:

*A working definition of *poverty* is “the extent to which an individual does without resources” (Payne, p 16). Typical poverty is thought of in terms of financial resources only, but there are other resources that play a vital role in the success of an individual. These will be discussed later in the article.

*Poverty is relative. If everyone around you lives in similar circumstances, the notion of *poverty* and *wealth* are very vague. You have no point of reference as to what constitutes poverty, middle class, or wealth. Poverty or wealth only exists in relationship to known quantities or known expectations.

*Poverty occurs in all races and countries. Middle class as a large segment of the population is related to industrialized “Western” countries in this century. The percentage of the population that is poor is subject to definition and circumstance. For example, data gathered by the 2000 census indicates the following:

<u>USA</u>	<u>Number of Children in Poverty</u>	<u>% of Children in Poverty</u>
All races	11,733,000	16.3%
White	7,527,000	13.4%
African-American	3,492,000	30.2%
Hispanic*	3,570,000	28.0%
Asian-American	369,000	11.5%
Native American	260,403	38.8%

*Hispanics may be of any race or multiple races.

*There are two types of poverty: generational and situational. Generational poverty is defined as being in poverty for two generations or more. Situational



poverty is a shorter time and is caused by circumstances such as death, illness, divorce, job loss, etc. There are four reasons one leaves poverty. One reason is that it is too painful to stay. Other reasons are that the individual has a strong goal or vision, a key relationship, and/or a special talent or skill.

*Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the “hidden rules” of middle class. “Hidden rules” are norms and rules not directly taught in our schools or businesses and represent patterns of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies, etc. They are the unspoken cues and habits of a group – the significant, unspoken understandings that alert the members of a group as to whether an individual does or does not belong. In the United States, we generally think of these distinctions in terms of racial and ethnic groups and not economic groups. For instance, three of the hidden rules of poverty are:

1. The noise level is high (TV is always on and everyone may talk at once),
2. The most important information is non-verbal (On-going research by Dr. Payne and others has shown that students from poverty often miss half of the verbal interaction in a classroom because they are focusing on the non-verbals), and
3. One of the most important values an individual brings to the group is an ability to entertain. The entertain rule or value often is misinterpreted in a school setting. The loud “show off” may only be doing what he/she is praised for in the neighborhood.

The students’ knowledge of the hidden rules of school and middle class is directly related to their ability to be successful! The lack of knowledge puts students from generational poverty at a disadvantage from the beginning. Educators can neither excuse students nor scold them for not knowing these rules. We must set expectations, teach them the rules, insist that they follow them, and provide support. We must teach them that there are two sets of rules: one for school and one for survival in their neighborhoods.

There are many hidden rules but the following are the ones that have the most impact on achievement in schools and work.

Hidden Rules among Economic Classes
(Adapted from Payne, p. 59)

	Poverty	Middle Class	Wealth
Possessions	People	Things	One-of-a-kind objects, legacies, pedigrees
Money	To be used, spent. Little understanding	To be managed	To be conserved, invested



	of savings.		
Personality	For entertainment. Sense of humor highly valued.	For acquisition and stability. Achievement is highly valued.	For connections. Financial, political, and social connections are highly valued.
Food	Key question: Did you have enough? Quantity is important.	Key question: Did you like it? Quality is important.	Key question: Was it aesthetically appealing? Presentation is important.
Time	Present most important. Decisions made for the moment based on feelings or survival.	Future most important. Decisions made against future ramifications.	Traditions and history most important. Decisions made partially on basis of tradition and decorum.
Education	Valued and revered in abstract but not as a real possibility in their lives.	Crucial for climbing success ladder and making money.	Necessary tradition for making and maintaining connections.
Destiny	Believes in fate. Feel they cannot do much to mitigate change in their lives.	Believes in choice. Can change future with good choices and hard work now.	<i>Noblesse oblige</i> (notion of aristocratic responsibilities).
Language	Casual register. Language is about survival.	Formal register. Language is about negotiation.	Formal register. Language is about networking.
Transportation	Walk, multiple old cars, public and taxis.	Personal cars.	Airplanes, airlines and personal.
Family Structure	Tends to be matriarchal.	Tends to be patriarchal.	Depends on who has money.
Driving force*	Survival, relationships, entertainment	Work, achievement.	Financial, political, social connections.



The chart shows that one of the driving forces, or most important values, in an individual from generational poverty's life is relationships. When an individual from poverty is making decisions, the impact the decisions will have on his/her relationships is one of the things that deeply affects the decision-making process.

For example, it is often difficult for educators to understand why certain students never have the materials they need (e.g., pencils, pens, paper) but are sporting the newest, coolest \$150 Nikes. Many of you have students whose families own the latest satellite dishes, big screen TVs, coolest computer games, or clothing, but do not have the money to buy a pencil. That's because one of the hidden rules of poverty is, *"the way you show love is to buy things for loved ones."* This hidden rule is related to the most important value and driving force in poverty - relationships. Relationships are to be conserved, nourished, and maintained at any cost even it means spending part of the rent money. Possessions can be sold, reposed, or stolen but not the people in your life. This value is directly connected to the way children in poverty are punished and forgiven. Often the matriarch will holler at them, whip them, and then will feel sorry because after all she has moved them 3 times in the last 6 months and their life is hard. She then will make the child's favorite meal or buy him/her those \$150 Nikes or the latest Game Boy – thus showing the child that she forgives him/her. People are thought of as possessions and all you really "have," so Mama does not want her children mad at her for punishing them because they might leave and then what would she be left with? So, *the way you show love is to buy them something or make their favorite meal even if you can't pay the rent. The child is then forgiven and free to do the same thing over again. This is not punishment that will change behavior.*

Another driving force or important value that influences an individual from generational poverty's decision making is access to entertainment. The faculty in one school district collected funds to purchase a refrigerator for a family who did not have one. About a month later, the children in the family were gone for a week. When the students returned, the teachers asked where the students had been. The answer the family gave was that the family had gone camping. What had they used for money to finance the camping trip? Proceeds from the sale of the refrigerator, of course.

One of the major difficulties related to poverty is not being able to manage money. Managing money responsibly is a hidden rule in the middle class. Individuals living in poverty generally lack information about how the banking system works and how to manage money. How would you know how to manage something you have never had? Money in poverty is seen as an extension and expression of personality and is used for the present - for entertainment and relationships. The idea of using money for savings or in a future-looking context is not a rule or expectation in generational poverty.

Living in poverty teaches more than just a set of rules for survival in the neighborhood. These are some other concepts that people living in poverty learn:



- *Success*: Generally unattainable, limited to people who have a lot of luck.
- *Failure*: Inevitable, no hope to overcome inherent deficiencies.
- *Job*: Does not pay in respect or a living wage. It takes you away from your family.
- *Emotions*: Made to be expressed, publicly or privately.
- *Future*: Difficult and painful to envision, so live now.
- *Money*: To be used before it gets away, not enough anyway.
- *Police*: Hurt people, the enemy, unfriendly, out to get us and should be avoided.
- *Education*: For “those” people, not people like me. Takes you away from your family and causes additional stress because you don’t have the status symbols to belong (e.g., right clothes, shoes, food, car, house).
- *Teachers*: The enemy, don’t like people like me, make me feel unwanted, not cared about, and stupid because I don’t know things that others seem to have mastered.
- *Health care*: Non-existent, if very sick go to emergency room, share prescription medicine, glasses, remedies.
- *Doctors*: Stay away and they can’t tell you bad news, not seen as advocates or caring. They are seen as “knowing everything.”
- *Dentist*: Fear; people we don’t know go to the dentist. When they do need to go, difficult to find access to one and then end up in a great deal of pain, on-going brushing and flossing are required rules made up by “those” people. Anyway, won’t help me, other things more pressing than my teeth - will have them all pulled later so what is the use.
- *Nutrition and Exercise*: Not words we use, for people who have too much time and money on their hands. Whatever is going to happen to your body is going to happen no matter what you do.
- *Fate*: Life happens. You have no control over it nor do you have the power to change it. You can only react to it.

*(Adapted from information on Dr. Donna Beegle’s website,
Communication across Barriers - <http://www.combarriers.com/index.php>.)*

As mentioned before, a working definition of poverty is “the extent to which an individual does without resources.” (Payne, p 16.) Typically poverty is thought of in terms of financial resources only, but there are other resources that play a vital role in the success of an individual. The presence, or lack of, these resources helps determine if an individual will be successful or not. The resources include the following:

- Financial: Having money to purchase goods and services. Many of us are only a paycheck or two away from situational poverty.



- **Emotional:** Being able to choose and control emotional responses, particularly to negative situations, without engaging in self-destructive behavior. This is the most important of all resources because when present it allows an individual to NOT return to old habit patterns. Persistence, staying with the situation, is proof that emotional resources are present. This resource comes, in part, from role models.
- **Mental:** Having the mental abilities and acquired skills (e.g., reading, writing, computation) to deal with daily life. This includes the ability to process information and use it in daily life. A person lacking these mental resources will always be dependent on others.
- **Spiritual:** Believing in divine purpose and guidance, that help can be obtained from a higher power, and that there is a purpose for living. Association with a formal religious organization often provides a safe place to socialize and a way to get out of the difficult surroundings, if only for a few hours.
- **Physical:** Having physical health and mobility means an individual can be self-sufficient.
- **Support systems:** Having friends, family, and backup resources available to access in times of need. The individuals who will help are resources. These support systems are not just about meeting financial or emotional needs. They are about knowledge bases as well. How do you get into college? Who helps you negotiate the mountains of paper work? When a child has homework, who in the support system knows enough math to help the child? Who knows the ropes about getting a new car loan? Access and understanding of information and know-how are crucial to survival and success.
- **Relationships/role models:** Having frequent access to adult(s) who are appropriate, nurturing to the student and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior. One uses role models to build self identity. Role models or adults in a child's life who abuse alcohol or drugs, provide inappropriate gender role models, poor work ethic *or* show limited or no parenting skills impart no framework or model of appropriate social behavior. Knowledge of alternative choices in behavior (how to react in certain situations) and the development of impulse control and good judgment are also fostered by role models available to students. Dr. James Comer says, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship." (Payne, pp 16-18)

What does this mean for school staff who teach and work with individuals from generational poverty?

1. Educators need to understand the hidden rules of the neighborhoods, the middle class and schools.

School staff may make assumptions about individuals' intelligence and approaches to school and work place without understanding the hidden rules of



schools that the students don't know and the hidden rules they are using in school that help them survive in the neighborhood.

Educators, often members of the middle class, may not really understand that students from poverty come to school with a set of skills that help them to be safe and successful in their homes and neighborhoods. We should not "put them down" for having these skills because these are very necessary for their survival away from school and work.

Learning more about the culture and values of poverty would lessen the frustration and anger educators may periodically feel when dealing with these students and parents.

2. Students need to be directly taught the hidden rules - the behaviors, and reactions - expected of them so they understand that there are two sets of rules and can make a choice of how they will behave.
3. Research indicates that when a student is down to five or fewer resources (i.e., financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models), it is virtually impossible for him/her to be successful. The resources of students and their families should be analyzed before punishing, providing advice, or seeking solutions to situations. What may appear to be very workable suggestions from a middle-class point of view may be practically impossible given the resources available to individuals from poverty. An example would be a homework assignment that involves a parent assisting a student in making a project on a poster board with cut-outs from magazines, glue, markers, and an understanding of how to put this project together. Often the parent has little or no formal education, nor the financial resources to purchase poster board, glue, markers, and magazines. And, finally, the parent may be working two or more jobs, long hours or a night shift, so there is no one available to help the student.
4. School staff have tremendous opportunities to influence some of the non-financial resources that make a difference in their students' lives. For example, it costs nothing to be an appropriate, nurturing role model!

Following are specific things that educators can do as they work with students of poverty:

1. School staff members need to build relationships with students and families. Individuals who have lived in poverty for generations value and revere education as something abstract that other people can attain but not them. It is abstract because there is a lack of understanding of the educational system, what is involved in getting an "education," distrust of authority and systems, no



comprehension of how to plan for the future, and a very vague understanding of the future. Since their lives take place in the present based on simple survival needs and decisions, intervention is needed to help students and families grasp these concepts.

To accomplish this, educators have to begin by respecting the skills families have developed in order to survive in a chaotic, hostile, and often dangerous environment and the effort they do put forth to provide for their children and other family members.

The next step is to build trusting relationships based on respect. Once a respectful, trusting relationship is established, many other things can be achieved. This kind of relationship is the key and the most significant motivator for students and their parents from generational poverty.

Stephen Covey has developed the concept of an emotional bank account to convey crucial aspects of building relationships. He indicates in his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, that in all relationships one makes deposits and withdrawals from the other individual in the relationship. A successful relationship with students and families who have lived in poverty for generations occurs when emotional deposits are made to them, emotional withdrawals are avoided, and students and families are respected. In final review, it is the relationships educators have with the students and their families that will help students to be successful and what we educators will remember.

Here is an example of how building relationships will help. Parent-teacher conferences tend to be misunderstood on both sides. Teachers want to get right to the point; parents – particularly those from poverty – need to “beat around the bush” first. When teachers cut the conversation and get right to the point, parents view that as being rude and non-caring. In poverty, relationships are number one, and children are “possessions to be protected at all costs.” If a teacher takes the time to begin to build a relationship with the parents, he/she will get more cooperation from them as well as begin to teach the hidden rules of schools and the middle class to them. Show a parent that you care and explain to them reasons why it is important for their children to stay in school.

2. For students from poverty to be successful, educators must teach them the rules that will work. By directly teaching the hidden rules we expect from students entering our classrooms, we are offering choices that students from poverty would not otherwise have – as well as more of an opportunity to succeed.

It is not enough to just post school or classroom rules of behavior and generally refer to them. These rules have to be taught in a concrete way



through role playing, pictures, *realia*, and framed with the generational poverty students' prior knowledge in mind.

An example of a hidden rule would be educators' unspoken respect for and need for personal space. Many times we have students who "invade" our personal space by speaking loudly, getting right up in our face to talk with us, or shout out in class. In their world of limited personal space and often chaotic home life, if the student wants the attention of a parent or caregiver, he/she has to physically get in front of the person, raise his/her voice over the voices of others in the house, the radio and television and the noise from adjacent houses/apartments and the street.

The direct teaching would be to first explain that in school there are different ways to behave and one of the hidden rules is to sit as quietly as possible, raise your hand, and wait to be called upon during class time. You would then say that if the student needs to talk to the teacher one-on-one, he/she should step back two steps and allow the teacher to ask first what he/she needs; then the student can speak.

We may consider students' "invasion" of our personal space as a lack of manners and good upbringing, but if you have not had a role model or someone to directly teach these behaviors, they remain hidden rules.

Being physically strong and able to fight or have someone who will do the fighting for you is important to survive in poverty. We, in the middle class, use words/ vocabulary as tools to negotiate our way through conflict. Individuals from generational poverty are not able to work through conflict verbally because they lack the abstract vocabulary found in the more formal language register used in middle class and wealth. One of the ways to provide choices for students from poverty is to directly teach them the abstract words associated with handling anger and difficult situations. They also do not have a role model at home using the "adult" voice. For example, the teacher might model using words to deal with conflict by saying, "I no longer find this agreeable." "This situation seems unfair because..." "I am feeling upset because" "Are there other ways to resolve this problem?" All of these phrases, taught in context and explicitly, offer choices and ways for the students to "save face."

Additional informational on behaviors related to poverty and suggestions for interventions are listed on chart below. (Payne, pp 103-104)

Behavior related to poverty	Intervention
<i>Laugh when disciplined:</i> a way to save face or hide nervousness in matriarchal poverty.	Understand the reason for the behavior. Offer student other more appropriate behavior choices.



<p>Argue loudly with the teacher: Poverty is participatory and the culture (hidden rule) is to distrust authority. Individuals from poverty see the system as inherently dishonest and unfair.</p>	<p>Don't argue with the students. Model respect for students. Have the students answer these questions on a piece of paper with their name on it:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What did you do?2. When you did that, what did you want?3. List four other things you could have done?4. What will you do next time?
<p>Angry response: Anger is based on fear. Determine from where the fear is coming (e.g., loss of face, threats/bullying).</p>	<p>Respond in the adult voice. When students cool down, discuss other responses they could have used. Offering choices of responses is likely not something they have been taught at home.</p>
<p>Inappropriate or vulgar comments: Reliance on casual language. Do not know appropriate words to express feelings/thoughts/ideas because they may not know the formal register of English.</p>	<p>Help students generate (or teach them) phrases that could be used to say the same thing.</p>
<p>Physically fighting: This is a necessary skill to survive in poverty, and the students often only know the language of survival. They do not have the vocabulary, language, or belief system to resolve conflicts. They see themselves as "less" of a man or woman if they don't fight.</p>	<p>Stress that fighting is unacceptable in school. It is one of the hidden rules of behavior. Seek options that students can agree to stick to in school other than fighting – such as not settling their business at school.</p>
<p>Hands always on someone or something else: In poverty much of the communication is done non-verbally and through touch.</p>	<p>Allow them to draw or doodle. Have them hold their hands behind their back when in line or standing. Give them as much to do with their hands – in a constructive way - as possible.</p>
<p>Cannot follow directions: Have not been trained to have procedural memory because little is evident in poverty. Following a specific pattern or sequence is not used or valued.</p>	<p>Write specific steps on the board. Have them write at the top of their paper all the steps needed to complete the task. This is directly teaching a hidden rule they will need to be successful in school and work.</p>
<p>Extremely disorganized: Lack of planning, scheduling or prioritizing skills. These are not taught in poverty. Probably do not have a place at home to put things so they can be found.</p>	<p>Teach a simple color-coded method of organization in the classroom. Use graphic organizers, identify and teach a systematic method to approach tasks or organizing data/text.</p>



<p>Disrespectful to teachers: May not know any adults worthy of respect. Lack of respect for authority and the “system.”</p>	<p>Tell students that disrespect is not a choice. It is a hidden rule of middle class. Model for the students the correct voice tone and word choices that are acceptable. This will allow students the opportunity to practice without losing face.</p>
<p>Talk incessantly: Poverty is very participatory and in order to be heard one has to keep talking to get a word in. Also, talking can be considered a form of entertainment which is one of the most valued attributes in poverty.</p>	<p>Have students write all questions and responses on a note card 2 times a week. Allow students 5 comments a day. Build participatory activities into lessons.</p>

3. Determine the current resources students and their families possess. Here are some questions to obtain information needed to analyze students’ resources.

FINANCIAL

Is there available \$410 (recommended federal amount for sustainability) a month a person?

Is the issue the use of the finances versus the amount of finances?

EMOTIONAL

Is there evidence that the individual has persistence?

Does the individual act on feelings (e.g., hit when he/she is angry)?

Does the individual have coping strategies for adverse situations that are not destructive to self or others?

MENTAL

Can the individual read, write, and compute?

Can the individual plan?

Can the individual problem solve?

Can the individual do cause and effect and then identify the consequence?

SPIRITUAL

Does the individual believe in divine guidance and assistance?

PHYSICAL

Does the physical body allow the individual to work and to learn?

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Who is available to help this individual with time, money, know-how, and advice?

Is this person the support system for the household?

What coping strategies are available in this household?



How much time is available for this person to devote to school and learning?

RELATIONSHIPS/ROLE MODELS

Who in the household cares about this person? Who does this person care about in the household?

Is there someone who cares about this person who is not destructive to self or others?

KNOWLEDGE OF HIDDEN RULES

Does this individual know the hidden rules of work and school?

How important is achievement and work?

Will this individual give up achievement and work for relationships?

Adapted from an *Aha!Process* training program handout.

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