

# Overcoming the Silence of Generational Poverty

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I was born into a family where no one was educated beyond the eighth grade. For generations, my family subsisted on menial-wage employment and migrant work. Although we worked hard, we were constantly evicted, hungry, and struggling with poverty. Early on, I learned that education meant stress: the stress of trying to arrive on time; having the right clothing, shoes, and lunch; and completing homework projects. Like others born into generational poverty, I find that thinking of my early educational experiences evokes memories of violence, humiliation, and fear; school became peripheral to my family life and earning a living.

By age 15, I had dropped out of school, married, and worked in a foam rubber factory, as a migrant laborer, and in other menial jobs. At 25, I had two children and was divorced and homeless. At that time, I was fortunate to learn of a pilot program connected to a community college, the goal of which was to help single women gain education or skills to earn a living. I earned my GED, a proud moment for my family and me. I was encouraged and sought a higher degree. To my despair, I found that if I went to college, the state would sanction me and severely cut my welfare check (a policy still in effect in all but five states today).

I was determined to go to college, and was finally able to do so when I secured subsidized housing. With support from the program staff and my family, I entered a community college, but my fear, humiliation, and insecurity emerged once again when professors wrote comments such as “fragment,” “double negative,” and “run on” on my papers. My language created difficulties. I said *ain't* and confused *gone* with *went*, and *seen* with *saw*. I sensed that I was being judged as unintelligent by those around me. Professors rarely asked for my opinions or thoughts. Dr.

Fulford was an exception. He worked with me to help me move from non-standard English to middle-class language. Another source of support was my brother, who, after reading widely during twelve years in prison, helped me through my studies by sending me extensive letters about the content of my courses. I continued my graduate education with Dr. Fulford, and worked for five years to increase the graduation rates at the high school I had attended. Ultimately, I attained a Ph.D. My personal experiences, my determination to earn an advanced degree, and my work with those in generational poverty led me to the research that is the subject of this paper.

In this article I present some of the findings from a study I conducted of people who grew up in generational poverty but have achieved success through education (Beegle, 2000). The larger study was guided by these two questions:

- [1.] What are the institutional, environmental, and personal experiences of students from the third generation of poverty who have completed bachelor's degrees?
- [2.] What strategies and experiences contributed to their success?

## Poverty in the U.S.

Today, as in the past, education continues to be held up as the best escape route from a life of poverty (Gans, 1995; Holleb, 1972; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1998; Myrdal, 1962). Many of those who rise to middle-class standing in the United States do so primarily by obtaining a college education (Higginbotham & Weber, 1992). Paradoxically, people struggling with poverty are the least

likely to become literate and achieve a college education (Mortenson, 1998; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999). People in poverty tend to stay poor and have low levels of formal education generation after generation (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1998; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999). With poverty and illiteracy continuing to be passed down this way, there is a great need to understand how to increase literacy rates and educational success for students from generational poverty backgrounds.

Although some progress has been made in diminishing the educational barriers of race, gender, geography, and religion (Mortenson, 1993), poverty is the one barrier that has not been even partially overcome. In 1970, a person from the lowest income quartile was only 16% as likely to complete a bachelor's degree as a person from the highest income quartile. By 1989, that rate had fallen to 11% (Mortenson, 1991), and in 1996, to 10% (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Mortenson, 1996). Since then, an even lower percentage of the poorest people in the U.S. have become educated (Valadez, 1998; Greenberg, Trawn, & Plimpton, 1999).

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In the literature, there is little distinction made between working-class poverty, temporary poverty, situational poverty, and generational poverty. This lack of contextual clarity perpetuates the lack of understanding of the realities experienced by students living in generational poverty. For that reason, my research

respondents were all college graduates whose families had lived in poverty for at least three generations.

### **Context of the Study**

All of the people in this study grew up in generational poverty and graduated from college or university. Primary participants, ranging in age from 22–60, included 6 white males, 11 white females, 2 Hispanic males, 2 African American males, 2 Hispanic females, and 1 Asian female.

I collected two primary sets of data. First, I conducted intensive 2 ½-hour interviews with four focus groups comprised of 24 college graduates who grew up in generational poverty. These interviews were open-ended discussions designed to reveal the participants' subjective experiences related to education (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). Second, I administered a questionnaire that was given to the 24 focus-study members and an additional 32 college graduates with similar backgrounds. The questionnaire had a three-fold purpose: (1) to elicit background information on environmental and personal factors likely to have influenced a student's ability to complete a bachelor's degree, (2) to assist in shaping the development of the focus-group guidebook by gathering descriptive data and a profile of students' experiences in achieving their degrees, and (3) to create a pool from which to select focus-group participants. The primary benefit of the questionnaire was the collection of background data. This provided a focus for group interviews and supported the main objective of this study, which is to identify common strategies used by students from generational poverty to overcome poverty barriers and complete a bachelor's degree. Tape recordings, field notes, a reflection journal, and notes from a trained observer informed my analysis of the data. When reporting percentages of quantitative data, I use the term *respondents* to refer to everyone who answered the questionnaire and *participants* to refer to those who were a part of the focus groups.

### **Findings**

Several findings emerged from the data. In general, participants articulated that they experienced great shame and humiliation growing up in poverty. They believed that outsiders perceived poverty to be their fault. Participants faced physical, emotional, sociological, and economic barriers to literacy and education at all stages of their lives. Of particular note were participants' discussions about appearance; jobs; basic needs, including housing, food, and health care; money; and control over one's life. I briefly report on each of these categories below.

#### *Appearance*

Participants described a world in which appearance was important and one of the elements by which they were judged, a factor in their hate for and alienation from school.

Many respondents related experiences in which they were humiliated or embarrassed by their poverty or felt embarrassed by the appearance of parents or family members. Stories about appearance frequently focused on cleanliness, hairstyles, clothing, and shoes. Julie stated, "Everyone could tell I was poor by my ragged clothes, horrible shoes, and free lunch tickets." Another respondent, Kimberly, said that "no one wanted us around" because "our hair was dirty and stringy, and most people made us feel like we didn't belong." Such stories made participants aware that their and their parents' appearances were not considered normal.

### ***Expectations for Jobs***

Respondents reported that their expectations for jobs were shaped by their parents and others around them. When asked, "As a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?", 87% of the respondents did not have job or career goals. Most reported that they never thought about "being something." "I just wanted to survive and grow up," said Larry. "I never considered myself to be worthy to be anything." Of the females who identified a future goal, 72% stated that they wanted to be mothers when they grew up. Six males also identified parenting as their future goal. When asked how they would earn a living, 85% of the respondents reported that they would find "some kind" of work. Parents of 69% of the respondents survived on welfare, disability pay, or migrant work.

Participants talked about jobs as abstract concepts. They did not have a specific idea about what a job for them would be. As children, respondents envisioned three categories of jobs, all of which were familiar and visible: jobs they had seen performed in their communities, such as police officer, hair cutter, clerk, office worker, food server, and truck driver; jobs that were held by people they knew, such as working in manufacturing, textiles, fishing, a glass factory, a cannery, sign painting, and seasonal migrant work; and jobs they had seen enacted or portrayed on television, such as Solid Gold dancer, ballet dancer, nurse, and doctor. Seventy-one percent of the participants also reported that their personal worth was judged by the kind of work their parents did or did not do.

For the respondents, expectations of jobs or careers were directly linked to their social-class context. Growing up, they were not exposed to professional career opportunities other than what existed within their communities, and most of those jobs did not require a college education.

### ***Inadequate Housing, Food, and Health Care***

#### **HOUSING**

Inadequate housing was a barrier to participants. During the focus groups, most participants referred to the family housing situation as adding to their feelings of being ashamed and their perception that their home was "different." As Tammy told me, "I could never bring anyone home to our dump." Others mentioned extra people living at home, messy conditions, or living in a car. Vicki poignantly recalled a visit to a friend's house: "She had bowls that matched. I always wanted bowls that weren't Golden Soft margarine containers."

Respondents dreamed of better housing. They shared stories of cleaning, building, and repairing the places where they lived, but no matter how hard they tried, most participants reported that they were still ashamed of their homes. Eighty-six percent of the participants described efforts to make their homes nicer.

#### **FOOD**

Food was one of the most prevalent themes that emerged. Ninety percent of the respondents shared stories of how food was a barrier for them. Participants talked about not having food or of the embarrassment that came with having to purchase food with food stamps. Others were embarrassed by having to bring "cold pancake sandwiches" or "tea in a mayonnaise jar" to school, and felt inferior because they didn't have the same food that others were eating.

Most of the participants shared stories of hunger. They identified with each other as they told of feeling weak and shaky from not having enough to eat. This level of hunger affected not only their feelings of self-worth, but also their health. Most of the participants reported that their families were "sick all the time."

#### **HEALTH**

Almost all respondents reported that they and their family members had little or no medical care. Ninety-seven

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percent of the respondents could not remember ever going to a doctor or knowing of anyone in their family who went to a doctor. They were witness to a lot of sickness and many early deaths. As Norm put it, “I didn’t know people went to the doctor. I thought everyone went to the emergency room.” In addition to a lack of medical care, participants reported rarely having the money to purchase prescriptions, or if they did get their prescriptions filled, they shared prescription medicine, including antibiotics, with other family members and friends. Participants also reported not receiving dental or eye care. “I never saw a dentist,” said Rick. “Didn’t even know you were supposed to until you needed false teeth.” These comments not only reveal a lack of access to health care, but also ignorance of its existence.

***Economic Constraints and Loss of Control***

All respondents reported that not having money to get basic necessities contributed to their feelings of hopelessness. Ninety-one percent felt that without money, their lives

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were out of their control, and they had no power to change their life situations. When asked what money meant to them and their families, 98% of the respondents associated money with safety, security, and choice. “People who have money have choices,” James said. “It’s harder without money. No one chooses to be without money. My parents worked hard. For ten years, they made payments on a house thinking it was the ticket to security and then found out that the bank had

no deed. They lost everything.” Because of money constraints, respondents thought that personal, educational, and social opportunities were unattainable.

In addition to feeling no control over money, focus-group participants also attributed feelings of inner shame and humiliation to the lack of control they had over their lives. Most participants discussed reacting to the events in their lives rather than shaping or choosing their futures. Many of the participants said that they felt something was personally wrong with them and that was the cause of their poverty. “Life just happens,” said Jared. “No one makes plans. When you are poor, it’s like life has spun out of control and there is nothing you can do.”

***Educational Contexts***

When respondents were asked to reflect on what education meant to them and their families, 98% of them reported that education had little or no meaning in their early lives and simply was not important. For nearly all of them (92%), early education was just something they “did” and never knew why. Some of the most common reasons they cited for going to school included, “it was the law,” they “had to be there,” and they “just went and never gave it a thought.” Over two-thirds of the participants reported that education came easily to them. Many reported that, despite having had good grades, they had no direction and did not understand what they could do with an education.

Communication about education in the home lives of this group was limited. All respondents agreed that daily problems were the focus of their lives and almost all (96%) reported that education was simply not discussed. No one ever asked, “How are you doing in school?” Participants reported that this lack of communication about education sent the message that it was not important and that no one cared about it. Ninety-six percent of the respondents reported that their friends were also from poverty and that there was peer pressure to disregard education. “I never associated studying with success,” reported Larry. “I just thought intelligent kids did well, and others like me and my friends didn’t.”

The expectations for education for this group were also affected by their parents’ education levels. None of the parents were educated beyond high school, and for most (96%) of the respondents, the goal was to do just a little better than their parents. Considering that the majority of the parents had less than a tenth-grade education, high school graduation became the goal for many. But even that was beyond what 59% of the respondents could envision. “I could not imagine finishing high school,” said Tammy. “If I did, it would be an incredible accomplishment because no one I knew went beyond the eighth grade.” How far a participant was expected to go in school was also determined by sex. Almost all participants recalled being told that education was for the boys, and girls get married.

The low value placed on education in the home, the lack of conversations about educational concerns, and the almost total absence of educational goals prevented the respondents from including education in their long-term plans. Familiarity with and appreciation of educational contexts are crucial in fostering a need and a desire to

understand the importance of higher education. Most did not realize that a college education could move them beyond the level of poverty to which they were accustomed.

### *The Role of Teachers*

There was a widespread perception among respondents that most teachers in elementary and high school “didn’t care.” Most had not experienced teachers who had protected them or reached out to them. Respondents (94%) also perceived that teachers “didn’t know what to do with kids like them.” They reported that they were so far behind that they were constantly being ignored or put in the back of the room. Twelve of the 24 focus group participants reported that they had learning disabilities that were not diagnosed. In some cases, they were judged as unintelligent, when in fact, it was a learning disability that had prevented them from learning. Conversely, some students were assumed to have learning disabilities when they didn’t. Bill, for example, was labeled as a poor learner, but he reports that “Years later they found out that I needed surgery on my tongue. I wasn’t stupid. No one cared enough to find that out.” Similarly, Lynda couldn’t read the board because of a vision problem, but “the teachers didn’t care to find out” the true cause of her difficulties in reading.

Participants overwhelmingly felt that teachers were the “enemy.” They told story after story of being humiliated by teachers. Most participants reported that they were afraid of their teachers. In fact, only 4 of the 24 focus group participants reported positive relationships with teachers. Most of the participants who had negative experiences reported that they handled the teachers’ behavior by “acting out” or by withdrawing and becoming silent. Lynda’s comment provides an example of the kind of silence that poverty induced: “My clothes and my shoes drew enough focus on me. I didn’t want to ever raise my hand and draw more.”

Furthermore, respondents (89%) reported that they did not feel their teachers believed in them. This was emphasized again in focus-group interviews. Most of the participants reported that teachers had a negative impact on their lives, and even today, many report still getting upset by how they were treated and “pushed aside.” Participants felt that their teachers had the power to make them feel included, cared about, and safe from ridicule or violence, but didn’t exert that power. In addition, most participants

described teachers as using middle-class examples to explain the lessons being taught. They could not relate to examples that had little or nothing to do with the poverty-stricken world that they lived in. Since elements of the participants’ world were not part of the curriculum, the students themselves, as a result, felt invisible.

Participants reported that they believed their lives would have turned around sooner had they experienced teachers who believed in them and treated them like they were “somebody.” Participants did not want to be singled out for negative reasons, but most reported that they wished teachers had shown them what was good about themselves.

Teachers’ lack of understanding of social class made nearly all respondents feel as though they did not belong in school. Most reported that there was little or no understanding of their experiences of growing up in poverty. For white respondents, social class carried an additional stigma. They reported feeling that it was almost expected that people from minority groups had grown up in poverty, but for them, it was expected that, as whites, they should have led privileged lives. Of course, the invisible nature of social class created barriers for all respondents across racial lines in educational settings, regardless of whether or not that social class met teacher expectations.

Most respondents reported feeling empowered when they began to understand, as a result of education and their interactions with others of varying social classes, that they were not the cause of their poverty. “I was so excited when I learned about class,” said Bill. “Finally, I had the language and knowledge to understand and help others understand that I wasn’t deficient and neither was my family.”

### *Two Distinct Communication Styles*

Learning middle-class language and communication styles proved to be essential for success in the education world. Participants learned middle-class norms by observing and interacting in meaningful ways with middle-class people. These interactions provided them with cultural artifacts and helped them understand the norms and the language

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that dominate education. They also reported learning to imitate the social behavior of the middle-class. In a fuller version of this study, I found that adjusting to the education culture was particularly important to breaking the cycle of generational poverty (Beegle, 2000). The behavior norms of people from poverty were not rewarded in the education setting. Grammar and vocabulary emerged as barriers to literacy and education for students.

In addition to linguistic barriers, communication style presented challenges to literacy and success in an educational setting. Ong (1982) found that most people who live in poverty exhibit characteristics of oral culture, getting most of their information verbally. Ong characterizes oral culture as relationship-based, spontaneous, and strongly associated with emotions and physical touch. Verbal communication may not necessarily focus on one idea, but may bounce from idea to idea. Ong found that people who get their information primarily from reading exhibit characteristics of print culture, and tend to be linear, analytical, individualistic, and focused. Education is designed for those people. When students from poverty backgrounds enter the world of education, their communication styles are likely to clash with the formal nature of print-culture communication.

### ***Mentoring and Social Capital***

A strong link between mentor support and academic success emerged in my study of students from generational poverty. I found that if students had mentors early in life and in college, they were more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree. Mentors facilitated their understanding of social capital possibilities, expanded their networks of support, and let them know about important resources. In addition, mentors helped generate trust, and once participants felt safe and trusted, they were able to share their poverty-related experiences with others. As a result, they received more assistance. Additionally, through their mentors, respondents learned new communication styles and behaviors that enabled them to communicate more effectively in

the college environment. Mentors, and in most cases, the mentors' connections, were pivotal when linking participants to information and contacts. This facilitated their success in achieving literacy and completing higher education. For example, mentors helped respondents understand the intricacies of filling out financial aid forms and taught them how to improve their study habits. In some cases, these resources reduced the stress of poverty and allowed the respondents to focus on their studies for the first time.

People from generational poverty endure societal, economic, and personal hardships from the moment they are born. Seeking help, building confidence, and becoming knowledgeable about resources are key elements to their future success. The rest of this article provides a final analysis and presents suggestions from participants for improving educational opportunities for college students from generational poverty backgrounds. Their suggestions were insightful and reflective and are presented in their own words. As teachers and administrators, we should consider the recommended actions. We are more likely to increase literacy rates and education levels for students from generational poverty if we can hear and understand how they themselves would like us to help.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study illuminate the social, economic, political, and personal factors that influence the potential academic success of students from generational poverty. In a speech given by Paulo Freire in Santa Cruz in 1990, he argued that each society "programs" its people, articulating what is normal and what it takes to belong. From birth, children from generational poverty learn that their families are not "normal," but rather that they are deficient because they do not have the "right" appearance, food, house, job, or communication style. Such messages place blame on those in poverty and reinforce their alienation from middle-class society. Very early on, children from poverty understand from other people that their "poor" choices or "bad" behavior placed them into poverty. Structural causes of poverty such as a lack of living-wage jobs for people with limited literacy or a lack of affordable housing for people with limited incomes are rarely discussed or understood. The isolation of generational poverty compounds the internalizing, as students from generational poverty rarely interact in a meaningful way with those who have benefited from education. Respondents in the study did not grow up

believing that education was meaningful or that education was for “people like them.” Their families did not have the resources to move out of poverty.

Unfortunately, teachers are often unequipped to provide children from generational poverty with the resources they need to break the cycle. University teacher educators for example, sometimes teach teachers to “maintain their distance” and to “not get personal” with their students. This is the opposite of what is necessary for educating students from generational poverty. These students need to connect with adults in meaningful ways that help them to externalize their poverty conditions. Internalizing poverty conditions as individual inadequacies adversely affects self-esteem, educational goals, and the ability to request needed help. Yet many teachers do not even recognize the elements and challenges of poverty, much less feel prepared to provide the kind of guidance that will help young people overcome them.

The participants in the study’s focus groups and the additional respondents who answered questionnaires all felt that understanding root causes of poverty was instrumental in shedding the false burden of responsibility for the social condition of their youth. Yet discussions of the structural causes of poverty rarely occur in the school setting. While school policies often demand that race issues (which similarly prevent people from reaching their potential) be taught and addressed, we do not have the same understanding of the social class issues that also hinder achievement.

Schools, like many other institutions in America, focus on “punishing” students for their poverty. Students living in cars, motels, or even worse living conditions arrive at school late and are punished with tardy slips and detention. Thousands of students from generational poverty fail early grades because they do not turn in their homework. Perhaps the students have parents who are illiterate or have low education levels and cannot help them with their homework. Perhaps they have no space to work or materials with which to do the homework. We cannot know the reason behind the behavior unless we are connected in meaningful ways to the students and their families. Yet the underlying assumptions behind school homework policies are that all students are experiencing middle-class lifestyles, and if the homework is not complete, it is due to a character defect rather than to the situation in which the student lives. Students who don’t complete

homework are often labeled as not caring about school or as “deviant.” The messages of personal deficiency and hopelessness from society in general are echoed in the halls of our schools and exacerbated by silence about the causes of poverty and the skills and resources needed to overcome them.

Not having a clear definition of generational poverty in the literature also perpetuates stereotypes and misunderstandings. Working-class poverty, temporary poverty, situational poverty, depression-era poverty, and immigrant poverty are all classified as poverty. The reality is that each of these experiences presents those living in it with unique challenges and world views. For example, an educated family facing unemployment may experience situational or temporary poverty, but their middle-class background, social networks, assets, and education create possibilities for moving out of poverty that other groups are unlikely to have. Someone from generational poverty who is uneducated and whose social network consists of others from generational poverty will be presented with very different challenges.

The voices I’ve presented in this article clearly show that teachers play a pivotal role in the lives of students from generational poverty and can make a difference in whether or not students successfully attain literacy. The following recommendations, provided primarily by respondents in the study, can be building blocks for teachers who want to promote the literacy and learning of students from generational poverty.

- [1.] Show and tell students that they are special. Teachers should make every effort to help students learn what is unique and good about themselves. Find ways to highlight students’ strengths, and believe in the learning potential of each child. Creating opportunities for small educational successes helps build self-confidence and infuse meaning into students’ education.
- [2.] Make extra efforts to ensure understanding of the material being covered. Because of low self-confidence and/or shame, students from generational poverty are often silent, and their silence is often mistaken for understanding the material. When

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students from generational poverty do not answer a question or a peer answers it before them, teachers often forget to go back and make sure that the students who did not speak out understand the concepts being explained.

[3.] Ensure that the school and the classroom are safe, both emotionally and physically. The world of generational poverty is not safe. Basic needs are often not met, and children often witness or experience violence. The resulting insecurities can create anger, bad attitudes, and

“smart” mouths. Try to help students counteract these through trust and understanding. Furthermore, protect students from ridicule of their clothing, hair, shoes, or other status symbols.

[4.] Address social class as part of the curriculum and fight classism. Create learning opportunities for exploring structural causes of poverty. For example, talk about how much the minimum wage is and what it will buy (housing, food, transportation, etc.). Discuss the differences in pay for someone with a high school education and someone with a bachelor’s degree.

[5.] Examine your own attitudes, beliefs, and values related to people from generational poverty. Educators, like many others in America, are socialized to believe the stereotypes about people from generational poverty, including that they are lazy, they make bad choices, they are not motivated, and they are not intelligent. Professional development in this area, as well as an attempt to gain a historical understanding of the current attitudes toward poverty in America, can help teachers learn to suspend judgment. Support groups with others who work with families from generational poverty are also helpful.

[6.] Examine the school culture and leadership attitudes, beliefs, and values related to generational poverty. What norms are in place in the school climate? Do they facilitate learning for students from generational poverty? Carefully examine school discipline policies and explore whether problematic behavior is related to conditions of poverty. For example, one innovative school administrator threw out tardy slips and replaced them with “we are glad you are here” slips. The administrator, after a home visit, had learned that the fourth-grade student who was often tardy was living in the back of a pickup truck, and that home visit

changed the way the boy was treated at school. Students do not want to be pitied or judged. They simply want a school environment in which peers, teachers, and administrators try to understand and appreciate them.

[7.] Connect students with a mentor who is sensitive to the realities of poverty and understands how to help them through the educational system. Participants in this study gained resiliency skills through connecting with middle-class people in meaningful ways. The research is clear that a mentor is essential for breaking the cycle of generational poverty (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Beegle, 2000) and for achieving literacy.

[8.] Build a network of support. In other words, know who else in your school community is working to address poverty issues and how to link students and families to them. Building partnerships increases the social capital for families experiencing generational poverty. Teachers and mentors can illuminate the rules and norms of middle-class life and increase educational success for students and families.

[9.] Educate students and other school staff about the two distinct styles of communication: written and oral. Students from generational poverty tend to have the characteristics of oral culture, which are generally not valued in the educational setting. Middle-class students are used to thinking abstractly, gaining information from print, and having their lives organized in a linear style. Teachers can assist students by helping them balance the two styles; they can specifically demonstrate aspects of print culture (such as how to get information from reading and the use of “standard” middle-class English), as well as teach which characteristics of an oral culture are situationally appropriate (such as when interrupting is and isn’t acceptable). Through example, you can help your own peers replace negative value judgments of oral culture characteristics (such as interrupting, jumping from subject to subject, being late, focusing on relationships, expressing emotions, and exhibiting more physical behavior) with understanding that there are these two very different styles of interacting.

[10.] Understand that meanings are in people, not words. Meanings are created by the context in which we grow up. Education generally has negative meanings for students and families from generational poverty. Work to create a new “definition” of education that includes positive school experiences for both students and families. One example is to spotlight children and let parents clearly see that you value their child.

[11.] Think through incentives and motivators. Are they based on middle-class frames of reference (e.g., work

hard so you'll be prepared for the next grade, or stay in school to get a good job)? If school doesn't represent success, being prepared for the next grade means nothing. A job in the world of generational poverty means that you work hard for very little pay, while perhaps still going hungry or being evicted from your home. Therefore, the prospect of getting a job will not be an effective motivator for students from generational poverty. Instead, ask them, "If you get knocked down, what are five things you would get back up for?" Their responses will tell you what their passions are and what motivates them, so you will be more prepared to approach things from a perspective they can relate to.

[12.] Rethink homework assignments. Homework is a middle-class construct that does not fit well in the world of generational poverty. What is the purpose of the homework? Is there another way to achieve the goals in the school setting (preferably in school or perhaps after-school tutorial programs)? Keep in mind that learning for students from generational poverty is going to happen primarily during the school day unless supportive conditions are created to make it possible elsewhere.

[13.] Expose students to a variety of educated professionals. Bring in speakers, take field trips, and talk about career possibilities. They can only know what they are exposed to. Make sure there is time for the students to hear personal stories of how professionals came to be educated or obtained their jobs.

[14.] Suspend judgment of parent/guardian behavior. Express appreciation of parenting efforts, even if the efforts are not what you might expect from a middle-class parent. Students feel when parents are judged negatively. Parents and guardians living in generational poverty are in survival mode. While it may seem they do not support or care about their children's education, my research findings and personal experiences say otherwise. My mother, for example, never went to a school conference. She'd say, "I ain't going in there and make a fool of myself," yet I have the most caring mother you could ever want. Researchers often cite statistics saying that parents from generational poverty do not support their child's education. This is interpreted to mean that they do not care about their children. My findings indicate that parents of respondents cared very much about their children, but had different world-views from middle-class parents about education and about what was best for their child. Many parents or guardians from generational poverty have bought into the American myth that if you work hard, you will move up, even though their lives are in direct contrast to this. They believe their children

should be working, not going to school. Do not ask parents to do what they do not have the emotional, educational, or financial resources to do. Asking a single mother with a sixth-grade education and three children to spend an hour reading or helping with homework is unrealistic. Parental involvement happens when schools and teachers build trusting relationships and create a welcoming climate that accepts people where they are.

### Conclusion

My personal experiences of growing up in generational poverty and the voices of research participants can contribute to our understanding of what is necessary for increasing literacy rates for students from this background. To assume the challenging task of becoming literate and educated, these students must bridge social-class, cultural, and academic gaps. Listening to the voices of those experiencing generational poverty forces us to confront the inadequate ways in which we, as a society and in educational settings, deal with social-class differences. The extremely low numbers of people in generational poverty who achieve literacy and obtain college degrees force us to examine the limited progress we have made with educational equity in this area. The information, stories, and recommendations of respondents in this study can help us do something about it. My education, my work, and my passion are to help people from all races who are trapped in generational poverty. I want them to have literacy and higher education as genuine options. But this will only happen if the voices of those struggling with generational poverty are heard and their perspectives understood. ●

*Asking a single mother with a sixth-grade education and three children to spend an hour reading or helping with homework is unrealistic.*

### References

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