

The Whole Child Channel

Reflection Activity

Nine Powerful Practices

Goals and Objectives

- 1 To name and describe strategies for advancing impoverished students in school.
- 2 To provide research data on impoverished children that supports the recommended strategies.

Article Overview

“Nine Powerful Practices” by Ruby Payne. *Educational Leadership*, April 2008, pp. 48–52.

In this article, Ruby Payne identifies nine strategies that help raise the achievement of students living in poverty, including building relationships of respect, teaching the hidden rules of school, and building relationships with parents.

Reflection Questions

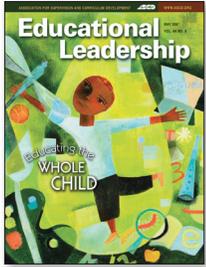
Use these questions to reflect on the key ideas and principles found in the article. Specifically, how might you use the key ideas and principles in your own classroom or school community?

- What are Payne’s views on the relationship between poverty and student achievement? Do you agree or disagree with her perspective? Explain.
- Of the nine practices Payne suggests putting in place, which of these seem most practical (and applicable), particularly in your present professional position? Explain.
- How does Payne balance impoverished children’s identities (culture, lifestyles, language) with a school’s academic and behavioral mores? Describe how this balance occurs (or does not occur) in your workplace.
- For a schoolwide process that nurtures impoverished students’ academic success to exist, what perspectives must a school have about these students?
- Why does Payne recommend assessing students’ external and internal resources? Is this a practice at your current workplace? If yes, describe how this assessment operates and how the absence of resources is addressed.
- Is it possible to argue that the nine strategies Payne lays out should not be relegated just to impoverished children, but to all students? Explain your views.

Nine Powerful Practices

Nine strategies help raise the achievement of students living in poverty.

Ruby Payne



Students from families with little formal education often learn rules about how to speak, behave, and acquire knowledge that conflict with how learning

happens in school. They also often come to school with less background knowledge and fewer family supports. Formal schooling, therefore, may present challenges to students living in poverty. Teachers need to recognize these challenges and help students overcome them. In my work consulting with schools that serve a large population of students living in poverty, I have found nine interventions particularly helpful in raising achievement for low-income students.

1. Build Relationships of Respect

James Comer (1995) puts it well: “No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship.” Building a respectful relationship doesn’t mean becoming the student’s buddy. It means that teachers both insist on high-quality work and offer support. When my colleagues and I interviewed high school students in 1998 about what actions show that a teacher has respect for them, students identified the following:

- The teacher calls me by my name.
- The teacher answers my questions.
- The teacher talks to me respectfully.
- The teacher notices me and says “Hi.”
- The teacher helps me when I need help.

The nonverbal signals a teacher sends are a key part of showing respect. I have found that when students feel they have been “dissed” by a teacher, they almost always point to nonverbals, rather than words, as the sign of disrespect. Nonverbal signals communicate judgment, and students can sense when a teacher’s intent is to judge them rather than to offer support. Although it’s hard to be conscious of nonverbal signals at times, one way to sense how you’re coming across is to deeply question your intent. Your gestures and tone will likely reflect that intent.

2. Make Beginning Learning Relational

When an individual is learning something new, learning should happen in a supportive context. Teachers should help all students feel part of a collaborative culture. Intervene if you see an elementary student always playing alone at recess or a middle or high school student eating lunch alone. Assign any new student a buddy immediately and ensure that each student is involved with at least one extracurricular group at lunch or after school. Whenever possible, introduce new learning through paired assignments or cooperative groups.

3. Teach Students to Speak in Formal Register

Dutch linguist Martin Joos (1972) found that every language in the world includes five registers, or levels of formality: frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate (see fig. 1, p. 51). Both school and work operate at the consultative level (which mixes

formal and casual speech) and the formal level (which uses precise word choice and syntax). All people use the casual and intimate registers with friends, but students from families with little formal education may default to these registers. Researchers have found that the more generations a person lives in poverty, the less formal the register that person uses, with the exception of people from a strong religious background, who frequently encounter formal religious texts (Montana-Harmon, 1991). Hart and Risley’s (1995) study of 42 families indicated that children living in families receiving welfare heard approximately 10 million words by age three, whereas children in families in which parents were classified as professional heard approximately 30 million words in the same period. Teachers conduct most tests through formal register, which puts poor students at a disadvantage. Teachers should address this issue openly and help students learn to communicate through consultative and formal registers. Some students may object that formal register is “white talk”; we tell them it’s “money talk.”

Have students practice translating phrases from casual into formal register. For example, a student I worked with was sent to the office because he had told his teacher that something “sucked.” When I asked him to translate that phrase into formal register, he said, “There is no longer joy in this activity.” Teachers should use consultative language (a mix of formal and casual) to build relationships and use formal register to teach content,

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