

# **Moving from Middle Class to Situational Poverty—from Stability to Instability: What You Can Do to Help Your Students and Parents During the Present Economic Downturn**

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Because of the current recession, many principals and teachers are reporting to me the growing number of students and parents who are seeking assistance through the school, as well as increasing numbers of students who are homeless. There is a great reluctance on the part of people who have been in the middle class to admit that their resource base is becoming unstable. In my book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (1996, 2005), the continuum from poverty to wealth is defined as “the extent to which you have resources.”

## **RESOURCES**

### **FINANCIAL**

Having the money to purchase goods and services.

### **LANGUAGE**

Being able to speak and use formal register in writing and in speech.

### **EMOTIONAL**

Being able to choose and control emotional responses, particularly to negative situations, without engaging in self-destructive behavior. This is an internal resource and shows itself through stamina, perseverance, and choices.

### **MENTAL**

Having the mental abilities and acquired skills (reading, writing, computing) to deal with daily life.

### **SPIRITUAL**

Believing in divine purpose and guidance.

### **PHYSICAL**

Having physical health and mobility.

### **SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

Having friends, family, and backup resources available to access in times of need. These are external resources.

### **RELATIONSHIPS/ROLE MODELS**

Having frequent access to adult(s) who are appropriate, who are nurturing to the child, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior.

### **KNOWLEDGE OF HIDDEN RULES**

Knowing the unspoken cues and habits of a group.

The first thing that happens in a severe economic downturn is that hope and choice are replaced with fear and a sense of scarcity. When fear and scarcity come into one's thinking, the brain is less able to seek options or see possibilities. The negative "parent voice" takes over the internal conversation with the self. For adults who have never experienced unemployment, insufficient funds to pay the mortgage, or the need to sell things for cash, there's considerable confusion because the knowledge base isn't available to know what the choices are. Furthermore, in middle class it's usually seen as a personal failing to lose a job or not be able to pay the mortgage. So it often isn't shared right away. Making things worse, credit cards often are used as a short-term borrowing mechanism to avoid the possibility of losing one's house, which then exacerbates the financial issues.

As adults begin to assess the reality of their situation, most go through the five stages of grief as outlined by Kübler-Ross. These five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. A person tends to move back and forth along this continuum. Middle class generally makes its decisions about time and money against these three factors: work, achievement, and material security. When you have lost your job, you have lost two of the three decision makers—work and material security. It then impacts your identity: Who are you if you don't have work? If you cannot keep your house? If your material security is breached? Then how do you make decisions? Furthermore, the two rules about money that middle class uses are now out the window: (1) "I don't ask you for money, and you don't ask me" and (2) "If you borrow money, you have to pay it back." Personal pride and the deeply ingrained hidden rules about money are now challenged. Furthermore, it's typically taboo in middle class to tell people that you're in financial trouble. Middle class has another hidden rule about personal money, and it's simply that you don't talk about it. So asking a middle-class person to participate in a group sharing session about finances usually isn't going to happen—particularly for the men because male identity in middle class is, first and foremost, about being a provider.

The adults then are moving through the stages of grief as the resource base becomes less predictable and stable. For example, as the financial resources disappear, the emotional resources become less predictable. The spiritual resources of hope and optimism tend to be replaced with fear and scarcity. Relationships become strained. Support systems either are not accessed or become thin. And the hidden rules don't work anymore for this new situation. Life becomes about day-to-day survival. More time is spent accessing fewer resources—i.e., food, shelter, money.

And you lose social capital. You find out in a hurry who your real friends are. You say things that are less than fully accurate. For example, when money is tight, you don't go out to eat as part of a social group. You say things like, "I need to help my daughter with her homework" or "That evening doesn't work for us." In time, the very individuals who could provide support are not available. AND, when they find out you've lost your job, there's reluctance on their part to ask you to join the group because no one wants to embarrass you. So the support systems become thinner.

Three times in my marriage of 31 years, my former husband lost his job because of recessions. I can tell you from personal experience that it's not only financially difficult but emotionally devastating. It impacts identity, self-worth, and personal value. The stages of grief are so palpable that you can touch them on a daily basis. Furthermore, the resource base that you worked so hard to develop erodes before your eyes—much faster than it took to develop it. Even if the words are there, you can't talk about it every day. Anxiety is the cousin of fear. Anxiety produces cortisol, which makes anxiety increase. So less

is said every day, and certain topics are avoided. Eventually, each person goes to his or her own corner to worry, to work through the fears—ALONE.

This in turn impacts children. Often middle-class parents don't want to burden their children with fear or don't tell the children. But the child usually knows when things aren't right. And so students may become withdrawn, act out, or involve themselves in substance abuse.

### **How does the school help students deal with the grieving and the shift in resources?**

1. Journal writing: Give students questions or topics to write about. For example: What do you think it feels like to lose a job? Should the government give money and provide support for those who have lost their homes? How does it feel when you can't have many of the same things your friends have? Which is more important—things or love? Why?
2. Have teachers look for “red flag” behaviors:
  - Truancy
  - Patterns of tardiness
  - “Acting out” or withdrawn behaviors
  - Knowledge of, or conversation about, sex and drugs inappropriate for the child's age or stage of development
  - Delays in common adaptive-behavior skills
  - Lower-than-expected academic performance
  - Inability to build or maintain appropriate peer and/or adult relationships
  - Anxiety, fearfulness, flinching
  - Inability to cope with transitions during the school day
  - Lethargy, sleeping at school
  - Hunger
  - Poor hygiene
  - Encopresis, enuresis, or other unusual toileting habits
  - Unusual eating habits or patterns
  - Somatic complaints
  - Lack of parental interest in child's basic health or school performance

Refer to the counselor or office if these behaviors show up. Provide coping strategies and access to community resources.

3. All of us orient ourselves to daily life through space, time, and ritual. For example, I get up in the morning at 5 a.m., use the bathroom, make coffee, go online, and check my e-mails. All of these things involve space, time, and ritual. When you're homeless, all of these are disrupted. You don't know where your things are, routines are not predictable—nor is time. There are other people in the bathroom, you cannot go to the computer, you only have a few things ... what you can carry with you. So for students who are homeless, provide them with a place in the classroom that is THEIR OWN SPACE to put their things where they can find them. Allow them to keep a couple of extra things there if they aren't dangerous, such as mementos, stickers, etc.). Give them a morning routine when they come into the class—i.e., “Do these three things first.” Routine calms and orients people.

## How does the school help parents deal with the grieving and the shift in resources?

1. Encourage parents to talk to their children about their personal economic situation. Assure the children that it won't last forever. Provide an analogy for children to help them understand. For example, remember when you were riding your bicycle and you had to pedal hard to get up the hill, and you stopped and took a rest to get to the top, and then you got to coast down the hill? Well, right now we're riding the bicycle up the money hill, and we're having to stop and take a rest. So we aren't going to buy this or this or this; those will come later when we're coasting DOWN the hill.
2. Put the situation in a long-term perspective. Ask these questions: Will this situation last forever? NO. Have I lost the people I love? NO. What am I learning from this situation that will help me in the future? How has this situation changed my thinking?
3. In the research, if you are homeless, religious social capital does more to move you out of being homeless than any other form of assistance. Link the homeless family with a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious organization.
4. Pair men together (not groups): "A father came in yesterday about the same situation ... Would you be willing to talk to him?"
5. Provide a list of linkages where food and other forms of assistance are available.
6. Share this article with parents. This may be their situation or that of their siblings or their neighbors. When people understand that they aren't going through this alone, there is more ability to name the experience and deal with it.
7. Develop a plan to address the current situation (sometimes termed situational poverty), along with a future story that includes what you will do when this situation is past.
8. Provide a list of books that you have read or staff has read that talk about what it's like to go through tough times. This could include autobiographies/biographies of individuals who have gone through very difficult times—for example, Lincoln or Einstein or Michelangelo. Sometimes someone else's story puts our own in perspective: "I cried because I had no shoes until I met a man who had no feet."
9. DO NOT ENGAGE IN PITY. That is humiliating for the persons receiving it. If they have the courage to tell you about their situation, accept it, and give them time to talk about their thoughts and feelings. Focus the conversation on what they will DO next. Having a plan usually helps with anxiety.

## Conclusion

It isn't the school's responsibility to provide resources for students and parents in this time of economic downturn. It is, however, the school's responsibility to provide high expectations, insistence, and support for students academically and behaviorally. To do that, some understanding of the students' personal situation needs to be acknowledged. All learning is double-coded—both emotionally and cognitively.

When I was principal of an elementary school, a sixth-grader was determined to come to school the morning after his father was killed in an auto accident at 2 am. A neighbor brought the boy to school and the neighbor said to me, "I don't understand why he insisted on coming to school." I said to the neighbor,

“I do. It’s the one place in his life that is still the same, that is predictable and he knows what is going to happen. There’s a routine. The rest of his life is up for grabs. He needed to know that one place in his life is stable.” I took the boy into my office and said to him, “I can’t bring your life before your father died back for you. But I can help you cope. Go on to class. If you need to leave, tell your teacher to let you come back to the office— and then you and I can figure out how to handle the rest of your day.”

Education can give you the language, the tools, and the options to move beyond a situation. That is a gift we can give to our children and, sometimes, their parents. Schools can be a tremendous source of stability and routine for children, even when their own world seems to be falling apart.

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