



This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Printed on page A7

Cepeda: Poverty, school and 'grit'

By ESTHER CEPEDA

Published: Monday, July 8, 2013 at 1:00 a.m.

CHICAGO

Teachers in low-income school districts often get specialized training about the culture of poverty in order to better understand their students' lives and take those challenges into account in the classroom. As a high school teacher, I was trained in Ruby K. Payne's "A Framework for Understanding Poverty."

Payne has a 20-item list of the characteristics of generational poverty, which includes constant high levels of background noise, the overvaluation of entertainment as a respite from the exertions of survival, a strong belief in destiny or fate because choices are in low supply, and polarized thinking in which options are hardly ever examined (again, because so few tend to be available).

Also pervasive in the culture of poverty is the sense that time isn't for measuring, that it occurs only in the present, and that the future exists only as a word.

Living in the moment is the rule: "Being proactive, setting goals and planning ahead are not a part of generational poverty," Payne writes. "Most of what occurs is reactive and in the moment. Future implications of present actions are seldom considered."

This also explains poverty's lack of organization and order. "Devices for organization (files, planners, etc.) don't exist."

If this sounds like the perfect environment for producing students with few prospects for academic achievement, you're right.

Lack of planning skills

In a recent report by Cornell University, "The Role of Planning Skills in the Income-Achievement Gap," researchers used longitudinal data from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development's Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development to establish a significant link between early childhood poverty and weak math and reading achievement in the primary grades, regardless of IQ.

Previous research has shown that income-related gaps in academic achievement start as early as kindergarten and continue through high school. Those gaps are amplified by low levels of intellectual stimulation and few healthy relationships with adults in the home. But this is the first time the income-achievement gap has been explained with the behavioral measurement of ability to plan efficiently, from such a young age.

This Cornell study quantifies what every math and reading teacher in low-income schools knows about the difference between students who excel and those who languish: It's all about who can persevere through the difficulty of a task instead of giving up. Success hangs on whether a child can, as the study defines it, "plan in a goal-oriented manner."

As both a first-grade and a high school teacher in high-poverty schools, I saw these differences firsthand. The first-grader who grew tired after just a few minutes of

encountering text with unfamiliar words was generally the same student who also could not keep items in his desk in order and was easily frustrated by the unfamiliar.

In contrast, the first-graders who had a sense of the days of the week, could keep from losing their personal belongings and exhibited small signs of patience were less likely to immediately quit such challenging tasks as learning how to subtract with cubes.

A question of focus

"I think the most fundamental policy implication here is that though cognitive factors and academic preparation have been the focus, we now understand that making sure these young children know their numbers and colors, or learn to read a little better or spell a little better, isn't enough," said Gary Evans, a professor of human ecology at Cornell University, who co-authored the study with Stephen R. Crook. "Whether they can focus, sit still and plan ahead is a much more fundamental issue."

Unfortunately, the education system is at a tremendous disadvantage here. Formulating a plan, making the preparations to execute it and then having the determination to persist even in the face of obstacles -- Paul Tough, author of "How Children Succeed," has recently popularized the term "grit" -- is not something that can simply be taught in the classroom.

The children likeliest to navigate the mind-boggling intricacies of applying for admission to college and financial aid will almost certainly be the ones who, from their earliest memory, had adults in their lives who set clear goals, methodically worked toward fulfilling them and successfully dealt with setbacks.

This leaves us with a much tougher education puzzle than just adding "goal-setting" to the common core curriculum.

Ultimately, ingraining the qualities associated with planning and perseverance in low-income children is really the remarkably bigger challenge of how to instill them in their parents.

WASHINGTON POST WRITERS GROUP

Email: estherjcepeda@washpost.com

Twitter: [@estherjcepeda](https://twitter.com/estherjcepeda)

This story appeared in print on page A7

Copyright © 2013 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.