NEIGHBORHOOD EFFECTS AND POVERTY

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As we move deeper into the 21st century, it is important to develop human capacity (talent and expertise) in adults, which in many ways is the new frontier. How do we develop human capital on a mass scale? And then, how do we measure it?

When the United States was primarily agrarian, human capacity was largely developed by the family and faith-based entities. When we were primarily industrial, human capacity was largely developed on a mass scale by the institution (school, corporation, organization, etc.). But now that we are a knowledge-based economy, the institution alone cannot carry the load because, in large measure, of the neighborhood effects of the community. Neighborhood effects have been virtually ignored in legislation, which has focused mostly on the institution.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

The research is extensive. David Berliner (2009) identifies six out-of-school factors common among the poor that significantly affect learning opportunities for children:

- Low birth weight and nongenetic influences
- Inadequate medical, dental, and vision care
- Food insecurity
- Environmental pollutants
- Family relations and family stress
- Neighborhood characteristics

Students spend 1150 waking hours a year in school and 4700 waking hours per year with their families and in their neighborhoods.

In the area of neighborhood effects, Berliner also identifies the following:

One’s ZIP code, both direct and indirect, both positive and negative, affects student achievement.

- In a Chicago study, neighborhood responsibility and trust were measured, which is referred to as “collective efficacy.” Low collective efficacy accounted for 75% of the variation in violence levels, and low efficacy is associated with violent crime. Research indicates that “high collective efficacy” can be very powerful in keeping poor children on track.
• Another Chicago study followed poor African American children no matter where they moved and rated the neighborhoods. Students were assessed on verbal ability and achievement test. States Berliner: “The results showed that staying in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty has a cumulative and negative effect on verbal achievement independent of a host of other factors.”

• Neighborhood effects rival family effects in influencing child development.

• Poor neighborhoods have more environmental pollutants.

• There are two types of mobility: opportunity-driven and poverty-driven. Thirty percent of the United States’ poorest children have attended at least three different schools by third grade. Middle-class children have a rate that is one-third lower. According to Berliner, “Transient students have more behavioral problems, and the more they move, the greater the severity of the behavioral problems teachers note.” Those who move three or more times between the ages of 4 and 7 are 20% less likely to graduate from high school.

• Violence, drugs, and gangs are part of the reality of high-poverty neighborhoods. Domestic violence is particularly damaging to learning. History and experience tell us when the economy is bad and unemployment rises, children do not do well. Ten to 20% of American families have some form of serious family violence annually. Fifty to 60% of women who receive public benefits have experience physical abuse by an intimate partner at some point in their adult life (other studies put it as high as 82%). The No. 1 killer of African American women between the ages of 15 and 34 is homicide by a current or former intimate partner. Domestic violence usually makes the parent unavailable to the child emotionally. Many children exposed to violence suffer symptoms that resemble post-traumatic stress disorder. In one study with an elementary grade cohort, “An increase in the number of children from families known to have a history of domestic violence shows a statistically significant correlation to a decrease in the math and reading test scores among the students’ peers … [T]he negative effects were primarily driven by troubled boys acting out …” (Berliner, 2009).

BRAIN PROCESSING AND DEVELOPMENT

Furthermore, there has been significant research on the impact of brain processing and development in poor neighborhoods. Consider the following:

According to the book *Scarcity*, the stress of daily poverty narrows “bandwidth” by 13 IQ points. A study at Cornell University between 1997 and 2006 in rural upstate New York with 339 children (52% male, 97% white) in three waves indicated that “… The findings suggest that poverty, over the course of childhood and early adolescence, increases allostatic load, and this dysregulation, in turn, explains some of the subsequent deficits in working memory four years later” (Schamberg, 2008).

At the University of California-Berkley, students from poverty were tested via a brain scanner alongside students from middle class and given tasks to do. Researchers compared the brains of low-income 9- and 10-year-olds with the brains of wealthy children using EEGs. Reported Mark Kishiyama, lead
researcher: “It is similar to a pattern that’s seen in patients with strokes [who] have had lesions in their prefrontal cortex [which deals with executive function] ... It suggests that in these kids, prefrontal function is reduced or disrupted in some way ...” (Toppo, 2008).

A University of Chicago study found “a family’s exposure to neighborhood poverty across two consecutive generations reduces child cognitive ability by more than half a standard deviation” (Sharkey & Elwert, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Obviously, neighborhood effects are present in institutions (hospitals, schools, police departments, churches, homeless shelters, etc.) on a daily basis. It simply is no longer possible to expect that one or two institutions can solve the problems associated with being under-resourced. It is imperative that we move to a community model and we focus on the development of human capacity and resources.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


