

Curriculum, Wellness & Poverty: Going Beyond Scores

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There has been much research literature on the relationship between education and poverty; a causal relationship being that poverty is the result of a removal of education (Finn, 1999; Heath, 1982; Lankshear, 1989). In fact, governments often use educational policy in efforts to control, reduce, and manage poverty (United States Department of Education, n.d.). Such a narrow focus of poverty - on the economic aspects - neglects the quality of education on students' experience. Poverty exists not only through the lack of material objects, but also can exist through intellectual poverty.

Provincial and national governments, educational departments, and school districts have heightened the focus on literacy in policy legislation (Office for Standards in Education, 2002; United States Department of Education, n.d.). The impetus for such an increased focus is the belief that student literacy achievement must be increased so that students are prepared for the *real world* (Nichols, 2007). With this as the scope of educational policy, it is the output - often in the form of student standardized test scores - that is prioritized and valued in the discourse of educational policy (Ball, 2003). Such a focus

removes the lived experiences of students both inside and outside school.

When student performance on standardized tests is the focus, classroom interactions and learning experiences tend to reflect a rigid, scripted curriculum. The goal is to get a high score on the test and that will be rewarded through recognition of high scores (Ball, 2003). This narrowing of curriculum has resulted in a curriculum that is sterile. Curricular decisions are being made through purchased programs with a rationale of increasing student scores. There is a disconnect between decisions being made outside the classroom by publishers that have never met the students, and students' experiences. Student experiences are not accounted for in the literacy instruction. The lessons are pre-determined and sequenced so that students assume a role that has been set forth by the program.

In this environment there is often no time for student questions, interests, or lived experiences. When student experiences, connections, and questions are narrowed and subsequently removed from instructional decisions, there is a negative influence on their identity, self-esteem and consequently well-being. Such negative influences are the result of what Jackson (1968) referred to as hidden curriculum - unintended learning which takes place. In this situation, students internalize that their lived experiences are not accounted for during instruction and therefore learn that their experiences, and consequently they themselves, are not valued by the curriculum. Resulting from this realization is the loss of self-esteem as a learner, student, reader, and member of the classroom community. The identity of the student suffers from the omission of their existence from the curriculum. Without self-esteem, without identity, and without a

presence, students experience a form of poverty, in terms of intellectual loss and corresponding loss of identity.

When students are removed from the dynamics of curriculum, from instructional decision-making, they suffer a loss. This loss may or may not be seen in terms of reading scores, but can be seen in terms of well-being. Not only are students omitted from the interactive nature of the learning process, but they are also omitted from their own journey as learners, readers, writers, classmates, and individuals. This loss of identity and self can permeate throughout their school experience to their experiences outside school. Will students regain their self-esteem? Will students regain their identity as learners? Will students regain their identity as collaborators instead of subordinates? Or, will students leave school feeling as though their thoughts, feelings, questions, concerns, interests, and lived experiences do not matter?

Many researchers and theorists stress the importance of the relationship between personal connections and learning. Such a notion echoes Dewey's (1897) belief that curriculum which does not become part of the child's life experience is not truly educative. When we consider our narrowed, impoverished curriculum, we must consider not only whether such a system is educative, but also whether such a system is suggestive - and if so, what is suggested when students are unable to connect with the curriculum or identify themselves within it?

References

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