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Introduction

It has been more than two decades since the original “red book,” *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, was published in 1995. I have added three new chapters to reflect current concerns: one on the intersectionality of class and other factors, one on poverty and the development of the brain, and one on who the parents of children in poverty are.

In the intervening years, many practitioners have expanded on the ideas I introduced in 1995 and, in many cases, also have done their own original research. The work of countless scholars, researchers, and practitioners, along with the continuing work of my company, aha! Process, has contributed to greater understanding of children’s experience of poverty and the critical role schools can play in helping children and teens exit poverty—when those schools have the tools they need to understand and respond with care. In addition to education, I have been gratified by the way the work has expanded into other areas and arenas by those who understand and adapt the *Framework* concepts to their particular settings. These include businesses, healthcare providers, social service agencies, religious entities, higher education, and Bridges Out of Poverty communities.

I believe that this book is even more necessary now than it was in 1995. Due to economic conditions, childhood poverty is on the rise. We have more information than ever on the economic costs of poverty—not only to individuals, but to all of us. Since 2002, the U.S. federal government’s insistence on publishing student achievement data has shown just how great the achievement disparities are between economically disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.

One of the persistent debates in social-stratification research and theory pertains to the causation of both poverty and wealth.¹ In fact, four prevalent theories are extant: individual choice, exploitation/colonialism, economic and social systems,

and resources of a community. I would suggest a fifth explanation: the cognition and knowledge base of the individual and that individual's relationships.

All disciplines move through three research stages: classification, correlation, and causation. For example, when people first saw the stars, they named them and called it astrology. Then Galileo came along and said the stars moved in relationship to each other and called that astronomy. And then Newton appeared and said there is a reason they do that and called it gravity. In social theory, however, there is no clear agreement about what causes social class.

Most legislation in the United States in the last 70 years has been based on social determinism. In the 1800s, Western civilization tended to believe in genetic determinism. Who you were and what could happen to you were based largely on your genetic inheritance. Then the women's movement and the civil rights movement came along and said it didn't matter what you were born with. If you weren't allowed to vote, own property, or be educated, then your genes were essentially a moot point. This is called social determinism. It's "the system" that holds you back. Beginning in the 1940s, we began to look at artificial intelligence, brain and MRI scans, and eventually computer programming. We became very interested in how individuals process and manipulate information and knowledge. It would seem it is time for a cognitive model of social class. In other words, what thinking and knowledge are necessary to function in different social-class environments? How can individual initiative—based on resources—overcome, even transcend, the very real impact of social determinism?

Social determinism is based on correlation models that use numbers as their main point of proof. In cognitive models of brain processing, the brain tends to process in patterns. As a person has greater expertise in a situation or discipline, that person processes very rapidly in patterns.² So a cognitive model would rely more heavily on patterns of thinking as evidenced in patterns of behaviors. Many researchers are uncomfortable looking at patterns and would prefer the "safety" and proof of numbers. Yet experts in any discipline would agree that there are patterns of response among human beings.

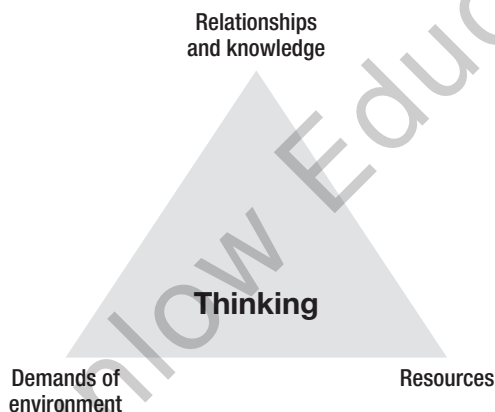
Social determinism cannot answer the following questions:

- Why do only 42% of children born to parents in the lowest-earning quintile stay in the lowest-earning quintile?³
- Why do only 36% of the children born to households in the highest-earning quintile stay there?

- Why do 7% of individuals make it from the lowest-earning 20% of households to the highest-earning 20% of households?
- Why are 75% of the Forbes list of the 400 wealthiest people in America new money?
- Why is there such a “great divide” in income by educational attainment?

Based upon Bandura’s work on social cognition, I will argue that there is a relationship between the demands of the environment, the resources one has, and the knowledge base one has.

This relationship among and between who and what you know (relationships and knowledge), what the environment demands for survival, and your resources impacts how you negotiate your environment and create mindsets.



This work is not without its critics. In the early 2000s, a group of social justice professors became quite vocal in their criticism of my work because it did not approach poverty as a social justice issue but rather as a social cognitive issue—an application of Bandura’s theories. My approach to poverty is eminently practical: Having worked for many years in schools and school districts, I know firsthand that teachers need down-to-earth, relevant strategies in addition to theory. Their mission—and it is a critically important one—is to reach the children in their classrooms. They are on the front lines of social change, one student at a time.

The purpose of the book is to help those teachers, principals, district leaders, counselors, school nurses, and the many other educators who work with the poor to positively impact the opportunities of their students/clients by:

1. Naming the experience of generational poverty
2. Identifying the tools and resources necessary to become educated
3. Providing intervention strategies
4. Increasing the intergenerational transfer of knowledge

5. Understanding the thinking in generational poverty
6. Helping to understand the situated-learning reality of generational poverty so that individuals can successfully make the transition to the decontextualized world of school and work⁴

Research Base of This Book

This work is based on a naturalistic, longitudinal inquiry based on a convenience sample. I was closely involved with a neighborhood of people from generational poverty for 32 years. The neighborhood included 50–70 people (counts fluctuated over time based on situation, death, and mobility), mostly white. During this time I—coming from a middle-class upbringing—encountered the vast range of ways that the neighborhood’s understandings, actions, and responses differed from my own. I undertook an interdisciplinary analysis of the research to explain these differences. Additionally, I lived in Haiti for three and a half months to study poverty and engage in service while in college. Then I lived among the wealthy for six years while my former husband was working with the Chicago Board of Trade, which taught me much about wealth.

During and after these experiences, I took on the methodology of the anthropologist: I “went native” and then relied on research to explain these experiences. Subsequently, I have spoken with thousands of people in China, India, Australia, Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, Slovakia, Hungary, Great Britain, New Zealand, and the United States. The 2005 edition of the *Framework* book is being used in Jamaica and Korea. While every experience has unique elements, the commonalities and patterns within the experience of poverty—and the conflicts between children of poverty and middle-class schools—are much greater. For more on this topic, see “What Information Does *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* Have That Cannot Be Obtained Easily from Other Sources? Why Do Critics Love to Hate It and Practitioners Love to Use It?” in the Appendix.

Myths About Poverty and Wealth

1. *Myth:* Poverty belongs to minorities. *Fact:* Sixty-seven percent of all individuals in poverty in the United States are white.⁵
2. *Myth:* Poverty is caused almost totally by the system and exploitation. *Fact:* In addition to systemic and exploitation causes, poverty is also caused by individual choices, addiction, illness, war, lack of education, lack of employment, mindsets, disabilities, and thinking.

3. *Myth:* People in poverty are lazy. *Fact:* Actually, people in poverty are often problem solvers with limited resources who may or may not have the knowledge bases, tools, bridging social capital, and transportation to be employed.
4. *Myth:* Wealthy people do not pay taxes. *Fact:* Two thirds of U.S. federal taxes are paid by the highest-earning 20% of households.⁶
5. *Myth:* Your IQ is lower if you are poor. *Fact:* IQ is largely a measure of acquired knowledge. If your environment does not provide that knowledge or vocabulary, you cannot show evidence of it on a test.
6. *Myth:* Poverty is about money. *Fact:* Poverty is about a combination of resources.
7. *Myth:* In wealth, assets are more important than income. *Fact:* Assets are important, but income is what allows one to live every day. If none of the assets is producing income (or if they produce insufficient income) to live, then you are in significant trouble.
8. *Myth:* Poverty is mostly an urban problem. *Fact:* Poverty is equally found in rural areas, and to a surprising degree, in suburban areas as well.

Some Key Points to Remember

1. Poverty and wealth are relative to the environment in which you live. In Manhattan, \$1,000 is insignificant. In Haiti, \$1,000 will allow you to live for a long time.
2. Poverty occurs in all races and all countries.
3. Economic class is a continuous line, not a clear-cut distinction.
4. Resources in generational and situational poverty are different, just as in new money and old money.
5. This work is a cognitive study based on patterns, not on stereotypes. All patterns have exceptions. If this work is used to stereotype—i.e., to indicate that everyone in a given group is a certain way—then the work is misunderstood.
6. Privilege is as much about the intergenerational transfer of knowledge as it is about money and social access.
7. Individuals bring with them the hidden rules of the class in which they were raised.
8. Most schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class.

9. For our students/clients to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and work. “Code switching” is a term often used to describe this. We tell students that there are rules for basketball and rules for football. To use the football rules in a basketball game is to lose the game. We tell students that there are rules for school and rules for out of school, and they are not the same. You use the rules in the situation that will help you win in that situation.
10. We can neither excuse people nor scold them for not knowing; as educators, we must teach the students and provide support, insistence, and high expectations.
11. To move from poverty to middle class or middle class to wealth, an individual must give up relationships for achievement (at least for some period of time). The issue is time; there is not enough time to have both.
12. Four things that move you out of poverty are employment, education, relationships of bridging social capital (relationships with people who are different from you), and/or a future story.
13. Four reasons one leaves poverty are: It’s too painful to stay, a vision or a goal, a special talent or skill, and/or a key relationship.

It is my hope that as you read this book, you will understand your students in a deeper way and therefore increase your own happiness and satisfaction with teaching, as well as have better outcomes for your students.

Chapter 1

Resources, ‘Reality,’ and Interventions: How They Impact ‘Situated Learning’

To better understand students and adults from poverty, a working definition of poverty is “the extent to which an individual does without resources.”

Regardless of which country or race or gender, certain things happen when resources are in short supply. The fewer the resources, the more a person lives on the left-hand side of the chart. The greater the resources, the more a person lives on the right-hand side of the chart. Resources are always on a continuum and are not static. They fluctuate and may change over a lifetime.

Resource Continuum

Under-Resourced		Resourced
Instability/crisis	.....	Stability
Isolation	.....	Community
Dysfunction	.....	Functionality
Concrete reality	.....	Abstract, representational reality
Casual, oral language	.....	Formal, written language
Thought polarization	.....	Option seeking
Survival	.....	Abundance
Poverty	.....	Wealth
No work/ intermittent work	.....	Work/careers/ larger cause
Less educated	.....	More educated

Using resources as an analytical tool is a strength-based model and acknowledges the many strengths that students, including students from poverty, bring to school. The purpose of knowing the resources of a student is to know which interventions will work and which ones will not. Interventions will work only when the needed resources for that intervention are available. In other words, you have to work from strengths. These resources are the following:

Financial: Having the money to purchase goods and services.⁷

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.⁸

Mental/cognitive: Having the mental abilities and acquired skills (reading, writing, computing) to deal effectively with daily life.⁹

Spiritual: Believing in divine purpose and guidance.¹⁰

Physical: Having physical health and mobility.¹¹

Support systems: Having friends, family, and backup resources available to access in times of need. These are external resources.¹²

Relationships/role models: Having frequent access to individual(s) who are appropriate, who are nurturing, and who do not engage in self-destructive behavior.¹³

Knowledge of hidden rules: Knowing the unspoken cues and habits of different groups.¹⁴

Language/formal register: Having the vocabulary, language ability, and negotiation skills necessary to succeed in school and/or work settings.

Typically, poverty is thought of in terms of *financial resources* only. However, the reality is that financial resources, while very important, do not explain the differences in the success with which some individuals leave poverty nor the reasons that many stay in poverty.¹⁵ The ability to leave poverty is more dependent on other resources than it is on financial resources. Each of these resources plays a vital role in the success of an individual.¹⁶