

POOR
STUDENTS,
RICH
TEACHING

**MINDSETS FOR
CHANGE**

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Introduction

The title of this book, *Poor Students, Rich Teaching*, suggests it is about succeeding with students from poverty. It is also about something that many poor students are not getting: *rich* teaching. Here, the word *rich* means bountiful. Based on my past, I could have just as easily become a dropout, but several teachers cared about me. They made the rich-teaching difference, and you can too. Every student that you help graduate means one less dropout, which means one less student at risk for getting into the juvenile justice system, receiving welfare, or going to prison. Finally, if you're a teacher who has lost faith in the system, I have a message of hope. You can do this because you always have a choice. I'll show you how to teach differently, and you'll start loving your job again.

I am fully aware that there are other ways that would help solve poverty than what you do in your classroom. I just don't see those other ways happening anytime soon. So, I'm inviting you to do what you can, with what you have, in areas where you have some influence over the outcomes. Ignore the political, social, and economic "noise" out there, and focus on helping each of your students graduate. Nothing moves forward when we complain about what we don't have, how we are undervalued, and how we work with some who poison our school culture. Things only move forward when you focus on the path of success for your students.

Today, I dedicate my time to working with teachers in low-performing schools to help students graduate either job ready or college ready. My advocacy is for teachers like you. I'll do anything to help you grow and succeed. I see teachers as the single most critical factor in helping the United States survive and thrive. I just wish policymakers felt that way too, but that's a topic for another book. We need you to be a tough, gritty teacher who is willing to make hard choices to help your students from poverty succeed.

Digging Into This Book

Poor Students, Rich Teaching is designed to be a starter book for those struggling with teaching students from poverty. Even if you have been successful before, my promise is that through this book, you'll become a richer teacher. It will offer you highly effective and research-driven tools you can use right away.

To change student lives, you will have to change *before* any worthwhile change shows up in your students. You may experience some discomfort when you begin applying tools from this book. However, staying the same will ensure there is no chance to succeed with students from poverty. If your personal level of comfort (staying the same) is more important to you than the success of your students, then teaching may not be your calling. Some dislike change so much that they would rather be miserable (and make others miserable too) than make changes.

I'm not telling you the path of change is easy; I'm telling you that it can be done, and you can do it. To help you on your journey, you'll be getting over twenty chapters packed with effective tools. By the way, I would never tell you that every single page in this book will be mind-blowingly new to you; it won't be. What I will tell is that when you apply what's in this book, you'll be an amazing catalyst for positive change at your school.

In chapter 1, you'll learn what's really going on in the United States regarding poverty. You should know the facts, and I'll spell everything out for you. You'll explore how students from poverty may behave and learn differently. In chapter 2, you'll learn why you are more important than ever. Many books start off by telling teachers what to do differently in their jobs. This book is different. In the first two chapters, you'll learn why the suggestions are not just relevant but also urgent. Please do not change anything you do unless you are sold on the *why* and you buy into the research that supports the change. This is the only way to learn, teach, and grow.

In chapter 2, I'll also introduce the theme for this book—developing the powerful tool for change: mindset. A *mindset* is a way of thinking about something. As Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck (2008) explains, people (broadly) think about intelligence in two ways: (1) either you have it or you don't, or (2) you can grow and change. In the areas of intelligence and competency, you may have more of a fixed mindset (stuck in place) or a growth mindset (capable of changing). Those with a *fixed mindset* believe intelligence and competency are a rigid unchangeable quality. Those with a *growth mindset* believe that intelligence and competency can develop over time as the brain changes and grows.

This book broadens and deepens the mindset theme to many new areas of student and teacher behaviors that you'll find highly relevant. I've detailed four essential mindsets to reach students in poverty, and the remaining chapters of this book focus on each of them. Each part introduces the mindset and the research, with easy-to-implement and highly effective strategies you can use immediately. Here are the four parts.

- **Part one: The relational mindset**—In chapters 3 through 7, we'll explore the relational mindset and begin to discover why the types of relationships teachers have (or don't have) with students are one of the biggest reasons why students graduate or drop out.

- **Part two: The achievement mindset**—In chapters 8 through 13, you'll learn about powerful success builders with the achievement mindset. Students from poverty can and do love to learn, when you give them the right tools.
- **Part three: The rich classroom climate mindset**—Chapters 14 through 18 offer strategies to create an energetic, high-performing class culture, using the rich classroom climate mindset. You'll learn the secrets that high-performing teachers use to build an amazing classroom climate.
- **Part four: The engagement mindset**—Chapters 19 through 23 dig into student involvement in a new way with the engagement mindset. You'll gain quick, easy, and practical strategies for maintenance and stress, for buy-in, and to build community.

There's much more for you to learn, but these four mindsets and the accompanying strategies will make a world of difference when implemented well. That's my promise. Finally, the epilogue offers a quick-read summary of the chapters and offers organized tools for immediate application. In the appendix, you'll find useful resources to support your implementation of the book's tools.

This book will support you in making fresh, smart choices in teaching. As a *throwaway kid*, I was believed to be a disruptive loser who didn't care about learning. Actually, I loved learning; it was school I didn't like. However, those few teachers who treated me well, expected great things, and showed me *how* to be better, well, they got my best effort, attitude, and behaviors. The next time you have a student in your class who is acting out or feeling frustrated about class, remember this: *I* was one of those students, and *I* take it personally when someone does not help a student succeed. I am hoping that you choose to help the student graduate career or college ready. This is a powerful book, packed with real science and real teachers using powerful strategies. It's about doing the hard (and smart) work to help every one of your students that you work with graduate college or job ready. I'm hoping you're on board with that goal.

Now, let's find out what's *really* going on. Before you begin, take a deep breath as you open the door to change. An amazing journey is about to begin.

CHAPTER 1

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT POVERTY?

We've all noticed that things are changing in America, and they are changing fast. At one school I was working with, a teacher shared some pretty serious frustrations. As she spoke, her eyes moistened, "You want us to do *this* and *that*, plus you say it might be hard—and it might even take months or years! For starters, do you even know how much we are being asked to do these days? Do you know how little support we get from leadership? How do we even know these things you suggest are possible? And, really, why should we even bother? After all, things will change again in a few years, and there'll be some new flavor of the month that we all have to jump on board with again!" She was nearly in tears, and her pain was obvious.

When teachers tell me, "Our jobs have changed," they're right. When teachers tell me, "Students aren't like they used to be," they're right. When staff tell me, "The whole profession has changed," they're right. Lastly, when teachers like you tell me how frustrating their jobs are, I'm on your side. I've been a teacher. I work with teachers, and I know the profession well.

But let's be honest. *The whole world* is different; so much has changed. Compared to only a couple of generations ago, it's a different world. The concerns that teachers shared with me are real, and they are at the heart of a growing, deepening frustration among teachers nearly everywhere. Let's just say it again, "The world has changed!" Now, let's drill down and learn some of the most relevant changes affecting your classroom when we talk about students from poverty.

What Should You Know About Poverty?

There are three critical characteristics you may want to know about poverty. Each of these has high relevance to you because it affects both your time at work and life away from work.

1. Poverty is far more prevalent than you think, and the devastating effects are accelerating.
2. It affects both you and your students in the classroom (in multiple adverse ways—some that you may have never thought about).
3. Because brains can change, you can reverse the academic effects of poverty and help your students graduate college or career ready. The rest of the book will show you how to make that happen.

Let's begin with understanding poverty in a different way. A common way to think of poverty is simple: at school, you've got students from families that qualify for free and reduced school meals. However, poverty is complicated, not simple. First, it's not a culture (Gorski, 2008).

Saying that someone is from poverty tells us nothing about the family. Is it fragmented or intact, caring or careless? We don't know because on the surface, all poverty means is having a low socioeconomic status, but it does not define the individual. My own definition is less focused on federal standards for annual income. Instead, I focus on the common effects of poverty via an aggregate of risk factors. Here's how I define *poverty* in this book: poverty is a chronic experience resulting from an aggregate of adverse social and economic risk factors.

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Poverty could be urban or rural (most poverty is now rural). Poverty could be generational or the result of multiple adverse incidents (such as job loss, bankruptcy, or a divorce). Experiencing just one risk factor (such as a broken-down car, racism, divorce, unreliable child care, a death in the family, an eviction, poor nutrition, chronic stress, or poor health care) rarely places one in poverty. But multiple risk factors almost ensure one would be in poverty. The poor typically have multiple (three to eight) risk factors in their lives (Pungello et al., 2010).

Next, let's understand the true economic impact of poverty in the United States. Read this closely; you'll want to understand this massive and dramatic change happening right now in our society. You have been told the economy is getting better, but the poor might disagree. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson initiated the War on Poverty, and over fifty

years later, the poor have lost. A commentary from Cato Institute Senior Fellow Michael Tanner (2014) asserts the total monies spent on poverty exceed \$16 trillion, and poverty rates still remain high. Percentage-wise, we have about the same number of poor than in 1964. Since 1982, the percentage of married couples (black, white, and Hispanic) who are poor has decreased (ChildStats, 2015). However, in the year 2000, thirty-two million people in the United States were in poverty. By 2009, over forty-three million people in the United States were poor (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). In fact, each generation is getting worse than the last, not better.

A staggering 1.46 million American families live in extreme poverty, with family members surviving on \$2 per day of spendable cash or less (Shaefer & Edin, 2012). The number of Americans receiving government food assistance is now a third of the entire United States, a total of over one hundred million people (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of Inspector General, 2013).

The sheer number of students who live in households of poverty have risen from 16 percent in the year 2005 to 22 percent by 2010—a huge 37.5 percent increase (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2011). But by 2011, *one in four* (25 percent) school-age children (fourteen million) lived in a family below the poverty line (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011).

By early 2015, the majority (51 percent) of all U.S. students in public schools came from homes that met the federal standards for poverty. Texas, California, and Florida all have over 50 percent of their public school students from poverty (Suitts, 2015). If you see more students from poverty in your classroom, school, or district, now you know; it's no illusion. And what's more alarming is that it's getting worse every year.

The United States has orchestrated biased social and economic policies. There are marriage penalties, which occur in the tax system when spouses pay more income tax by filing jointly as a couple than filing as an individual. This is detrimental because when two people are married, resources are pooled and the chances of being poor drop (Rector, 2012). We have “look the other way” institutions (including police departments, judicial systems, and public schools) when it comes to institutionalized racism (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). There are reverse incentives (when a welfare recipient realizes that taking a paying job can actually leave one with less disposable income than when receiving a benefits check). This fosters a dependent lifestyle and discourages upward mobility. We have poor economic policies, which discourage family savings with bank interest rates near zero. There are ineffective health policies that promote free meals at school, which are rarely nutritious (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, 2013). In sum, to escape poverty in America, one must escape the chains of policymakers too.

Now, what is the relevance for you? Many believe that poverty is a problem for the poor. Actually, it is a problem for everyone. Statistically, it is far more likely that you

personally will experience downward mobility (dropping down one socioeconomic class) than upward mobility. If you are middle class, the odds are one in four (25 percent) that you'll be poor within ten years (Pfeffer & Hällsten, 2012; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2007). If you still think your life could never intersect with the poor, answer this question, "Would you meet the federal guidelines for poverty if you lost your job, your car was wrecked, or you were in the hospital for cancer treatments?" That's it; just three big risk factors, and we are all vulnerable.

Greater poverty means we can predict that future federal and state revenues will decline (decreased tax revenues and greater cost of services such as court systems, corrections, and welfare). At the federal level, less revenue means more money printing (to cover the budget deficits), meaning your retirement dollars become worth less (inflation). At the state level (where balanced budgets are mandated), it means the state will be forced to charge you more for services that used to be affordable or free (which reduces your monthly net income). The greater the number (and percentages) of poor in any country, the greater the loss of untapped creativity, cultural contributions, economic strength, community building, and workforce potential.

I am hoping that you see that having an increasing number of poor people will directly affect your paycheck and lifestyle unless we help the next generation graduate college or career ready. The good news is that quality teaching has a greater effect on student achievement than does the adverse effects of poverty (Hattie, 2009; Wenglinsky, 2002). Now, let's connect the dots: how does poverty influence students in your classroom?

How Does Poverty Affect Your Students?

There are three examples of how the students at your school are likely (but not guaranteed) to be different if they grow up in poverty. These are common, but not universal, differences in people from poverty. You could, of course, show me many, many exceptions, which I am aware of. The first is chronic stress, the second is the presence of cognitive gaps, and the third is less emotional support. Let's begin with the most familiar topic: stress.

Stress

You may recall the word *homeostasis* from high school. Homeostasis is a system property in your body and brain that maintains stability and health. When things go awry, your body wants to revert to a "normal" and healthy state. But exposure to acute and chronic stress often disrupts homeostasis, and we don't go back to a healthy level. Your brain's emotional center, the amygdala, triggers a safety alarm too often (hypervigilance) or not enough (hyporesponsiveness). This means your brain has reset your stress thermostat to a new adjusted stress load, known as allostasis (McEwen, 2000). This new adaptive and draining state fosters ongoing physiological arousal and depletion of