

# TEACHING CHILDREN

*from Poverty  
and Trauma*



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“Poverty is a chronic and debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse synergistic risk factors and affects the mind, body, and soul.”

(Jensen, *Teaching*, 6)



## Introduction

This handbook was created to provide NEA member educators with a research-based description of the impact of poverty on teaching and learning. It is important to understand poverty’s impact on children’s educational success, along with strategies for overcoming the impact of poverty on the brain and learning.

In 2015, according to government standards describing poverty, 51 percent of students in public schools lived in a poverty household. (Jensen, *Poor Students, Rich Teaching*, 7) Poverty impacts the lives of students by creating emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues. These issues include more hazardous places to live, less green space, and contaminated water and air. What does the poverty that our students come from look like? Poverty is crowded, noisy, physically deteriorating households. There are fewer support networks on which students can rely. Students often rely on peers for social and emotional support. The stressors experienced from poverty traumatize their victims. (Jensen, *Teaching*, 7-10)

In addition, many students from poverty have been traumatized in ways not directly related to their socioeconomic status. The number of students living in poverty who have been traumatized has been estimated between 50-80 percent. Trauma is the unimaginable experience of what happens to a person who has experienced or witnessed a threat to themselves or another person. That event or series of events changes the person’s physiology in such a way that the sensations from the traumatic event become the current sensations of the body and mind until healing takes place. This handbook will equip educators to address both sources of stress—from poverty and from trauma—that show up in classrooms and interfere with a child’s ability to learn.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to develop this handbook is to review NEA research on the challenges of teaching students from poverty, along with Eric Jensen's two books related to teaching students from poverty (*Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do about It* and *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind: Practical Strategies for Raising Achievement*). In addition, this handbook also references the author's own research into teaching students from poverty, especially as it relates to the trauma many students from poverty carry with them into the classroom.

### Why focus on poverty?

Educators often protest that their responsibilities go far beyond the classroom. They argue that they did not sign up to be—nor are they trained to be—social workers or therapists.

Nevertheless, it is important for educators to understand poverty and its impact on learning. The number of students from poverty is increasing in our public schools. Over 51 percent of students in public schools today are from low socioeconomic backgrounds. (Jensen, *Poor Students, Rich Teaching*, 7) At the same time, many students from poverty fail to graduate, do not contribute economically to society, and often continue to cost society through government assistance, healthcare, and the justice system.

The effects of poverty can have an economic impact on educators both directly and indirectly. More and more local educational agencies (LEAs) are considering or implementing pay for performance in the compensation plans for educators. As a result, students failing to pass high-stakes achievement tests can directly affect an educator's pay. Students who fail to graduate can have an indirect economic impact on educators, as well. When students drop out, their limited contribution to the economy can have an impact on educators' pensions, which are funded by taxpayers. Fewer taxpayers from the pool of students from poverty could jeopardize educators' future retirement benefits.

Trauma stemming from the effects of poverty place an additional burden on the economy and health care systems, as the stressors of both poverty and trauma increase the likelihood of chronic illness and socioeconomic issues among these students as they become adults. According to the definitive Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, (Felitti and Anda, *ACE Study*) children from poverty have a higher risk of chronic diseases and mental health issues from having experienced just one adverse childhood experience. The risk factors

rise, especially for children from poverty, when the children have multiple risk factors as discovered by the ACE Study.

Finally, educators should care about their role in teaching children from poverty because of the potential loss of contributions to society when the gifts of a disadvantaged, traumatized child are not developed and passed on to the next generation. Students from poverty and those who have experienced trauma want to learn. They want to remove the barriers to their natural abilities to learn so they can better receive instruction.

This handbook addresses the barrier to learning and provides strategies to remove or significantly minimize it. The handbook is divided into six sections. The first section will identify the symptoms of poverty manifested on school campuses and in the classroom. The second section will address the risk factors and impact of poverty to the student, the family, the school, and the community. The third section will identify the science behind what we know about the impact of poverty and trauma on learning through researched-based studies. The fourth section will address the role of educators in minimizing the effects of poverty and trauma on learning in their classrooms. The fifth section will itemize the long-term learnings that educators realize when teaching students from poverty. The sixth section will provide actionable strategies that a school and educators can implement to make a difference in teaching students from poverty. Finally, the handbook will provide a list of resources for educators to use in expanding their capacity to teach students from poverty.

“The essence of trauma is that it is overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable.”

*The Body Keeps the Score, 195*

## Section 1. Symptoms

“...traumatic experiences do leave their traces, whether on a large scale or close to home, on our families, with dark secrets being imperceptibly passed down through generations. They also leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems.”

*The Body Keeps the Score, 1.*



### **What are the symptoms of poverty that show up in the classroom?**

Students from poverty exhibit a variety of symptoms that are cries for help from the stressors of their low SES background. On the one extreme, students from poverty may act out with various behaviors not conducive to learning. They can be loud and boisterous. What educators often first perceive as misbehaviors initially started out as ways of dealing with the overwhelming emotions and need to escape from the brutality that comes from trauma. These moments of acting out are attempts at dealing with the ravages of poverty. This behavior often results in punishments that include suspensions and expulsions, which cause the student to fall behind in classwork.

On the other hand, students from poverty, and those who have been traumatized, may withdraw and attempt to disappear in the classroom. The behavior of wearing a hoodie pulled tight over their heads, curled up, head down on a desk or sitting quietly in the corner of the classroom, is similar to what they may have had to do at home. They try to become invisible so that they are not seen by a drunken caregiver or abuser who comes home looking for a punching bag or worse. The smaller their footprint, they reason, the less likely they are of being seen and hurt again.

## Section 2. Risk Factors/Impact

Educators should also be aware that chronic absenteeism is another symptom of stressors from poverty and trauma. Sometimes students cannot hide their injuries with long-sleeve shirts, hoodies, makeup, hats, or long pants. This is especially true during warmer months when the covering clothing seems so out of season. Staying at home, waiting for the bruising to subside may help prevent discovery; it does not help when the student is falling further and further behind in classwork.

Chronic health issues, even at an early age, can be a sign of stressors from poverty and trauma. Attention deficit disorder, attunement disorders, depression, sleep disorders, eating disorders, hypervigilance, among other symptoms, are clues for educators to use in evaluating whether a student is experiencing the stress of life from poverty or if that student might be a victim of trauma.



### What difference does poverty make? What is the risk to the student?

Students from poverty often have emotional dysregulation, which means that they may give up more easily on challenges presented in the classroom, often find it difficult to work in groups, and may have difficulties with manners.

(Jensen, *Teaching*, 19)

Students from poverty have come from and often continue to live in an environment where the rate of discouraging words is higher than the rate of encouraging words. (Jensen, *Engaging*, 47) Parents, guardians, or caregivers may be stressed from their own experiences from poverty or abuse. Once wounded themselves, they often respond to the normal questions from a child with an angry, short temper filled with words, tones, and gestures that beat down and bruise the soul of

the child. In some circles, that is called “sinning out of your own wounds.” These words cause children to blame themselves for the problems faced by their caregivers. As their self-esteem is attacked, these children try to either hide or over function to fix the problem by attempting to please caregivers who can never be pleased enough.

These same caregivers may be short with their children because of their own mental health issues, work-

ing multiple jobs, and having too little time for their own stress relief, let alone quality time with their children. Educators sometimes see this when they have students who are in need of attention or those who resist attempts at building relationships to avoid getting hurt by getting close to another person who, they think, will more than likely disappoint them.

Poverty influences the emotions, shapes behaviors, changes the structure and processing of the brain, affects cognitive capacity, and influences attitudes. Poverty's impact on the brain is especially seen in the student's executive function skills: attentional skills, working memory, ability to prioritize, and ability to self-regulate.



As noted, students from poverty often have both physical and mental health issues. Studies show that students from poverty often have more asthma, more respiratory infections, tuberculosis, ear infections and hearing loss, obesity, and poor nutrition. These conditions are all exacerbated

by the lack of appropriate health care. These early health issues have long-term impacts that are often not reversed, even with improved access to health care resources later. (*ACE Study*)

Poverty can also increase the likelihood that a student will be depressed. This poverty-related depression perpetuates a lack of hope that the student cannot break out of the cycle of poverty. (Seligman, *Learned Helplessness*, and *Learned Optimism*)

The effects of these stressors from poverty and trauma are cumulative and work to impact brain structure and neuronal processes. (Jensen, *Teaching*, 25)

### WHAT IS THE RISK TO THE FAMILY?

Low SES families, and those individuals who have experienced trauma, are at risk of perpetuating the poverty and participating in passing trauma on to the next generation. This is readily known from bullied students becoming bullies and victims of sexual abuse becoming perpetrators. Without interventions, the inertia of poverty, especially if it has been generational, will continue. Without interventions to heal the effects of trauma, the stressors do not dissipate easily. These problems cannot be ignored.

The good news is that schools are in a central position in the life of a community to be that place of safety,

hope, and healing to families and their children. Teen pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, mental illnesses, and continuing economic suffering will continue to be the result of a lack of intervention into the impact of stressors from poverty and trauma upon families. The fabric of the family will continue to be broken by addictions, abuse, single parent-led households, absentee caregivers, and neglect.

### WHAT IS THE RISK TO THE SCHOOL?

“The greatest hope for traumatized, abused, and neglected children is to receive a good education in schools where they are seen and known, where they learn to regulate themselves, where they can develop a sense of agency.”

*The Body Keeps the Score, 351-52*

Often the schools located in poverty-stricken areas are substandard physically and academically and may be understaffed. These schools are populated by children who have experienced the pain of poverty and trauma in their lives. They come to school each day trying to pretend they are fine. They come to school yearning to be heard and known.

If a school in a low SES neighborhood has unresolved issues from the

“Sadly, our educational system, as well as many of the methods that profess to treat trauma, tend to bypass this emotional – engagement system and focus instead on recruiting the cognitive capacities of the mind. Despite the well-documented effects of anger, fear, and anxiety on the ability to reason many programs continue to ignore the need to engage the safety system of the brain before trying to promote new ways of thinking. The last things that should be cut from school schedules are chorus, physical education, recess, and anything else involving movement, play, and joyful engagement.

When children are oppositional, defensive, it's also important to recognize that such “bad behavior” may repeat action patterns that were established to survive serious threats, even if they are intensely upsetting are off-putting.”

*The Body Keeps the Score, 86*

past, also known as corporate pain, and functions on the margins of its own resources of money, supplies, and human capital, the school will not have the emotional presence to hear and respond to these students' cries for help. In such schools, students are often three years behind in what should be their current level of academic achievement. They will continue to lag behind and be held back.

In such an academic atmosphere, many students are almost destined to drop out around ninth grade or shortly after. High schools will continue to record lower performance, lower graduation rates, turnover in leadership staff and educators, and a loss of its role of leadership and transformation in the community.

Turnover among educators and staff are high at schools in low SES neighborhoods because of the burnout that results from working with students carrying the pain of poverty and trauma in their lives. This turnover perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

Schools that do not retain the same quality principals and assistant principals for at least five-eight years in a row do not realize the full gifts of those administrators. Leadership circles have known for years that it takes five-eight years for a leader to hit a stride with their gifts, talents, and understanding of the culture and needs of their organization. Schools and their princi-

pals are not immune from this pattern when principals are shuffled around like cards on a gaming table.

Schools are also at risk when they focus on less than a comprehensive approach to education, focusing solely on a curriculum and assessments that measure the attempts to teach to it.

### WHAT IS THE RISK TO THE COMMUNITY?

There are multiple risks to the low SES community that comes from not addressing the stressors from poverty and trauma. Economically, the community will not build a stronger future when students do not graduate or graduate with less than adequate academic, life, and working skills. Without an intentional, informed intervention plan—especially from the educational institutions of the community—perpetuation of stress filled lives, the disintegration or deterioration of families, and a lack of a skilled labor force able to change the status quo will continue. The intellectual capital loss when students wounded by poverty and trauma do not fulfill the potential of their gifts and talents is tragic. Instead of experiencing a transformation from a vibrant education, the community continues a downward spiral.

### WHAT IS THE RISK TO THE EDUCATOR?

Teaching is indeed *daring greatly!* Educators who continue to teach in low SES schools and teach students who have experienced trauma without understanding the impact of poverty and trauma on learning will continue to work in less than optimal situations with less than adequate skills to address and remove the barriers that these stressors create in the lives of their students. Because the educators are in the presence of students who carry within them the physical and emotional pain and scars of poverty

weariness that educators experience is not just from the amount of work and hours they perform, it comes from the atmosphere and situation in which they teach, especially in low SES schools.

Without high-quality educators, students from poverty have a lower chance of excelling in their education. A high-quality educator can make a significant difference in a student's life. That will be less likely to happen in a low SES school until districts equip educators with the skills to protect themselves from the "radioactivity" of stress by strengthening their own

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“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, aware of the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly;...who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while *daring greatly.*”

Theodore Roosevelt 1910  
As found in *Rising Strong*, xx-xxi

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and trauma, these educators are at risk of burnout.

This burnout comes from the mirror neurons of the students passing on their pain to the mirror neurons of the teachers, administrators, and staff. (*Born for Love*, 21-22) Without knowledge, skills, and strategies to minimize this impact, educators' physical and mental health will be affected, increasing absenteeism, and contributing to their leaving the profession. The

resilience, and incorporating proven strategies for lessons that play important roles in healing the stress from their students' childhood.

The stress from poverty and trauma can interfere with the best of educators' performances in the classroom. Removing those barriers with research-proven skills, strategies, and understanding will go a long way to improve student performance, as well as educator performance in the classroom.

“Research on the effects of early maltreatment tells a different story: that early maltreatment has enduring negative effects on brain development. Our brains are sculpted by our early experiences. Maltreatment is a chisel that shapes the brain to contend with strife, but at the cost of deep, enduring wounds. Childhood abuse isn’t something you get over. It is an evil that we must acknowledge and confront if we aim to do anything about the unchecked cycle of violence in this country.”

Martin Teicher, MD, PhD, Scientific American  
In *The Body Keeps the Score*, 149.



## Section 3. Research

### The science behind a brain-based learning approach to teaching children from poverty

Simply put, stress, whether from poverty, trauma, or any other source can and does change the structure and processes of the brain. Chronic stress from repeated contact with living in poverty, the witnessing or experiencing firsthand of trauma, and the constant experience of the sensations from past trauma creates what has been called allostastic load. Constant stress without relief increases the baseline resting stress level of a person, changes the brain, lowers the immune system, and in turn, increases health and emotional issues. (*ACE Study*)

The good news is that the brain can and does change, even after the devastating effects of poverty and trauma have been experienced by a student in childhood. (Jensen, *Teaching*, 47-48) The neuroplasticity of the brain allows it to heal from these stressors because the brain is changing all the time. The risk, at the same time, is that if the

stress is experienced severe enough and long enough, certain structures of the brain can be irreparably harmed. The hippocampus, which is involved in memory formation, is especially sensitive to allostastic load from long-term stress.

The first three years of life are critical. A child in its first three years needs to be attuned. (*Born for Love*, 1-6) That means they need to be talked to, played with, appropriately touched, and held. They need to be responded to when they have a biological need of hunger, thirst, elimination, or comfort. They also need to experience a gradual, safe separation from caregivers so that they do not experience an attachment disorder later. The children who are played with, read to, and experience quality music have brains that develop exponentially in their capacity for future learning. Nothing can substitute for face-to-face, eye-to-eye,

## Section 4. Educator Roles

and meaningful skin-to-skin moments in teaching empathy to a child.

Without those necessary components of childrearing, a child may grow up to display mental and social challenges. (*Born for Love*, 120-144) When a student in the classroom demonstrates no empathy, that is a good sign of a lack of attunement from caregivers in the first three years of life. The good news is that empathy can be taught, caught, and modeled by an educator in the classroom.

Healthy child development comes about because the child has mirror neurons that pick up on what he sees in the 18 inches around him after birth. A well-attuned child will have seen and experienced a wide range of emotions that he has not only been hardwired at birth to experience, but also the emotions and self-regulation that must be taught for the child to grow up developmentally strong.

Mirror neurons are the way a parent or caregiver passes on humanity to the next generation. The child imitates and learns from what he sees from those early caregivers. When a child raised in poverty is either passively or actively neglected, abused, or a witness to abuse, she does not receive the normal experiences to imitate. She will repeat the behavior she saw through those mirror neurons. If that child has trouble attaching to a parent or caregiver, that same child

will grow up not only having problems developing relationships in school, but also in adult relationships, for example, attaching to a mate.

The lack of attunement impacts brain structures. Further, brain structures change as the stress hormones constantly put the child on alert in either a fight, flight, or pause mode. "Compared with a healthy neuron, a stressed neuron generates a weaker signal, handles less blood flow, processes less oxygen, and extends fewer connective branches to nearby cells." (Jensen, *Teaching*, 25)

Long term, these changes in structure and brain processes impact cognition with delays and may lead the child into risky behaviors that may appear the norm through the lenses of poverty and trauma. Together these less than optimal experiences, neglect, and chronic stressors create an invisible barrier to learning when the student shows up in the classroom. Stressors cause the lower brain to focus on survival while slowing down the prefrontal cortex, which is not developed enough in a child to overrule the sensations. In turn, this prevents—or at least temporarily shuts down—the brain from learning. When chronic stress is present, *temporarily* becomes most of the time.



### What educators can do

Educators must be prepared to teach students from poverty and work with those who have been traumatized. Educators, administrators, and staff who work with students from poverty and those who have suffered trauma carry the risk of picking up the stress from those students. That, in turn, can elevate stress levels and causes health issues, burnout, and may even result in leaving the profession. The elevated stress levels are caused by educators' mirror neurons picking up the pain from the mirror neurons of the students who have been impacted by trauma and poverty.

How do educators protect themselves from stress? Exercise and getting a good night's sleep will help drain the stress from their bodies. Having a trusted colleague or administrator with whom to debrief can also help to dilute the impact of stress.

Breathing exercises—whether yoga or controlled breathing—meditation, or practicing mindfulness, impact the parasympathetic nervous system whose function is to relax the body. These calming techniques are important for educators to practice as they

interact and teach students impacted by poverty and trauma. (See *Mindfulness* for techniques and strategies to implement in the classroom over time.)

If the educator is not adept at yoga, similar results can come from breathing in to a count of four seconds and releasing the breath to a count of six or eight seconds. The key principle is to exhale longer and more slowly than the time taken to inhale. Practicing this technique for a few minutes each day over a period of time will release stress and tension and create a greater sense of peace. Educators can experience similar results from blowing bubbles! In addition to reducing stress, it's fun!

Educators of students from poverty and those who have been impacted by early adverse childhood experiences need to build capacity to enter into the lives, stories, and pain of their students. Most educators lead full and busy lives professionally, at home, and in their communities. When a student who wants to share their story comes to an educator whose plate is already full, or the educator picks up on the pain being reflected in the student's body, posture, or gestures, the educator will throw a "circuit breaker" to not overload their own circuits. The educator may do this unconsciously by walking away from the student, telling their own story, or changing the subject. When this happens, the student does not get heard.

It is important that teachers develop their own resiliency and capacity in their teaching. Capacity includes strengthening your own resiliency. Capacity is being aware of your own limitations, shame, vulnerability, courage (*Rising Strong*). Capacity is building your own hope while having a trusted friend or colleague to walk with you on this journey of educating students who have experienced adversity. As Brenè Brown writes in *Rising Strong*, capacity is the willingness to fall down and fail, only to get back up, stronger than ever in your efforts to teach children from poverty and trauma.

The rule of thumb is that a person cannot enter into the pain, joy, or meta-story of another person any further than that person has gone into his or her own story. Busy, overworked, stressed out educators have no room, no capacity, to hear their students' stories. Educators have to prepare themselves like Red Adair's oil well firefighters used to do—protecting themselves in order to get close enough to the fire, the stress, the pain in their students' lives in order to help extinguish the flames of poverty and trauma. Self-reflection, mindfulness, meditation, yoga, a good night's sleep, healthy nutrition all come together to protect and prepare educators for this task.

According to Van der Kolk, resiliency comes from the power of the life force, the will to live and to own one's

own life, the energy that counteracts the annihilation of trauma (*Body Keeps the Score*, 135). With resiliency that has been strengthened by information into the dynamics of stress from poverty and trauma and the increased capacity carved out of full plate of activities, an educator is ready for students who have known poverty and trauma.

Once equipped, the first thing educators can do is greet their students by name with a smiling face. Intentionally build relationships with students, not just from what you know of them on paper, but personally, asking about what is important to them. Children from poverty and those who carry the effects of past trauma feel as though they have not been seen or heard appropriately by people who were supposed to care for and protect them. The educator can become that missing person, filling that socioemotional gap by making time for the student to be seen and heard in the classroom and between or after classes in secondary schools.

Because students impacted by poverty and trauma have not learned appropriate emotional responses, when the educator models appropriate social behaviors, the student's mirror neurons that were neglected or harmed earlier can still pick up on clues from the educator to learn now what they missed earlier. The educator also needs to listen beyond the surface to how the student experiences his or

her world in words, tone, and body language. Students usually experience life through their eyes, ears, or skin. One of those three modalities—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic—is a default setting for when the student is stressed. That is the normal, or usual, way the student communicates and learns.

At the same time, one of those three modalities is where the student stores pain. If the educator's preferred modality for teaching is the same as the student's modality for the storage of painful memories, the student may not be able to learn from the particular educator's teaching style. That is because the brain creates a visual image, in full color and at normal-life speed, in front of the face of a student about an inch from the nose. This is the same sensation a person feels if someone gets in their face that close—the resulting feeling of fear and worry about what is about to happen.

In addition, past traumas and stressors that have been stored visually are very present to the student and are not in the visible field of view of the educator. While the educator is telling the students to "**look** at the board and I will **show** you how to solve this problem," those key words trigger the visual modality with its traumatic movie showing on demand in the student's mind.

This also occurs when a student who has been yelled at all of his or her life is **told** by an educator, "Let me **tell**

## Section 5. Long-Term Learnings

you how to read this paragraph and **hear** the author's **voice**." Unwittingly, the student tunes into the auditory modality and has difficulty hearing the educator's voice over the cacophony of pain stored in her auditory memory.

Some students are more kinesthetic and learn by a hands-on approach, by touch, and having the opportunity to go to the board, touch a marker, and feel the response of the rest of the class. Memories for a kinesthetic learner are stored in the brain through the sense of smell and in memory cells located all over the skin, not just in the three-pound dense matter of the brain. That is why in passing, an educator may gently touch a student on the shoulder or forearm and get a paradoxical response of anger. Like hitting a memory key on a computer, by gently touching a student, a teacher may have unwittingly brought up through the skin a painful memory from the past. The very place touched may have been where someone hit the student in the past, and the touch gives the student the feeling that they have been hit again, even though the teacher only lightly touched them.

The bottom line is that educators, as the caregivers entrusted with the well-being and education of their students, may have to go out of their own preferred modalities. At times they may have to teach from a modality where their own pain has been stored to effectively teach and communicate with

students from poverty and trauma. An educator builds capacity to do this by being aware of negative sensations when they happen, talking about the experience with a trusted colleague, and using mindfulness practices to heal their own past pain experiences.

These strategies may seem overwhelming in the face of all the demands on an educator's time. In the PBS special on the teenage brain, the young scientist who discovered the changes in the brain during adolescence spends an hour going through all the research and science understanding how the brain undergoes a radical redevelopment in the years between ages 11 and the early 20s. He closes the video by saying he is not sure what to tell parents and teachers of teenagers about these findings, except to say, "*Tell your children that you love them.*" When the task of teaching students from poverty and those who have been traumatized becomes overwhelming, pause, take a deep breath, and remind your students that you love them. (PBS, "Frontline: Secrets of the Teenage Brain, 2002)



### What are the long-term "take home" messages of this approach to teaching students from poverty?

#### Importance of socioemotional component to education

Policy makers, administrators, and educators should be aware that curriculum alone will not fully and completely educate students. The education community must make room to include the socioemotional component of learning to not only make the educational process whole, but also the minds of our students, especially those from poverty. "No curriculum, instruction, or assessment, however high quality, will succeed in a hostile social climate." (Jensen, *Teaching*, 87) Jensen goes on to write "[The soft side of students' lives, the social side] runs their brains, their feelings, and their behaviors—and those three run their cognition!" (Jensen, *Teaching*, 20)

#### Schools are the optimal place to heal the traumas from poverty and traumatic events

“The safety a school and its classroom can provide for a child from poverty becomes a fertile place for healing and learning. The positivity of the school and the neuroplasticity of the brain have the tremendous capacity to reduce or eliminate the negativity of the traumas children sometimes bring with them to class. This approach to learning will go a long way to address current challenges in education that include graduation rates and dropouts. Self-esteem and school engagement are the most likely factors to keep students in school.”

*Teaching with Poverty in Mind, 87*

## Section 6. Actionable Strategies

### What are the actionable strategies an educator and school can implement in addressing the challenges of teaching students from poverty?

#### Build positive, enriching relationships

The first thing an educator should do in his or her interaction with a student from poverty or one who has been traumatized, is to acknowledge the student's resiliency. According to Van der Kolk, resiliency comes from the power of the life force, the will to live and to own one's own life, the energy that counteracts the annihilation of trauma (Body Keeps the Score, 135). The fact that the student shows up in your class means the student has resiliency, or he would not go to school. They are already survivors, with a lot of emotional and physical baggage being carried on their young shoulders. Celebrate that with your students by affirming their strengths, their efforts, and their dreams.

#### Create a safe atmosphere for learning

Before any other teaching task gets done, one of the most important things a school and a classroom educator can

do to address the challenges of teaching students from poverty is to create a safe environment for learning. This safety begins as the students first enter the building. Greet each and every student with a smile and welcoming words at the door as they enter the building.

At the school where I teach, our principal has challenged us and organized our morning routines and duties to guarantee every student experiences at least five positive greetings from the time they enter the building until the bell rings for the first period of the day. At first the students try to appear imperious to the greetings, looking down or away. Gradually, they come to welcome the greeting with a face-to-face acknowledgment of the greeting. And if the educator is not quick enough, the student might even greet first before the educator can utter the greeting.

As students enter the classroom, greet them by name. As time and



opportunity present themselves, ask a question, finding out how each student is doing and something about their interests and who they are.

Creating a safe space enriches the students' emotional safety. Additionally, creating an environment where students feel comfortable making mistakes creates a positive learning environment. Students can learn more from a wrong answer than a correct one because the student could have guessed the correct answer without knowing why that answer is correct. Making a norm of allowing for and learning from mistakes and wrong answers without being made fun of cements the safety students from poverty need to feel in the classroom.

### **Give students a sense of control**

Students from poverty come to class with a diminished sense of control in their lives. (Jensen, *Engaging*, 42) Household resources limit the choices for nutrition and entertainment. They may be awakened in the middle of the night at the end of the month to be loaded up to move out of housing for which there is no money for the next month's rent. They may share a bed or mattress or a blanket on the floor with any number of other people in the same room.

A student's acting out or withdrawal in the classroom may be a sign of his loss of control and a less than adequate way to attempt to regain control. An alert and caring educator can provide opportunities to return a perception

of control to the student in the form of choices on assignments and how they are completed. This may give time and space to regain composure when emotional control has been temporarily lost. Some elementary schools have developed calming corners where there is a box of objects that can serve to calm a student and help him regain composure. The Momentous Institute of Dallas has directions for creating the corner and the objects on their Web site. ([www.momentousinstitute.org](http://www.momentousinstitute.org)) Even secondary schools can benefit from objects and places in the classroom that calm a student who constantly lives in the sensations of the past from a life in poverty and from adverse childhood experiences.

### **Use a calm voice to teach**

An educator can facilitate a safer atmosphere for students from poverty and trauma by teaching and talking in a calm voice. Students from poverty and those who have been traumatized have a noisy, clamoring voice of stressors inside their heads. An educator's calm voice can soothe those painful sounds and words running through their minds and replace them with words and a tone that can free their bodies from tensing up and locking their brains from learning. In doing so an educator may experience what is known as a change back reaction.

All relationships are experienced in a balance like two people balanced on a seesaw. When an educator self-defines by introducing something new

to the classroom routine, the educator often receives a change back reaction from the students with a resounding chorus of moans, groans, and "Oh, no!" This reaction is not because one side is right and the other is wrong. Rather, the new ritual or routine is not familiar and, autonomically, the students want the educator to change back to what was familiar. When the educator stands ground calmly and nonreactively, waiting for the change back reaction to subside, the students will have to make a choice and move in the direction of the educator's new initiative or move further away. The educator has changed the balance on the seesaw, and the students are forced by what is known as family process in family systems theory to regain the homeostatic, balanced relationship with their educator.

### **Teach emotional skills**

Students from poverty and those who have been traumatized are no different from other students in that all children are born with only six emotions hard-wired in the brain. (Jensen, *Teaching*, 15) The difference is that the other students may have had more attunement from their parent(s) growing up, especially in the first three years of life. They may have parents who actively teach the other emotions humans are capable of experiencing appropriately.

Gratitude is an important emotion to teach all students—especially those who carry the weight of their

past in sensations caused by poverty and trauma. If a student does not respond with gratitude for something an educator has done for her, it may be because she has not been taught gratitude. Find opportunities to teach gratitude. When a student does not demonstrate respect, use the moment to teach, perhaps for the first time, that important emotion and attitude. A sense of gratitude strengthens the brain.

This does not have to be done separately from the lesson. A science or social studies class is a fertile area to teach emotions. Ask students to identify the emotions that might have been going on in a historic person's mind when they acted courageously or had to make a decision that impacted a large number of people, sometimes negatively. A scientist may have experienced disappointments before making the discovery that is immortalized in school textbooks.

The educator might create a bulletin board with the names of the various emotions to be taught. One emotion can be emphasized each week. By the end of the year the students will have been exposed to a wider range of emotional responses. To take the emotional learning a step further, the educator might ask the students to take pictures of each other modeling what those emotions look like on their faces. These photos could be posted on the bulletin board alongside the

emotion focused on for the week. Students could be affirmed and rewarded when they express that taught and now caught emotion appropriately.

### Working with students who act out

Students who have experienced poverty and trauma often misbehave. Their behavior is a cry for help that gets missed in the moment as tight teaching schedules, interruptions, and emotions come together to create a situation where the student is removed from the classroom and sometimes from the



school by way of suspension. If an educator can reframe the misbehavior as a cry for help—a symptom of the stressors from the past that is fueling the student’s emotional response—then, hopefully, discipline does not require the student to leave the classroom. A calming table and chair in the corner of the room may provide a safe place for the student to save face, regain control, and cool down while processing what just happened. The educator, as

opportunity allows, can inquire about what is going on with the student.

All behavior has a reason that drives it. A student whose stress level is running high may act out to distract from the fact he does not understand the lesson. A flashback may occur that shuts down a student’s speech. At that point, the student can only act with fists or movements because he was not granted permission for what he perceived as an immediate need to be satisfied. Knowing the why of behavior can lead to positive actions to address the behavior instead of a punitive approach that takes the student away from the learning environment.

Students from poverty and those who have been traumatized act out because they have experienced a lack of control in their lives due to a lack of resources, emotional support, and understanding. As counterintuitive as it may seem, giving the student more perceived control over her life in the classroom can lessen the misbehavior. Give the student a task or responsibility to fulfill for the teacher or the class. (Jensen, *Engaging*, 42) Ask her to share one of her strengths as the lesson is taught. Give choices to how she can respond and allow her to save face when she might give a wrong answer or make a mistake. Change the perception of making a mistake or giving a wrong answer to be an opportunity to teach that a person can learn

more from a wrong answer than a correct one that was guessed.

### Working with withdrawn students

Educators may encounter a withdrawn student. The student reasons that “If I can appear invisible, I won’t be called on for what I don’t know or haven’t been able to learn. I won’t get embarrassed by a wrong guess at the answer. If I can hide quietly enough in the class, perhaps the teacher won’t see me or the scars and wounds on my body and my face.”

While it will take time, the educator of a withdrawn student will need to proceed slowly, continuing to create a safe place to be, a calm voice, and a gentle approach to invite the student to come out of hiding into a classroom that is safe and full of hope. In this approach, the educator may discover significant physical and emotional needs in the student’s life. This may require a referral to the appropriate specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) on the school staff because the educator may not have the time, skill, or resources to address the need in the classroom.

### Build short-term working memory

The most important cognitive skill that an educator can use to address the stress and neglect from poverty is short-term working memory skills. (Jensen, *Engaging*, 60-65) The lack of appropriate attunement, self-regulation, and stress contribute to a lack

of attention and cause many students from poverty to be treated with powerful drugs for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In fact, low SES students are medicated with psychotropic drugs at a significantly higher rate than their higher SES counterparts. (*Body Keeps the Score*, 37) These drugs have significant side effects—including sleepiness—and have to be regulated often when families from poverty have limited time and resources to provide ongoing follow up treatment. Some students stop taking the medication because of the side effects or the family does not have the means to keep the prescription filled.

Attentional skills can be built by practicing short-term working memory skills. In as little as a week with daily practice a few minutes a day, the growth actually shows up on brain scans. This can be done with number sequences and with words making sentences and telling a story.

In working with numbers sequences, give students a set of numbers such as from 1-20. Have someone begin by naming one of those numbers. A second person repeats the number called out by the first person, then adds his own number, which cannot be a consecutive number. The third person repeats the numbers in sequence from the first two, then adds her own. This goes on around the room until either the process is successfully completed or breaks down. If it breaks down, do not emphasize that

someone got it wrong. Rather focus on how far the group got. Celebrate and start over again and see if the group can go further the next time.

The process with words is similar. The first person begins with a word and the second person adds a word to begin to create a thought in a sentence. As each person participates by repeating the previous words in the order they were spoken, then adds his own, a story begins to emerge. This process not only develops working memory, but also creates anticipation regarding where the story will go and planning for what the next student will add to the story.

### Expressive writing

The next strategy a teacher can use with all students—especially those from poverty and with trauma in their lives—I call: **Write, write, write!** Researchers asked a group of people to write about their trauma for 15 minutes for four consecutive days. The ones who wrote about the facts and emotions of the trauma reported fewer health problems in the months following the test. A similar study by Pennebaker (*Expressive Writing*) and his research assistants also demonstrated an increase in health when a person was allowed to express the emotions from trauma, either in writing or spoken words. (*The Body Keeps the Score*, 239-40) Find ways to incorporate this type of expressive writing across the

curriculum. In turn, the captive feelings from poverty and trauma can be released in as little as four days. The invisible barriers to learning will begin to disappear at the same time.

### Teach reading skills

A child is not born with the ability to read. Reading must be taught. (Jensen, *Teaching*, 37) The skills that come together to develop reading skills can be shared at an early age by caregivers reading to a child and allowing the child to read on his own. Parents from poverty sometimes can't read themselves or have scant time or resources to read or buy books. (Jensen, *Teaching*, 37) The parts of the brain involved in reading develop over a long period in gestation and are therefore susceptible to problems and concerns. That is why some children from poverty have difficulty reading due to poor nutrition, poor prenatal habits, and limited health care resources. Providing reading classes and involving students in reading across the curriculum will assist in alleviating this symptom from poverty and trauma. Once the student gets involved in words and stories, the world horizon begins to enlarge and the limiting stressors from the past events come into perspective as indeed belonging in the past. Then the stressors begin to relinquish their hold on these students.

Reading is important across the curriculum and will enhance the socioemotional development of the children at the same time. For a student

from poverty or one who has known trauma, reading will also expand her horizons as it makes the curriculum accessible to the student through books. Through reading, students can try on another's experiences, freeing them—at least momentarily—from the constant sensations of pain from trauma and poverty. (Jensen, *Teaching*, 370)

### Build students' vocabulary

Building a student's vocabulary builds brain structure quickly, and that growth shows up on brain scans. Instead of a word wall being an afterthought or secondary to the lesson plan, incorporate vocabulary building in your lesson plans. Adding words to a student who has been traumatized not only increases their ability to speak with a wider range of words, increasing vocabulary builds new structure in the brain for learning. (Jensen, *Engaging*, 11-22)

Using a journal, have students track in a journal a list of the new words they learn. Ring a bell or celebrate as a class when a student uses a new vocabulary word correctly in class. Serve a vocabulary sheet cake at the end of a unit of study with new words written in icing on the cake. Create a wordsmith badge that students can wear to demonstrate increased mastery. Vocabulary building not only strengthens the structure of the brain of a traumatized student from poverty, it also adds words that may access and give a voice to the feelings and stressors that have been driving their behavior.

### Teach self-regulation

It is important to teach students from poverty how to self-regulate their emotions and their behaviors. Many students whose lives have been impacted by poverty or trauma lack quality attention time and social skills from the first three years of life. In that vacuum of neglect, they have learned little em-



pathy. The educator can begin to teach students self-regulation by teaching in a calm voice so that the stressors from poverty and trauma do not get excited.

The same calming techniques recommended earlier to address educators' stress can be taught to students as well. If the educator is skilled in yoga, that can be a way to begin. If the educator has no yoga training, the students can be led in a breathing exercises. If students balk at the breathing ex-

ercises, have them blow soap bubbles. The breathing process in blowing bubbles is a slow breathing out which accomplishes the same goal—relaxation.

Mindfulness is the current buzzword for meditation. (See *Mindfulness* for skills and strategies to use with students in the classroom) Rituals can be established for the beginning of class or when stressors seem to arise and get in the way of learning. Taking a moment to reflect and attempt to feel and name the sensations a student is



experiencing is at the heart of healing trauma. The more a student comes into awareness of current sensations, the feelings from the past that have ruled the present moments since the trauma occurred begin to fade into the past. According to Van der Kolk, this is where trauma begins to heal, more so than with talk therapy and medications. (*Body Keeps the Score*, 62-63, 96) The use of relaxation techniques is critical in managing trauma and neglect in schools. (*Body Keeps the Score*, 207-210)

Students may also need to be taught manners, anger management, taking turns, and the emotions that the body is not hardwired with at birth. Instead of fussing and raising her voice, the educator can use occasions when students demonstrate what they were not taught growing up as teachable moments. Yes, this takes some extra time, but it pays off in the long run.

### Teach empathy

Because many students from poverty and those who have experienced a variety of adverse childhood experiences have often had little to no attunement in the first three years of life, they need to be taught empathy. (See *Born for Love* for the research and strategies for teaching and modeling empathy) It is never too late to learn empathy. The students' mirror neurons are still picking up the clues to what life is about from their teacher as he or she models appropriate behavior. As you teach and interact with these students look them in the eyes as you talk. Provide opportunities for students to move around the room as they learn. The brain moves knowledge that is being learned to long-term memory potentiation as the student learns and moves at the same time.

### Meaningful touch

A big challenge for educators in teaching and modeling empathy is that students who did not receive attunement experiences in their early years lack having received meaningful touch. Be-

cause of the abuse of touch by some, educators are often afraid to touch a student. The risk of being misunderstood or having an innocent interaction perceived as inappropriate is too great. Resolving that topic is beyond the scope of this handbook. It is still important for the educator to be aware that talking eye to eye with appropriate touch has been demonstrated in studies to increase the oxytocin levels in the ones talking and touching appropriately. (*Born for Love*, 30-34, 61-66) Oxytocin is a hormone that not only elevates good moods, it also strengthens the immune system. That is a good thing for students from poverty and those who have been traumatized since their immune systems have been weakened by the stressors in their lives.

### Teaching hope

Martin Seligman pioneered understanding of what has come to be known as learned helplessness. (See Seligman's classic works, *Learned Helplessness*, *Learned Optimism*, and *The Optimistic Child*.) This mindset is rampant in schools with students from poverty and where students have been repeatedly traumatized. After experiencing years of disappointments, neglect, and abuse from those who were supposed to be caregivers, children may learn to be helpless. They withdraw in class. They do not make the effort to do their work because they believe nothing will come from it; or with low self-esteem, they do not believe they can learn.

Eventually, students give up. When students say they are bored, they may be expressing their anger at feeling helpless, having been disappointed too many times. When the student says he or she does not care, the student is telling the teacher, "I have no hope." An educator can counter this expression of apathy by modeling hope and by not giving up on the student. This can come in the form of asking the student to say more about her boredom or apathy. Ask her, "When did you first become aware of this feeling?"

### Listening to the students' stories

Listening is one of the most powerful skills an educator can have. Every student in every class is yearning to be heard and to be known, especially the ones from low SES families and those who have been traumatized because they were not seen and heard growing up.

Begin by listening for the modality in which the student learns—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. As previously noted, the challenge then is for the educator to be able to teach outside her comfort zone in order to teach to the preferred modality of the student.

# Conclusion



If this handbook could leave one final message for educators who face the challenge to teach students in low SES schools and those who have experienced one or more traumas in their childhood, it would be this:

1. Brains can and do change.
2. Schools can be the most positive place where the neuroplasticity of the brain can replace the negativity of poverty and trauma with hope and a real bright future for our students' successes.
3. Let your students know you love them!
4. Do so by *daring greatly!*

Many more resources and strategies are available to the teacher, administrator, and school staff to develop a school that is sensitive to the impact of poverty and trauma. The limited insights and strategies that have been presented in this handbook are powerful strategies that address specific needs from the symptoms of poverty and trauma. They represent a great way to begin your journey as a poverty- and trauma-informed educator. More strategies and insights can be found in the resources listed at the end of this handbook. If the educator is looking to build a foundation upon which to build a program of trauma-sensitive teaching, begin with the historical and up-to-date overview provided by Bessel Van der Kolk, MD in *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Follow that with Maia Szvalitz and Bruce Perry, MD's, *Born for Love*, to understand the necessity for attunement in early childhood development and how that plays out in later years. Learning how empathy is learned is indispensable for an educator. Then sign up for the three Web sites hosted by the ACEs Connection. The newest site focuses on trauma-informed schools is ACEs in Education for K-12.

# Resources

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[www.acesconnection.com](http://www.acesconnection.com)

<http://momentousinstitute.org/>

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This handbook was written by Ernest Izard, PhD. Dr. Izard is a high school inclusion teacher in Dallas, Texas, and president of The Aurora Network. He holds certification as a trainer in Brain-Based Learning through Jensen Learning Corporation. Dr. Izard's passion is equipping educators with cutting edge skills and strategies to remove the stressors of childhood traumas that interfere with learning through professional development and a unique educator certification program.

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