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Jensen, Eric. (2009). *Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), an estimated 13.2% of Americans were living in poverty in 2008. Even more striking is the fact that 19% of children under 18 years of age live in poverty, up one percent from the 2007 estimate. This means that approximately one-fifth of all children in the United States from birth to age 18 come from a household that has very limited means in providing adequate housing, health care and nutrition. The consequences of such impoverished conditions profoundly impact the nature of our schools. Eric Jensen, author of *Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It*, provides a framework for understanding the effects of poverty on children and suggestions for schools on how they may better support this growing population.

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Jensen begins the book by bringing together a large body of facts and information about the adverse traits associated with chronic poverty under the mnemonic device, EACH.

Poverty involves a complex array of risk factors that adversely affect the population in a multitude of ways.

- Emotional and social challenges
- Acute and chronic stressors
- Cognitive lags
- Health and safety issues (p. 7)

Emotional and social challenges are explained as the attachments formed between the parent and child. Such attachments can be weakened by poverty's unfavorable characteristics and subsequently result in "undermining emotional and social development and predisposing [children] to emotional dysfunction" (p. 16). Acute and chronic stressors are associated with experiences of brief but severe distress or excessive distress over time. "Students subjected to such stress may lack crucial coping skills and experience significant behavioral and academic problems in school" (p. 22). Cognitive lags are more commonly defined in education as achievement gaps found between varying socio-economic groups. Closely associated with such lags is language development (the foundation supporting academic success) for which poverty has been found to have the largest effect as opposed to any other cognitive function (Noble, Norman, & Farah, as cited in Jensen, 2009). Finally, health and safety factors include "malnutrition, environmental hazards, and insufficient health care" (p. 41). Physiological and psychological reactions to the conditions and situations related to poverty are delineated for each risk factor. In addition, each area is supported through sections on theory and research, and effects on school behavior and performance followed by promising practices that can help remediate each factor.

The tone in Jensen's book converts a daunting subject matter to one that conveys hope for children of poverty. He states that "brains are designed to reflect the environments they're in, not rise above them. If we want our students to

change, we must change ourselves and the environments students spend time in everyday” (p. 46). Jensen categorizes these changes into three areas; neuroplasticity and gene expression, changing IQ, and fluid intelligence.

Neuroplasticity is a characteristic that allows various regions of the brain to change as a result of particular experiences such as increased visual capacity in deaf people.

Encouraging and stimulating environments and continued attendance at school have been shown to positively change IQ. Finally, fluid intelligence is the transference of strategies from one context to another. The point of this section of Jensen’s book was to highlight that environment matters significantly. If schools are to be successful in providing advantageous situations, he suggests supporting and encouraging staff as the catalyst for change through “difficult conversations” (p. 63) regarding classroom practices and beliefs.

Jensen moves into discussing the characteristics of schools that are currently succeeding with low socio-economic populations. He groups these qualities into five categories: support of the whole child, hard data, accountability for teachers, relationship building, and enrichment mind-set. Once again, Jensen uses an acronym, SHARE, to discuss these five categories. Jensen develops each category by going through extensive research, clarified with examples from high poverty schools, and followed once again by action steps for improving conditions. While these action steps provide sound and logical recommendations, I have decided not to elaborate as they are consistent with what can be found in most literature regarding school reform.

What I found most original regarding successful schools with low socio-economic students were the seven “mistakes that high performing schools never make” (p. 98). Jensen recommends avoiding pep talks with staff and instead, focusing in on clear communication and creating an action plan that incorporates attainable goals. This will ensure teacher buy in and results. Another mistake is never getting started because of fear of failure or disagreement on which path to follow, which will easily create setbacks. Success is built on simple plans that may or may not be perfect, but the

lack of perfection does not ensure failure. Putting teachers last on the priority list is another error avoided by successful schools. It is important to understand and support those who will be leading change efforts, and priority needs to begin with staff if efforts are going to be effective. Fear in school climate and focusing exclusively on test scores are two additional conditions to avoid. Accountability to state measures and associated results tend to ignore other indicators that support accomplishments and successes. Finally, avoiding root causes of failure and overestimating a school's capacity to succeed concluded Jensen's description. According to Jensen, goals should be few and focused on the authentic issues faced by a school's population. These broad suggestions illustrate how learning communities must operate overall in supporting the outlined SHARE characteristics associated with effectively supporting students from poverty.

Jensen uses the same technique when describing effective classroom level characteristics. Using the identical acronym, SHARE, he describes these research based factors as standards-based curriculum and instruction; hope building; arts, athletics, and advanced placement; retooling of the operating system; and engaging instruction. One caveat was expressed; school-wide SHARE characteristics are central to supporting classroom SHARE characteristics. Jensen believes that taken together, these factors will positively impact students in successfully overcoming the effects of poverty.

I find Jensen's book to be extremely practical and insightful with regard to the physiological and psychological impact of poverty. This book supports educators in understanding the big questions of *how* children are impacted and *why* classrooms and school systems can no longer continue operating in the same manner. At the same time, Jensen sets the ground work that gives reason to change. His claims are supported by extensive and rigorous research and presented in a well-organized manner. Technical language is clearly stated and examples are provided. Jensen builds a thorough conceptual framework from which teachers and learning

communities can begin supporting students affected by poverty.

My interest in reading this book stems from my current position in an urban school district, working multiple years on a Native American reservation, and supporting students impacted by poverty in various other professional positions. Having had extensive experience working in settings that seek to improve circumstances for these children, I would recommend this book to any classroom teacher or administrators with low socio-economic populations. After all, educators have a moral responsibility to support all students and need a foundation from which to provide emotional and social support as well as effective instruction and interventions.

References

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About the Reviewer

Jennifer Shank is a doctoral student in the Leadership for Educational Equity program at the University of Colorado Denver. Her interests include supporting educational institutions in meeting the needs of students from diverse backgrounds.

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