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Op-Ed on Our Current Educational Inequalities

By Cristin McDonough

The world is not fair, but does the education system have to vary so widely that we are leaving bright and talented students behind solely because of their socioeconomic status? Think of yourself as a student – did you have the resources and encouragement you needed to get where you wanted to be? Did you have a teacher that shaped your future? What if you could help provide that for someone else?

The future is in children, and we need to make certain that low-income children are being given the opportunities they need and deserve to allow them to be successful students.

As an undergraduate psychology student, I have had many opportunities to work with children of varying ages and backgrounds. Most recently, I spent time at a preschool filled with bright students raised by highly educated parents. These children had access to Spanish and music classes, field trips, and engaging learning activities. They all have the opportunity to receive individualized attention from one of the many teachers available in the classroom. Before the age of five, many of these students are able to read along to “morning message” and are working on improving their handwriting. I have also had the opportunity to work with high school students who are preparing to go to college, and most of these students come from low-income and/or first-generation backgrounds. Like the preschool children I worked with, they are bright and motivated. But, many of them are dealing with more issues than any teenager should have to: family problems, the need to work to support the family, mental or physical health issues, a lack of confidence or support, and a lack of resources.

According to research from the American Psychological Association, low-income children often enter high school with literacy skills that are five years behind those of their higher income counterparts. Research has also shown that before formal education has even started, low income children are less likely to have positive learning experiences at home. The lack of a conducive learning environment can impact their abilities, and therefore students are at a disadvantage before they’ve even entered the education system. On top of that, they are dealing with the staggering data that shows the physical, mental, and social disadvantages that correlate with being a part of a low-income family.

Studies have shown that teaching styles, teacher interactions with students, and motivation in the classroom can have a large impact on academic success for all students – a suitable learning environment at an early age can help students who are at a disadvantage developmentally or economically “catch up.” Research shows that biology is not as important as it was originally thought, and psychologists now know the importance of environment in terms of its impact on education and academic success. This means that if students, starting as early as preschool, are given access to a learning environment that provides for internal motivational influence and positive teacher interactions, those positive experiences can combat negative ones happening at home.

Ultimately, I am arguing that early interference in the classroom to provide positive experiences and an environment that encourages internal or intrinsic motivation could help to keep low-income students from falling so far behind. They may not get Spanish or music classes in their preschool, but we can help to provide the tools that will motivate them to learn and be successful. My suggestion is that more adults and role models need to be present in the classroom. Often, lower-income schools or neighborhoods have fewer teachers available per classroom, meaning students are getting less one-on-

one attention. The importance needs to be on the positive experiences that can be fostered, not the background that already exists. So, I am recommending the implementation of more support in the classroom, which can come in many forms. It could be parents or other family members volunteering in the classrooms, high school students coming in to “mentor” younger students a few times a month, or college students who need experience in the classroom.

There is opportunity for anyone and everyone to be involved, whether you have children or not, or the time and ability to assist in a classroom. Contact your local school board, your local government officials. Talk about it with others. This topic is important, not just for today, but for the future. If we are potentially leaving students behind, we don’t know whose talents are being overlooked or underdeveloped, or who is lacking the motivation, resources, or confidence to get where they want to be. We could be leaving our best students behind, and we are holding the future back.