

ERIC JENSEN

ENGAGING  
STUDENTS WITH  
**poverty**  
IN MIND

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES  
FOR RAISING ACHIEVEMENT



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## Preface

Looking at this book's title, maybe you're wondering about a couple of things. What would I know about this subject? What gives me, a middle-class white guy, the right to do a book on poverty? A skeptical teacher actually e-mailed me these questions. I think they are valid, and I'll answer them with a short story about a real kid.

This boy's first memory was of standing in the living room of his house at age 2. Tears streamed down his cheeks. His mother sheepishly walked out the front door. It was the day the divorce went through. Four tumultuous years later, his father remarried for the second of four times. The first of the boy's three stepmothers was alcoholic and abusive. Both of his older sisters quickly moved out of the house, one to live with neighbors and the other to live in the garage.

At home, the young boy often ate dog food for snacks between meals because he was locked out of the house. From 2nd through 10th grade, he was terrorized by his violent stepmother. Blood and broken glass were commonplace in the house. Every time things got *really* bad, the father moved the boy and his sister to stay with relatives. Then the boy's stepmother would promise to be better, and the trio would move back. The boy lived with his grandmother, his aunt, his uncle, and then on his own. The cycle repeated itself every couple of years. School was a confusing and disconnected process. During those turbulent years, he went to nine schools and had 153 teachers.

The boy wasn't at any school long enough to develop real friendships. He was often truant and frequently got sent to the office for discipline issues. In class, he usually sat at the back, troubled and disconnected from the content. Mostly, he thought about what it was going to be like when he got home. For him, home was a war zone. Getting homework done was impossible in his environment. He had zero parental support, and his only friends were troublemakers. His dad was gone most of the time, going to night school and often spending weekends working in the National Guard. His dad was also engaged in an affair, which made for even more friction and accusations at home.

Why am I telling you about this child's upbringing? What do these experiences have to do with this book?

This is the true story of my own childhood. I'm not asking for sympathy. My upbringing was not of my choosing, so I accept neither credit nor blame. This is just a brief edited piece of my life story. (The reality was not nearly so G-rated.) My point is this: don't judge someone by his or her skin color, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.

Just because I grew up white and middle-class does not mean I don't understand the "real world." I've been arrested twice and had eight near-death experiences. I lived in a laundry room for two years and in a 15-foot trailer for five years. I've been kidnapped and held at gunpoint. I've been robbed, I've been a stowaway, and I've had to ride boxcars for over 1,000 miles to get home. I understand what it's like for the kid sitting in the back of the room who can't focus and spends the class worrying about what might happen when he goes home. I know what it's like to be hungry all the time. I was one of those kids.

Teaching students who live in poverty—especially teaching in a school with a high-poverty student population, like a Title I school—exposes every single weakness a teacher has. If you don't learn, adapt, build relationships, and bring your A-game every single day, your class will be a living hell. If you're adaptive, if you dream big, if you care a lot, and if the impossible doesn't scare you, then your students will pick up on that and respect you. How do I know? Two middle school teachers made that difference in my life. They showed me empathy. They challenged me to do better, and they engaged me in class. I became a teacher because of them. I learned to focus,

write, and learn—and then to learn again, from my mistakes. Teachers can make a real difference in the lives of students who face continual adversity.

Some teachers tell me, “Those kids just need more discipline. You have to show them who’s in charge.” It doesn’t work that way. First, they are not “those kids”; they are *our* kids. The future of the United States depends on whether or not these kids succeed. They need loving, caring role models, not prison guards.

Second, if you want high-performing students, you must be willing to become a high-performing teacher. Stop pointing fingers and making excuses. Every student would rather have a caring, engaging teacher than a finger-pointer. The attitudes and strategies of yesterday are not enough anymore. It’s time to upgrade your teaching.

Why am I encouraging you to set your own bar so high? If you’re like most educators, it’s likely you’re pretty engaged with your work. You participate in meetings, take care of logistics, make phone calls and write e-mails, plan lessons, administer tests, and engage in a host of other activities. But what if you set the bar higher for your own classroom? I’m not saying, “Work more hours.” I am saying, “What if your new bar was to reach far more students in far more engaging and profound ways?” How engaging is today for every single one of your students?

You won’t ever get good at your job if you stay the same. You’ll still have underperforming students, and they will see through you with X-ray eyes. Teaching is easy; teaching *well* is hard work. If the only change you want to make is to add a few cutesy strategies, this book is not for you.

The truth is, teaching students well will change you. Let me repeat that: *teaching well will change you*. This book will enable you to understand the students you work with in new ways that will help you to help them succeed. If you are ready to take that journey, fasten your seat belt. It’s going to be a wild ride.

# Introduction

The academic record of students who live in poverty is not good. In the United States, if you are poor, your odds of graduating are lower than are those of a middle-income student. If you are also Hispanic or black, your odds just dropped again. Half of all poor students of color drop out of school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Seventy percent of all children who do not graduate from high school have spent at least a year living in poverty (Hernandez, 2012). In 2009, the dropout rate of students living in low-income families was about five times greater than the rate of students from high-income families: 7.4 percent versus 1.4 percent (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011).

This is not a failure within the students. There are no poor students with deficits; there are only broken schools that need fixing. There are no failing students; there are only schools that are failing our students. There are no unmotivated students; there are only teachers whose classrooms are frightfully boring, uncaring, or irrelevant. Such classrooms fail to engage students enough to be able to meet their needs. If you think these are outrageous statements, this book is for you. I'll show you the evidence and share the success stories.

## Engagement Matters

Engagement shows up as a vital achievement factor in most studies, although it's not always explicitly called *engagement*; sometimes it's

“disguised” as feedback, cooperative learning, project learning, or interactive teaching (Hattie, 2008). The correlation between student engagement and achievement is consistently strong and significant: research shows that for every 2 percent disengagement rises, pass rates on high-stakes tests drop by 1 percent (Valentine & Collins, 2011).

Students love being engaged, and they value engagement *very* highly (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Engagement is especially important for low-socioeconomic-status (SES) students. In their study of more than 1,800 students living in poverty, Finn and Rock (1997) found that school engagement was a key factor in whether students stayed in school.

Unfortunately, students are far less engaged than we think (Marks, 2000). In a survey (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007) of 81,000 U.S. high school students, fewer than 2 percent of respondents said that they were never bored. More than 30 percent of respondents claimed that they did not interact with their teachers on a daily basis. An overwhelming 75 percent of respondents said that they were bored because the material they were taught wasn’t interesting. Seventy-five percent also indicated that they went to school only to earn a diploma and get out. Not surprisingly, these same students reported spending very little time on homework.

The lack of engagement cited in this study is reflected in other research. Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, and Shernoff (2003) reported that the average high school student spends over 25 percent of the entire day slumped in his or her chair in a state of apathy. Another study (Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007) found that despite students’ overwhelming preference for group activities, 5th graders, on average, spent 91 percent of their time either working alone or listening to a teacher, with less than 5 percent of their time spent engaging in group learning activities. In fact, teachers spent over 20 percent of instruction time telling students how to manage materials or time. More critically, children from poverty had only a 10 percent likelihood to experience highly engaging, quality instruction across multiple grades. The authors of this study referred to their findings of the nature and quality of learning opportunities in U.S. elementary classrooms today as “sobering.”

These data speak to a significant problem in schools. To get kids to graduate, we need to keep them in school. To keep them in school, we need to

make our classrooms relevant, engaging, and full of affirming relationships. If your students are not engaged, it is time to upgrade your skill set and, possibly, your attitudes about students. Students do not magically become more interested and engaged every year they attend school unless *you* get better each year, too.

## A Note About Generalizations

The strategies in this book address seven factors that are crucial to student engagement and that are strongly tied to socioeconomic status. In my 2009 book *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, I cited more than 200 high-quality, peer-reviewed studies showing typical differences between low-SES and high-SES students. I introduced these differences in an attempt to help teachers understand the deep effects of poverty and to bolster their efforts to help students succeed. Some may believe that highlighting the differences between those who grow up poor and those who grow up in middle- or upper-income homes is classist. That is patently false; classism occurs when people promote policies that benefit one class *at the expense* of another.

Of course, it is important to keep in mind that socioeconomic classes are not homogeneous. There are no “average poor people” any more than there are “average middle-class people.” A powerful quality of the human brain is to learn from experiences and generalize to aid in subsequent decision making. For example, if you grew up poor and “made it” to the middle class, you might generalize that what worked for you should work for others struggling to advance in socioeconomic status. If the only low-income people you knew were abusing drugs and neglecting their children, you may generalize that poor people are “broken.” But it’s important to remember that your own world is just a grain of sand on a beach of experiences. Do not assume that your individual experiences are representative of everyone else’s. There are loving, joyful families that are poor, just as there are angry, small-minded families that are wealthy.

That said, generalizations are occasionally useful. When the research is compelling, I do generalize. I intend these generalizations to sketch a broad picture of what goes on inside the lives of people living in poverty. Although acknowledging the differences between low-SES and high-SES students

may be uncomfortable, we need to accept the fact that there are relevant differences among our students. Understanding this background and the behaviors that stem from it will help you better engage low-SES students in the classroom. If all teachers needed to do to succeed with students who live in poverty was to use the same strategies they already use with middle- and upper-income students, there would be far less of an achievement gap. Instead of fixating on politics or semantics, we need to stay focused on the goal of helping kids graduate and become productive citizens.

## Time for a Change

We need to face reality: the same old mind-sets and strategies are not working. It's time for a change. Over the years, I have visited numerous schools with high-poverty populations. Many of you work in schools like these, under difficult circumstances, and I empathize with you. But when you share your problems with me, my response will always be, "So what are you going to do differently tomorrow?" Every day, staff members at high-poverty schools around the world continue to do the same thing and vainly hope for a miracle that will never come. We have to make our own miracles.

In a recent e-mail to me, a principal wrote, "We did a book study on *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, and our scores are still the same. What happened?" If boosting student achievement were as easy as reading a book, every student's scores would be through the roof. It takes sustained commitment to ensure that every student succeeds. Until you make your school the best part of a student's day, you will struggle with student attendance, achievement, and graduation rates. Having a high-achieving school is no accident. It is the result of purposeful, engaged teaching over time.

That's where this book comes in. In *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, I advocated student engagement as a core strategy to help students of low socioeconomic status succeed, but I had limited space to delve deep into engagement strategies. The purpose of this book is to fill in the gaps—to provide the rationale behind engagement, generate more ideas, and build the attitudes to succeed with students who live in poverty. This book is a "no excuses" resource that will get you on the path toward making good things

happen every single day. If students do not come up and thank you for a great class, this book is for you.

Let's walk through how this book can help change the lives of everyone in your school, staff members and students alike.

## An Overview of the Book

Chapters 1 and 2 of this book lay the groundwork of the strategies that follow. Chapter 1 reveals seven factors that are crucial to student engagement and that are strongly tied to socioeconomic status. These engagement factors form the rationale behind the specific strategies I advocate and discuss throughout the book. Chapter 2 shares the rules for engagement that teachers are usually never taught but that are essential for success.

Chapters 3 through 7 get into the nitty-gritty of engaging students. Chapter 3 explains how to create a high-energy, engaging, and positive class climate that fosters success every day. Chapter 4 focuses on building cognitive capacity through engagement. Chapter 5 shows you how to build excitement for greater student motivation and effort. Chapter 6 focuses on ways to build a deep, sustained understanding of the content in students' brains. Chapter 7 provides engagement strategies to elevate both energy and focus in your classroom.

Chapters 8 and 9 take a broader view. Chapter 8 empowers you with strategies to automate engagement in your classroom and school, and Chapter 9 prompts you to look forward and plan how you will implement the actions laid out in this book.

An important note: although the first two chapters of this book focus intensely on the seven engagement factors and why the engagement strategies in this book are especially crucial for low-SES students, the remaining chapters often discuss engagement in broader terms. They do not explain in depth how each strategy helps students who live in poverty. This is intentional. Although this book is titled *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind*, it could just as easily be titled *An Expert Teacher's Guide to Mastering Engagement*. The mind-sets and the strategies in this book will work for every single student—rich, middle-income, or poor—and they can be used by teachers across all grade levels and content areas. As my description

of my childhood in the Preface indicates, not all students who grow up in adverse circumstances or are disengaged with school are poor. *If you teach, you will find something that applies to you and your work in this book.* It's just that this book will give you an even greater return on your investment with students who live in poverty.

Experiencing adverse circumstances as a child can shape a person's entire life. I know this personally, and maybe you do, too. This book is in your hands because engagement is the crucial factor that combats these circumstances and helps keep kids in school and on the path toward success.

This book has been a joy to write, and I hope you find it a joy to read and implement. Let's all work together to make both your work and your school *way* more engaging. When we do, everybody will win. Are you game?

# 1

## The Seven Engagement Factors

During the last 75 years, engaging low-SES students has been a challenge to public and private school teachers alike. Although most teachers have traditionally succeeded in reaching students who come from middle- and upper-income homes, they struggle to reach economically disadvantaged students.

This engagement gap is often blamed on ineffective local, state, and federal policies. It is widely acknowledged that poor students are more likely to attend schools that receive inadequate funding (Carey, 2005), pay lower teacher salaries (Karoly, 2001), have larger class sizes, provide a less rigorous curriculum, retain fewer experienced teachers (Barton, 2005), and are less likely to be safe learning environments.

But if these factors are so compelling, how do we explain the success stories? There is a key bit of evidence missing from this litany of adverse factors: over 50 percent of the academic outcomes of school-age children stem not from public policy but from what the teacher does in the classroom (Hattie, 2008). *Teaching matters more than any other factor in a student's school years.* In fact, research (Hanushek, 2005) tells us that quality teaching can completely offset the devastating effects poverty has on students' academic performance. Here's how: if any teacher performs at one standard deviation in quality (as measured by student achievement) above the district's mean adequate yearly progress rate for five years in a row, the resulting improvement in student learning would *entirely close the gap* between the performance of a typical student from poverty and the performance of

a higher-income student. If you are serious about helping kids succeed, stop wishing for a miracle. Five years of strong teaching *is* the miracle.

Although it may be understandable to complain about the “system” or local politics, these complaints do not amount to a valid excuse. With so many Title I schools succeeding, blaming the system is hollow reasoning. Nobody is buying into the excuses anymore.

It is time to end our pattern of failure. But before we tackle solutions, it will be helpful to gain an understanding of *why* so many teachers have difficulty working with and graduating students who live in poverty.

## The Seven Engagement Factors

In my broad survey of the research and through my many years of experience, I have uncovered seven factors that correlate with student engagement and that are strongly tied to socioeconomic status:

### The Seven Engagement Factors

1. Health and nutrition
2. Vocabulary
3. Effort and energy
4. Mind-set
5. Cognitive capacity
6. Relationships
7. Stress level

How can we decide which factors are more significant than others? In addition to my own findings, there is a standardized scale that measures the relative size of an intervention or factor known as *effect size*. The effect size is particularly useful for quantifying effects from widely varying scales and for understanding the comparative influence of each. Throughout this book, I occasionally touch on an engagement factor or strategy’s effect size as a way of showing its degree of impact. Generally, an effect size falls into one of five groups: negative, marginal, positive, substantial, or enormous (see Figure 1.1).

**Figure 1.1 Understanding Effect Size**

Under 0.00	= negative effect
0.00–0.20	= marginal effect
0.20–0.40	= positive effect
0.40–0.60	= substantial effect
0.60–2.00	= enormous effect

Let's review the research background of each of the seven key factors and its connection to socioeconomic status and student engagement. You'll see that growing up in poverty can affect students in wide-ranging ways that may surprise you.

## Factor 1: Health and Nutrition

Physical, mental, and emotional health support engagement and learning. Sadly, the lower a child's socioeconomic status is, the greater the health risks he or she faces (Sapolsky, 2005). The lower parents' income is, the more likely it is that children will be born premature, low in birth weight, or with disabilities (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Compared with their higher-SES counterparts, people living in poverty are less likely to exercise, get proper diagnoses of health problems, receive appropriate and prompt medical attention, or be prescribed appropriate medications or interventions (Evans, Wells, & Moch, 2003). They experience a higher incidence of such conditions as asthma (Gottlieb, Beiser, & O'Connor, 1995), untreated ear infections and hearing-loss issues (Menyuk, 1980), tuberculosis (Rogers & Ginzberg, 1993), and obesity (Wang & Zhang, 2006). In addition, people living in poverty are more likely to live in old and inadequately maintained homes with peeling paint and outdated plumbing, which increases their exposure to lead (Sargent et al., 1995), and their neighborhoods are less likely to provide high-quality social, municipal, and local services (Evans, 2004). A study of 3,000 subjects found that low-SES people are also more likely to have mental health problems (Xue, Leventhal, Brooks-Gunn, & Earls, 2005).

Each of these health-related factors has a significant effect on cognition and behavior. For example, exposure to lead correlates with poor working

memory and a weaker ability to link cause and effect. That means that although your students may know the behavior rules, they won't necessarily understand when and how those rules apply. Students with ear infections may have additional trouble with sound discrimination, making it tough for them to follow directions, engage in demanding auditory processing, or even understand the teacher.

Many of the health problems experienced by lower-SES people can be linked to poor nutrition. In 2010, 14.5 percent of U.S. families were food insecure (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2011). Skipping breakfast is disproportionately prevalent among urban minority youth, many of whom live in poverty. Recent research suggests it has had a clear negative impact on their academic achievement by adversely affecting cognition and absenteeism (Basch, 2011).

In addition to inadequate *quantity* of food, food *quality* is also an issue: children who are raised in poor households typically eat a low-cost, low-nutrition diet that can have adverse effects on the brain (Gómez-Pinilla, 2008).

Poor nutrition poses a strong risk to students' learning and engagement. When kids don't eat well, or when they don't eat at all, their behavior suffers, and they have a tougher time learning. Poor nutrition at breakfast affects gray-matter mass in kids' brains (Taki, 2010). Deficiencies in minerals are linked to weaker memory, and low levels of certain nutrients such as omega-3 fatty acids are linked to depression.

The two most important fuels for the brain are oxygen and glucose. To get a stable supply of glucose to the brain, kids ideally should eat either a high-protein breakfast including, for example, lean meats, eggs, or yogurt, or one that includes complex carbohydrates, such as oatmeal. Either of these breakfasts will stabilize and manage the levels of glucose over several hours. In contrast, simple carbohydrates such as sugary cereals, pastries, PopTarts, pancakes, or fast food—which are often what poor children eat for breakfast—create wide fluctuations in blood sugar. Unstable glucose levels, whether too high or too low, are linked to weaker cognitive and behavioral outcomes (Wang, Szabo, & Dykman, 2004).

Although hunger does have an adverse effect on academic performance, food quality is more important than quantity (Weinreb et al., 2002).

Cognitively, it's better to eat less but better-quality food. The brain actually produces more new brain cells on a restricted-calorie diet than on an ordinary one (Kitamura, Mishina, & Sugiyama, 2006).

Although the factor of health and nutrition is the least directly addressed engagement factor in this book and is not easily “fixed” by teachers, I include it because it strongly affects most of the other six engagement factors. Poor health and nutrition cannot be ignored; nor should they be used as an excuse for letting students underperform. Before you assume that poor nutrition is the irreparable cause of your students' unsatisfactory behavior or academic performance, consider this: thousands of teachers succeed with low-SES students who don't have ideal diets but who nevertheless demonstrate appropriate behavior and earn high achievement scores. You have a greater effect on your students' performance than you may think. Creating a highly engaging classroom can help compensate for behavioral and cognitive issues resulting from poor nutrition. Chapter 7 discusses strategies you can use to help regulate students' glucose and oxygen levels.

## Factor 2: Vocabulary

A child's vocabulary is part of his or her brain's toolkit for learning, memory, and cognition. Words help children represent, manipulate, and reframe information. Unfortunately, the vocabulary differences among children of different socioeconomic status are staggering. A six-year study by Hart and Risley (2003) found that by age 3, the children of professional parents were adding words to their vocabularies at about twice the rate of children in welfare families. Both the quantity and the quality of phrases directed at the children by caregivers correlated directly with income levels. Here's another stunning illustration of the vocabulary chasm: *toddlers* from middle- and upper-income families actually used more words in talking to their parents than low-SES *mothers* used in talking to their own children (Bracey, 2006).

Low-SES students' smaller vocabularies place them at risk for academic failure (Gonzalez, 2005; Hoff, 2003; Walker, Greenwood, Hart, & Carta, 1994). It's up to teachers to try to build low-SES students' vocabularies. Otherwise, these students will struggle and disengage. When students don't understand many of the words used in class or in their reading materials,

they may tune out or believe that school is not for them. Often, they won't participate because they don't want to risk looking stupid, especially in front of their peers.

Vocabulary building *must* form a key part of the enrichment experiences for students at school. Academic vocabulary—the vocabulary students need in order to understand the concepts and content taught in the various subject areas and to succeed on tests—is particularly critical. Teachers must be relentless about using nonverbal communication, visual aids, and context to add meaning and incorporate vocabulary building in engagement activities whenever appropriate.

### **Factor 3: Effort and Energy**

The sight of kids slouching in their chairs, inattentive to the goings-on of the class, is a familiar one to many teachers. But uninformed teachers often interpret the reasons behind the disengagement differently according to SES. Whereas they may label middle-income students as “not reaching their potential,” they often assume that low-income students are simply lazy, or that they show little effort because their parents are lazy.

Yet people living in poverty typically value education as much as middle-income people do (Compton-Lilly, 2003), and they spend at least as many hours working each week as do their higher-SES counterparts (Bernstein, Mishel, & Boushey, 2002). In fact, almost two-thirds of low-income families include at least one parent who works full-time and year-round (Gorski, 2008). There is no “inherited laziness” passed down from poor parents to their children. Poor people simply work at lower-paying jobs.

Students living in poverty are practical about what motivates them. They want to know who the teacher really is, and they want the teaching to connect to their world. When teachers cannot or will not connect personally, students are less likely to trust them. Teachers must make connections to low-SES students' culture in ways that help the students see a viable reason to play the academic “game.” When teachers remain ignorant of their students' culture, students often experience a demotivating disconnect between the school world and their home life (Lindsey, Karns, & Myatt, 2010). As a

result, they give up. Who you are and how you teach both have a huge influence on whether low-SES students will bother to engage.

Effort matters a great deal in learning. If you see motivational differences in the classroom, remember your own school days. When you were affirmed, challenged, and encouraged, you worked harder. When the learning got you excited, curious, and intrigued, you put in more effort. We've all seen how students will often work much harder in one class than in another. The difference is in the teaching. When you care about your students, they respond. When kids like and respect you, they try harder.

A student who is not putting in effort is essentially telling you that your teaching is not engaging. Give that same kid an engaging teacher, and a whole new student will emerge. The teacher has the power to make a difference. Take control and be the determining factor in the classroom.

## Factor 4: Mind-Set

Research suggests that lower socioeconomic status often correlates with a negative view of the future (Robb, Simon, & Wardle, 2009) and a sense of helplessness. Positive response outcome expectancy (“coping”) is associated with high subjective SES, whereas no expectancy (“helplessness”) is associated with low subjective SES (Odén et al., 2013). In short, poverty is associated with lowered expectations about future outcomes.

When it comes to success in school, mind-set is a crucial internal attitude for both students and teachers. A student's attitude about learning is a moderately robust predictive factor of academic achievement (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). Taken together, student mind-set and teacher support can form either a significant asset or a serious liability. When both teachers and students believe that students have a fixed amount of “smarts” that cannot be increased, students are far more likely to disengage. Conversely, when students have positive attitudes about their own learning capacity, and when teachers focus on growth and change rather than on having students reach arbitrary milestones—a strategy that leaves students more vulnerable to negative feedback and thus more likely to disengage from challenging learning opportunities (Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006)—student engagement increases.

Often, teachers underestimate the prevalence of negative emotions in their students' lives (Jordan et al., 2011) and misinterpret these emotions. For example, they may view anger as a sign of students' insubordination or lack of self-control, when it is more likely to be a symptom of depression. Teachers may unknowingly reinforce false assumptions that certain students don't have the "mental strength" or "staying power" to succeed, and that belief can hurt students' performance (Miller et al., 2012) and substantially affect students' ability to recruit their cognitive resources to sustain learning over time.

Therefore, teacher support is essential to the academic success of low-SES students, many of whom do not believe in their capacity to learn and grow. Teachers' positive, growth-oriented mind-sets can help compensate for students' negative mind-sets. Gradually, with teacher support, students will begin to believe in themselves and in their capacity to reach their goals and thus increase their own learning success.

## **Factor 5: Cognitive Capacity**

Cognitive capacity is highly complex. It can be measured in many different ways and is affected significantly by socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status is strongly associated with a number of measures of cognitive ability, including IQ, achievement tests, grade retention rates, and literacy (Baydar, Brooks-Gunn, & Furstenberg, 1993; Brooks-Gunn, Guo, & Furstenberg, 1993; Liaw & Brooks-Gunn, 1994; Smith, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1997). Studies show that low-SES children perform below higher-SES children on tests of intelligence and academic achievement (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994) and are also more likely to fail courses, be placed in special education, or drop out of high school (McLoyd, 1998).

Poverty affects the physical brain. In poor children's brains, the hippocampus—the critical structure for new learning and memory—is smaller, with less volume (Hanson, Chandra, Wolfe, & Pollak, 2011). A 2008 study (Amat et al.) showed a correlation between hippocampal volume and general intelligence.

Adverse environmental factors can artificially suppress children's IQ. For example, poor children are more likely to be exposed to lead, which correlates with poor working memory. The majority of children with low working memory struggle in both learning measures and verbal ability and exhibit such cognitive problems as short attention spans, high levels of distractibility, problems in monitoring the quality of their work, and difficulties in generating new solutions to problems (Alloway, Gathercole, Kirkwood, & Elliott, 2009).

The good news is that a brain that is susceptible to adverse environmental effects is equally susceptible to positive, enriching effects. IQ is not fixed, and we can influence many of the factors affecting it. Students with low cognitive capacity are ripe for an engaging teacher who is willing to teach the core cognitive skills that lead to academic success.

## **Factor 6: Relationships**

All children need reliable, positive adults in their lives. When a child's early experiences are chaotic, or if at least one parent is absent, the child's developing brain often becomes insecure and stressed. This insecurity is more pronounced among children living in poverty. Marriage rates have dropped by half in the last two generations among low-SES populations (Fields, 2004). Almost three-fourths of all poor parents with children are unmarried, compared with about one-fourth of higher-SES parents (Bishaw & Renwick, 2009).

Strong and secure home relationships help support and stabilize children's behavior. Children who grow up with positive relationships learn healthy, appropriate emotional responses to everyday situations. Children raised in poor households often fail to learn these responses because of absent or stressed caregivers. Learning these responses requires countless hours of positive caregiving (Malatesta & Izard, 1984), which poor children are less likely to receive than their higher-SES peers. In poor homes, the ratio of positives (affirmations) to negatives (reprimands) is typically a 1-to-2 ratio. Contrast this to the 6-to-1 positives-to-negatives ratio in the homes of higher-income families (Hart & Risley, 1995).

These relational deficits can negatively affect students' engagement and achievement. The probability of dropout and school failure increases as a function of the timing and length of time children were exposed to relational adversity (Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). Poor emotional regulation among prekindergarten children predicts academic difficulties in 1st grade (Trentacosta & Izard, 2007). Low-SES adolescents are more likely to experience depression (Tomarken, Dichter, Garber, & Simien, 2004), and among older students, lower SES is associated with overreacting to others' emotions (Gianaros et al., 2008), which can lead to inappropriate school behaviors. Social dysfunction may inhibit students' ability to work well in cooperative groups. This exclusion can hurt overall classroom cooperation and harmony and lead to increasingly troubled academic performance and behavior.

Many poor children simply do not have the repertoire of necessary social-emotional responses for school. It is easy to misinterpret low-SES students' emotional and social differences as a lack of respect, poor manners, or laziness. Yet it is more accurate and helpful to understand that many poor students come to school with a narrower-than-expected range of appropriate emotional responses. Many simply do not know how to behave.

Developing strong teacher-student relationships helps counter the negative effects of these inappropriate emotional responses and has a profound effect on student engagement. To succeed, you may need to shift your own responses. Instead of disciplining students for poor emotional responsiveness, teach them how to respond in ways that will help keep them out of trouble. Instead of becoming upset, retool your thinking, open your heart, and show students how to behave. Learn to reframe your thinking: *expect* that students may be impulsive, blurt inappropriate language, and act "disrespectful" until you teach them otherwise. *Expect* kids to test their boundaries until they learn stronger social and emotional skills. They will exhibit coarse behavior until the relationships you build and the school's social conditions make it attractive for them *not* to behave inappropriately.

## **Factor 7: Stress Level**

Stress can be defined as the body's response to the perception of loss of control resulting from an adverse situation or person. Small amounts of stress

are healthy; in fact, occasional stress can actually build resilience. However, children raised in poverty are more likely than their affluent peers to experience both acute and chronic stress (Almeida, Neupert, Banks, & Serido, 2005; Evans & Schamberg, 2009), which leave a devastating imprint on their lives. *Acute stress* refers to severe, intense stress resulting from exposure to such trauma as abuse or violence, whereas *chronic stress* refers to high stress sustained over time.

The frequency and intensity of both stressful life events and daily hassles are greater among low-SES children (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994). In any given year, more than half of all poor children deal with evictions, utility disconnections, overcrowding, or lack of a stove or refrigerator, compared with only 13 percent of well-off children (Lichter, 1997). In addition, compared with middle-income children, low-SES children are exposed to higher levels of familial violence, disruption, and separation (Emery & Laumann-Billings, 1998). Abuse is a major stressor. Caregivers' disciplinary measures grow harsher as income decreases (Gershoff, 2002; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger, 2004). Lower-income parents tend to be more authoritarian with their children, issuing harsh demands and inflicting physical punishment (Bradley, Corwyn, Burchinal, McAdoo, & Coll, 2001).

Stress exerts a relentless, insidious influence on children's physical, psychological, emotional, and cognitive functioning—areas that affect brain development, academic success, and social competence (Evans, Kim, Ting, Teshler, & Shannis, 2007). At school, a child who comes from a stressful home environment tends to channel that stress into disruptive behavior (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), such as impulsivity. Impulsivity is commonly misdiagnosed as AD/HD, but it is actually an exaggerated response to stress that serves as a survival mechanism: in conditions of poverty, those most likely to survive are those who have an exaggerated stress response. Each risk factor in a student's life increases impulsivity and diminishes his or her capacity to defer gratification (Evans, 2003).

Acute stress in particular is more likely to lead to aggressive, “in-your-face” behavior. In the context of a high-stress life, aggression enables a student to feel in control and take charge of a situation. Like impulsivity, it's an exaggerated stress response that serves as a survival strategy: fight first, ask questions later. Aggressive school behaviors include talking back to the

teacher, getting in the teacher's face, or showing inappropriate body language or facial responses.

Conversely, chronic stress can result in the opposite effect: an increased sense of detachment and hopelessness over time (Bolland, Lian, & Formichella, 2005). Low-SES students are more likely to give up or become passive and uninterested in school (Johnson, 1981). This giving-up process is known as *learned helplessness* (Hiroto & Seligman, 1975) and, sadly, frequently takes hold as early as 1st grade. The more stress children experience, the more they perceive events as uncontrollable and unpredictable—and the less hope they feel about making changes in their lives (Henry, 2005). Passive school behaviors include failure to respond to questions or requests, passivity, slumped posture, and disconnection from peers or academics.

All of these behaviors—both aggressive and passive—are often interpreted as being signs of “an attitude” or laziness, but they are actually symptoms of stress disorders. Overall, stress has an insidious effect on student engagement. It is linked to more than 50 percent of all absences (Johnston-Brooks, Lewis, Evans, & Whalen, 1998); impairs attention and concentration (Erickson, Drevets, & Schulkin, 2003); reduces motivation and effort (Johnson, 1981); and increases the likelihood of depression (Hammack, Robinson, Crawford, & Li, 2004).

But kids are not stuck this way. For example, when aggressive low-SES students attended classes that taught appropriate coping skills and stress-relieving techniques, there was a decrease in hostility (Wadsworth, Raviv, Compas, & Connor-Smith, 2005). Similarly, giving students appropriate amounts of control over their daily lives at school helps diminish the effects of chronic and acute stress and increases engagement. Later in the book, we will explore why giving students more control over their classroom experiences is part of the solution (Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009).

## **Making a Difference**

In the following chapters, you will learn powerful engagement strategies that will help you nurture a positive climate, build cognitive capacity, encourage greater effort, build understanding, and activate energy. Starting with Chapter 3, each chapter includes a section at the beginning called “The

Connecting Engagement Factors.” This section lists which of the seven key engagement factors connect with the strategies provided in the chapter. Some chapters will connect to more factors than others, but the book as a whole will enable you to influence every single one of the seven engagement factors discussed here. It’s not easy: this process requires you to upgrade your repertoire, roll up your sleeves, get a fiercely positive attitude, and charge ahead into your job. But you can make a difference.

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## About the Author



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