Poverty is an uncomfortable word. I'm often asked, "What should I expect from kids from low-income households?" Typically, teachers are unsure what to do differently.

Just as the phrase middle class tells us little about a person, the word poverty typically tells us little about the students we serve. We know, for example, that the poor and middle classes have many overlapping values, including valuing education and the importance of hard work (Gorski, 2008). But if poor people were exactly the same cognitively, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally as those from the middle class, then the exact same teaching provided to both middle-class students and students from poverty would bring the exact same results.

But it doesn't work that way. In one study of 81,000 students across the United States, the students not in Title I programs consistently reported higher levels of engagement than students who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Are children from poverty more likely to struggle with engagement in school? The answer is yes.

Seven differences between middle-class and low-income students show up at school. By understanding those differences and how to address them, teachers can help mitigate some of the negative effects of poverty.

But first, my most important suggestion is to get to know your students well. Without respect—and without taking time to connect with your students—these seven factors will mean little.

**Difference 1: Health and Nutrition**

Overall, poor people are less likely to exercise, get proper diagnoses, receive appropriate and prompt medical attention, or be prescribed appropriate medications or interventions. A study by two prominent neuro scientists suggested that intelligence is linked to health (Gray & Thompson, 2004). The poor have more untreated ear infections and hearing loss issues (Menyuk, 1980); greater exposure to lead (Sargent et al., 1995); and a higher incidence of asthma (Gottlieb, Beiser, & O'Connor, 1995) than middle-class children. Each of these health-related factors can affect attention, reasoning, learning, and memory.

Nutrition plays a crucial role as well. Children who grow up in poor families are exposed to food with lower nutritional value. This can adversely affect them even in the womb (Antonow-Schlorke et al., 2011). Moreover, poor nutrition at breakfast affects gray matter mass in children's brains (Taki et al., 2010). Skipping breakfast is highly prevalent among urban minority youth, and it negatively affects students' academic achievement by adversely affecting cognition and raising absenteeism (Basch, 2011).

When students experience poor nutrition and diminished health practices, it's harder for them to listen, concentrate, and learn. Exposure to lead is correlated with poor working
Kids with ear infections may have trouble with sound discrimination, making it tough to follow directions, do highly demanding auditory processing, and understand the teacher. This can hurt reading ability and other skills. Poor diets also affect behavior. Students can often appear listless (with low energy) or hyperactive (on a sugar “high”).

What You Can Do

Remember, the two primary foods for the brain are oxygen and glucose; oxygen reacts with glucose to produce energy for cell function. Schools can provide these at zero cost. Having students engage in slow stretching while taking slow deep breaths can increase their oxygenation. Yoga training has been shown to increase metabolic controls so children can better manage themselves.

Recess and physical education contribute to greater oxygen intake and better learning (Winter et al., 2007). Never withhold recess from students for a disciplinary issue; there are countless other ways to let them know they behaved inappropriately. Children need physical education programs at every level to perform well academically. In addition, the use of games, movement, and drama will trigger the release of glucose, stored in the body as glycogen. Proper glucose levels are associated with stronger memory and cognitive function. In short, physical activity will reduce some of the issues associated with poor nutrition and will build student health.

Difference 2: Vocabulary

Children who grow up in low socioeconomic conditions typically have a smaller vocabulary than middle-class children do, which raises the risk for academic failure (Walker, Greenwood, Hart, & Carta, 1994). Children from low-income families hear, on average, 13 million words by age 4.
In middle-class families, children hear about 26 million words during that same time period. In upper-income families, they hear a staggering 46 million words by age 4—three times as many as their lower-income counterparts (Hart & Risley, 1995). In fact, 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). This language difference is not subtle; it's a mind-boggling, jaw-dropping cognitive chasm.

A child's vocabulary is part of the brain's tool kit for learning, memory, and cognition. Words help children represent, manipulate, and reframe information. Kids from low-income families are less likely to know the words a teacher uses in class or the words that appear in reading material. When children aren't familiar with words, they don't want to read, often tune out, or feel like school is not for them. Also, many students don't want to risk looking stupid (especially to their peers), so they won't participate in class.

What You Can Do

Vocabulary building must form a key part of enrichment experiences for students, and teachers must be relentless about introducing and using new words. Include vocabulary building in engagement activities, such as by creating “trading card” activities, in which students write a vocabulary word on one side of a 3 x 5 card and a sentence using the word correctly on the other. Students can do a “class mixer” and test other students; they give the new word to their partner, and their partner has to use it in a sentence. Teachers can also draw cards from a bowl and ask the class to use the new word in a sentence.

Teachers can incorporate vocabulary practice into daily rituals. For example, the teacher posts a word for the day and when either the teacher or a student uses it—and another student is first to point it out—that student gets a simple privilege. Classroom teams or cooperative groups should present a word for the day to the whole class every day, with teachers reinforcing those words for days and weeks afterward.

Difference 3: Effort

Uninformed teachers may think that poor children slouch, slump, and show little effort because they are—or their parents are—lazy. Yet research suggests that parents from poor families work as much as parents of middle- or upper-class families do (Economic Policy Institute, 2002). There’s no “inherited laziness” passed down from parents. One reason many students seem unmotivated is because of lack of hope and optimism. Low socioeconomic status and the accompanying financial hardships are correlated with depressive symptoms (Butterworth, Olesen, & Leach, 2012). Moreover, the passive “I give up” posture may actually be learned helplessness, shown for decades in the research as a symptom of a stress disorder and depression. Research from 60 high-poverty schools tells us that the primary factor in student motivation is effort.
As a result, there is a disconnect between the school and their home life. Students often experience demotivation and disengagement without clear links between classroom learning and the real world. Using money, shopping, technology, and family roles can help them see connections to students' worlds in ways that involve them more in decision making.

First, strengthen your relationships with students. Familiarity with their backgrounds is key in whether the student stayed in school (Finn & Rock, 1997). In a study of more than 1,800 children, students who are not putting out effort. The feedback from poverty, school engagement was a key factor in whether the student stayed in school (Finn & Rock, 1997). Effort can be viewed as a moderating variable in the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement. Low or no expectations from adults who came from the same circumstances the students did and who were simply giving you feedback. When the learning got you excited, curious, and intrigued, you put effort in. When you liked your teacher, you worked harder. When the feedback affirmed, challenged, and encouraged, students work harder. When students believe they are good at something, he or she has "other" strengths (Cooper, 2012). Instead, focus on affirming and reinforcing effort.

Second, teachers must make connections to students' worlds. Can you tie classroom academic game. Can you tie classroom learning to the real world? Use money, shopping, technology, and their family roles to help them see connections to students' worlds in ways that involve them more in decision making.

Students who show little or no effort are likely to disengage many of them (Miller et al., 2012). There's an alternative to brain drain. Instead, say, "Stick with this just a bit longer. You can do this! Your mind is a powerful force to finish. It's late in the day, and we've all said, "I don't have the energy." Instead of saying, "Don't feel bad that you didn't do it," say, "You can do it!" Instead of saying, "I don't have the energy," say, "You can do it!"

Third, affirm effort every day in class. What have I done to affirm and reinforce effort? Students need to know that effort matters and that they can adjust it for even greater success. Affirm your students, and let them know they can grow in intelligence along with this. You must help them see that effort matters and that they can adjust it for even greater success.

Fourth, set high goals and sell students on affirming and reinforcing effort. Students on their chances to reach them. Set high goals and believe in the goals and teach students to believe in the goals. Students who show little or no effort are likely to disengage many of them (Miller et al., 2012). There's an alternative to brain drain. Instead, say, "Stick with this just a bit longer. You can do this! Your mind is a powerful force to finish. It's late in the day, and we've all said, "I don't have the energy." Instead of saying, "Don't feel bad that you didn't do it," say, "You can do it!" Instead of saying, "I don't have the energy," say, "You can do it!"

Finally, provide daily feedback so students can adjust their effort. WhatYouCanDo: Set high goals and believe in the goals. Teach students to believe in the goals. Students who show little or no effort are likely to disengage many of them (Miller et al., 2012). In short, being poor is associated with lowered expectations (prompt, actionable, and task-specific).

Hope is a powerful thing. Research suggests that lower socioeconomic status is often associated with viewing the future as containing more negative events than positive ones (Robb, Simon, et al., 2012). There's an alternative to brain drain. Instead, say, "Stick with this just a bit longer. You can do this! Your mind is a powerful force to finish. It's late in the day, and we've all said, "I don't have the energy." Instead of saying, "Don't feel bad that you didn't do it," say, "You can do it!" Instead of saying, "I don't have the energy," say, "You can do it!"

Different students have different home environments; it's the school and the teacher (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). Effort can be viewed as a moderating variable in the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement. Low or no expectations from adults who came from the same circumstances the students did and who were simply giving you feedback. When the learning got you excited, curious, and intrigued, you put effort in. When you liked your teacher, you worked harder. When the feedback affirmed, challenged, and encouraged, students work harder. When students believe they are good at something, he or she has "other" strengths (Cooper, 2012). Instead, focus on affirming and reinforcing effort.

Children from lower socioeconomic status is often associated with viewing the future as containing more negative events than positive ones (Robb, Simon, et al., 2012). There's an alternative to brain drain. Instead, say, "Stick with this just a bit longer. You can do this! Your mind is a powerful force to finish. It's late in the day, and we've all said, "I don't have the energy." Instead of saying, "Don't feel bad that you didn't do it," say, "You can do it!" Instead of saying, "I don't have the energy," say, "You can do it!"

Second, teachers must make connections to students' worlds. Can you tie classroom academic game. Can you tie classroom learning to the real world? Use money, shopping, technology, and their family roles to help them see connections to students' worlds in ways that involve them more in decision making.

Third, affirm effort every day in class. What have I done to affirm and reinforce effort? Students need to know that effort matters and that they can adjust it for even greater success. Affirm your students, and let them know they can grow in intelligence along with this. You must help them see that effort matters and that they can adjust it for even greater success.

Fourth, set high goals and sell students on affirming and reinforcing effort. Students on their chances to reach them. Set high goals and believe in the goals. Teach students to believe in the goals. Students who show little or no effort are likely to disengage many of them (Miller et al., 2012). In short, being poor is associated with lowered expectations (prompt, actionable, and task-specific).

Hope is a powerful thing. Research suggests that lower socioeconomic status is often associated with viewing the future as containing more negative events than positive ones (Robb, Simon, et al., 2012). There's an alternative to brain drain. Instead, say, "Stick with this just a bit longer. You can do this! Your mind is a powerful force to finish. It's late in the day, and we've all said, "I don't have the energy." Instead of saying, "Don't feel bad that you didn't do it," say, "You can do it!" Instead of saying, "I don't have the energy," say, "You can do it!"

Different students have different home environments; it's the school and the teacher (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). Effort can be viewed as a moderating variable in the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement. Low or no expectations from adults who came from the same circumstances the students did and who were simply giving you feedback. When the learning got you excited, curious, and intrigued, you put effort in. When you liked your teacher, you worked harder. When the feedback affirmed, challenged, and encouraged, students work harder. When students believe they are good at something, he or she has "other" strengths (Cooper, 2012). Instead, focus on affirming and reinforcing effort.

Children from lower socioeconomic status is often associated with viewing the future as containing more negative events than positive ones (Robb, Simon, et al., 2012). There's an alternative to brain drain. Instead, say, "Stick with this just a bit longer. You can do this! Your mind is a powerful force to finish. It's late in the day, and we've all said, "I don't have the energy." Instead of saying, "Don't feel bad that you didn't do it," say, "You can do it!" Instead of saying, "I don't have the energy," say, "You can do it!"

Second, teachers must make connections to students' worlds. Can you tie classroom academic game. Can you tie classroom learning to the real world? Use money, shopping, technology, and their family roles to help them see connections to students' worlds in ways that involve them more in decision making.

Third, affirm effort every day in class. What have I done to affirm and reinforce effort? Students need to know that effort matters and that they can adjust it for even greater success. Affirm your students, and let them know they can grow in intelligence along with this. You must help them see that effort matters and that they can adjust it for even greater success.

Fourth, set high goals and sell students on affirming and reinforcing effort. Students on their chances to reach them. Set high goals and believe in the goals. Teach students to believe in the goals. Students who show little or no effort are likely to disengage many of them (Miller et al., 2012). In short, being poor is associated with lowered expectations (prompt, actionable, and task-specific).

Hope is a powerful thing. Research suggests that lower socioeconomic status is often associated with viewing the future as containing more negative events than positive ones (Robb, Simon, et al., 2012). There's an alternative to brain drain. Instead, say, "Stick with this just a bit longer. You can do this! Your mind is a powerful force to finish. It's late in the day, and we've all said, "I don't have the energy." Instead of saying, "Don't feel bad that you didn't do it," say, "You can do it!" Instead of saying, "I don't have the energy," say, "You can do it!"

Different students have different home environments; it's the school and the teacher (Irvin, Meece, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2011). Effort can be viewed as a moderating variable in the relationship between socioeconomic status and achievement. Low or no expectations from adults who came from the same circumstances the students did and who were simply giving you feedback. When the learning got you excited, curious, and intrigued, you put effort in. When you liked your teacher, you worked harder. When the feedback affirmed, challenged, and encouraged, students work harder. When students believe they are good at something, he or she has "other" strengths (Cooper, 2012). Instead, focus on affirming and reinforcing effort.

Children from lower socioeconomic status is often associated with viewing the future as containing more negative events than positive ones (Robb, Simon, et al., 2012). There's an alternative to brain drain. Instead, say, "Stick with this just a bit longer. You can do this! Your mind is a powerful force to finish. It's late in the day, and we've all said, "I don't have the energy." Instead of saying, "Don't feel bad that you didn't do it," say, "You can do it!" Instead of saying, "I don't have the energy," say, "You can do it!"
End by affirming common goals and interests ("We're both in this together. We can make this work—if we each do our part").

Difference 7: Distress

Although small amounts of stress are healthy, acute and chronic stress—known as distress—is toxic. Children living in poverty experience greater chronic stress than do their more affluent counterparts. Low-income parents' chronic stress affects their kids through chronic activation of their children's immune systems, which taxes available resources and has long-reaching effects (Blair & Raver, 2012). Distress affects brain development, academic success, and social competence (Evans, Kim, Ting, Tesher, & Shannis, 2007). It also impairs behaviors; reduces attentional control (Liston, McEwen, & Casey, 2009); boosts impulsivity (Evans, 2003); and impairs working memory (Evans & Schamberg, 2009).

Distressed children typically exhibit one of two behaviors: angry "in your face" assertiveness or disconnected "leave me alone" passivity. To the uninformed, the student may appear to be either out of control, showing an attitude, or lazy. But those behaviors are actually symptoms of stress disorders—and distress influences many behaviors that influence engagement.

The more aggressive behaviors include talking back to the teacher, getting in the teacher's face, using inappropriate body language, and making inappropriate facial expressions. The more passive behaviors include failing to respond to questions or requests, exhibiting passivity, slumping or slouching, and disconnecting from peers or academic work.

What You Can Do

Address the real issue—distress—and the symptoms will diminish over time. Begin by building stronger relationships with students; this helps alleviate student stress. Reduce stress by embedding more classroom fun in academics. Provide temporary cognitive support—that is, help students get the extra glucose and oxygen they need—by having them engage in such sensory motor activities as the childhood game "head-toes-knees-shoulders," in which children touch different parts of their bodies in quick succession. Such actions can support behavioral regulation, which is so important for early academic success.

Next, don't try to exert more control over the student's life. This will only create continued issues with engagement. Instead, give students more control over their own daily lives at school. Encourage responsibility and leadership by offering choices, having students engage in projects, and supporting teamwork and classroom decision making. Having a sense of control is the fundamental element that helps diminish the effects of chronic and acute stress.

Finally, teach students ongoing coping skills so they can better deal with their stressors. For example, give them a simple, "If this, then that" strategy for solving problems using new skills. You can do this through telling stories about your own daily stressors, allowing students to brainstorm solutions, and then sharing the coping tools that worked for you and modeling how you addressed various challenges.

Seeing Clearly

Remember, students in poverty are not broken or damaged. In fact, human.