

Negotiating Barriers to Learning

Susan Herbert

Part 1

I recently read the award-winning novel, “White Teeth,” by Zadie Smith, in which she touched on the issue of parental knowledge of the subject matter (content) that may arise within the formal school context, and parents’ feelings of inadequacy when they cannot assist their children with schoolwork. Another writer, Andrea Levy, author of the novel “Never Far from Nowhere,” also raised the issue of parents’ feelings of inadequacy within the formal educational system. Hyacinth Evans, a Jamaican researcher, puts it thus: “parents from lower socioeconomic groups do not feel comfortable in schools and are often intimidated by teachers.”

Most of us are aware, from either popular culture—the novel, movies—or from formal publications of academic research, that there is a relationship between level of parental education and student achievement within the formal school context. A recent article in the *Express* (13/10/07), which reported on siblings who were scholarship winners and which traced their parents’ educational history, illustrated the point. Evans presented Coleman’s framework in which family background comprises financial, human, and social capital. This framework can be used to explain intergenerational academic success in terms of children’s access to the human and social capital of the home. The former comprises parents’ knowledge of the concepts and explanations presented in the formal setting, and the latter their physical presence (availability) to assist, encourage, and motivate their children.

If we accept this framework, then we can begin to understand the phenomenon of student underperformance or underachievement at school. It also means that the tasks that teachers assign for homework can be a significant barrier to learning. This article discusses barriers to learning that are experienced by students, especially those of low socio-economic status (SES), and suggests strategies for negotiating these barriers.

As a homework assignment, some pupils were provided with a number of sentences and were expected to supply a word opposite in meaning (the antonym) to one selected in the sentence. The sentence provided the word in context, which is useful in determining the meaning of the selected word. This task appears simple enough, and we could speculate about the purpose of the assignment. It might have been to provide pupils with opportunities to use the vocabulary covered during Language Arts classes that day. The assignment would then have provided the teacher with useful feedback on students’ knowledge and understanding. But suppose that the task was used as a teaching method for concept attainment—a strategy to have students learn antonyms (either specific words or the concept). If so, then the teaching strategy (the task) could have been a barrier to learning, unless the pupils (a) were in possession of resource material that included the selected words and antonyms, or (b) possessed the skills and competencies to locate the appropriate resources. A standard dictionary would not necessarily have helped because it provides the meanings of words rather than antonyms. In order to complete the

homework task, pupils would have had to have been familiar with both sets of words, unless the antonym is formed by adding an appropriate prefix (for example, wanted, unwanted) and the pupils had been taught the rule. Consequently, if the homework assignment was an independent learning tool to teach antonyms, then it is doubtful whether that purpose would have been fulfilled.

When pupils do not have the prerequisite prior knowledge or the materials and books for the tasks assigned, they resort to their parents/guardians or elder siblings for assistance, that is, they try to negotiate the barrier to learning. However, if the help required is not available, then a perhaps non-intended outcome of assigning such tasks is that additional barriers to learning can be erected. If pupils are unable to complete the homework or if the homework is consistently incorrect, then students can become disillusioned and negative feelings and attitudes towards schoolwork can emerge, with the associated reduced self-esteem and self concept within the school context.

The barriers of negative self-concept/self-esteem, though difficult to dismantle, can be surmounted if pupils experience success within the classroom through (a) carefully selected outcomes, (b) learning strategies to facilitate the attainment of the outcomes, and (c) appropriate assessment tasks that take account of student diversity. Such strategies would go a long way in assisting students to access the lesson concepts and to demonstrate what they have learnt. The importance for students of positive attitudes and experiences of success cannot be overstated. Their emotions towards school play a significant role in shaping their self-concept and self-esteem with respect to formal school learning, and also in shaping the relationship between themselves and the teacher.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine