



SANDY SCARMACK | Herald

Thiel College education majors are studying the effects of poverty on learning.

'Teaching with Poverty in Mind'

Book is a guide for education majors

By SANDY SCARMACK *Herald Staff Writer*

GREENVILLE – A set of yet-to-be educators is learning that looking at a child's socioeconomic status might be the key that unlocks the secret to teaching him.

Education majors in Thiel College professor Doug Hazlett's education class have spent the better part of the spring semester learning from Eric Jensen's book, "Teaching with Poverty in Mind: What being poor does to kids' brains and what schools can do about it." Hazlett has long been interested in the subject, studying in some detail the cognitive and physical changes that happen in young developing brains that are continually burdened with stress.

Research has proven, Hazlett said, that brain growth, particularly in toddlers, is slowed by the effects of stress, and that children who grow up in poverty are often the ones who fall behind academically, may have behavioral problems and have less exposure to cultural and educational opportunities than children from wealthier homes.

But, he cautioned and his students explained, that's no reason to set anything other than high expectations.

"By integrating the arts – music, art, dance, theater – into the core curriculum, we know that we can affect change on those brains," he said.

Darerrick Slater, a senior education major, demonstrated how using music can make classes fun and engaging,

particularly if it's something a child can relate to. Slater had the entire class rapping to the theme song from the 1980s television show "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Aire."

"And I can tell you, the whole atmosphere of the room changed when he started. That's what introducing music can do," Hazlett said.

Slater said he too felt the stigma of coming from a lower socio-economic background, after he switched from a private school to a public school near Erie. "And when I said where I went to school, everybody sort of expected that I'd never really amount to anything, that I'd never go to college or do anything.

"But I'm here and I want to go back to a school just like that and tell kids they have a chance, that they can do anything."

Student Hannah Fernandez said she envisions teaching children to learn math by creating curriculum they can relate to.

"I'd like to see them build models of baseball or football fields. They'd have to learn ratios to build them to scale, but if I could get them to do something they were already interested in, it would be fun and educational," she said.

Hazlett said that while high poverty levels often provide schools with a "legitimate excuse" for poor academic performance, it doesn't need to be true.

"We need to set a high level of expectations. While acknowledging the poverty issues, we need to let students know that we expect them to succeed," he said.

Each of the 10 students in the class developed a presentation that will be put together and presented to county school superintendents during a meeting in March at Midwestern Intermediate Unit IV in Grove City.

The United Way of Mercer County also has taken on poverty reduction as its goal for the coming year and Director Jim Micsky is interested in providing copies of Jensen's book to those involved.

Student Kenady Hubbard said it's important that newer teachers understand the inherent social issues with students they teach, but also not to stigmatize them.

"We need to think of them not as 'those poor kids' but rather 'my gifted kids' because I think we can foster curiosity and social bonding with the right kind of teaching."

"When I start teaching I'm going to take the things I learned here and use it to look for indicators. I want to let these kids know that they can learn, with the right teachers and the right staff, even if they have been sleeping on a couch," Hubbard said.

All agreed that key to a successful education is instilling a sense of hope in children for whom learning is difficult.

Hannah Stoneman said: "If we can capture them in the arts, the academics will follow."