

Sesame Street and Disadvantaged Children:
“Sweepin’ the Clouds Away” for Children in Poverty

Morgan A Belveal
University of Pennsylvania

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Both poverty and Sesame Street work to holistically influence the developmental trajectory of children. Neither operates in domain siloes nor do they act alone within the child’s environment. In 1997, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan identified a series of pathways through which poverty influences the development of a child. Of these pathways, the work of Sesame Street is currently targeting the health and nutrition, home environment, parent interactions, and neighborhood conditions of children across the United States. Sesame Street acknowledges that the environment holds a place of significance in the development of children and in order to succeed at supporting children to become smarter, stronger and kinder they must provide holistic support to children with disadvantaged environments.

The Sesame Way

Central to the Sesame Street model is the idea that each of their initiatives be fun, furry and flexible. For learners of all backgrounds to engage with the material, the content must be intrinsically motivating and engaging. It is this fun approach to learning that encourages young children to access the multimedia content created and remain engaged for prolonged durations throughout their development. One of the crucial elements to Sesame’s 40 years of success is the representative nature of their characters. The furry Muppets of each initiative are made of different colors, textures and materials. This means that the majority of the characters on Sesame Street are often not of any particularly identifiable demographic of person. Instead they become more relatable to the diverse population of children across the United States. Finally, and most importantly, the Sesame approach is flexible. Built into the process of developing any Sesame Street initiative is an intensive formative research process. In actuality, Sesame Street is the most researched television show in history (Cole and Lee 2016). This formative research is a part of

the planning process, the monitoring process, and the assessment process of every initiative. Formative research ensures that a production does not move forward without significant input from the populations it directly and indirectly intends to serve. This flexible nature of production is crucial when working with children in poverty as this population is constantly evolving.

From its beginnings in the late 1960's, Sesame has acknowledged the unique hurdles that stand in front of children living in poverty. They recognized the powerful voice of the Civil Rights Movement and became one of two national organizations to focus on the impacts of poverty on the most crucial developmental period: before the age of 5. The second organization to recognize the inequity in education attainment was Head Start. Unlike Head Start, Sesame decided against a poverty-exclusive approach and targeted its initiatives at the 97% of households in the United States with a television (Fisch & Truglio 2014).

Pathways of Poverty

Still today, these two organizations almost exclusively occupy the space of national preschool education in the United States. Today, the Sesame approach to education remains less segregated than the Head Start approach. While Head Start continues to tout an intervention focused exclusively on high concentrations of poverty, Sesame's focus on diversity and kindness works against the early development of prejudice and stereotypes (Wong 2015). This means that children exposed to diversity, as they are on Sesame Street, are likely more aware of diversity in ethnic identities and social statuses simply by way of exposure (Bigler & Liben 2007). This focus on improving the diversity awareness of peers in a child's neighborhood is the first way Sesame Street is targeting poverty's pathways of influence.

Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) identified health and nutrition as one of the influential pathways through which poverty influences development. The authors explain that malnutrition

in childhood is a precursor to lower scores on cognitive tests. This is the poverty pathway that Sesame Street targets most directly. With its Food for Thought initiative, Sesame uses a bilingual production home kit to teach families how to eat well on a budget. This free initiative is distributed directly to families living in poverty. As a supplement, the initiative broadcasted a one hour special to homes across the United States to educate families about the difficulties surrounding nutrition in poverty (Food for Thought 2016). Kauschal, Magnuson, and Waldfogel (2012) identified that parents and caregivers overwhelmingly desire to support their children's enrichment when given the resources. Sesame acknowledges that family nutrition education is a resource that parents desire and the organization sees it as a step to mediate this pathway of poverty and work to reduce the influence of malnutrition in the lives of poor children.

With outdated and rigid national definitions of poverty, families living on the fringe of poverty are often overlooked. These families are just one event away from what the government would define as poverty but are often financially ignored. Sesame Street's Families Stand Together initiative recognizes this gap in services and provides support to this overlooked population. Similarly to the Food for Thought initiative, Families Stand Together targets the child's microsystem with a home kit and public broadcast each of which focuses on reducing the shame and isolation that accompanies poverty. In their 2013 report, Walker et. al identified that cross culturally, shame accompanies poverty and this shame acts as a direct influence on perceived quality of parenting. Parents engaged in the initiative reported feeling more hope and less shame (Families Stand Together 2016). By showing commonality with the Families Stand Together initiative, Sesame Street took a step to weaken the relationship between poverty and shame.

Even with low levels of lead exposure, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1997) report harmful effects to development. These effects disproportionately impact the lives of children in poverty. In its pursuit of achieving equity in child development, Sesame Street published its Lead Away! initiative which focuses on teaching children to recognize and avoid lead containing hazards. This simple education initiative remedies a problem uniquely relevant to children living in poverty and helps them mediate the negative influence of the home environment pathway on their lives.

Recommendations

While the impact of Sesame Street is vast, they have room for adjustments that would better position them to help children and families living in poverty. The first deficit in their poverty structure is their population target. There is strength in providing the same resources to all children, however children in poverty are already operating at a disadvantage and need a more targeted approach. As they did with their Food for Thought initiative, Sesame Street needs to ensure that they are directly targeting their resources at the children that most need them. This will allow them to ensure the resources offered are the most relevant, via formative research cycles, and that their resources are not wasted. Second, children today are spending more time in classrooms and less time at home in front of their television. In response, Sesame Street needs to adapt its flexible initiatives to better support learning and development in the classroom. They have the capacity to use this format, as is the case in their co-production in Indonesia where they have developed complete preschool curriculum to ensure learning carries over from the television to the classroom (Cole and Lee 2016). This introduction of content into the classroom will broaden the reach of Sesame's content and support the over taxed classrooms operating with limited resources in low-income neighborhoods.

Conclusion

Sesame Street works to holistically improve the lives of all children in the United States (and around the world with their international co-productions). The fun, furry and flexible nature of the organization means that the multimedia production team is uniquely positioned to provide contextually produced education materials intended to help all children become smarter, stronger and kinder. The overwhelming access to television in the United States and the cost effective nature of distribution creates a perfect environment for Sesame Street. Its initiatives that focus directly on issues relevant to children in poverty are complemented by a constant dialogue focused on building resilience. If Sesame could first target its poverty focused initiatives on the populations most negatively impacted by poverty and second expand its initiatives to bridge the gap between living rooms and classrooms, Sesame Street would be an even more viable tool in the fight to holistically improve the lives of children living in poverty.

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