

Heroes and Princesses:
How Imagination Can Alleviate Poverty

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Abstract

Researchers have found that children who are raised in poverty are more likely to be impoverished later in life as a result of educational limits, health implications, or lowered self-esteem. The latter cause could be alleviated by encouraging imagination, a means by which children create hope in visualizing themselves in a life different than their own and believing that their perseverance in life has the power to bring them to a new place, one where they feel safe and capable of great deeds. This research will explore how imagination can facilitate the growth of children's confidence in their abilities, and findings will discuss avenues of imagination, which include close relationships with strong role models in the community, as well as parents and educators, who can encourage children to pursue activities such as participating in imaginative play or reading fictional stories. If general attitudes toward children living in poverty are transformed to believe that imaginative efforts can alleviate the intergenerational poverty cycle, then outcomes will be improved for children who perceive poverty as impossible to overcome.

Keywords: imagination, intergenerational, poverty, creativity, children

Heroes and Princesses

Typical young children naturally initiate imagination. Perhaps they create fictional realities of heroic characters or an imaginary best friend. Perhaps they try to avoid the thought of punishment by envisioning a world where they did not disobey their parents. As children grow older and gain experience and knowledge, adults and friends tend to reveal the realities of life, including truths about Santa Claus, relationships, and work. As a result, imagination is often associated with the minds of children. However, while researchers originally thought that children adopted imagination because of “their inability to differentiate between fantasy and reality,” imagination may be a result of being able to understand causal relationships, as adults are also interested in fictional worlds (Gopnik & Walker, 2013, p. 16). Therefore, the development of imagination has a greater implication than simply envisioning false realities. Adults can help children who are living in poverty to utilize imagination, as children envision themselves breaking free from the chains of poverty by employing hard work and resiliency that they can begin to develop early in life.

The United States Census Bureau (2019) calculated the poverty rate in 2018 to be 11.8%; however, the poverty rate for children under the age of eighteen was 16.2%. Not only are children more likely to be impoverished than adults, but research has shown that those who experience poverty during childhood are more likely to be impoverished in adulthood as a result of educational limits, health implications, or lowered self-esteem. However, children from low socioeconomic backgrounds begin as all children do – with considerable goals. They imagine themselves as successful in their dream job, as a doctor or astronaut or princess. Without fully understanding the extent of adversity, children confidently believe that they are capable of any achievement that they wish to pursue. However, children living in poverty often become aware

of their status at a young age and begin believing that they will not be able to accomplish as much as those from wealthier families. They begin to feel as though they are confined to the limitations of their parents' means, unable to afford the hidden costs of schooling, extracurricular activities, and beneficial opportunities. Additionally, communities underestimate their potential, devaluing the quality of their education and overlooking their need for support through financial supplementation or personal relationships with successful role models.

In order for children living in poverty to believe that their dreaming is not in vain, they must first understand that they have the ability to succeed. Therefore, instead of discouraging children from imagining themselves in seemingly unattainable lifestyles, communities must implement programs that contribute to children's self-esteem and provide them with evidence as to why they should be confident in their abilities. Parents, educators, and members of the community should believe in all children equally, emboldening them to reach their full potential through opportunities that strengthen their skills. Influential adults can enthusiastically encourage children when they accomplish a task well and reassure children after perceived failures. Ultimately, communities can alleviate intergenerational poverty cycles by encouraging imagination. For children who live in poverty or abusive situations, imagination may be a means by which they create hope, as they are able to visualize themselves in a life different from their own and believe that their perseverance in life has the power to bring them to a new place, one where they feel safe and capable of great deeds.

The imagination of children begins where most of their lives do – at home. Specifically, the beliefs and attitudes of caregivers often trickle down to create children's ideas, so their ability to imagine a better life for themselves encourages their children to do the same. Parents influence the skills and confidence that their children will develop by the degree to which they support and

advocate for their children, as well as their involvement in their children's lives. Therefore, parents maintain a great role, perhaps the greatest role, in influencing the future of children living in poverty. Parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds often do not have the means to provide abundant opportunities for their children, making imagination difficult when a better lifestyle seems unattainable, but maintaining extravagant lives to any extent is not necessary for the pursuit of imagination. Small steps occurring in attitude and parenting technique can make a monumental difference in developing children's imaginations.

As a tangible solution to the lack of imagination in children, parents can begin to expand and encourage their child's imagination by providing and reading fictional stories, which are widely available for little to no cost. Parents can encourage their children to imagine the characters, possibly even drawing them in various scenarios and considering who they know in their own lives who resemble the characters. Beyond the realm of reading, parents can verbally share stories and request their children to do the same. By exposing their children's minds to diverse characters of different professions, parents expand the dreams of children and provide opportunities for children to discover their passions that can lead them to a life outside of poverty.

Storytelling, beyond its role of exposing children to opportunities within the world, can also help children who have lived through difficult situations to cope with their emotions and imagine themselves in a safe and comfortable world. Molly Salans (2004), a licensed family therapist and social worker, describes the power of storytelling to help children who have experienced traumatic situations in her book *Storytelling with Children in Crisis: Take Just One Star – How Impoverished Children Heal Through Stories*. Salans (2004) often worked with children who have lived through difficult circumstances, including domestic violence, run-down

communities, and family instability. Most of the children struggled with disruptive behavior or depressed moods, unable to express their emotions in an appropriate manner. However, Salans (2004) discovered that the families she met reacted positively to stories, so she began telling them stories that she and others had written. Afterwards, she encouraged her young clients to tell her a story from their own imagination, utilizing a few common components as a guide (Salans, 2004).

Storytelling allows children to insert themselves and others in their sphere of influence as characters, imagining themselves in a different role or place. Salans (2004) incorporated questions that required children to think critically and express some of the pain and brokenness that they were experiencing. She was able to gain a better understanding of their thoughts and feelings through a medium that does not require them to directly face their memories and emotions. Additionally, she would use themes and morals within the stories as tools to explain concepts of behavior and reality in a way that makes sense to a child. Through stories, children can imagine the rewards and consequences of their behavior, including how their behavior affects themselves and other people, both in the present and future. Since the lives of children in poverty are often full of chaos, stories allow them to create order and peace, feeling as though they can control parts of their lives (Salans, 2004). After Salans' (2004) clients wrote stories and drew pictures to accompany them, she would encourage them to present their work to their parents and other influential adults in their lives. Children gain confidence and self-esteem when they are praised for their accomplishments. Ultimately, parents and teachers in the lives of Salans' clients were able to observe improvements in their children's attitudes and behaviors, as the children began to imagine the breadth of their abilities (Salans, 2004).

Salans (2004) describes her experience with client Debbie Carlton, a ten-year-old girl living in poverty with anxiety that stemmed from her chaotic home. Carlton created a story about a princess who became a hero in defeating a group of witches. Afterwards, Salans (2004) attempted to better understand Carlton's emotions and circumstances by dissecting the meaning of the story. Carlton expressed that she desired to be like the princess: generous, strong, and the daughter of parents who paid attention to her (Salans, 2004). She wanted an inner power to be able to change her current situation into beauty and eliminate the trauma she had experienced. In this environment, Carlton could express her emotions slowly, and felt comfortable to speak about the terrible circumstances in which she had lived. With time, her grades improved, she began clarifying issues instead of arguing with her family members, and her mom, the figure whom most children hold in highest esteem, began to express pride in her (Salans, 2004). Thus, Carlton began to imagine what her life would look like if she were to escape poverty, which, she understood, would require her to try hard in school and be proud of her abilities.

In addition to storytelling, parents can encourage imaginative play, which does not necessarily require costumes, props, or expensive toys for children to utilize. In this case, a cardboard box can become a spaceship or a stick can become a magic wand. The simple encouragement from a parent to play, explore, and imagine fantasy worlds can make a difference in how children view their own abilities and aspirations. Salans (2004) noted that the developmental process for children is not meant for expressing their feelings in deep manners, but it is meant for play and imagination. When she encountered children who had reservations about drawing pictures because they were afraid that they were going to mess up or fail in their artwork, she drew with them rather than watching them (Salans, 2004). She modeled creativity for them, even though she claimed that she did not have artistic talent herself. As a result, her

vulnerability proved to the children that they could mess up while trying new things, but she also encouraged them to transform their mistakes into something new and beautiful (Salans, 2004).

Psychologists Gopnik and Walker (2013) studied the importance of imaginative and pretend play in the development of children, specifically their ability to reason counterfactually. Pretend play allows children to explore activities typically part of adulthood, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for a pretend child, in an environment that involves little risk and offers them the ability to imagine various scenarios of both reality and fantasy (Gopnik & Walker, 2013). Gopnik and Walker (2013) conducted experiments on preschool children and determined that children who understood causal relationships in pretend play could understand cause-and-effect concepts in real scenarios.

Children create causal maps in their brains, representations of “how one thing is causally connected to another” (Gopnik & Walker, 2013, p. 18). Gopnik and Walker’s (2013) experiment applies the “theory theory,” which states that children form and change theories in their mind as they experience the world (p. 17). They form a representation of how something looks or works, but alter their idea if they encounter new or contradictory stimuli (Gopnik & Walker, 2013). Then, children assign probabilities to each theory and choose the theory with the greatest probability (Gopnik & Walker, 2013). Therefore, children learn through the act of play, and pretend play exposes them to different skills and behaviors in a safe environment where they can explore and determine the activities they enjoy. Parents can expand children’s worlds to new opportunities and encourage children to imagine themselves in different careers and role-playing scenarios beyond the limitations of poverty.

Parents could implement an abundance of reading and imaginative play in their children’s lives, but these methods will be fruitless if parents do not convey optimism to their children.

They must believe in their children's abilities to succeed with an attitude that conveys to children that they can achieve any goal they set. Additionally, the behavior of parents has a significant impact on children's attitudes toward life. To create a better environment for children to develop imagination and pursue their goals, parents should be attentive to them while also being patient, compassionate, and warm. They should express to their children that mistakes are a part of life and that they will be loved and cared for regardless of their performance. Salans (2004) instructs parents to avoid focusing solely on the bad behavior of their children, but to praise them for the actions that they do well so that they will accept correction and learn to improve positively. When children understand that their parents will continue to love and support them even if they fail in pursuing their goals, they will be more likely to follow their dreams and step outside of their comfort zone, beyond the confining borders of poverty and expectations of others, to reach for a life they desire.

While involved parents and caregivers have great influence in encouraging their children to expand their dreams beyond their financial limitations, educators within school systems have a similar responsibility. In a personal interview, Dr. Angela Baker (personal communication, November 15, 2019), a former teacher and current principal who has spent most of her educational career within Title I schools, asserts that educators should model imagination themselves by never conveying that students cannot achieve their dreams. She argues that teachers should set high academic expectations for students who are living in poverty but encourage them to persevere when they fail, reminding them that mistakes are part of the process and praising them when they succeed. In addition to believing in students' abilities to succeed, Baker (personal communication, November 15, 2019) also argues that in cases of poverty where children are not receiving support at home, educators must approach teaching with the attitude of

“I am their only chance to get out of their current situation,” since school may be the students’ only resource to escape poverty.

Salans (2004) offers an account of Saul, a young boy who struggled to complete and turn in his homework because he was afraid that he was going to fail. However, when Salans demonstrated that he could finish his homework successfully while working in small steps, he gained the courage needed to focus on and submit his homework without fear of disappointment from others (Salans, 2004). Even if schools face a lack of funding, as they often do, educators can still embolden students to reach their full potential through the resources that are available, with special consideration given to the differences in the amount of academic input that children receive at home. Teachers can provide extra support to students who are struggling with the curricula so that they do not feel forgotten or left behind but are encouraged to imagine how their current abilities will help them succeed.

The quantity and quality of language that children are exposed to at home differs between children of low socioeconomic families and wealthier families. Latham, von Stumm, and d’Apice (2019), experts in developmental psychology, conducted a study that researched the impact of home language input on children’s cognitive and behavioral development. Previous research has shown that children from impoverished homes hear less words per day, on average, than children from homes of higher economic classes (d’Apice, Latham, & von Stumm, 2019). The study on home language input found similar results, noting that, while the amount of words spoken per day varied greatly within and between families, greater amounts of speech from the parents were associated with greater cognitive ability of their children. Baker (personal communication, November 15, 2019) emphasizes that educators should be aware of the differences in oral language and vocabulary that children hear in conversation at home. Thus,

teachers should strive to provide quality materials in instruction that supplement the vocabulary that children are lacking from home.

Beyond instructional material, educators can recognize the difficulties that impoverished families face and appreciate their efforts in pursuing an education. Baugh, Vanderbilt, and Baugh (2019) studied the disadvantages that those with impoverished backgrounds face in regards to pursuing medical school. The socioeconomic status of students' families affects their amount of resources, likelihood to succeed, and view of higher education as they enter school. With fewer educational opportunities, those with poor backgrounds lack representation in the medical field. The researchers argue that medical school should not be limited to wealthy classes, but those of impoverished families should be given opportunities to pursue this field for the benefit of the community, especially since medical providers tend to practice in regions and social classes in which they were raised (Baugh, Vanderbilt, & Baugh, 2019). Just as educators appreciate the contributions that students of ethnic minorities bring to discussion, they should appreciate the contributions of impoverished students because they also have unique perspectives and experiences that are important to medicine (Baugh, Vanderbilt, & Baugh, 2019). In the same way, educators of every field should welcome students from low socioeconomic statuses, as they bring diverse and valuable insight into the conversation with the ability to achieve significantly. Schools must open the door and make it possible for students to be able to imagine themselves accomplishing their goals in their dream professions.

In addition to an optimistic outlook on students from impoverished backgrounds, school curricula should provide opportunities for students to be creative, strengthening their skills and allowing them to feel accomplished with their work. Students should be encouraged to explore options of careers, talents, or hobbies to discover their passions and skills. Salans (2004) states

that if children are dealing with poverty at home, “the last thing that will be important to [them] is some meaningless subject taught in a classroom which confines [their bodies] and stifles [their] imagination” (p. 71). Baker (personal communication, November 15, 2019) strives to provide her students with opportunities to discover careers and meet professionals of different fields, offering field trips, inviting guest speakers, and starting career assessments in third, fourth, and fifth grades to begin finding students’ interests and explaining the steps they will need to take to build a successful career.

Loughrey and Woods (2010) describe how a project called “Sparking the Imagination” inspired students in three low socioeconomic status primary schools in Northern Ireland to develop creative skills and confidence in their abilities. Leaders of the project worked with the schools to invite several creative artists to spend time in the schools, teaching students various artistic techniques and envisioning what the accomplishment of a goal looks like in reality. Not only did the self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-discipline of the students increase, but they also developed better relationships with other students and teachers, approached school and learning with an enthusiastic attitude, and formed better relationships with their families (Loughrey & Woods, 2010).

The article contributes a creative solution to poverty by challenging the prevalent idea that impoverished children should be viewed with lower expectations, and argues that educational programs should be in place to guarantee these students the same quality of schooling as those with higher socioeconomic status (Loughrey & Woods, 2010). If students are given proper support, they can gain the confidence needed to set high goals and pursue them adequately, breaking the cycle of poverty in which families often become trapped. After meeting role models who have succeeded in reaching their goals and realizing that they can also learn and

explore new skills, the students can begin to view their dreams as realistic. Imagining themselves in occupations and situations different from that in which they were raised is crucial to their attitudes toward education, learning, and themselves.

In addition to programs implemented in school curricula that encourage students to engage their imagination, school systems can also install programs to provide extra support for children who are living in poverty to help them consider their dreams feasible. After-school tutoring sessions can be excellent resources for students who do not have parents that can help them adequately at home. Also, strong counseling programs can be a resource for students who feel as though they have nowhere to safely express their feelings and emotions regarding the trauma they have experienced or the chaos in their everyday lives. When students can learn to use their difficult experiences as tools to help prepare them for a successful life, they are more likely to find hope in the possibility of escaping poverty.

Rak and Patterson (1996) discuss the benefits of encouraging the development of resilience in children, especially for those at a disadvantage for success in society. Counselors, both within and outside of school systems, contribute to resiliency in children by focusing on their strengths, instead of their weaknesses, and building those strengths so that they have confidence to succeed (Rak & Patterson, 1996). Their training also allows them to educate parents on the emotional needs of children so that they are better able to parent their children in a warm and nurturing manner. Counselors are in an appropriate position to welcome children from impoverished backgrounds and encourage others to include them, also (Rak & Patterson, 1996). They can teach these children that they are capable of succeeding and are responsible for their actions just like everybody else, encouraging them to focus on their behavior and have faith in their future. These techniques work to make children feel comfortable and confident enough to

explore new opportunities and reach beyond their limitations of poverty, focusing on their academic and relational success, rather than the trauma that they have experienced in the past.

Ultimately, communities also need to believe in the capabilities of children from impoverished backgrounds because they can be influential in supporting parents, educators, and students. To begin, communities can refrain from underestimating the potential of these children. Thus, community members can affirm that students are receiving a quality education through the power of their majority voice and votes. Where possible, along with local governments, they can provide financial supplementation, including food, school supplies, books, and other resources for students. Simply donating gently-used clothes and backpacks can greatly help children in need and give them tangible hope and encouragement to imagine that someone is concerned about their education and well-being.

An inexpensive but powerful medium through which communities can encourage imagination in children is role modeling for young people. Community members who have emerged from poverty or who have achieved their childhood dream could spend time with children. The relationship that is formed will further the imagination of children by providing them with evidence that overcoming adversity is possible when they interact with a person to which they can reasonably aspire. Salans (2004) emphasizes that children often copy the actions of adults, so positive role models can provide a healthy example of how to manage difficult emotions. Additionally, adults that children look up to should encourage them, which can include support of student art shows, athletic events, school fairs, or concerts through the simple act of attendance. When impoverished students are able to see that they are supported with the same expectations that the community has for students of higher socioeconomic classes, they strive to achieve the same accomplishments.

An article by Harris (2018) in the *Daily Mail* of London describes a trend regarding the lack of role models among modern youth. As internet usage becomes increasingly popular among young people, they are turning to media celebrities as role models instead of their parents or members of their community, which occurs especially with younger youth (Harris, 2018). While the newspaper was published in Europe, its discussion has applications to most developed countries with the increasing popularity of technology. Harris notes that 15% of young people, and 21% of those from poorer economic backgrounds, reported the absence of role models in their lives (Harris, 2018, p. 21). However, experts agree that positive role models are important for successful careers and creating firm goals for life success. Children can discuss issues and dreams with realistic role models to imagine the models' accomplishments in their own lives.

Ruggeri, Luan, Keller, and Gummerum (2018) also discuss role models, specifically the influence of adults and peers on children and adolescents. Bandura's social learning theory asserts that children learn behavior by watching others (Ruggeri, Luan, Keller, & Gummerum, 2018). Therefore, adults and peers who are involved in children's lives are able to influence their beliefs about normal behavior. After conducting a study on children and adolescents from Italy and Singapore, the researchers discovered that children were more likely to follow the direction of adults, while adolescents were more likely to follow the direction of their peers (Ruggeri, Luan, Keller, & Gummerum, 2018). Thus, role models should be involved in young children's lives, working to shape their early conceptions of behavior and goals for life. Models should continue to spend time with children to help them through the stages in which they tend to rely mainly on peers for direction, which may stifle their imagination.

While imagination is natural in children and can support them in dreaming at an early age to escape difficult situations in which they are raised, some experts argue against the

encouragement of imagination in children. For example, according to the research of Waddington (2010), Dewey was a large opponent of the development of imagination because he believed that uncontrolled imagination could lead individuals to become overly aware of their thoughts and feelings, eventually bringing them to cynicism, where they are unable to find pleasure in the world. Dewey thought that children should utilize imagination for scientific, technological, and artistic purposes, but they should not be encouraged to develop their wild thoughts beyond those fields (Waddington, 2010).

Salans (2004) also addressed Dewey's argument, noting that some experts believe that encouraging children to explore their trauma and imagine an escape may "create more instability and anxiety in their lives by delving deeply into the subconscious of such young clients" (p. 15). However, Salans (2004) argues that these children face traumatic experiences every day. They understand the feelings that are associated with poverty and neglect well because that unfortunately makes up the majority of their young lives. Therefore, imagination in the form of stories creates order in their lives as they envision themselves in a different world – one where they are heroes and princesses who accomplish great feats. They seek out opportunities for peace and joy in the midst of their anxiety and loneliness.

Celebrities who move from "rags to riches" by overcoming poverty and pursuing their dreams are often recognized in media. J. K. Rowling (2008), who is famous for her creative *Harry Potter* book series, grew up in an impoverished home. Her parents wished for her to achieve an education and career that would provide her with the necessary means to escape poverty, but her story traveled far from their plan. In her commencement speech to a graduating class of Harvard University, Rowling (2008) shares how failure and imagination played a great role in leading to her current success. Regarding imagination, she clearly supports the use of

creativity in writing stories and fabricating characters in alternate worlds. However, the imagination she discusses is beyond the realm of storytelling, in the ability for individuals to empathize with other people without ever having experienced their circumstances: “Unlike any other creature on this planet, humans can learn and understand, without having experienced. They can think themselves into other people’s places” (Rowling, 2008, para. 34). While this attitude towards imagination helped Rowling (2008) to overcome poverty in both her childhood and adulthood, it can also span beyond the individual to those nearby.

Parents, educators, and community members can utilize imagination to cultivate a genuine understanding of others, imagining themselves in the shoes of children facing poverty. They can imagine how children’s dreams are stifled by limitations beyond their control, which illustrates the power of imagination to spark hope and perseverance in the lives of children who desire to escape poverty. Rowling (2008) notes that people often neglect their imagination because “they choose to remain comfortably within the bounds of their own experience, never troubling to wonder how it would feel to have been born other than they are” (para. 36). Children living in poverty need those around them to imagine their perspectives, emotions, feelings, goals, and dreams. Then, those around them need to rally together to encourage these children to keep imagining themselves in the shoes of the people they wish to become. In her book, Salans (2004) describes a young boy named Saul — the same boy who painstakingly perfected his homework to avoid mistakes. As his behavior and attitude improved drastically through storytelling, he proclaimed, “I try to tell myself that I am something, even if I don’t know that yet” (Salans, 2004, p. 231).

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