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Examining the Culture of Poverty: Promising Practices

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Examining the Culture of Poverty: Promising Practices

Kristen Cuthrell, Joy Stapleton, and Carolyn Ledford

ABSTRACT: Spurred by preservice teachers' perceptions that diversity issues such as poverty would not affect their teaching, professors in 1 southeastern U.S. elementary teacher-preparation program took action, which resulted in this examination of the culture of poverty and the identification of strategies to best serve children living in poverty. The authors explored the effect of poverty in the role of schools, families, and teachers. In this article, they identify key strategies that focus on providing a strong support system for children living in poverty. The authors make recommendations on how teacher-preparation programs could infuse the teaching of these strategies into programs.

KEYWORDS: *classroom environment, culture of poverty, family involvement, instructional strategies, school environment*

KIRBY, A 6-YEAR-OLD first-grade student, would come in from the bus with a concern about the way someone talked to or about him. His face was usually serious, with few smiles. However, in late spring, our class was going on a field trip to the local airport. The children were excited about their trip to tour the airport and actually sit on an airplane. Knowing that the school cafeteria would prepare box lunches, I explained that we would need to bring our lunches with us to eat at the airport. Misinterpreting the directions, Kirby, excited on the day of the field trip, came to school carrying an old sock and a half-eaten donut. He had always entered the classroom with concerns, but today he was excited and prepared with his lunch to go on the field trip.

How does a teacher-education program ensure that its graduates are prepared to meet the diverse needs of all learners such as Kirby? How do universities take into consideration each preservice teacher's individual identity and the effect of that identity on his or her teaching? To begin the dialogue, a group of professors reviewed the demographic information of their region and the placement of the majority of program graduates. In terms of race, the schools surrounding the university were high in minorities and low in wealth, with a poverty rate that exceeded the national rate. The preservice teachers that the university enrolled did not

reflect these demographics, although 66% of them took a job teaching in the surrounding areas upon graduation.

To examine this concept further, perception surveys of current students were administered to gauge their awareness of issues of diversity and identity with a specific focus on poverty. Results from those surveys indicate that students felt issues of poverty would not affect their teaching. With this shocking revelation, poverty became the immediate focus of our examination.

The Landscape of Poverty

As the number of children living in poverty continues to rise, poverty is garnering more attention as a factor in determining identity. According to the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) statistics from 2006, 1.3 million children have fallen into poverty since 2000. After reaching a historic low in 2000, the number of children living in poverty in the United States is approaching 13 million, and a child's likelihood of being poor has increased by almost 9%. In more concrete terms, one of six children is poor, and one in three Black children is living in poverty. Although the United States leads other industrialized nations with 12.3% of children living in poverty (CDF, 2006; Reid, 2006), the number of children around the world living in extreme poverty has increased 22% since 2000, reaching almost 5.6 million children. *Extreme poverty* is defined as living with an annual income of less than \$7,870 for a family of three. Because of the importance of poverty's influence and the growing need to better prepare preservice teachers in meeting the needs of diverse students, we discuss the following areas: (a) the possible effects of poverty on student learning,

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(b) strategies that are effective in working with students and families from the culture of poverty, and (c) recommendations for infusing instruction of these strategies into teacher-education programs.

Views of Poverty

Individuals have used various terms to describe characteristics and circumstances of poverty. *Situational poverty* is caused by specific circumstances, such as illness or loss of employment, and generally lasts for a shorter period of time. Alternatively, *generational poverty* is an ongoing cycle of poverty in which two or more generations of families experience limited resources. Generational poverty is described as having its own culture, with hidden rules and belief systems. Furthermore, *absolute poverty* equates to a focus on sustenance and the bare essentials for living with no extra resources for social and cultural expenditures.

In the literature, researchers have examined poverty from two perspectives: absence of resources and risk versus resilience. Payne (2005) defined *poverty* as the “extent to which an individual does without resources” (p. 7). Leading experts in the field of poverty have suggested that the problem is much more than financial hardship. Payne identified eight resources whose presence or absence determines the effect of poverty: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships and role models, and knowledge of hidden rules. If an individual has limited financial resources but strong emotional, spiritual, and physical support, the burden of poverty may be lessened. Although teachers may not be able to change financial resources, they can affect some of the other areas.

Rather than focusing on risk factors and taking the view of a damage model, a resilience model focuses on protective factors—individual, familial, community, or all three—and allows for positive adaptation despite significant life adversity (Rockwell, 2006). This model examines characteristics of individuals who have “made it” despite coming from an impoverished background. Factors that seem to support resilience are the following: having an internal locus of control, an ability to form warm relationships, a caregiver who values education, and opportunities to participate in recreational and service-oriented activities (Rockwell).

Poverty’s Effect on Children

Researchers have linked poverty to several key issues of child welfare including low birth weight, infant mortality, growth stunting, lead poisoning, learning disabilities, and developmental delays (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). Children from families in poverty experience more emotional and behavior problems than do children from middle- and upper-class families (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan). Eamon (2001) identified lower self-esteem, lower popularity, and conflictual peer relationships as socioemotional effects of poverty.

Poverty’s Effect on Children in Schools

Although all children go to school, the background of some puts them behind their peers academically from the start. Impoverished students are far more likely to enter school as linguistically disadvantaged because they have not had experiences that promote literacy and reading readiness (Strickland, 2001). The achievement gap increases as students progress through school. Alexander, Entwistle, and Olson (2001) found that children from low-income families are at a disadvantage during the summer when children from middle- and upper-income families are exposed to museums and camps—activities that promote children’s social and intellectual development (Koppelman & Goodhart, 2005). According to educators, early childhood education is the most effective intervention for closing this achievement gap (e.g., Karoly et al., 1998; Ramey & Ramey, 1998; Thomas & Bainbridge, 2001), but it should be noted that the United States is the only industrialized nation without universal preschool and child care programs (Koppelman & Goodhart).

With the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools, administrators, and teachers are accountable for the academic success of their students. Although administrators are interested in the best practices associated with student achievement, Pascopella (2006) suggested that teachers make the difference for students living in poverty and highlighted the need to better educate teachers about poverty and student achievement (Burch et al., 2001). Grissmer, Flannagan, Kawata, and Williamson (2000) noted that the achievement gap could be addressed by targeting resources to disadvantaged families and schools, lowering class size in early grades, strengthening early childhood and early intervention programming, and improving teacher education and professional development. Schools, teachers, and families working together can create strong academic gains for all students. (For a complete list of the strategies, see the Appendix.)

Strategies for Working With Students and Families Living in Poverty

School Environment

The school environment is an essential component to the success of the school and its students. Reeves (2003) conducted a study of what he called *90/90/90 schools* with 90% minority, 90% free or reduced lunch, and 90% of their learning outcomes met. Six strategies emerged from his research on these successful schools; these strategies are repeated in other literature on school improvement.

The first and perhaps most important strategy is to hire and retain teachers who believe in their students (Center for Public Education [CPE], 2005; Danielson, 2002; Reeves, 2003). Reeves found that these teachers go beyond just

believing that all students can learn by taking responsibility for their students' learning and by expecting results from students regardless of their background. Expressing sentiments that begin with "My students can't" or "My students aren't ready for" is not acceptable, and administrators in these successful schools were not afraid of making personnel changes if teachers did not believe in or have high expectations for their students.

The second strategy is to focus on academic achievement (CPE, 2005; Marzano, 2003; Reeves, 2003; Schomoker, 2001). In the schools in which these researchers conducted their studies, the curriculum was specifically defined by narrowing the focus to small achievable goals, particularly in mathematics and reading (Marzano). Although little time was spent teaching other subjects, test scores in these areas increased, revealing the importance of reading ability in assessment outcomes (Reeves).

The third strategy is to give assessment a prominent role in the daily activities of students and teachers (CPE, 2005; Marzano, 2003; Reeves, 2003; Schomoker, 2001). Faculty members assess students daily, weekly, and yearly (Marzano), and when reviewing test scores, the focus is on where they ended the year, not where they began. Yearly test scores are deemphasized, and daily or weekly test scores are highlighted as a form of continuous feedback to the students. Teachers use daily and weekly assessments to create academic interactions that closely resemble active coaching by the teachers (Reeves).

In addition, faculty members who are within the successful high-poverty schools work together on their assessments. Students must submit answers to questions from all content areas, requiring them to process the information and to "write to think." By providing answers that document their understanding, teachers are able to get a better diagnostic picture of the student's grasp on the content. Through this process, students also work on creating good nonfiction writing, and a rubric is used to evaluate the students' writing (Reeves, 2003).

Another strategy that successful schools use is creating common assessments for each grade level, establishing consistency in teacher expectations. For this strategy to work, teachers must discuss curriculum outcomes and expectations for each assignment. Following discussions, teachers are better equipped to grade work equitably (Reeves, 2003).

The fourth strategy is to increase collaboration throughout the school (CPE, 2005; Marzano, 2003; Reeves, 2003). In this case, the collaborative assessment is taken one step further by having teachers and principals regularly exchange and grade student work. After faculty members discuss expectations for each common assignment, collaboration is extended throughout the school by holding everyone accountable for student learning, including physical education teachers, librarians, music teachers, and even

bus drivers. Teachers collaborate to determine the best ways to cover the content. In addition to the school community, families are also an important part of the collaborative process (CPE; Marzano).

The fifth strategy is to use creative scheduling (Danielson, 2002). Administrators play a key role in freeing up time for activities that promote teacher success, including scheduling time for instruction based on the needs of the students. For example, some elementary school principals who wanted to focus more on certain aspects of the curriculum created 3-hr literacy blocks, whereas some middle and high school principals created double periods of English and mathematics. Similarly, school principals used faculty meetings and replaced professional development sessions—which teachers had found to be a waste of time—to allow for collaborative discussions among teachers. Announcements were sent via e-mail, and the faculty meetings were spent by collaborating with colleagues (Reeves, 2003).

The sixth and final strategy involved administrators who spent money on things that worked. Reeves (2003) found that, overall, effective teachers and teaching strategies obtain results, not programs. Assessment with collaboration and consistent instructional practices were vital to the continued success of these schools. This collaboration in determining what strategies were effective enabled teachers to overcome many of the academic deficits that are often observed in children from low-income families and communities.

Classroom Environment

In addition to schoolwide strategies, creating a positive environment within the classroom is one of the most powerful actions that a teacher can implement to ensure that all children belong, especially children living in poverty. The following research indicates that strategies specifically designed to establish a positive classroom environment can greatly affect the school experience of a child living in poverty.

Often, children living in poverty give up on school because of low self-esteem. Almost as often, teachers give up on children because of a perceived lack of trying and unwillingness to learn. Research has shown that one person can and does make a difference in the life of a child, and children living in poverty need the teacher to be the person who believes in them and provides a reliable, positive relationship. Researchers have concluded that focusing on assets—not on deficits—significantly contributed to a child's success in school (Cooter, 2006; Dorrell, 1993; Marzano & Marzano, 2003; Payne, 2005; Pellino, 2006; Pugach, 2006).

Researchers have found that creating ongoing relationships with families and communities was equally positive in maintaining positive classroom environments (Cooter, 2006; Epstein, 2001; Machan, Wilson, & Notar, 2005;

Mapp, 2002; Pugach, 2006). It is necessary not only to value and assure the child of his or her importance, but also to appreciate what families know and can do. Educators can do this by celebrating differences and showing respect for all families. Educators must be knowledgeable of the cultures in which students live to have clear expectations in the classroom. Chrispeels and Rivero (2001) and Payne (2005) have suggested that teachers need to investigate what hidden rules govern the child's life and be willing to teach the child and the child's family about the school's hidden rules.

According to Pellino (2006) and Pugach (2006), planning lessons and activities that are appropriate and meaningful to the child is important when building a positive classroom environment. Classrooms should be high in challenge and low in terms of threat. Activities and lessons that are neither appropriate nor meaningful can be highly threatening to a child. An example is an activity that many educators use in teaching mapping skills but is often not meaningful for all students: A teacher asks his or her students to draw a map of their bedrooms. In this scenario, the child living in poverty may put his or her head down and not complete the assignment. When asked why he or she is not drawing the map, the child replies that he or she does not have a bedroom or bed. As a teacher, it is important to think beyond personal experiences and help children develop a base of knowledge and experiences for themselves. In terms of appropriateness, teachers should consider the following example: By the time a child gets home in a Vermont town, it is rather dark. The child's home does not have electricity, yet the child is expected to complete homework at home and will be punished the next day for not doing so. Is this assignment appropriate for this child? Would a more appropriate activity be to review the information in the morning at school or as part of differentiated group work during the day?

Setting high expectations is a strategy that sets the stage for a successful year for all children. Children can and do rise to a teacher's expectations, and educators must not assume that because a child is living in poverty that he or she lacks the ability to achieve. The educator's job is not to expect less but to focus on learning and overcoming the challenges associated with poverty (Pellino, 2006; Tableman, 2004).

Marzano and Marzano (2003) and Tableman (2004) suggested that teachers use simple positive reinforcement strategies for establishing a classroom environment. It is important to learn names quickly. Teachers can have children use each others' names positively and often in the classroom. Integrating quick team-building exercises throughout the week to establish positive relationships among the children is also key to reinforcing a positive classroom environment. Something as simple as tossing a smiley face beach ball into a circle of children and telling them they are responsible

for keeping the beach ball happy and off the ground unites children and makes them feel like they belong. This activity teaches children not only how to problem solve, but why they must work as a team to do it. The best part is that there is more than one way to solve the problem. Educators can also give hugs or high-fives throughout the day—especially at the end of the day—to let that child know that someone cares. It is imperative in building a positive classroom environment that the teacher continues to model genuine acceptance of all the children.

By believing in a child, cultivating positive relationships, and offering meaningful activities, teachers can build positive classroom environments that affect the child for much longer than a single school year. These positive classroom environments can affect a child for life.

Family Involvement

The earlier in a child's educational process that family involvement begins, the more powerful are the effects. The most effective forms of family involvement are those that engage families in working directly with their children on learning activities at home (Cotton & Wickelund, 2001).

At times, teachers and schools struggle to interact effectively with families of poverty. Research conducted to better understand the interactions between families and schools has revealed three overarching roles that are created in the development and implementation of parent and community involvement programs (Lyons, Robbins, & Smith, 1983). Each of these roles is actualized differently in relationships in classrooms, schools, and school districts. The roles include (a) parents as the primary resource in education of their children, (b) parents and community members as supporters and advocates for the education of their children, and (c) parents and community members as participants in the education of all children.

In addition, the following strategies for working with families are based on the National Standards for Family Involvement. The first strategy is to design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress. Schools and teachers need to think outside the box when determining communication strategies. For example, a parent conference held at McDonald's is equally as valid as a parent conference held at school.

Another strategy for family involvement is to provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. One example of this is a teacher's videotaping him- or herself helping a child read a story. The teacher could explain why each step in reading aloud is important. This video could be made in multiple languages.

A final strategy is the need for schools and teachers to identify and integrate resources and services from community health, cultural, recreational, social support, and other programs or services. Schools and teachers may adopt the Head Start model of serving the whole child. Everyone benefits from this strategy when the family's needs are met.

Recommendations for Infusing Strategies Into Teaching Programs

If strategies like those previously discussed are to be implemented by preservice students, it is critical that administrators of teacher-preparation programs consider ways to model and infuse these strategies within programs. On the basis of our experiences, we recommend the following in the instructional design, program design, and faculty considerations of a teacher-preparation program.

Instructional Design

Increasing and varying practicum experiences in diverse settings may provide students the opportunity to observe and engage in the use of multiple strategies in working with children living in poverty. Requiring practicums as early as the sophomore year in undergraduate programs and in the 1st year of graduate programs assists students in developing a greater understanding of the classroom. Students need to experience the reality of the classroom and how teachers best meet the needs of students. Establishing virtual learning communities that specifically address topics of classroom environment, family involvement, and school leadership may serve as valuable corequisites of the practica. If the supply of practicum placements are a concern, building a video library of local teachers who demonstrate use of the strategies in diverse classrooms is an alternative. These videos could be used in common assignments across courses. The creation of standard rubrics to guide and assess student reactions to videos may lead to greater consistency in providing appropriate instruction in the strategies across courses.

Additional course requirements across all methods courses could include the creation of common assessments in courses that include family involvement, classroom environment, and school leadership strategies. These assignments would be in relation to a particular content methods course and may provide a systematic approach in determining students' understanding of the strategies. An example could involve a senior portfolio that includes one artifact documenting how students participate in and reflect on a family-involvement activity (e.g., "Literacy Night").

Program Design

The development of stand-alone courses in family and school partnerships, classroom environment and management, and diversity is also an important tool for

determining multiple strategies of working with students. However, the harsh reality of credit-hour crunches in many teacher-preparation programs may prohibit the development of additional courses. If that is the case, educators could develop modules that focus on the different strategies to use when working with children living in poverty. Completion of these modules may then serve as transition gateways into senior year.

Programs could establish a teacher resource center, both on campus and on the Internet. A teacher center may provide the infrastructure for coordinating student, community, school, and family resources and programs. In addition to providing resources and collaboration opportunities for all stakeholders, these centers may facilitate the training of school personnel, students, and faculty members on the various strategies of working with students from families living in poverty.

Faculty Considerations

Training is essential for faculty members to model the best practices in using multiple strategies to work with children living in poverty. Following structured training, faculty members may explicitly model strategies in courses. These strategies may be highlighted in a daily class blueprint (i.e., the agenda for each class session) that is shared with students on the day of class. In these blueprints, faculty members identify the course objectives and topics to be covered in the class. Faculty members then describe what strategies they are modeling in that class session and why those particular strategies were chosen to be modeled during that class. For example, choosing to begin each class with an icebreaker is a classroom environment strategy that may be described in the blueprint. In the blueprint, the description of the icebreaker may be accompanied by an explanation that the strategy was chosen to build team skills among classmates and to allow the faculty member to learn more about the students. The blueprint may indicate that this is important because it would build student motivation both collaboratively and individually, which in turn would affect student achievement. Providing a blueprint each class session gives students clear examples of how to effectively use the varying strategies in a class setting and offers clear justifications of why strategies are selected. It also ensures that faculty members practice what they preach and model great teaching for students. As a result, students begin to build a greater understanding of how and when to use multiple strategies appropriately in the classroom.

When modeling strategies, it is equally important to model within the same parameters that the students would be working with in their future classrooms. If expensive technology or other resources are needed, faculty members need to equip students with methods for searching for funding or alternative resources.

Furthermore, expanding faculty members' teaching roles to include the supervision of practica allows students to cement their learning from the practica experiences. The feedback that is given and the discussions that arise when faculty members are present during practica experiences can be powerful. Students make connections immediately and faculty members are able to strengthen or reshape those connections as needed. Supervised practica enable the growth of strong school–university partnerships. These partnerships are vital as preservice students learn how to teach all children. Faculty members can also forge individual partnerships with classroom teachers and participate in faculty–teacher exchanges. During these types of exchanges, classroom teachers instruct on campus, while faculty members teach in the classroom. Again, this type of partnership supports the continual professional growth of faculty members and teachers in the classroom and provides invaluable teaching case studies for faculty members to share how to best use multiple strategies when working with children living in poverty.

In addition, it is crucial that faculty members conduct course-alike meetings so that all instructors of the same course are on the same page in strategy instruction and use of common products. In these meetings, all faculty members who are teaching a certain course—whether full or part time—meet to discuss the primary course content and requirements for the semester or quarter. Although preserving academic freedom in how a faculty member teaches the content is important, students have the right to be taught the same basic content in a course regardless of the section number. Instructional strategies for working with children living in poverty must be included in that discussion of content and in the final decisions of topics and assignments.

Summary

The literature clearly shows that poverty has a great effect on a child's life and subsequently on a teacher's life. For this reason, it is imperative that teacher-preparation programs and public schools continue to explore the effect and strategies that affect the development of children. Strategies must be used by teachers, modeled by professors, and applied by preservice students. How else would preservice teachers be prepared to best meet the needs of the diverse children in their classrooms? Only after recognizing and studying this effect would preservice teachers be prepared for the future Kirbys in their classrooms.

AUTHOR NOTES

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APPENDIX
Key Strategies for Working With Students and Families

Type of environment

School	Classroom	Family
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hire and retain teachers who believe in their students. • Focus on academic achievement. • On a daily basis using common grade assessments, assess achievement through collaboration with faculty. • Increase collaboration throughout the school. • Use creative scheduling. • Spend money on things that work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a positive environment. • Focus on assets, not deficits. • Create ongoing relationships with families and communities. • Believe in all students. • Plan lessons and activities that are appropriate and meaningful. • Set high expectations. • Use simple, positive reinforcement strategies. • Create a classroom that is high in challenge and low in threat. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design effective forms of communication: School to home and home to school. • Provide information and ideas to families on how to help with home work and curriculum-related activities. • Identify and integrate resources and services from the community.