

Teaching Students in Poverty: Research Based Insights into Preparing Teacher Candidates to Be Successful

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Abstract

The poverty level of students has grown the past ten years at an alarming rate in the United States. Research notes the impact upon classrooms and schools. Poverty issues result in student trauma, high mobility, resource inequity, achievement gaps, truancy, health issues, and often a lack of parental support. Student strengths are often supported by resilience and adaptability. Schools of Education must consider a mechanism, which can be successful for preparing teachers to work with impoverished students.

The definition of poverty, as we know it, continues to change in our society due to many factors. According to Census.gov (2016), it is defined as “if the family’s total income is less than the family’s threshold, then that family and every individual in it are considered in poverty”. Thus, a family of four consisting of two adults and two children who make less than \$30,000 a year (before taxes) a year meets the criteria for poverty. The scale of poverty also reaches our students who live in both urban and rural areas and continues to grow each year in our society. Socioeconomic status (SES) is often used as a way to define an individual’s income level, education, health, and employment (U.S. Social Security Office, 2006). Rothstein (2004) noted that student achievement and performance are influenced by the time the family has lived in poverty, assets, home ownership, savings for college, and with a child younger than five. According to a study by Murnane (2007), impoverished students also are concentrated in schools that are considered low performing, and teachers are not equipped to handle the many challenges of their students. He also noted that when students living in poverty leave school, they often do not have the skill set to earn a wage that will allow them to grow out of their impoverished life style. Trauma is another term that is often used as a measure to describe poverty in students. Herman (1997) defined trauma as “an affliction of the powerless” in which the victim “is rendered helpless by overwhelming forces” and often results in violence. Thus, we often see acts of violence in our schools where there are high pockets of crime and bodily harm. Trauma can also be seen in the classroom where behaviors are often misinterpreted. (Sitler, 2009).

An increase in poverty continues in both the United States and our home state of Illinois. In analyzing census data issued in an article by Bishaw (2013) indicates that poverty increased from 2000 to 2012 from 12.2 percent to 15.9 percent. Bishaw added that in the 25 largest metropolitan areas, poverty rates ranged from 8.4 percent to 19.0 percent. This figure included an increase of 33.3 million to 48.8 million. Three states (Alaska, Vermont, and Wyoming) showed an increase in the number of people living in poverty, but the change in the percentage of people in poverty was not statistically significant. In 2000, poverty rates ranged from a low of 5.3 percent in New Hampshire to a high of 20 percent in Louisiana. A University of Michigan study (2016) noted that in the late 1950’s, the poverty rate was 22.4 percent, or 39.5 million individuals. What is interesting to note is that these numbers declined in the 1960’s to a low of 11.1 percent, or 22.9 million persons. However, by 1983 the number rose to 35.3 million or 15.2 percent. Since 2012, the poverty rate has remained relatively stable for the past four years. The Michigan study (2016) added that children represent a disproportionate share of the poor in our country, with them representing 23.1 percent of the total population, and 33.3 percent of the poor population. This poverty rate also varies by race and origin.

Data for Illinois for the same period shows an increase from 1,334,589 to 1,850,562, or a percentage increase from 11.1 to 14.7. Diane Rado (2013) reported in 2013 the impact that funding plays when students are located in an Illinois school district. Poverty grants to local school districts have gone up nearly \$10 billion over the past decade. She added that there are many questions as to how poverty funding is distributed throughout the state.

For 2013, the general state aid formula was calculated at \$4.8 billion, which shows an increase of 12 percent from 2003. Rado (2013) also pointed out concerns over how poverty money is distributed for each school district, which means that as the number of impoverished students rise, state aid is accounting for a larger number of the overall state aid. As one can deduct, the poverty level continues to rise each year both in the state and nationally. Schools continue to rely more on state aid.

Numerous studies have been done to note the impact of impoverished students related to the classroom/school.

- One study conducted by Coles (2008/2009) showed that “children of poverty are more likely to suffer from food insecurity which means slower language development as well as behavioral problems”.
- A lack of medical insurance means that high poverty families result in more childhood illnesses, which results in more school absences and low school achievement. Another concern added to this is that poor schools often lack a school nurse (Berliner, 2009).
- Impoverished children are often exposed to higher levels of air pollution, lead paint, PCB’s, and smog (Martin, 2004).
- There is little access to books at home, school, and in communities for students living in poverty. This is a concern (Neuman and Celano, 2001). Access to books is often related to higher reading achievement.
- Infants in poverty develop full-blown insecurity during early childhood years due to weak and anxious attachments. The result is poor school performance and behavior issues on the child’s part (Jensen, 2016).
- Petrilli and Wright (2016) added, “States with a higher percentage of students from low-income families report lower average scores on 8th grade math on the National Assessment of Education Progress”. These results show evidence of a correlation between poverty and lower test scores.
- Naparstek (2004) sees students as having no interest in the future, have difficulties with concentration, and exhibit negative physical and verbal behaviors.

Educators often stereotype students, especially those from impoverished homes. However, resilience has shown to play a major factor in allowing these students to overcome adversity. In a study by Kitano and Lewis (2005), resilience and coping was reviewed as it related to gifted students. “Effective coping strategies differ depending upon particular circumstances, but successful academic experiences can enhance self-efficacy, which, in turn, supports resiliency. Specific factors among different groups affect resilience, and also common positive coping strategies that might be shared across groups”. Strategies that are cited to enhance resilience include working with a caring person, encouraging optimism and self-efficacy, and support for cultural strategies and heritage. Another major factor for supporting children in poverty includes the primary caregiver. Burney and Cross (2006) in their research added that when someone from the family is supporting college-related goals, the student was most likely to attend college. Another factor that is often observed is the role of mentors that, over a long period of time is a critical influence (Burney and Cross, 2006). Schools and colleges are now providing more focused academic and social support services to help students achieve through high school, apply to a college/university, and stay in school until graduation. Hopefully, this will allow for an increase of college-bound impoverished students.

What can Schools of Education do to prepare teacher candidates at the undergraduate and graduate level? This question is often asked in our schools since there has been a considerable growth of our impoverished and diverse students in the general population.

K.M Zeichner (1992) did a study, which focused on integrating issues of diversity throughout field experiences, course work, and subtopics on teacher education courses/programs. Although his ideas did not specifically address poverty, they do relate to the issue in many ways. His “key elements” aimed at preparing teachers for diverse students included:

1. Admission procedures screen students based on cultural sensitivity and commitment to social justice.
2. Student’s sense of their own ethnic and cultural identities is developed.
3. Students examine their attitudes toward others.
4. Students are taught the dynamics of prejudice and racism and how to deal with them in the classroom.
5. Students study the dynamics of prejudice and racism and the school’s role in social reproduction.
6. Histories and contributions of various groups are integrated into the curriculum.
7. Characteristics of learning styles of various groups and individuals are incorporated, and the limitations of such information are assessed.

8. Sociocultural and language issues are infused into the curriculum.
9. Methods for gaining information about communities are studied.
10. A variety of “culturally sensitive” instructional strategies and assessment procedures are taught.
11. Success models of traditionally underserved groups are highlighted.
12. Community field experiences and/or student teaching experiences with individuals from various cultural backgrounds are a part of the practical component of the teacher education program.
13. Students experience opportunities to “live” or become immersed in communities of color.
14. Instruction is embedded in a group or cohort setting that provides intellectual challenge and social support.

Engagement for students living in poverty must have a continual focus, which includes a pedagogy that is structured to meet their specific needs. One of the first considerations should include family involvement. This includes reaching out to parents at the beginning of the school year so that they know you are supportive of them and their child. Continue to include physical education and the arts in the school curriculum since many of our low-income schools have dropped these two programs; thus denying our low-income students access to these important subjects. Jones (2008) noted that one must make sure to look closely at instructional materials that often create class bias. Another example to consider for impoverished students includes having them read for enjoyment, which will result in literacy enjoyment (Kellett, 2009).

Moving beyond the classroom should also include universal preschool, which can enhance student achievement later in life. Providing access to health clinics and farms for fresh food will result in better overall well being (Neuman, 2009). Lastly, Gould and Gould (2003) added that schools need to increase health services, such as nurses in schools, which will result in students with less health issues. The research related to this topic of preparing teachers for work with impoverished students continues to present many approaches and challenges that educators need to consider and be aware in today’s ever changing society. No matter what their socioeconomic status, with hard work and commitment, dedicated teachers will meet the needs of all students in today’s schools and classrooms.

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