

Chapter 13

A National Crisis and a Call to Action: Preparing Teachers to Teach Children From Poverty

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ABSTRACT

Well over 16,000,000 children live in poverty in the United States. One of the widest achievement gaps in education today exists between children from lower and upper income families. Our nation's teachers are woefully unprepared to work with children from poverty and the current soaring poverty rate is serving to exacerbate an already bad situation into a major educational crisis. Considerable dispute exists between and among differing approaches related to identifying an optimum way of perceiving and working with children of poverty, but the literature is clear that high quality professional development programs are critical for preparing teachers to work with these students. This chapter describes a program for preparing teachers to work with children of poverty that could be adapted for use in both preservice programs and also as professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Emphasis on student achievement and accountability measures for teachers and schools have both been under intense scrutiny since the No Child Left Behind Legislation of 2001 was enacted, and this emphasis continues to grow as calls for even stricter standards and accountability mount. Coupled with the demands for improved student achievement, there has been a concurrent rise in the number of children living in poverty in America. The national economic decline that began in 2008 has increased the number of public school children who are struggling to survive in poor economic conditions while, simultaneously,

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A National Crisis and a Call to Action

more is being expected of them academically. This has created an almost unbearable level of stress for the students, their parents, and the teachers in our schools.

The numbers are staggering. Well over 16,000,000 children live in poverty in the United States and this number is continually rising. There were an estimated 16.1 million children living in poverty in 2012. That number rose to 16.7 million in 2013. Accurate numbers for 2014 are not yet available, but the number is expected to rise. Nationally, this represents approximately 23% of all school-aged children from 5-17 years old who struggle to survive in poverty; this is an amount higher than any other industrialized nation in the world. Much higher rates of poverty can be found in local areas or counties across the country. It is not uncommon to find counties with poverty rates over 30% and some even approaching 50%. When these numbers are drilled down even further to a school level, there are some schools across our country that are faced with a nearly 100% poverty rate. This poses incredible difficulties for the children, obviously, but it also poses significant challenges for the teachers who are charged with educating them.

Adding to the problem, research has shown that schools and teachers have not historically worked well with children from poverty (Barr & Parrett, 2007). This could be due in large part to the fact that institutions of teacher education have not prepared them to do so. Training on working with children of poverty is largely absent in most teacher training programs (Jennings, 2007). Jennings found most teacher preparation programs focus on diversity in terms of race/ethnicity (46%), special needs (34%), and language (18%). Social class received a mere 2% of the overall emphasis. Future teachers are not being prepared to work with these children. Professional development for in-service teachers is also sorely lacking in this area. Therefore, our nation's teachers, as a whole, are woefully unprepared to work with children from poverty and the current soaring poverty rate is serving to exacerbate an already bad situation into a major educational crisis.

Not only is very little time devoted in teacher preparation programs across the country to understanding the unique needs of children in poverty, even less time is devoted on teaching future teachers how to teach children of poverty. While understanding and empathy of the needs and struggles of students are an important piece of the puzzle, it is only the first piece, yet this is where what little training teachers get ends. Teachers need concrete methods and strategies that will work for reaching these students and supporting them in their enterprise of learning. They need to understand their situation and how to support them, not merely feel empathy for them. There is no magic bullet, but our teacher preparation programs could do more to prepare future teachers for educating these children that will likely make up at least a quarter of their future teachers' classrooms. We know more than ever before about the needs of these children and ways in which they could be encouraged and supported, but that information is not making it into the field of practice. Teachers should not have to be on the front line trying to figure out on their own how to help these students. Our country's schools need a plan of action to address this crisis. It is a moral, professional, and educational imperative that both universities and teacher professional development programs do a better job of preparing our future teachers to meet this demand and prepare teachers who can help these children succeed and break through the struggles of poverty. It is possible for children to overcome the odds and rise out of poverty; but it is far too uncommon that this actually becomes a reality. Research has demonstrated that students from high poverty schools can perform well if their unique educational needs are addressed (Kannapel & Clements, 2005; Pogrow, 2009). The literature is clear that high quality professional development programs are critical for preparing teachers to work with these students and that students from even the most difficult of circumstances can achieve academically if given the proper supports (Simon & Izuni, 2003).

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