Chapter 5
Walking a Mile in Their Shoes:
Understanding Students in Poverty

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of a poverty simulation project, an experiential learning procedure on preservice teachers' perception of elementary students living in poverty. Thirty undergraduate preservice teachers from two cohorts in a public university in the southern part of the United States were asked to participate in a poverty simulation activity to expose them to the lived experiences of people living in poverty. An early analysis of the debriefing session after the simulation project showed that students viewed this simulation project as an engaging learning experience. Means and standard deviations of scores in relation to pre-test and post-test personal bias toward poverty, understanding individuals in poverty, effort in teaching students living in poverty, and responsibility for students living in poverty were obtained. While there was no significant difference from the paired sample t-tests, there was a slight difference in three of the four areas measured.

In assessing what it means to live in poverty, it was of paramount importance for me to look at the personal experiences of families and other people in the community in which I grew up. Poverty in Nigeria, where I am originally from, means not having access to basic human needs such as food, clothing, medical facilities, quality education, and government assistance. For my experience I will go with Alexander, et al., (2020) definition of poverty. These authors suggest poverty is characterized by living with restricted

economic resources and includes various income thresholds that vary based on geographical location. This is the situation in Nigeria.

However, according to the United States Census Bureau, the poverty threshold is based on related income given the number of people in the household. The poverty threshold was $13, 300 for a one-person household with an individual who is under the age of 65. Their threshold for a four-person household with householders and two children under the age of 18 is $26, 370. Thus, to be considered poor, the family income must be at or below $26, 370 (United States Census Bureau, 2020). In examining my own experience growing up and looking back at the lives of children I went to elementary school with, I would conclude I came from a somewhat middle-class family because my parents could afford to send me to a boarding school. I had friends who did not have that luxury because their parents did not have enough money to send then to secondary school (high school).

I would therefore not say I know what it really means to be poor. Having lived both in Nigeria and the United states, I would say the term living in poverty is different in these two countries. This is because the needs of the people are different, and so are the available resources. In the United States the poverty threshold for a family of 4 is around 26,370 dollars a year (United States Census Bureau, 2020), but in Nigeria, people living below the poverty line earn about the equivalent of $1.90 a day in U.S. dollars (Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2022 Correcting Course, 2023). In Nigeria, if you are poor, you are on your own, as there are no government services or assistance programs compared to individuals living in the United States. Having not experienced poverty, my views about poverty were very different when I first started teaching in the United States. My first teaching job was in a suburban school district with mostly middle-class families who one would perceive as caring about what their kids were learning in school. These families were very willing to come to the classroom to volunteer any time they were needed. The situation was, however, different at the second school I taught at because it was more populated with students from low income families. The perspective here was different as parents were preconceived as not caring about their child's education. This is because these families sometimes would not show up for parent/teacher conferences or to pick up their child's report card. This is supported in the literature by Smith-Carrier, T., et, al. (2019) who stated, that "students and practitioners from privileged socio-economic backgrounds may thus have little understanding about the root causes, effects and experiences associated with poverty" (p. 3). Through continued research on poverty and academic success, I have come to conclude that these families/ guardians

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