Poverty and Children with Special Needs: Implications and Strategies for the Classroom

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Abstract

The rate of poverty has steadily increased across the nation. Living in poverty affects health, academic growth, social-emotional development and classroom engagement. Many preservice teachers in our program come from suburban environments and have little experience working and interacting with diverse populations. Therefore, using service learning and civic engagement as a framework for understanding poverty as a whole, and students with special needs within that context, will help prepare Inclusive Education preservice teachers to address student needs.

Poverty

More than 16 million children residing in the United States live in families with incomes below the poverty level. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP; 2014), in economic terms, a standard of $23,550 for a family of four is a benchmark for poverty. 45% of US children live in families at or below that level. Additionally, the NCCP (2014) reports that research shows families need about twice that just to cover basic expenses. “Poverty can impede children’s ability to learn and contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems” (para. 2) and can also lead to poor health. The NCCP also stresses that “research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to children’s well-being” (para. 3). Families with children with disabilities face additional financial challenges such as the cost of additional care for their disabled child and barriers to entering and maintaining employment. The Every Child Matters campaign (2007) asserts that it costs three times as much to raise a child with a disability as it does to raise a nondisabled child.

Types of Poverty

Poverty for some families is situational, occurring when a lack of resources due to an event such as chronic illness, job loss, or divorce transpires. Generational poverty, however, occurs when two generations have been born into poverty. People living in urban poverty deal with “a complex aggregate of chronic and acute stressors (including crowding, violence, and noise) and are dependent on often inadequate large city services,” notes Jensen (2009, p. 6). Rural poverty is growing at a rate exceeding the growth of urban poverty. In areas with rural poverty there are equity and access issues regarding services. Job opportunities are fewer (Jensen, 2009). It is valuable for preservice teachers to recognize that the implications can be different for students in their respective situations. Most schools and businesses operate using middle class rules “stressing
authority, time, work, achievement, and order” (LeCompte, 1978, p. 22), often implicitly; rules foreign to, or at the very least not always embraced by those living in poverty.

**Poverty and Students with Special Needs**

Children in poverty are likely to live in substandard housing, where homes are more likely to be poorly maintained, and possibly exposing children to lead based paint and/or molds and dusts that cause asthma. Other risk factors include poor nutrition, lack of quality health care, and lack of transportation. People who live in chronic poverty are socially devalued, where they are mistreated and denied social opportunities, and have less access to resources on an ongoing basis (Lustig & Strauser, 2007). When children with special needs live in poverty, the problems they face become more complex and multidimensional.

The Poverty Disability Model demonstrates that the likelihood of disability increases when children are born into poverty. Mothers living in poverty have about a 40% higher risk of having a child (or children) with a disability. They are less likely to get prenatal care, more likely to have preterm births, and to give birth to children with fetal alcoholism (Lustig & Strauser, 2007).

Additionally, many parents are unable to work because of the lack of, or cost of, appropriate child care. The stress of caring for a child with a disability can place strain on family relationships (Every Child Matters, 2007).

**Culturally Responsive Teaching: Learning Through Experiences**

Preservice teachers often have little experience understanding and interacting with others outside of their own socio-economic status. To gain an understanding of what is happening in their own communities, preservice teachers reviewed statistics for their communities, surrounding counties, their home state, and the nation. Our home community in Rochester, New York currently has more people living at less than half the poverty level than any other similarly sized U.S. city, and the most extreme poverty (family of four with income less than $11,925) in the nation. Concentrated poverty levels are getting worse, rising from 31 to 32.9% over the last year, with statistics being high for all racial and ethnic groups. Rochester is the 5th poorest city among the nation’s top 75 metro areas (Detroit, Cleveland, Dayton, Hartford, Rochester), and the second poorest city compared to similarly sized cities (Hartford, Rochester). It is the only U.S. city where over half the children live in poverty, and Rochester has the highest rate of extreme poverty at 16.2%. Further, there are 14,000 people living in conditions just above the federal poverty guideline (Rochester Area Community Foundation and ACT Rochester, 2015). Clearly, this is a contest city residents do not want to “win.”

Using Milner and Laughter’s (2015) misconceptions and mindsets, discussions held with preservice teachers focuses on three of the five mindsets to help them reframe their concepts of race, culture and ethnicity: Mindset 1, *If I acknowledge the racial backgrounds of my students or myself, then I may be considered a racist*, Mindset 2, *I treat all of my students the same, regardless*
of their racial or ethnic backgrounds, and Mindset 3, I focus on teaching children and ignore the race of my students because race is irrelevant. We address these mindsets and misconceptions and move from discussion to understanding lived realities by using strategies for culturally responsive teaching.

In field placement settings, preservice teachers were able to address misconceptions held by students. During one field placement, when careers were being discussed, a teacher candidate noticed no one wanted to become a teacher. When she brought this up, one of the students said “Black people don’t become no teachers, Miss.” When she challenged this assumption, the student said, “Look around.” This teacher candidate was comfortable in this interaction to promote teaching as a future possibility as a career choice for the students. She challenged the students to become future role models for others. One preservice teacher wrote in her reflection assignment that her most memorable moment was when a student ran up to her, hugged her and said she wanted to be like her when she was older. The students in her class were thinking about college, careers and their futures beyond their immediate situations.

Preservice teachers also gained a better understanding of themselves. Hidden biases were brought to attention through participating in activities like Project Implicit. Hidden bias tests/ implicit association tests can measure unconscious bias that teacher candidates are unaware they have. Teaching tolerance (2016) reports: “bias thought to be absent or extinguished remain as ‘mental residue’ in most of us. Studies show people can be consciously committed to egalitarianism, and deliberately work to behave without prejudice, yet still possess hidden negative prejudices or stereotype” (http://www.tolerance.org/Hidden-bias). There are several dozen variations of hidden bias tests developed by researchers at Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington. You can take Project Implicit tests here: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/

Service Learning

Service learning experiences are one way to provide a reciprocal relationship that links academics to the service in ways that both the students and partners benefit. Integrating service learning into a teacher education preparation program helped preservice teachers learn to develop cross-cultural awareness and understanding of others who were, in some way, different from themselves, while learning their course content. Service learning differs from community service in several ways: it includes reflection, is sustainable, it extends the curriculum, and it benefits all partners.

Hildenbrand and Schultz (2015) assert service learning experiences can “provide for pre-service teachers to become engaged with individuals who have different life experiences from their own and potentially shift principles of multicultural education from an abstraction to reality” (2015, p. 263). This helped preservice teachers move from volunteer status to social change agents. At first the concept can seem overwhelming to teacher candidates. One noted, “At first I was overwhelmed when I found out that (service learning) was on top of field placement hours,” but she
went on to report her group ended up completing more hours than they were required to because “we were going to (service site) every week, even twice a week when we were all able to...The fact they looked up to us like that made us want to keep going back.”

Service learning projects at the college helped preservice teachers better understand the economic, cultural, and language diversity present in our schools. One service project, in conjunction with a local charter school for adolescent girls focused on building a “Thanksgiving Tree” where each girl had the opportunity to write what or who they were thankful for, or an encouraging message to other girls at the school. The school indicated the project helped the girls to reflect on the positive aspects of their lives, and provided a symbol of hope for brighter futures. This was a simple, low cost activity with a high impact factor. Jensen (2009) asserts that given family stressors, students living in poverty are more likely to need and less likely to get caring, dependable adults in their lives, and they often look to teachers for such support.

In a different course, preservice teachers worked with a local children’s center that housed Universal Preschool classrooms, Head Start classrooms, a community day care, and an after-school program. Preservice teachers were assigned to classrooms in groups of two, where they interacted with children and also completed lessons that focused on language development and literacy. The preservice teachers had opportunities to interact one on one with the children who lived in poverty. These on one interactions dispelled stereotypes and assumptions, and created new realities for the preservice teachers who became trusted adults in the lives of the children. One teacher candidate said “I enjoyed reading countless of stories.” And another notes “Every time we walked through the door and sat down, someone was on our lap wanted to be read to!” Engle and Black (2008) note that poverty affects a child’s developmental and educational outcomes beginning in the second year of life, and risks that occur in the early years have long-lasting consequences. The ability to “use and profit from school has been recognized as playing a unique role in escape from poverty in the United States” (p.243). Subsequently, school readiness plays an important part and the children that preservice teachers worked with benefited from education opportunities and helped to place them on the trajectory towards school success.

**Reality Tour**

Participating in a reality tour anti-poverty movement is another activity that encourages preservice teachers to look more closely at their students’ lived experiences. In Rochester, New York, the Reality Tour takes a ride through town, stopping to hear from people who live in poverty every day, from the homeless to the working poor. Participants also get to interact with organizations that support individuals and families living in poverty (Kasper, Affronti, & Sydor, 2009). Many communities conduct organized reality tours. Bennett (2008), who is an assistant professor in Georgia, also supports including a reality tour to help students become more aware of socioeconomic differences. Her students complete a self-guided driving tour. She states “preservice teachers realized many students only have access to their course content during the school day: they have limited outside resources with which to learn about content” (p. 253). Tours like these encourage teacher candidates to think about the diverse backgrounds of their students beyond the typical exposure of facts and figures, and personalized the experience, leaving students to take ownership of the needs of their students, and empathize with those living in poverty.
As a result of the activities above, preservice teachers can gain a deep understanding how limited outside resources can impact what happens in the classroom. Wexler (2014) posits that while it is not the only cause, effects of poverty like access to health care, toxic environments, drugs, and violence, are factors that contribute to learning and other disabilities and inevitably, low performance on standardized tests, noting that “longitudinal studies indicate that the lowest test scores on standardized tests are largely clustered in the poorest school districts” (p. 54).

**Promoting Good Nutrition**

Proper nutrition is important for all children, however, when it comes to children with disabilities, “timely and cost-effective nutrition interventions can promote health maintenance and reduce the risk of comorbidities and complications” (Ptomey & Wittenbrook, 2015, p. 593). Additionally, children in poor environmental living conditions are more apt to be exposed to lead because properties have been poorly maintained. Reduction of risk to children can be addressed through nutritional factors by providing diets rich in calcium, iron, and vitamins D and C, as a secondary prevention method after removing exposure to lead (Gallicchio, Scherer, & Sexton, 2002), increasing the long term impact of a good diet.

Poverty and obesity are also linked as individuals from low socioeconomic groups tend to have less access to healthy foods. Nutrient rich high quality foods cost more, while fats and sweets cost less notes Drewnowski (2009), who also reports that low-income neighborhoods also attract more fast food restaurants. Strecker (2011) asserts that it is important to educate children, including those with disabilities on the importance of physical activity and healthy eating to address the obesity epidemic. She points out that optimally, children receive half their daily calories at school, so it is important for schools to provide healthy choices, and for children to make them. Children with disabilities are at greater risk for obesity since it is often more difficult for them to be healthy and/or be active.

One of our service learning projects included developing lesson plans for local early childhood program P-2. This gave our preservice teachers the opportunity to practice differentiation in lesson planning as well as promote good nutrition and healthy choices. Additionally, preservice teachers wrote and received a grant to create nutrition kits (totes with materials appropriate for each lesson plan). Lessons also focused on healthy habits, like washing hands before eating.

**Literacy Development Strategies**

Preservice teachers addressed literacy inequities they discovered locally through several methods. The student chapter of Council for Exceptional Children initiated a pen pals program to get students in area classrooms writing by choice. Service learning classes completed “Classroom Makeovers” where they painted classrooms, provided classroom libraries and school supplies. These programs created renewed energy and engagement for students and teachers.
In another project, they created take home activity bags to encourage parent/child interactions around literacy activities.

It is not uncommon to find one college group or another conducting a book drive. When preservice teachers heard that many of the students did not own their very own book, they created an action plan, wrote a grant for books, and then conducted a reading pen pals program around books selected by partnering classroom teachers (Grade 1- Pete the Cat- I Love My White Shoes, Grade 3- More than Anything Else, Grade 5- A View from the Cherry Tree). It was a striking comparison for these preservice teachers who lived their childhood surrounded by a multitude of books and who were frequently read to.

In a different service project, preservice teachers worked with an area library program that acts as a neighborhood hub for families who recently immigrated to the United States. Of the families that regularly attend, 90% are a refugee population, representing 14 different nationalities and languages. On a daily basis, 40-50 children attend. Through the creation of word walls, personalized books and take home activities, preservice teachers set up opportunities for English Language Learners to improve language and literacy. Preservice teachers also assisted at the after school tutoring center. One stated she learned first-hand that when you “build positive student-teacher relationships the students are more likely to engage fully” and another stated, “I learned how important it is to have a connection with your students… I knew them and how they learned.” The value of the experience was summed up by a preservice teacher who said “I never would have thought that working in a library would change my perspective.”

**Summary: Preservice teachers making a difference.**

Living in poverty can affect a child’s ability to learn and impact his or her long term academic progress. Students with disabilities face additional barriers, and living in poverty creates a more complex and multidimensional set of risk factors that can impede academic success. Through a combination of service learning and community engagement activities, preservice teachers were able to make a difference in their community while gaining essential conceptual skills. Preservice teachers also gained a deeper understanding of educational inequities and the needs of their communities while making theory to practice connections. They know they are making a difference now, but the potential for the long term impact by preservice teachers on the futures of students they work with is immeasurable.
References


