Educational Realities of Poverty: Developing and Delivering Effective Professional Development

Jane C. Manner
East Carolina University
College of Education
Greenville, NC 27858, USA.

H. Carol Greene
East Carolina University
Greenville, NC. USA.

Abstract

Educators are not always well prepared to work effectively with children and families in poverty, although the numbers of those affected is alarmingly high in some regions. Professional development, provided by a regional university, can be a powerful tool to improve outcomes for these students, if crafted to meet perceived needs through a conceptual framework integrated with practical strategies. The conceptual framework is an essential first step, as it lays the foundation for both understanding and action. Approaches to working with students in poverty have historically been represented by models that are polar opposites: the deficit model and the "funds of knowledge" approach. However, this professional development protocol adopts the CESPR Model to provide a contemporary and balanced approach, accounting for both challenges and resources that learners in poverty may possess. In addition, it provides a practical series of strategies that classroom teachers can implement immediately through the lens of a guiding conceptual framework. This program is designed to support practicing teachers who are working with low-income populations and who are seeking to maximize their effectiveness with their students, while improving clinical placements for teacher candidates who complete field experiences in those classrooms.

Keywords: poverty, low-income schools, professional development, students in poverty

Many schools struggle with providing effective instruction for students living in poverty. Nationally, students in poverty account for a significant percentage of classroom populations, estimated at 19.7 % by povertyusa.org in 2015, a figure that represents approximately one in five children. Foster (2016) suggests that the number is closer to one in four, and points out that this is the highest rate among other advanced industrial nations in Europe, North America, and Asia. In some parts of the United States, the numbers are greater. North Carolina's poverty rate is substantial with estimates in some counties exceeding 30%. Berner, Vasquez & McDougall (2016) assert that, although the poverty rate in North Carolina has risen irregularly over the course of more than a decade, the trend appears to be on the increase with a particularly clear pattern in the eastern rural part of the state. The most recent reports from NC Policy Watch indicate that North Carolina's poverty rate continues to be greater than before the recession and higher than that of most of the nation (2018). These compelling statistics mean that educators in the area are looking to their regional university for professional development that is responsive to the classroom realities they encounter on an increasing basis.

School districts have not always been well positioned to provide effective educational settings for low-income populations, in part because of the substantial and growing numbers of students represented in the group, but also because instructional staff may not possess correct information about these students. However, it is not only districts that must make changes to meet the needs of students in poverty. Teacher education programs that serve affected areas have an obligation to offer assistance in terms of professional development, and to allocate appropriate time and attention to poverty in an effort to respond to regional conditions.

They must recognize that poverty in surrounding districts affects not only the students and teachers in those schools, but their own teacher candidates as well, many of whom will experience internships and subsequent professional employment in those same locations.

Practical and Theoretical Considerations

Some, such as Teitelbaum (2015) assert that it is not so much that teacher education needs to change, but that poverty itself is what needs to be alleviated. Gorski (2008) noted that we have failed to connect the dots between educational failure and economic conditions. The National Education Association (NEA) suggests that emphasis on student attitudes and their effects on academic success is less important than the fact that so many children do live in poverty and that it is the latter that needs to be addressed (2016). These are compelling arguments, and many educators would welcome the opportunity to have greater influence on social justice. This is a notion that resounds with many, since, as the NEA points out, great teachers are the best agents for appropriate and sustainable change in challenged schools (2009). These are important directions, but are likely to be very long term initiatives. Addressing more proximal goals for immediate needs, however, can be approached with professional development targeted at helping teachers craft better outcomes for low-income students through understanding, knowledge, and practical classroom strategies.

Others have focused less on the need to eradicate poverty in general, and more on the need for changes in educational practice with low-income students. As early as 1996, Haberman noted that schools for poor children were getting worse, not better. In part, he argued, this was because, while we want children in poverty to succeed, we are asking them to do so in ways that are alien to them. Teachers are trained to expect them to do things using methods that are unfamiliar to many children who are coming from a background of poverty. Mader (2015) asserts that too many beginning teachers are unprepared for contemporary classrooms and that they lack experience with diverse, low-income students. A related factor is cited by Foster (2016) who observes that students attending low-income schools are twice as likely to have teachers who have only temporary alternative certification than those in middle income settings. Teacher attrition in the poorer schools is great, and the NEA (2009) has described what it calls a revolving door in these schools for both faculty and administration. The nexus of these circumstances casts a challenging pall on the educational scene for many young people in poor financial circumstances.

We believe it is becoming increasingly important for teacher education programs to provide professional development regarding educational strategies that address the often-ignored requirements of children and families in poverty. In our case, since we are located in eastern North Carolina, poverty is a significant challenge for most public schools. We considered that practicing teachers represented a central population that could make a difference at several levels. First, improved teacher understanding and instructional skills would support improved student outcomes. This initiative would represent potential effects to two levels of the educational population: teachers and students. Second, that same professional development could improve practicum and internship experiences for our own teacher candidates. A large percentage of our candidates complete field experience requirements in the immediate environs and are subsequently employed regionally following graduation and certification. Therefore, it makes sense that, in addition to the central skills and knowledge that professional educators share, our graduates should recognize and be responsive to the needs of the regional population and that of so many others in high need areas. With this approach to inservice teachers, we could actually serve them, their students in high poverty schools, and our candidates simultaneously, as represented in Figure 1.
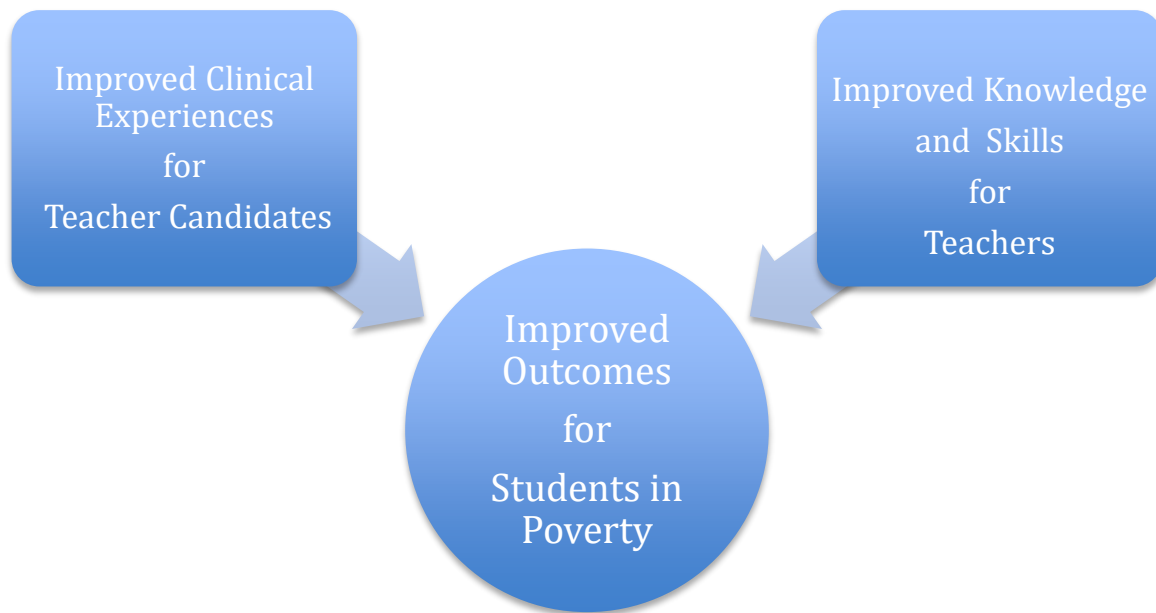
Improved Clinical Experiences for Teacher Candidates

Improved Knowledge and Skills for Teachers

Improved Outcomes for Students in Poverty

Figure 1: Simultaneous Service of Professional Development on Three Levels

Initiating the Process

As a teacher education institution, our evolutionary process follows a dual focus in which administration and faculty consider the merits of a potential response to changing conditions that affect our teacher candidates as well as the utility of our program to the region and the profession at large. Two faculty members had both personal and professional experience with children and families in poverty, and worked to coalesce their beliefs through a rigorous examination of professional principles as well as academic and practical literature. This process resulted in the development of a conceptual framework for working with children and families in poverty that was released in the form of a book chapter describing the CESPR Model, an acronym that stands for cognitive support, emotional engagement, social learning, and positive relationships (2016). The model provides the basis for conceiving of poverty from a perspective more balanced that the more typical deficit or funds of knowledge views. CESPR takes a position in which the assets of children and families are respected, but in which challenges are both acknowledged and addressed. The latter feature is significant, because the model does not stop with the theoretical, but continues with practical professional development that offers immediate assistance to staff in poor schools.

As a result, this professional development process began with a request for input within a department of elementary and middle grades education from faculty, both tenured and fixed term, who were involved in surrounding schools. Most had observed a growing population of students and families living in poverty. While many faculty members and teacher candidates felt both empathy and sympathy for those affected, it became clear over time that, as a department, we were not doing enough to examine systematically and respond to the needs of public school students in those circumstances. Further analysis disclosed that we were not making teaching related to poverty a significant part of our coursework. While other topics, such as diversity, language, and culture were visited with more or less regularity in our courses, poverty, as an educational consideration, was nearly absent. An examination of other teacher education programs disclosed that this lack was nearly omnipresent. Making revisions to actual course offerings would be undertaken, but it is a rigorous and time-consuming process. Offering professional development could be a related and powerful tool that could provide assistance in a timely manner, and then co-exist with new or modified coursework in the future.

The CESPR Model provided a framework from which faculty and administration could craft a response to the immediate need of addressing poverty in surrounding schools. Its professional development component meant that there was the potential to offer immediate assistance to an existing cadre of educators who could then offer improved educational services to a large segment of the public school population in the areas served by the regional university.

Faculty and administration alike were highly supportive of the idea and agreed to elaborate the process to include the addition of coursework in the College as an adjunct to the professional development being planned. This new coursework concept generated considerable favor, but was assigned a position in the queue as future work requiring a lengthy and multi-stage process of initiating new courses. The professional development protocol, however, using the phases described by the CESPR Model, was ready for delivery, and could be enacted with alacrity.

Following the process of soliciting faculty and administrative perceptions and approval, a multiple-county needs assessment was conducted through interfaces with a quasi-advisory organization that meets at intervals to articulate interactions between multiple school districts and the College of Education. An announcement was made that professional development targeting effective teaching of children in poverty was ready for delivery to those who would indicate their interest and be ready to schedule it. In terms of interest, the response was overwhelmingly positive, as might be expected considering the income statistics for this part of the state. From this point, the professional development went forward with the intention of offering an important and needed service to the immediate area.

Delivering the Professional Development - Formatting

Guskey (2009) asserts that there are multiple complexities attendant to evaluating the efficacy of professional development, including many that are context-based. Nonetheless, the duet of improving content knowledge and understanding of how students learn is the most frequently reported combination of effective training characteristics for educators across all sources. The professional development described here may be considered somewhat unique inasmuch as the content knowledge and understanding about how students learn represent a type of merger of both of these constructs. In other words, the content relates to poverty and how it impacts learning for children, rather than a curricular area and how we can help students master it. Also unique is an initial phase that encourages participants to examine personal perceptions and experiences through guided questions. This first step represents a foundation for understanding the content as well as a quest for exposing what may be unrecognized bias or misunderstanding. The guided questions are based on Beegle's work on educating children who live in poverty, and they focus on taking an authentic look at personal beliefs as well as both accurate and inaccurate information about those living in these circumstances (2012).

This initial phase is followed by seven others that include a quiz on facts and fiction about poverty; a "straight talk" rejoinder to inform participants about fictional, but widespread and persistent, beliefs that were included in quiz items; a component in which effective practices for connecting with children, families, and communities are examined; a planning phase in which effective instructional practices are evaluated and integrated into current educational practice; a virtual practicum; an actual practicum; and a summative attitudinal assessment. The CESPR Model provides templates that can be used in each of these steps, however, those wishing to implement similar professional development might wish to craft original prototypes that address parallel issues for their particular group(s) of participants. The phases of the professional development are depicted in Figure 2.
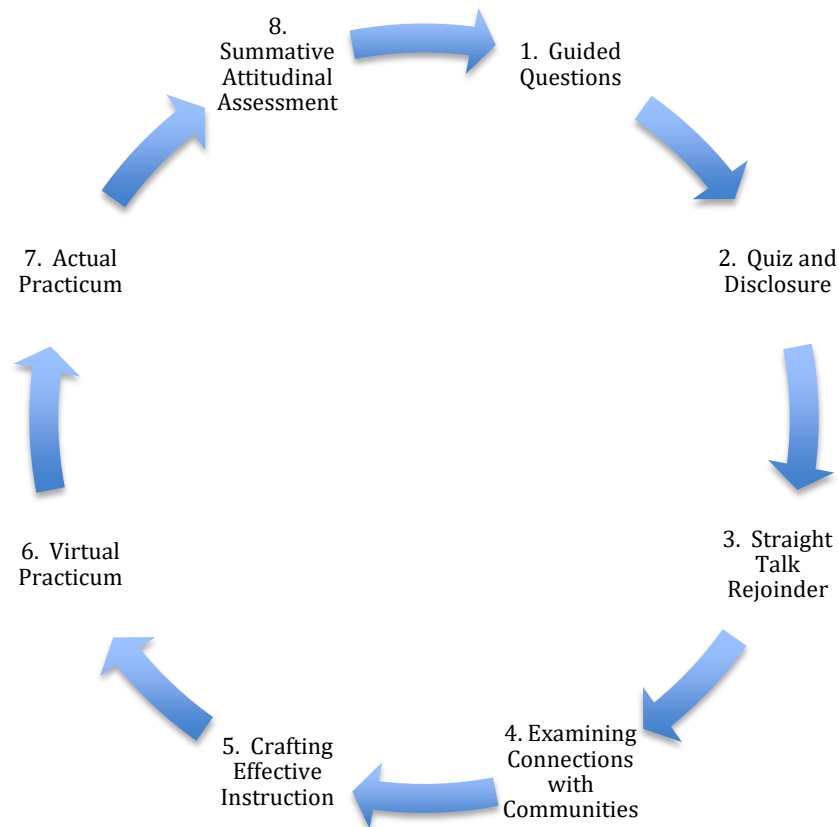
Figure 2: The Cycle of Professional Development about Poverty

Delivering the Professional Development – Flexible Scheduling

The professional development described here can be delivered according to the timing needs and schedules of participants and their particular context. It is planned in seven phases that can be delivered in a single day, or divided in ways that make sense for the group being served. While phase two is necessarily brief in the form of an eight-item quiz, it is important to note that the remaining phases can differ dramatically in terms of time, depending on the experiences and perceptions of the participants as well as the amount and quality of the discourse produced. A skillful facilitator can adjust the times, and may find it useful to table and return to discussion from a prior phase at a later date, when time constraints make this necessary. Though flexible, a favored model would be for the phases to occur in two half-day sessions with a hiatus intervening before the actual practicum, so that teachers could apply strategies and understandings developed in earlier components of the professional development in their own classrooms before reconvening. This works well to support that practicum before the completion of the final reflective attitudinal assessment and discussion. However, other divisions of the phases are at the discretion of those who deliver the training, since schedules and time constraints may vary widely, and since differing groups may wish to emphasize distinct phases.

Describing the Process

Phases 1 and 2: Questions and Quiz

Irrespective of scheduling preferences, the phases in the process begin with a personal examination of beliefs that are further analyzed in a brief quiz. The quiz invites participants to evaluate as true or false eight statements about poverty. This is an essential "hooking" experience, since most participants will discover that they hold at least one or more unfounded opinions about the subject. This outcome is typically effective in establishing the mindset among participants that they do, in fact, have something to learn. The statements in this professional development were selected to represent a combination of correct assertions, such as, "Poor children are more likely to go to schools that are poorly equipped and have fewer qualified teachers" as well as others that are sometimes described as myths about poverty, such as, "Children in poverty can come from all races, but the majority of them are black."   Since the questions reflect commonly held misconceptions, it is highly unlikely that a participant would get a perfect score.

However, in anticipation of such an event, the scoring mechanism includes a question immediately following the true/false items that would accommodate this event by asking, "If you got all of the quiz items right, please share how you came to possess the knowledge that helped you."

Phase 3: The Straight Talk Rejoinder

Following the self-scored quiz, responses are discussed as a group. Participants are invited to record and respond to accurate statistics provided in the "Straight Talk Rejoinder" phase that support the true or false status of each quiz item, as well as their reaction to any "myth" they may have believed was accurate. Participants are also invited to consider the veracity of the concept of a culture of poverty as well as the analysis by Bomer et al (2008) who assert that educators have been and are being miseducated by the media and some of the literature, such as the writing of Ruby Payne. According to Bomer et al, Payne's Framework for Understanding Poverty (2XXX) does not stand up to its claims of having a research base. The focus in this second part of Phase 3 is to emphasize that there are many types of poverty and many reasons that each type exists. Individual contexts of children and families further broaden the diversity within the circumstance of poverty. Consequently, no single concept of culture can apply in every case. Therefore, while there is merit in making an effort to understand the conditions related to children and families in poverty, to paint them all with the same brushstroke can only lead to unfounded generalizations. Participants are urged to examine individual cases as what they are: individual cases.

Phase 4: Connecting with Communities

In this phase, participants are asked to read a brief description of Johnson's work on six effective practices for use in working with low-income children and families (2013) and to consider how they might add those strategies to their own work. Investigation of local resources ensues during which they can become aware of appropriate agencies and referrals for assistance with multiple issues. Guided inquiry leads problem solving scenarios with respect to suitable recommendations that educators can provide when responding to the needs of children and families, including financial resources, housing, social services, faith-based organizations, nutrition and health.

Phases 5, 6, and 7: Crafting Instruction for the Virtual and Actual Practica

In the fifth phase, participants are asked to list favorite instructional strategies they find successful in their classrooms, and compare those strategies to those recommended by Jensen (2013). Using the comparison to merge familiar and new protocols, and armed with updated knowledge about community resources, they complete a virtual practicum by responding to a student biography and analyzing student needs and appropriate responses. Participants are then encouraged to implement their ideas in their actual classrooms, and to record their successes and challenges in a final reflective self-assessment regarding attitudes about poverty. These may be shared with the group to develop a summative, collective experience.

A Recommended Protocol

If a two-session protocol were being implemented, the first half-day session would include the first five phases of professional development, including the quiz, examination of quiz results, reflection on personal perceptions about poverty, group work about learning more about types of poverty and community organizations that can help, and examining the practices of educators who are having success in poor schools as a basis for crafting effective instruction for students in poverty. Participants would then be asked to work through a virtual practicum in which they would apply new understandings. The virtual practicum is based on a provided student biography, during which participants plan for integrating the four pillars of the CESPR Model, including cognitive supports, emotional engagement, social learning, and positive relationships in an academic setting. This two-session procedure allows for a valuable hiatus in which participants can apply the tenets of the virtual practicum to their own classroom situations. The advantage here is that the final phase does not occur until actual practice with actual students provides a basis for reflection and revision, if needed. The second session then provides participants with an opportunity to debrief and share, and to reflect upon changes in perception and instruction as they relate to personal professional practice, as well as to supplement the analysis of effective practices in their own experiences. The thoughtful application of strategies that are informed by new knowledge about how students in poverty learn can have timely and positive results at all three levels: the teacher, the students, and the teacher candidates in field experience.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Professional development on poverty can offer practicing educators a valuable set of experiences to apply immediately in their own classroom settings. The benefits of such training have been cited as accruing to teachers, students, and teacher candidates whose field experience is based in clinical classrooms headed by those teachers. The protocol described here can be effective in a variety of delivery schemes, but the authors have noted a caution to be considered that is related to the site of delivery. If the professional development is scheduled for a school day, it is recommended that the training occur at a location other than the school where teachers are employed. This is because it has been repeatedly demonstrated, that when the school site is used, (although it may be most convenient in some ways) multiple distractions and actual calls away from the sessions are frequent. This can be especially true in challenging schools, and ones where after school programs figure prominently in the afternoon hours. Sites without related responsibilities are more conducive to maintaining the focus and continuity of the professional development process.

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