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Karen L. Franck

University of Tennessee, kfranck@utk.edu

Shelly Barnes

University of Tennessee, sphill24@utk.edu

Julie Harrison

Wilson County Schools, harrisonj@wcschools.com

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Poverty Simulations: Building Relationships Among Extension, Schools, and the Community

Abstract

Poverty simulations can be effective experiential learning tools for educating community members about the impact of poverty on families. The project described here includes survey results from three simulations with community leaders and teachers. This project illustrated how such workshops can help Extension professionals extend their reach and impact by engaging coalitions and volunteers and building community partnerships with school systems and community leadership groups.

Karen L. Franck
Extension Specialist
University of
Tennessee Extension
Knoxville, Tennessee
kfranck@utk.edu

Shelly Barnes
County Agent
University of
Tennessee Extension
Lebanon, Tennessee
sphill24@utk.edu

Julie Harrison
Federal Projects
Supervisor and
Homeless Liaison
Wilson County
Schools
Lebanon, Tennessee
harrisonj@wcschools.com

Poverty simulations have been used in Extension and other community education and outreach programs as tools for increasing awareness and empathy about the issues and stressors faced by low-income families (O'Neill, 2008; Steck, Engler, Ligon, Druen, & Cosgrove, 2011). Experiential learning activities, such as simulations, are effective methods for teaching adults (Ota, DiCarlo, Burts, Laird, & Gioe, 2006). The project described here illustrated that these simulations also build and strengthen partnerships and are effective tools for engaging coalitions and volunteers.

Building Partnerships

For the project, a county family and consumer sciences (FCS) agent partnered with a local school system administrator to implement poverty simulations involving teachers to increase awareness about students dealing with homelessness and poverty. The school system received McKinney Vento funds to provide services for homeless students. In this county, McKinney Vento funds were used to help homeless students by bringing together resources from various groups, including Extension, the community help center, parent groups, and other state-funded and nonprofit agencies that provide assistance for low-income residents. As part of this McKinney Vento grant, a needs assessment was completed by the school system. Because the county in which the school system is located is relatively affluent, the school system administrator discovered that many teachers were unaware of the homelessness issue in the community. Furthermore, teachers did not know about community resources that could help children and families living in poverty. These findings indicated

the need to increase teacher awareness and understanding about students living in poverty.

In addition to working with the school system, the FCS agent worked closely with a county leadership training group that annually provides comprehensive leadership training for 30 community participants from business, education, civic, religious, and government arenas. The agent recognized the importance of educating these community business and social leaders about the issues facing low-income families in the county.

Engaging Coalitions and Volunteers

Poverty simulations are intensive 1-day workshops that require several volunteers to "staff" community agencies and businesses that are part of the simulation. These entities include social service agencies, banks, and food pantries. Volunteers need a brief orientation, and it is helpful for them to be involved at the debriefing that follows the simulation. For this project, the FCS agent worked with an Extension coalition that was formed as part of a Children, Youth, and Families at Risk (CYFAR) grant and has continued to work to address issues facing children and families in the community.

Poverty Simulation

The poverty simulation described here was developed by the Missouri Association for Community Action and is called the Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS). Community action agencies provide a variety of services throughout the country for low-income adults, youth, and families. CAPS was created as a unique tool for community action agencies to use to educate audiences about the stressors of poverty. CAPS is a copyrighted tool made available by the Missouri Association for Community Action to organizations that want to promote a greater understanding of poverty (H. Lucas, personal communication, June 17, 2015).

During a simulation, participants role-play situations faced by various members of families, from single parents with children to older adults. The goal of each "family" during the simulation is to acquire or maintain food, shelter, and other basic necessities while interacting with various community resources staffed by volunteers. The simulation uses props, play money, and fictional scenarios to enable participants to view poverty from different viewpoints in an experiential setting. An important part of the process occurs after the simulation ends, when simulation leaders debrief participants and participants have the opportunity to share their feelings and ideas about their experiences.

Study Design

The FCS agent and the school administrator worked together to provide three 1-day poverty simulations to teachers and community leaders in the county. One simulation was for teachers, and two simulations were for community leaders. Participants were emailed surveys 1 week after they completed the simulation. The surveys included an open-ended question about any changes or actions participants intended to make on the basis of their experiences.

Results

A total of 56 out of 102 participants completed the surveys (55% response rate). Of these respondents, 36 were community leaders, and 20 were teachers. Respondents included 19 men and 35 women and were primarily White (48 White, 5 Black, 1 Hispanic/Latino).

Question responses were coded, resulting in patterns and themes in participant perspectives. Coding produced three main themes that were consistent across the three groups. The themes were concrete actions, increased awareness, and increased empathy.

Concrete actions included specific behaviors that participants intended to implement. These actions included increasing donations to charities, improving their personal financial situations, and building better relationships with students and parents. One teacher stated, "I will not be pushy to get money returned for field trips. Some families cannot pay."

Increased awareness included statements about being mindful of what employees and students might be facing and having a better understanding of what homeless families are experiencing, as described by this comment: "The simulation increased my awareness of what my students go through in their daily life."

Increased empathy included statements about having more compassion, being sensitive to others' needs and situations, and being more forgiving and less judgmental. Typical statements included "I will be more sympathetic to those that have fallen on hard times" and "It will help me to think of the amount of stress that families living in poverty go through daily and that me getting upset over a paper not coming back is the least of their worries!"

Conclusions

As the survey results indicate, poverty simulations are an effective method for increasing awareness and empathy for children and families living in poverty. In addition, these simulations can lead to positive actions. Furthermore, simulations provide opportunities for agents to expand partnerships with schools and other community groups and engage coalitions and volunteers. These efforts can increase capacity and effectiveness for Extension agents in their communities.

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