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Kerri Ullucci

*Article*

# Pathologizing the Poor: Implications for Preparing Teachers to Work in High-Poverty Schools

## Kerri Ullucci[1] and Tyrone Howard[2]

### Abstract

The recent economic downturn highlights that poverty continues to be a significant social problem. Mindful of this demographic reality, it is imperative for teacher educators to pay close attention to the manner in which teachers are prepared to educate students from impoverished backgrounds. Given the number of frameworks that offer reductive recommendations for teaching students from impoverished backgrounds, we seek to accomplish two goals with this work: (a) to summarize mythologies about poverty that impact student–teacher relationships and (b) to offer new perspectives on educating students from impoverished backgrounds by providing anchor questions teacher educators can explore with pre-service teachers.

## Introduction

come celebrate

with me that everyday

[1]Roger Williams University, Bristol, RI, USA
[2]University of California, Los Angeles, CA, USA

**Corresponding Author:**
Kerri Ullucci, Associate Professor, Roger Williams University, 1 Old Ferry Rd., Bristol, RI 02809, USA.
Email: kullucci@rwu.edu

something has tried to kill me

and has failed.

—Clifton (1993)

While Lucille Clifton penned this poem to convey her everyday struggles as a non-White woman,[1] the sentiment seems apt for a discussion of poverty. Like racism, poverty creates daily obstacles that call on the strength and perseverance of those who endure it. The economic recession continues to have a ripple effect on much of the country, despite improvements for some. Previous downturns in the stock market, falling home prices, high unemployment rates, and shrinking school budgets left much of the country reeling economically. Undoubtedly, these occurrences have an influence on the nation's schools and students. Recent census data indicate that more than 1 in 5 of children below the age of 18 live in poverty, putting the number at close to 16 million (Addy & Wight, 2012). The National Center for Children in Poverty reports that children living in deep poverty (children living below 50% of the poverty line) is on the rise, meaning schools will educate children in poverty at a rate they have not seen in decades (Wight, Chau, & Aratani, 2010). It also is notable that race and poverty continue to intersect in disturbing ways (see Lin & Harris, 2009). Data from the US Census Bureau (see Children's Defense Fund, 2012), reveal that approximately 38% of Black children and 34% of Latino students live in poverty. Resegregation of schools also complicates the picture. Students of color and poor students are often educated in increasingly homogeneous schools, in some cases less diverse than schools in the 1950s (see McPherson, 2011). Large numbers of Latino students find themselves in resegregated schools; however, both Black and Latino students face a double dose of segregation, as they are segregated racially and by class (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012). For example, Orfield, Kucsera, and Siegel-Hawley (2012) find that "the typical black or Latino [student] today attends school with almost double the share of low-income students in their schools than the typical white or Asian student" (p. 9). Students of color in poverty are becoming increasingly isolated.

Some theorists argue that poverty—perhaps more than any other variable—explains why academic performance disparities exist across groups (Anyon, 2005; Rothstein, 2004; Wilson, 2009). Undoubtedly, poverty can have a chronic effect on the manner in which young people experience school (see Milner, 2013a). Students from low-income backgrounds are less likely to have access to medical care, which can allow vision, dental, hearing, and other health ailments (including asthma) to go untreated. Research shows that children living in older, dilapidated homes are more likely to be exposed to

lead-based paint, which is associated with delayed cognitive development and behavioral problems (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). These circumstances undoubtedly influence school performance and academic outcomes. Other theorists contend that issues related to poverty and despair are a direct result of American capitalism, which has been centered on market forces and exploiting the labor of working class, under-educated individuals (McLaren, 2006). These theorists have suggested a more radical altering of the political, ideological, and economic structures in the United States before widespread poverty will ever be disrupted (Anyon, 2005; Giroux, 1992).

Moreover, children from impoverished backgrounds are more likely to have parents with low-wage jobs or no employment at all, increasing the likelihood of their moving from place-to-place, with student mobility compromising learning opportunities for students. An increasing number of students who attend schools are homeless, with the number reaching more than one million (National Center for Homeless Education, 2012). Both these factors influence the quality of continuous schooling they receive. The disproportionate occurrence of violence, crime, drugs, and death to which young people in impoverished communities are exposed can have a profound influence on their social, psychological, and emotional well-being. A plethora of data also exists which suggests that students from impoverished backgrounds are more likely to have decreased educational outcomes, increased problems with social and emotional development, and more challenges in becoming academically successful (Barajas, Philipsen, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Lin & Harris, 2009; Murnane, 2007; Noguera, 2010).

While students from adverse economic situations have always been a part of the nation's schools, the recent recession has made it painfully obvious that poverty continues to be a significant and growing social problem in the United States. In light of this demographic reality, it is imperative *for teacher educators* to pay close attention to (or in some cases reexamine) the manner in which teachers are prepared to educate students from impoverished backgrounds. Moreover, keen attention needs to be paid to the knowledge, values, and perspectives preservice teachers are introduced to as they think about effectively educating students from low-income backgrounds. Immersed in the myriad negative data about children in poverty, we are concerned that teachers may adopt and maintain deficit and pathological thinking about the academic potential of students who come from impoverished backgrounds.

With this work, we want to bring much-needed attention to cautions, concerns, and considerations for educating students from impoverished backgrounds as they pertain to teacher education. The most economically depressed areas continue to be where schools find it difficult to staff classrooms. Moreover, these classrooms are more likely to have inexperienced,

underqualified, and novice teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2004, 2010). Many of these teachers have had limited interaction with students from impoverished backgrounds. Thus, teachers may believe that students from low-income backgrounds cannot be taught effectively, lack the necessary intellectual and cognitive dispositions to be successful learners, and come from home environments that do not support learning. To counter these mindsets, what are the requisite knowledge and dispositions that educators need to have to effectively teach students from low-income backgrounds? Given the number of frameworks that offer disturbing, reductive, and prescriptive recommendations for teaching students from impoverished backgrounds, we seek to accomplish two goals with this work: (a) to summarize mythologies about poverty that impact student–teacher relationships and (b) to offer new perspectives on educating students from impoverished backgrounds by providing anchor questions teacher educators can explore with their preservice teachers. In providing these, we hope to unveil the limitations of existing popular myths about students living in poverty and illuminate concrete directions for undertaking this work.

One caveat before beginning this work: To write about poverty as it pertains to education is fraught with contradictions. In a 2009 speech, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan continued to extol the benefits of "no excuses" when it comes to poverty (Duncan, 2009). Comparing public schools with charter schools, he explained how charters are (perceived as) successful with poor children because of their no excuses approach to serving children who are in poverty. In his model, poverty can simply be overlooked.

This belief—that poverty fails to operate in any way that should and could impact schools—is tenuous at best. Schools simply cannot mediate the myriad consequences of poverty. While we do not believe that students who are in poverty are inherently less intelligent, able, motivated, or worthy, poverty impacts students in real, tangible ways. Thus, we face a philosophical bind. In no way do we want to minimize poverty and take a "no excuses" stance. Its implications are urgent and far-reaching, touching all aspects of children's lives from health care to depression to homelessness to frequent uprooting. However, children in poverty can be resourceful, can be leaders, can exhibit maturity beyond their years, can triumph every day—as Clifton expresses— over those things that try to (psychologically and otherwise) kill them. There is no way to shorthand what being in poverty means and results in, no quick equation where a poor child automatically equals a hopeless, uncared-for, option-less child. So while we believe poverty functions in wide-reaching and real ways, we also believe in the promise of children in poverty. We continue to walk a fine line.

A key goal of this manuscript is to help teachers and teacher educators reconceptualize notions of poverty and its effects, moving away from deficit-laden models and toward a paradigm that acknowledges both the "damage and the promise" (Rose, 2006, p. xxv) of poverty. We fear that many teachers harbor distorted views of poverty. Drawing from years of working with in- and preservice teachers, we often see our students buying into "culture of poverty" frameworks. Such frameworks place all children into this "culture" of poverty, without knowing much about the child's *actual* culture. This hyper-generalization of how poverty impacts students reminds us of Ladson-Billings's (2006b) concern about how the term "culture" is utilized overall: "the problem of culture in teaching is not one of merely exclusion. It is also one of over determination. What I mean by this is that culture is randomly and regularly used to explain everything" (p. 104). Poverty functions in much the same way. In applying the "poor" label to a child, teachers may use the label to excuse why some students fail. In this way, teachers can convince themselves that their teaching plays little to no role in students' academic outcomes. We both have heard in-service teachers lament how little difference they can really make when students are poor and "have no support at home" or have parents who "don't value education." These refrains are examples of professional deflection by which teachers can remove blame from themselves when children in poverty struggle. They represent a classic example of what Ryan (1974) refers to as victim blaming.

## Revising Misconceptions About Poverty and Its Consequences

As teacher educators, we are concerned with *perceptions* about how poverty impacts students. It is these perceptions that seem most ripe for attention. Much in the way we wish our students to be race-conscious, we wish our teacher candidates to be class-conscious as well. By race-conscious, we refer to Teel and Obidah's (2008) explanation of racially competent teachers as having an "awareness of race, of the possibility of their own racism and the racism of others, and the significance of these perceptions in the teaching and learning process" (p. 4). Similarly, we see class-conscious teachers as having many of the same features: an understanding how poverty does (and does not) impact students, a nuanced reading of how race and poverty overlap (and do not), and a keen eye to how stereotypes about poverty bias our interactions with poor children.

There are many mythologies to counter concerning poverty. Over the years, we have worked with pre- and in-service teachers, we hear similar

claims being made regarding children in poverty. Although occasionally capturing the truth, many of these "observations" are based on misinformation. Being poor is not caused by a single factor. Being poor does not simply have one-dimensional ramifications. In this section, we will address several claims, namely,

1. Anyone can pull themselves out of poverty (The Bootstraps Myth).
2. Those who are in poverty are lazy, "welfare queens," and/or irresponsible (The Individual Faults Myth).
3. Poor children are not particularly smart or school-ready (The Educability Myth).
4. People in poverty share a common "culture" (The Culture of Poverty Myth).

We caution teacher educators to carefully unpack these myths. It would be counterproductive if students "swapped out" their misconceptions for a sense of hopelessness. For example, while we want students to understand the limits of the myth of meritocracy (not everyone can easily pull themselves out of poverty through their will alone), we also do not want them to become so derailed by the power of structural inequality that they feel incapable to act. In providing a new lens to see, we also want to make sure students still find agency in this work.

## The Bootstraps Myth

The United States has long prided itself on the belief that anyone can succeed in this country—that anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and reach their economic goals. Much of what is lacking from this discussion is the manner in which social policies and institutional arrangements reinforce poverty. It is disingenuous to suggest that people can *will* themselves out of poverty without looking at the complex contexts which keep them there. Instead, a web of systems and policies interact to help—or stymy—those who are trying to rise out of poverty. Hilfiker (2002) provides a thorough analysis of legislation, economic, and social policy that contribute to the c*reation and maintenance* of impoverished neighborhoods across the United States both historically and contemporarily. Haveman (in Cass, 2010) posits that those in poverty need a variety of supports including (a) skills building (through education), (b) health care, and (c) opportunities to use their skills (through employment possibilities and decent wages). But wages—in constant dollars—have fallen; high paying jobs are hard to come by (Anyon, 2005). Anyon argues that these consequences arise from faulty federal

policies (including the minimum wage laws and anti-union legislation) that actually exacerbate poverty in urban areas. In these cases, we see how structural mechanisms reinforce poverty. Poverty is not solely an issue of individual will. Adding more credence to the problem of structural barriers is the fact that "in America, more than in other advanced Western nations, rich children stay rich and poor children stay poor" (Cass, 2010). In troubling research cited by Berliner (2006), the United States leads the world in terms of *failing* to help people exit from poverty. Said another way, the United States has the highest rate of permanently poor when compared with other industrialized countries.

Despite wanting to rely on the "anyone-can-lift-themselves-up" mentality, generations of people are not able to "rise above" poverty. Faulty schools, few work opportunities, inadequate health care, a lack of a living wage, geographic isolation, poor child care, and a host of other factors weave together to threaten the chances people in poverty have of getting out (see Anyon, 2005). As an example, if Robert is born in Harlem, has access only to failing schools, is frequently hungry, and upon graduation, faces a community that is wracked by few job opportunities, what is his contribution to his economic scenario? Is he expected to clear all these hurdles by simply pulling up on those bootstraps? How can he compensate for all the structural inequities he has faced? It is this type of institutional critique that educators should be mindful of, because this analysis becomes less about what students and their families in poverty "lack" intellectually, morally, or culturally, and more about the structural conditions that limit access to opportunity.

## The Individual Faults Myth

Closely related to the Bootstraps Myth is the Individual Faults Myth. Sue Books (2004), in her insightful study, *Poverty and Schooling in the US*, writes that "laziness, promiscuity, poor judgment, devaluation of education—none of these popular assumptions about the poor are either unique to any socioeconomic group or a cause of poverty in any demonstrable sense" (p. 9). Some are in poverty because of their own decisions—drug abuse, dropping out of school, and so on. However, this "folk wisdom" is overextended to explain poverty on a wider scale. Baptist and Rehman (2011) remind us that this *individual* approach does not explain *mass* impoverishment, in places like the Rust and Black Belts. Such an approach would mean that entire populations in these locations each have the same individual flaws. This is clearly not the case.

Moreover, we know that many, many families who are in poverty are headed by working adults. They are still poor. The majority of poor people in

the United States are *not* unemployed (Baptist & Rehman, 2011); rather they are poorly paid, underemployed, or working part-time. Thus, the problem is not that those in poverty are lazy and unmotivated, but that we have a low-wage and too-few-jobs problem (Anyon, 2005). Anyon (2005) argues that the "main determinant of whether one is poor or not is whether or not one has a decently paying job" (p. 21). Families can be working consistently, but that work does not provide a living wage.

More disturbing are the racist and sexist mind-sets that the Individual Faults myth hides. Books (2004) reminds us that most people in poverty are White, living outside of urban areas and often headed by two parents; however, a closer examination of poverty in the United States reveals that families of color, and female-headed families are disproportionally poor (see Moore, Redd, Burkhauser, Mbwana, & Collins, 2009). Lin and Harris (2009), in looking at how racial disparities continue to exist, point to discrimination and bias as factors keeping Latinos and African Americans in poverty. For example, they discuss how geographic steering impacts where African American and Latino homebuyers feel they may live. They also cite survey data that report ongoing discrimination in hiring. Women continue to make less than men when working in full-time, year-round jobs. Combined with a lack of child care, few job options, and low-wages in general, it is not surprising that women-led families struggle financially. Again, to claim that there is an individual fault among everyone in these groups (*all* women or *all* Latinos) is racist and/or sexist. Although the goal is not to engage in a counterproductive discussion about who is poorer or who suffers more (e.g., Whites or non-Whites), the racial realities of poverty are real and cannot be ignored. The picture of poverty is complex, and in need of a much more nuanced analysis that what we see in most teacher education programs. The painting of any one or two groups as the face of poverty needs to be disrupted to develop a more comprehensive examination of structural and historical factors that contribute to, and maintain the grip of poverty. Instead, we must analyze the normative beliefs that feed policies around poverty, job creation, and assistance. Without raising the veil as to the often gendered and racialized roots of these policies, attempts at reform will continue to be stymied.

## The Educability Myth

Children in poverty are often seen as broken when it comes to schooling. They are often "defined by what they cannot do" (Rose, 2006, p. xvii) and by what they do not have. This manifests in cries of "families don't care about their child's education" and "this one is just not that bright." At some base level, a sense that poor children—as a group—are not academically talented

or academically nurtured is rather common. Families are often blamed for their students' lack of success in schools. Books (2004) points to this sentiment in her work: "It has been said so often it now seems accepted as truth that parents in poor communities 'don't care' about education. Neither research nor experience of school leaders supports this presumption" (p. 11). Just as in any social class strata, there are poor families who are dedicated to their children's schooling and others who are not.

Moreover, there is a lingering—if unspoken—belief that poor children are just not as intelligent as other children. They are perceived as *different* in their cognitive abilities and teachers are more willing to "write off" these students (see Halvosen, Lee, & Andrade, 2009). This belief has been widely discredited. Berliner (2006) argues that the charges of genetic inferiority in intelligence are baseless. Berliner recounts an important analogy (based on the work of Lewontin, 1982) in which two identical seeds of corn are planted. One is planted in an ideal environment: plentiful water and sun, rich soil. The other is planted in an inappropriate environment, without the needed nutrients. To no surprise, the poor environment stifles the plant. Berliner (2006) chides "Genes do not have a chance to express themselves under poor environmental conditions" (p. 28). This, of course, is akin to children in poverty. Environmental causes have significant impacts on the development of poor children. Lack of adequate food, poor health care, inappropriate shelter, exposure to lead, needing to work at an early age—all factors that poison the soil. Clean up the soil and a strong plant will grow.

To us, the most troubling aspect of this myth is the implicit way that "we" are being separated from "them." This myth, that children in poverty are somehow categorically *different* due to their class, is highly problematic. This worldview sets up a particularly difficult boundary as we work with teachers and potential teachers, as it sets children in poverty apart from "normal" children.

## The Culture of Poverty Myth

We hear frequent allusions to the "culture of poverty" and how certain families seem to be mired in their own inability to get ahead. The term "culture of poverty" refers to a belief that the "behaviors and values of the poor . . . play a role in persistent poverty and the intergenerational transmission of poverty" (Crane & Heaton, 2008, p. xii). This notion arises from the work of Lewis (1961, 1966); his ethnographic work laid out a set of attributes that people in poverty share. Pathology is ascribed to people in poverty, who self-perpetuate this pathology by transferring these learned behaviors to their children

(Wilson, 2009). Said another way, poor people remain poor because there are predictable beliefs, values, and behaviors, which are both monolithic and inherent in their culture and their overall way of being (Gorski, 2008). Lewis's work is often read as evidence as to why state-sponsored antipoverty programs are not useful in that the "cultural" components as to why people remain in poverty is difficult to undo (Bourgois, 2001).

Despite many scholars concluding that a culture of poverty *does not* exist (see Gorski, 2008), the long-term residue of this mentality remains. Wilson (2009) points to research which shows that "nine out of ten American adults felt that lack of effort was either very or somewhat important in terms of causing poverty" (p. 45). Contemporary opinion polls continue to reflect the notion that the poor are poor due to their own shortcomings (Wilson, 2009). Each time we hear "parents just don't care—they don't even know how to help their kids" or "he's just lazy" to reference families and children in poverty, we are reminded of how persistent this belief system is among adults. It is imperative for teacher educators to challenge these beliefs early and often with preservice teachers. In utilizing the culture of poverty rationale, teachers are able to shrug off responsibility to work against classism in schools as the source of the problem remains the children's own deficiencies and beyond their scope as educators (Gorski, 2008).

What is most disturbing about culture of poverty belief systems is the reductionist notion that is put forward, which casts individuals in poverty as a monolithic group that acts, thinks, speaks, and behaves in a similar fashion. Such beliefs fail to complexify the challenges that poverty raises for individuals, and the variation of behaviors in these context. Moreover, the culture of poverty framework distorts and overlooks the resilience, determination, and agency displayed by untold millions of children and families who grow up in poverty.

Together, these myths often taint novice teachers' beliefs systems about children growing up in poverty. In many ways, the maintenance of these myths supports a deficit ideology of students which only make learning conditions worse for them. To us, these deficit-ridden beliefs are consistent with the medical term *iatrogenesis*. Iatrogenesis refers to the phenomenon by which patients become worse after being diagnosed for medical care, through negligence or error. In other words, the very diagnosis which was designed to improve or cure a particular ailment contributes to the problem becoming more severe. Our aim as educators is to disrupt the educational iatrogenesis that can emerge when educators subscribe to narrow, simplistic, and deficit-ridden constructions of what it means to be poor in the United States. This iatrogenesis does not help to alleviate the challenges of poverty, but instead

intensifies the constraints put on young people in poverty. By applying the diagnosis of "poor," teachers often further wound the patient, rather than provide for a meaningful remedy.

## Anchor Questions for Teacher Educators: Moving the Poverty Conversation Forward

For the remainder of this work, we turn to new ways of talking about and processing poverty-based issues with students. We have chosen to base our suggestions around anchor questions that can guide conversation and activities in the teacher-preparation classroom. In choosing these questions, we wish to undo the classist frameworks and the culture of poverty lens, as well as unwind many of the myths about poverty that students bring with them. In doing so, we seek to offer updated perspectives on poverty, which are more critical of structural impediments, more thoughtful of overlapping forms of oppression, more wary of locating deficit in particular peoples and more humane in its approach to children, families, and communities.

   We assert that any framework for understanding poverty and learning be based on a comprehensive and critical set of ideas that do not blame students in poverty for being poor and cast them as inferior, but that recognize the social, political, and economic conditions, which have profound influences on the day-to-day lives of students in these communities (Milner, 2013a). We offer the framework to engage educators on how to effectively educate students from impoverished circumstances. We selected these components to create a critical foundation on which to ensure that the next generation of teachers—many of whom have not grown up in poverty—can enter the profession with an informed and healthy approach to working in low-income schools.

### What Are the Systemic and Institutional Factors That Impact Poverty?

One of the biggest challenges in helping preservice teachers to work in low-income communities is to help them to make a fundamental shift away from believing that individual behavior is the primary explanation for why individuals are poor. This deficit-based analysis of poverty falls tragically short of any institutional or structural analysis to explain and understand poverty. A number of theorists have outlined the role that capitalism (Apple, 2010; McLaren, 2005) and racism (Ladson-Billings, 2006a; Solorzano, 1997) have played in the schooling experiences and outcomes of young people. Therefore,

any analysis of poverty without interrogating and analyzing larger social factors becomes an uncritical and sorely narrow analysis. Moreover, a noncritical analysis of class arrangements assumes that to move out of poverty, all students and their families need to do is to work harder, make better choices, develop better cultural capital, and magically, all of their troubles will subside. It goes without saying that attributes such as hard work and better choices can have an influence on life chances, but these attributes alone do not necessitate the type of social and economic transformation that has eluded families for generations. A thorough preparation of novice teachers should be centered on identifying, discussing, and examining some of the root causes of poverty. For example, the work of Massey and Denton (1993) detail the manner in which urban and rural communities have become racially isolated. This creates, sustains, and perpetuates poverty in a manner that makes it increasingly difficult for its residents to escape its grasp.

The understanding of institutional arrangements is essential because it allows the analysis to be moved away from the "these people are poor based on their own doing" argument to a more nuanced, multifaceted, and complex understanding of how and why poverty happens and continues to perpetuate itself. While this institutional analysis does not offer practical approaches to working with students in classrooms, it does provide a conceptual understanding of how families are often caught in a web of generational poverty. The use of restrictive covenants that barred groups of people from access to certain neighborhoods dealt a crushing blow to poor whites and groups of color for years (Anyon, 2005). The manner in which the Federal Housing Authority for decades redlined communities of color, by refusing to grant mortgages in those areas, reinforced the vestiges of poverty for untold millions of children and their families (Hilfiker, 2002). Hilfiker (2002) writes,

> I want to suggest that the primary causes of poverty lie not in individual behavior at all, but in specific social and historical structures, in forces outside of any single person's control . . . the essential causes of American poverty lie elsewhere: in the paucity of jobs on which someone might support a family, in inadequate access to health care and child care, in meager educational resources, in specific governmental policies, in nonexistent vocational training, in the workings of the criminal justice system . . . in a painful history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination. (p. xii)

Thus, when working with our students, some thought exercises may be useful. In class, have students devise a list of why K-12 students might be in poverty. Then have them omit all those reasons that have to do with personal characteristics. Instead, ask them to look at what other factors may work to

| Factors Influencing Poverty | |
|---|---|
| Historical Factors | Job Opportunities<br>Health Care Access<br>  State and Federal Policies<br>  Transportation Issues |
| Contemporary Factors | Access to Education<br>Sexism, Racism and other forms<br>  of bias |

**Figure 1.** Factors influencing poverty.

keep families in poverty. Using the template below can help illustrate the multiple factors (see Figure 1).

Making this activity local would be even more powerful. By asking "Why are families in Los Angeles (Boston, New Haven, Miami) poor?" you can help students contextualize these factors to their own communities and families.

## How Does Poverty Impact Students' Lives?

Many preservice teachers lack knowledge about low-income students and see these students and their family through deficit lenses (Amatea, Cholewa, & Mixon, 2012). Out of this gap can grow a lack of empathy. We have found that a useful first step in building empathy is to have students interrogate their own lives and positionality (see Takacs, 2003). In the first author's classroom, students are asked to engage in racial, cultural, and class autobiographies. Over the courses of the semester, students work on activities (such as affixing labels to themselves and thinking through how their labels impact them) in the service of writing a full autobiography. We have found that this activity is powerful in getting students to attend to their own class (and racial) orientations and how *their* class has impacted *their* lives.

A second step is turning to the ramifications of poverty in students' lives. Poverty does not play out in a one-dimensional way. In class, (K. Ullucci) conducts an activity where she asks students to think about the ways in which poverty impacts our students. They often bring up issues around food, clothing, and perhaps housing. But there are more implications, both material and not, that are shaped by being in poverty. Books (2004) provides an extensive list of the ways in which students' lives are impacted by poverty. They are outlined in the first four components of Figure 2. We have added additional components that speak to the extensive implications of poverty. Taken

| Ways Poverty Impacts Children | In particular… |
|---|---|
| Environmental Issues | Mercury and lead poisoning<br>Pollution<br>Proximity to landfills |
| Health Issues | Medical care, vision, hearing, dental, asthma-related |
| Child Labor | Student needing to work at an early age |
| Community Violence | Anxiety, depression, withdrawal |
| Mobility | Students frequently move due to parental job and housing insecurity, leading to fragmented schooling experiences. Students may be sent to live with relatives. |
| Child Care | Children don't always have access to high quality day care; older children care for younger children, cutting down on homework time, and time for sports and extracurricular experiences. |
| Transportation Issues | Children may have to take many busses to attend school, leading to early wake-up and late returns home; parents may not have ways to pick up sick children, attend PTO, etc. |
| Mental Health Issues | Children may not have access to mental health services; they may have been witnesses to violence and abuse that they don't have ways to process. |
| Shelter Issues | Children may be homeless; they may live in substandard housing without heat; may share a small space with many people; may not have a place to complete homework |

**Figure 2.** Poverty's consequences, first four listed are taken from Books (2004).

together, they form a robust understanding as to the myriad ways that children and families are impacted by poverty. This well-rounded view matters. Many of our children struggle and will continue to struggle. Having a clear-eyed view of the realities of their situations will allow our teachers to serve them better.

## *What Assets Reside in Low-Income Communities?*

In addition to examining some of the fundamental contributors of poverty, it is critical for educators to embrace an ideology that recognizes the assets, strengths, and resources that are possessed by many people living in poverty. What is crucial to these approaches is to recognize the rich assets and knowledge that reside in low-income communities. Moll and Gonzales (2004) remind us that educators should take the time to incorporate these funds of knowledge, which they define as "the social and cultural resources" of local communities (p. 700).

While "poverty" is not a cultural group, and those who live in poverty do not share a common culture, the idea behind funds of knowledge is important here. All communities find ways to survive and capitalize on the resources they have. All communities develop ways of coping with the challenges they face. So while low-income communities are often viewed through what they *lack*, a closer look reveals resources that bind the community together and help support those who live there.

Both authors worked at a large public university where students completed asset maps of lo   w-income neighborhoods. Through field trips, guest speakers and research, students identified the sources of support that can be found in particular areas (community centers, libraries, community gardens, places of worship, social service agencies, youth leadership groups, after school programs, neighborhood groups, sports leagues). This is a demonstrably different way of understanding the lives of children in poverty. Instead of focusing on all the "problems" that children in poverty bring, this approach highlights determination and resiliency. It provides a new lens through which students can see differently. For each stereotypical label we hear—lazy, unmotivated, unintelligent—we can find other more positive characterizations. Switching the lens, while a small change, yields considerable impact.

## *Do Schools Provide Equal Educations to Children in Poverty?*

Teachers want to believe that their work contributes to the betterment of society. We doubt any teacher would willingly admit that her work oppresses certain children by design; however, one of the more disturbing questions to consider with teachers is how their work potentially contributes to reifying class hierarchies through the type of education student receive. Anyon's (1980) classic work is instrumental here. Anyon argues that children receive educations that mirror their social positioning. Thus, children from working class backgrounds engage in *the basics*, teachers keep students *busy*, and children learn that knowledge is created by *others*. Alternatively, students in elite schools

are expected to think and reason in preparation for college, teachers focus on excellence, and students create knowledge themselves. All aspects of schooling, from curriculum to pedagogy to teacher expectations, work in concert to produce children who "fit" their class backgrounds. Rather than the great equalizer, schooling functions as a way to sort children due to their class status and prepare them for a job market that represents their social standing.

Haberman's (1991) notion of the "pedagogy of poverty" is also illuminating. Teachers can further exacerbate poor students' feelings of inadequacy through the tasks they assign and experiences they provide. Students who are engaged in an engaging curriculum, by teachers who know their subject matter and provide students with stimulating learning opportunities, have a much better chance at success. However, the lowered expectations that are common in many urban and rural schools are steeped in a belief that student are unable to learn. Schools reify hierarchies by the experiences they provide children. So instead of schools being the great equalizers, we see quite the opposite. What is the rationale as to why suburban schools have an extensive list of Advanced Placement (AP) courses but urban and rural schools do not? Why do urban schools have cosmetology courses and suburban ones do not? Why do poor children experience drill and kill instruction, while wealthy students study rhetoric and robotics? Why do many urban and rural schools mandate teachers adhere to scripted curriculum and suburban schools do not? How do our class expectations continue to inform the type of schooling children receive?

These questions beg for an activity that compares well-off and struggling schools, along a variety of lines. In the past, we have asked our students to do web research to collect course offerings and graduation expectations for low-income urban and high-income suburban schools. Looking at the courses students are able/expected to take has been eye opening. Why does a suburban high school expect 4 years of math, and an urban or rural school require 3? Why are wealthier students offered Forensics and AP Calculus while many urban and rural schools students are not?

For a more involved task, we have asked students to conduct "equity surveys" of local schools. In these surveys, students look how equity is addressed in a myriad of ways (facilities, resources, course offerings, materials, etc.). When compared across the class, students are able to get insights into the ways schools are structured to meet the needs (or not meet the needs) of their particular student population.

## Can Schools Eliminate Poverty?

Berliner (2009) outlines six out-of-school factors which impact the school success of children in poverty, including low birth weight, lack of medical

care, food insecurity, family stress, environmental pollutants, and neighborhood characteristics. These factors begin the moment the child is born and proceed for five formative years before the student even arrives in schools. While schools *must* continue to be beacons of hope, it is disingenuous to suggest that schools alone can solve the issue of poverty. Neuman (2009) in her book, *Changing the Odds for Children at Risk*, expressed concern that while schools are a piece of the poverty puzzle, they are just one piece. Schools cannot eradicate poverty on their own (Neuman, 2009). Let's look at a potential case study.

Lila was born to a single mom, with a high school diploma, who had sporadic access to prenatal care. She was a "preemie," weighing just 4 pounds at birth. Because formula is so expensive, her mom often watered down the mix, leading to slow weight gain. She lives in an apartment that is riddled with lead paint, and her early blood tests showed elevated levels of lead in her system. She also has asthma, exacerbated by chronic air quality issues in her neighborhood. Lila's mom works two jobs, so she is often left with an older cousin. There are no books in her home, and the local library closed due to budget cuts. Her mother is warm and loving and takes very good care of Lila. But when she arrives to school underweight, poisoned by lead, not exposed to a print-rich childhood and without many of the childhood experiences that modern kindergartens expect, she is facing an uphill battle. While a same-age peer in an affluent neighborhood may come to school well fed, healthy, with access to doctors and dentists and therapists, with 5 years of lap reading that prepares them for early literacy experiences, Lila does not. Should teachers write her off? Of course not. Does the child have significant challenges in her life that will impact her education? Yes. Schools are not going to wipe away the effects of environmental pollution. They cannot create businesses to employ Lila's mom. They cannot erase violence that impacts young souls. So what can they/we do?

We are mindful that we are walking very tenuous ground here. It has been shown time and time again that poverty correlates with student performance (see Clayton, 2010; Ladd, 2012). We understand that teachers could easily throw up their hands in hopelessness, believing that they have no role in helping children in poverty succeed. This is not at all our intent. But we must portray a realistic vision of poverty to our students. This view cannot be romanticized, but it must be authentic, and it must be one wherein novice educators believe learning is possible. The causes and impacts of poverty are enormous and complex. We must focus on helping our students be clear-eyed about the struggles children may face without becoming helpless. Thus, on the teacher education front, two approaches are warranted. First, it would be helpful for students to see how poverty impacts the development and learning

of the young people with who they will work. How does lead poisoning impact development? What are the impacts of poor nutrition on attention? How does mobility impact the school experience? Explicitly unraveling these relationships is important. Moreover, providing case studies where students can brainstorm class, school, and community responses can be helpful. Helping soon-to-be teachers think through what is in their control and feasible (does a kindergarten student need experiences akin to lap reading to build early literacy skills? Does this fourth grader need a referral to an eye clinic?) can help preservice teachers find agency in this complicated web.

Perhaps most basically, schools and teachers can help work against reinforcing a cycle of poverty by not writing off their students. We know that teacher beliefs matter; we know that high expectations coupled with achievable goals matters. We know that chalking up poverty to an issue of "laziness" or "lack of care" contributes to deficit ideologies that cripple urban schools. While children in poverty bring with them particular needs, these children are *our* children and require access to meaningful, appropriate education. Moreover, we must be realistic about some of the challenges that poverty brings that are beyond the scope of how teachers are educated. Unfortunately, urban and rural schools can benefit from having social workers or mental health therapists, yet most do not have these resources at their disposal. We contend that it would be imperative for educators to identify resources in their respective communities. It is possible for teachers to know where and how to access counseling services for adults and children, where free medical care might be offered, where local food banks are located, how to access programs for job training for adults, and where to find subsidized child care and after school programs. Connecting children and families to these assets and resource communities can be instrumental in helping students overcome some of the obstacles brought about by poverty, and improve their educational experiences and outcomes.

## Next Steps for Teacher Educators

Where can we go from here? In the field of education, many scholars have worked enormously hard to provide in-roads as to potential next steps in our understanding of poverty and schooling. We agree with conclusions from Ladd's (2012) work that a needed goal is simply to admit that poverty impacts student learning. Period. No more debate about it, no more political football. Pretending that poverty does not operate in the lives of students is disingenuous at best, debilitating at worst. While an "unseen" form of difference (see Michael-Luna & Marri, 2011), poverty has long tentacles and interjects itself

in all manner of ways. As teacher educators—much like with the phenomenon of color-blindness—a critical next move is simply unveiling the truth.

In addition, those of us in the field must continue to convey the enormity of the task at hand and the need for nonschool actors to be involved in the work ahead. When we look at the variety of "gaps" that need addressing to provide equitable schooling (see Milner, 2013b), we cannot be as short-sighted as to think schools can achieve this work singlehandedly. Irvine (as cited in Milner, 2013b) lays out a variety of gaps that are beyond the reach of schools: employment, nutrition, child care, and affordable housing, as examples. Berliner's aforementioned work on out-of-school factors (low birth weight, lack of medical care, food insecurity, family stress, environmental pollutants, and neighborhood characteristics) further complicates this picture. Poverty is not *solely* a school problem. Schools cannot *independently* raise communities out of poverty. Thus, we need to convey to students the complexity of what schools and students face without seeming fatalistic. A thorough exploration of this topic is time-consuming and difficult. Indeed, while schools of education are beginning to address race and culture in more robust ways during teacher preparation, we suggest that a full vetting of class and the socioeconomic realities of communities needs to be equally addressed in teacher education. This means that a single class session tucked into a larger course on "multicultural" or "urban" education is insufficient. In addition, research that explores what can be gained by simultaneously working with school and community assets to tackle particularly aspects of poverty would be valuable.

In addition, moving the field toward a general acceptance that all teaching is context-specific—not context neutral—would also be valuable. Milner's (2013a) exhaustive work on poverty points out the importance of social and geographical contexts. Students' lives are impacted by the racial and class backgrounds of the communities in which they inhabit. Milner argues that context-neutral approaches evaporate the differences that students face depending on the reality of their lived situation: Urban poverty looks different from rural poverty which looks different from Southern poverty. The "typical" student does not exist. We in the teacher education field need to convey the importance of context-specificity to upcoming teachers. The University of Chicago's Urban Teacher Education program (UTEP) provides one model in which schools of education have targeted this issue (see Hammerness & Matsko, 2012). Arguing that the site in which new teachers work is not simply a setting but *content* that requires particular unpacking, UChicago's UTEP program provides a thoughtful framework for thinking through context on multiple levels. These include the educational policy context, the urban public school context, the local geographical context, the local

sociocultural context, and the children, classroom, and school context. By particularizing the novice teacher's experience, Hammerness and Matsko (2012) argue that such an approach can help teachers understand students better and manage the realities of urban schools more thoughtfully. Understanding the nexus of race and culture and poverty in a particular place, at a particular time moves our practice by helping teachers realistically understand the students in front of them. These particularities matter.

## Final Thoughts

In his book, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, Kevin Bales (2004) recounts a conversation he had with a contemporary Pakistani slave owner.[2] While this line of discussion might seem quite far afield in a manuscript on poverty in education, we were immediately struck by his discussion and its relevance to this work. Bales quotes his informant: "'You have to understand' one told me [Bales] 'they're not capable of planning or saving; they only live for the moment—if they get a little money they just drink it up or throw it away'" (p. 173). We were struck by this interaction for many reasons. Here, we have a slave owner justifying why slavery is necessary—"these poor people" are unable to care for themselves, unable to make good decisions of their own accord. His justification is also similar to language used to describe people in poverty. For example, Payne (1996), in her book *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, argues that people in poverty "live for the moment" and don't "consider future ramifications"; to them "the future doesn't exist" and "being proactive, setting goals and planning are not part of generational poverty" (pp. 52-53). The last page of her book laments "Many [poor] choose not to live a different life. And for some alcoholism, laziness, lack of motivation, drug addiction, etc., in effect make the choices for the individual" (Payne, 1996, p. 113). It is stunning how often this line of reasoning is used to "other" people. The more we build up how we are different than them, the more we highlight how we know better—do better—are better, the more we can justify their marginalization.

In preparing teachers to work with students in poverty, the single most important thing teacher educators can do is to work against this othering. People in poverty do not live some monolithic, shared cultural experience that makes all of *them* different from all of *us*. Throughout this manuscript, we have endeavored to unveil many of the myths about people in poverty that aid in this othering. We have laid out how institutional barriers reinforce generational poverty, how schools reify these gaps in their policies and how antiquated belief systems can taint the student/teacher interaction. To make real differences in the way we work with children in poverty, this truth telling is a

needed first step. As we strive to educate all children, understanding the pitfalls and promise of educating children in poverty requires clear eyes, new perspectives, and a determination to break the us/them dichotomy.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## Notes

1.   Term used by Lucille Clifton (1993) in "Won't You Celebrate with Me?"
2.   Debt bondage—a form of slavery—is still practiced in Pakistan. This is a contemporary slave owner.

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## Author Biographies

**Kerri Ullucci** is an associate professor in the School of Education at Roger Williams University. Her research interests include race and poverty issues in schooling and the development of culturally relevant teaching practices. She also prepares K-5 teachers for urban schools.

**Tyrone Howard** is a professor in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at UCLA. His research interests are concerned with race, culture, and education in urban schools.