ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE

Rebecca K. Davison

The Graduate School

Morehead State University

March 31, 2023

INFLUENCE OF POVERTY SIMULATION ON EDUCATORS' SOCIAL
EMPATHY AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

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Abstract of Capstone

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the
Ernst and Sara Lane Volgenau College of Education
At Morehead State University

By

Rebecca K. Davison

Morehead, Kentucky

Committee Chair: Dr. Daryl R. Privott, Associate Professor

Morehead, Kentucky

March 31, 2023

ABSTRACT OF CAPSTONE

INFLUENCE OF POVERTY SIMULATION ON EDUCATORS' SOCIAL
EMPATHY AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

This study explored how a poverty simulation experience influenced educators' social empathy levels and educational practices. More specifically, twenty-nine educators' levels of social empathy were measured using the Social Empathy Index (Segal, Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012) in a pre/posttest design. Influences on educational practices were measured through a follow-up survey. Findings indicated that educators increased their overall social empathy levels and made some changes to educational practices after participation in the poverty simulation. Further analysis considered gender and lived experience in poverty specific to two subscales of the Social Empathy Index: Contextual Understanding of Systemic Barriers and Macro Self-Other Perspective Taking. These findings provide a starting point for continued research exploring the intersection of poverty, education, social empathy, and experiential learning.

KEYWORDS: experiential learning, poverty, poverty simulation, social empathy, pedagogy

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EMPATHY AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

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DEDICATION

This capstone is dedicated to my mother, Winifred J. Klop. She was an agent of change as an educator, social worker, and advocate. Her actions and values deeply influenced my understanding of the importance and challenges of continually working to make the world a better place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

In August of 2022, twenty-nine educators including teachers, support staff,

and administrators from a high poverty district located in rural Eastern Kentucky

participated in a poverty simulation as part of a professional development. The

Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) developed by the Missouri

Community Action Network, requires participants to "live" in poverty for a month

with separate 15-minute sessions representing each of the 4 weeks of the month.

Participants are assigned a role to play in the simulation and must work with their

designated families to interact with community agencies and ensure they "survive"

the month by paying bills, working, caring for children, and having enough food. The

purpose of the poverty simulation is to, "Promote poverty awareness. Increase

understanding. Inspire local change. Transform perspectives" (Missouri Community

Action Network, n.d., para. 1).

Having participants immersed in this experience creates a space for them to

"feel" what it is like to experience poverty. At the conclusion of this simulation,

participants expressed feelings of frustration, disappointment, fear, relief, resignation,

determination, and empowerment in addition to new insights about poverty. One

participant, an elementary school teacher, described how she experienced poverty in

the role of an 8-year old child during the simulation. She explained that in the second

week, her teacher sent the students home with a request for $5 for an upcoming field

trip. The participant explained that her anxiety began to rise as she returned home.

She found herself in an extremely stressful situation where she was deciding whether

to ask her parents for the money, knowing they could not even pay their bills, or, to risk getting in trouble or "called out" at school because she did not bring the money for the field trip. She spent the entire break between the weeks worrying about what to do. After listening to her parents negotiate how to get through the following week and sensing their heightened stress-level, she decided not to ask her parents for the $5 and risk the consequences at school. In real-life, the teacher explained, she had always assumed that parents were choosing not to send in the money and never imagine a student would *not* ask their parent/s for field trip money. Yet, that is what she chose to do as an 8-year old in the simulation. She went on to explain that this new insight would compel her to rethink the way she handles extra costs like field trips in the future. This example captures the possible impact a poverty simulation can have on an educator's understanding of and empathy for students and families experiencing poverty, and, in turn, influence an educational practice.

Education is often seen as the solution to poverty because of the belief that education opens up economic opportunity. However, when one looks at how education as a system interacts with other systems like economics and government, it is not clear that education is the "great equalizer" as Horace Mann (1848) famously claimed. Instead, it can perpetuate educational disparities and income inequalities (Croizet et al., 2019; Gorski, 2013; Rhode et al., 2012). School readiness, underfunded schools, increased suspension rates, reduced school support like counselors, nurses, and social workers, and inadequate educational resources for foster-care youth or children experiencing homelessness are just some examples of

how low-income students are impacted differently than wealthier students (Children's

Defense Fund, 2021). Weiss and Reville (2019) claim that "Poverty and its attendant

stresses matter profoundly to a child's odds of succeeding in school. The data shows

that on average, schooling is an insufficient instrument for overcoming the

disadvantages of poverty" (p.7).

     Yet, public education has great potential to impact change because of its direct

connection to and influence on families experiencing poverty through schools and

communities. Schools are hubs of a community (Weiss & Reville, 2019). This

means that educators play an important role in that change. With this in mind, it is

important to recognize that educators' understanding of poverty can affect their

educational practices (Engler et al., 2019; Ellis et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2017; Gorski,

2016). If educators perceive poverty as an individual "choice," then the educational

interventions are directed towards student and family behaviors. On the other hand, if

educators perceive poverty as a structural problem, the efforts of intervention are

directed towards changing the system to ensure educational equity. Gorski (2016)

refers to this as "equity literacy."

     Burnett and Lampert (2019) claim that without a social justice approach to

teacher education, there is a risk that social inequities will be reinforced by

approaching disadvantaged students from a position of deficit, or the belief that

students need "fixing." They provide a number of reasons that teacher education

should take the responsibility for preparing teachers for high-poverty schools

including the moral work of the profession, preparation of teachers for where they are

needed the most, and empowerment of teachers to be culturally responsive and active agents of change in their communities (Burnett & Lampert, 2019).

Furthermore, one could argue that expecting educators to be the "fixers" of America's social problems oversimplifies the complexities of problems like poverty and demands too much. Educators are being asked to be teachers, social workers, nurses, parents, and mentors. Yet, educators are often unprepared to work with students experiencing poverty because of limited exposure in pre-service education and their own limited experiences with poverty (Burnett & Lampert, 2019; Ellis et al., 2018). However, if we start with the assumption that most people are drawn to education as a profession because of its emphasis on caring, we can utilize effective strategies to support educators to expand their understanding of and empathy for students and families who are experiencing poverty.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) describe how the ethic of care in the field of education focuses on prioritizing care for individuals in the educational system. In particular, they discuss Noddings (1992) position that the well-being of an individual should be more important than their "achievement." This emphasis on education's responsibility for the care of individuals within the educational system changes traditional, or justice, ethical decision-making by prioritizing relationships and human emotions and connections. Education and social work share in this emphasis on the ethic of caring (National Association of Social Workers, 2021; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011.)

Social work's dual focus on individuals and societal structures translates into practices that integrate empathy for and understanding of people within their environment. In other words, social workers always consider the context within which people navigate the world with a sensitivity to diversity, discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). This is a helpful way of framing poverty through a lived experience lens.

Dr. Elizabeth Segal, social work faculty at Arizona State University, combined this emphasis on person-in-environment with empathy resulting in the concept of "social empathy." Social empathy is defined as "the ability to understand people by perceiving or experiencing their life situations and as a result gain insight into structural inequalities and disparities" (Segal, 2011, pp. 266-267). She differentiates social empathy from compassion, sympathy, and interpersonal empathy in that it considers contextual understanding and macro self-awareness/perspective-taking. These additional considerations of lived experiences move people from interpersonal empathy to social empathy. This concept can be applied to educational practices as well.

Furthermore, Segal (2018) argues that social empathy can be developed through basic exposure + explanation + authentic experience. This aligns well with well-known experiential learning models like Knowles (1984) and Kolb (1984). Both theorists share the idea that experiences provide an opportunity for learners to become more self-aware and reflective learners. Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as

"the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38).

So, could educators' social empathy levels increase by exposing them to poverty through experiential learning? Creating a learning space where adult learners can explore the complexity of poverty may be an effective pedagogical approach in growing social empathy in educators for people experiencing poverty. The researcher is interested in this intersection of poverty, education, social empathy, and experiential learning. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to explore how a poverty simulation experience influenced educators' social empathy levels and educational practices.

To frame the research, it is important to provide context. Because this research is considering poverty, education, social empathy, and experiential learning, each concept will be defined and discussed within existing research.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

Poverty

Poverty is complex. It is a social problem that has challenged societies for all of history. How do we define it? What causes it? How do we determine who is poor? Of those determined to be poor, who deserves help? What kind of help is best? Can poverty be eradicated? These big questions about poverty reflect a complicated knot that is difficult to untie and understand.

According to the United States Census Bureau (2022), the official poverty rate in 2021 was 11.6 % or 37.9 million people in poverty. This rate is calculated using the national poverty threshold of $26,246 for a 4-person household to determine who is experiencing poverty. Is this the best way to define and measure who is experiencing poverty in America? What about income versus wealth? What about absolute poverty versus relative poverty? Alternatively, what about situational poverty versus persistent poverty? Lister (2021) explains that the term "poverty" is a web of differing concepts, definitions, and measures. Furthermore, she argues that how one conceives, defines, and measures poverty has practical implications affecting policies, structural conditions, power relationships, and individual behaviors.

Defining Poverty

One way of defining and measuring poverty is based upon material indicators. Since the 1960's War on Poverty legislation, the United States Census Bureau reports poverty rates based on the official poverty measure that considers cash resources like wages, salaries, savings, investments, and retirement income to determine who is

experiencing poverty. It defines households as related people living in the same

home and determines the poverty threshold by calculating the cost of a minimum

food diet in 1963 multiplied by three and adjusted to today's costs. In 2020, the

poverty threshold for a four-person household (2 adults and 2 children) was $26,246.

The poverty threshold is used across the United States regardless of geographical

location (US Census Bureau, 2022).

In 2011, the United States Census Bureau began reporting an additional

measure, the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which includes cash resources

and noncash benefits. The definition of a household includes related people living

together and any additional members who also reside in the home such as foster

children or unmarried individuals. The poverty threshold includes additional factors

like cost of basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, and utilities, for example) and

geographical location. These factors are included in a complicated calculus adding

cash and noncash benefits and subtracting necessary expenses (taxes, healthcare, and

childcare, for example) (US Census Bureau, 2022).

Lister (2021) warns that operationalizing poverty by considering material

indicators alone does not capture a true definition of poverty. Rather, she argues that

poverty must be understood and defined within a context of power, inequality, and

social stratification. In other words, who decides how to define poverty is not simply

a calculus of data. Instead, it reflects the values of those in power, or the "non-poor."

Lister (2021) writes, "poverty cannot be understood purely in material terms. Both as

a concept and as a lived reality, it has to be understood as a social relation – primarily

between 'the poor' and 'the non-poor,' inflected by intersecting inequalities" (p. 89).

The intersecting inequalities focus on the experience of poverty from an

intersectionality perspective that considers gender, race, ethnicity, disability, age, and

geography. Using this framework, Lister (2021) argues that people experience

poverty differently but are all "othered" in society.

Poverty Attribution

Attribution theory is a social psychology framework that seeks to explain how

people make causal explanations about events (McLeod, 2012). This theory is often

used to explain the causes of poverty. The three most common theories of poverty

used to understand causes of poverty can be categorized into three families of

theories: behavioral, structural, and political (Brady, 2019). Behavioral theories

focus on individual behaviors and choices. This can include blaming an individual's

culture, alcohol and drug use, lack of skills or ability, poor money management, or

lack of motivation for self-improvement. Weiner, Osborne, and Rudolph (2010) add

fate, or bad luck to this category. Structural theories, on the other hand, attribute

poverty to social structures includes blaming poor educational opportunities, high

taxes, lack of opportunity, low wages, sickness or disability, or discrimination.

Political theories contend that poverty is the result of power and resource distribution

(Brady, 2019).

Individuals and fate. The culture of poverty perspective is a good example

of attributing poverty to individual behaviors. It holds that persons living in poverty

are culturally different and poverty is the result of individual behaviors and choices

(Lewis, 1966; Payne, 2019). This perspective also embraces the attribution of fate, or

bad luck. In other words, an individual is simply unlucky in that they were born into

a family experiencing persistent poverty. One of the results of this perspective is a

fatalistic attitude towards poverty, which can perpetuate the cycle of poverty. This

cycle is also referred to as generational poverty, persistent poverty, or "poverty trap."

All these terms encompass the idea that families often remain poor because of

inherited poverty and systems that create barriers to overcoming poverty (Dalton et

al., 2016).

        Structural and Political. Another way of understanding poverty as a

structural/political issue rather than an individual one is systems theory. Systems

theory looks at macro-level interactions between societal systems and individuals and

holds that the interactions between the systems, sub-systems, and the external

environment all impact the system as a whole. The system wants to remain in

equilibrium, so it adapts and changes in response to interactions within the system

(Kwok, 2019). How interrelated systems and structures including macro-level

systems like government and economics adjust and change greatly impacts people

experiencing poverty. For example, lack of access to social systems like

transportation, education, childcare, health care, affordable housing, and high-quality

jobs all affect an individual's ability to emerge from poverty. In addition, large-scale

social problems like racism are too often embedded in systems (Hahn & Simms,

2021). Thus, blaming individuals for experiencing poverty dismisses the interacting

social systems that often create barriers to overcoming poverty.

Education

In teacher education, Payne (2019) and Gorski (2013) represent two differing perspectives on education's role in working with students and families experiencing poverty from these differing theoretical perspectives. In 1995, Payne published her impactful book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, detailing a specific understanding of and strategies for working with children experiencing poverty. Payne (2019) refers to this framework as a cognitive model for understanding poverty. For example, she suggests educational strategies that address individual student behavior or understanding, like language, within the context of poverty will provide access to economic opportunity. She claims that "individuals bring with them the hidden rules of the class in which they were raised" and that "most schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class" (Payne, 2019, p. 5). Thus, in order to move out of poverty a student must engage in "code-switching" between the social class levels. Code-switching "involves adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others" in different environments (McCluney et al., 2019, para. 3). While Payne does acknowledge the role of systems, one could argue that her theoretical framing of poverty with its focus on behaviors attributes the cause of poverty at the individual level.

Gorski (2013), on the other hand, argues that the only way to erase the opportunity gap in education is to address structural factors, like educational policy. In his book, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the*

Opportunity Gap, Gorski counters the idea that education is the great equalizer.

Instead, he introduces an *Equity Literacy* approach to educational equity that involves

challenging ineffective strategies for teaching students in poverty that reinforce

stereotypes and perpetuate inequalities and "working *with* rather than *on* families in

poverty" (p. viii). More recently, Gorski (2022/2023) argues that common school

policies and practices "increase disadvantage for economically marginalized

students" (p. 22). For example, parents experiencing poverty shared that one practice

they find most embarrassing at their children's schools is the school-wide book fair.

He details four ways school "punish" poverty:

1. Marking students as deficient.

2. Treating kids *equally* and, therefore, *inequitably*.

3. Humiliating children through everyday practices.

4. Pricing them out of learning (pp. 24-28).

A recent edition of *Educational Leadership* (2022/2023) focused on

"Confronting Poverty in Schools." This edition included a variety of authors

addressing how current education systems understand and address poverty. Crew and

Noguera (2022/2023) write that poverty "is an educational issue" (p. 14). The current

reality of increasing poverty rates and disparities in education affects students

experiencing poverty in multiple ways. For one, disruptions in education occur

because of trauma, health concerns (both mental and physical), and

housing/homelessness. As a result, students' opportunities are often limited because

of this "accumulation of disadvantages" (p. 16).

Torres (2022/2023) uses Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory to argue "for many families that live in poverty, education is a sixth priority. Food, shelter, safety, health, and access to technology come first" (p. 54). Bower and Rossi (2019) collected and analyzed current research on the link between poverty and academic performance in designated Promise Neighborhoods and determined 18 non-academic factors/conditions that impact academic performance. These factors range from violence and crime to social organization of neighborhoods to nutrition to prenatal care to environmental toxins and pollution to parenting style to language exposure. They argue "non-school factors drive achievement and attainment more than in-school factors" (p. 1188). Thus, concluding that educational interventions directed at communities and neighborhoods are most impactful.

Educators attitudes towards and understanding of poverty can influence their practice. Kizer and Hinueber (2022/2023) contend that educators can, often unintentionally, add to the shame and embarrassment of a student experiencing poverty because of their assumptions about poverty. The authors write, "When teachers use classroom time to remind children of what they lack economically, they perpetuate 'stereotype threat'" (p. 47). Ellis et. al (2018) explored the implications for children experiencing poverty if teachers hold stereotypical views about poverty. More specifically, they collected data from pre-service teachers from two schools in the United Kingdom and analyzed how their understandings of external (systems) and internal (knowledge, thoughts, reflections) influenced their teaching from a social justice framework. They concluded that direct experience and engagement with

students experiencing poverty was the most effective way of changing attitudes of

preservice teachers.

Engler, Strassle, and Steck (2019) argue that educators' understanding of

poverty and its causes, either individual or structural, can affect their teaching

practices. Their research found that educators who participated in a poverty

simulation experience significantly adjusted their attributions away from individuals

towards structural. This adjusted understanding of poverty allowed educators to

expand inclusive and effective strategies in their classrooms to support students

whose families are experiencing poverty.

Social Empathy

Segal (2011) defines social empathy as "the ability to understand people by

perceiving or experiencing their life situations and as a result gain insight into

structural inequalities and disparities" (pp. 266-267).

Figure 1.1 Social empathy

Interpersonal Empathy
- Affective Response
- Affective Mentalizing
- Self-Other Awareness
- Perspecitive-Taking
- Emotional Regulation

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Contextual Understanding of Systemic Barriers

Macro Self-Other Perspective-Taking
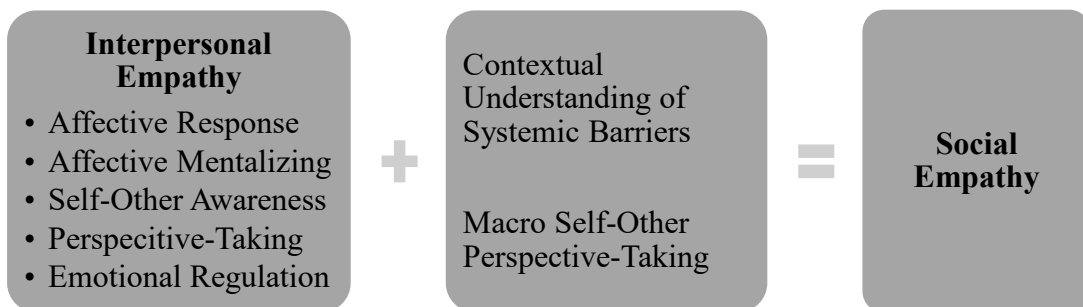
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Social Empathy

Figure 1.1 provides a visual of Segal's (2018) description of social empathy. It includes five components of interpersonal empathy (affective response, affective mentalizing, self-other awareness, perspective-taking, and emotional regulation) and two components that reflect social empathy (contextual understanding and macro perspective-taking).

The first component of interpersonal empathy is affective response. Affective response is an immediate reaction to an experience that engages one's senses. For example, people physically respond to seeing someone trip and fall. This response is initially unconscious. The second component, affective mentalizing, connects affective experiences to cognitive reasoning. This involves thinking about or being told another person's experiences, which triggers one to imagine what feelings or sensations they might have in that same situation. The third component, self-other awareness, is when someone identifies with another person but still has a clear sense of self. This means that a person can draw a boundary between feelings and meanings that belong to others and those that belong to self. The fourth component, perspective-taking, is when one can imagine what it is like to be in someone else's situation. Segal (2018) notes that perspective-taking requires an understanding of "what would I do if I were *you*" in the situation, rather than "what would I do if I were *me*" (p. 18). The fifth component of interpersonal empathy is emotional regulation. This involves finding a balance between self and other when engaging interpersonal empathy. It "tempers all the other components" (p. 19).

Broadening empathy beyond the interpersonal level includes adding two components: contextual understanding and macro self-other perspective-taking. Contextual understanding (CU) is understanding the lived experiences of others within the context of history, social structures like the economy, government and politics. Macro self-other perspective-taking (MSP) is engaging in self-other perspective-taking within a broader context considering the impact of external macro-level factors in order to understand cultures and groups different from one's own. Segal (2018) goes on to argue that experiential learning can be used as a powerful tool to enhance social empathy.

More specifically, Segal (2011) and Gerdes (2011) provide theoretical frameworks for how experiential learning can expand social empathy for and understanding of poverty. Segal (2011) developed a three-tiered model for developing social empathy: 1) basic exposure, 2) explanation, and 3) authentic experience. Gerdes (2011) builds upon Segal's model by suggesting that social empathy increases helping skills and provides a way to facilitate change within the systems that marginalize persons in poverty. Segal and Wagaman (2017) consider how teaching from a social empathy framework that emphasizes contextual understanding of systemic barriers and macro perspective impacts students' understanding of social justice.

Frank and Rice (2017) also suggest that experiential learning may be a pathway to the development of social empathy. They conducted a quantitative study that explored how a targeted social work curriculum using a social empathy

framework to understand poverty affected attitudes of first-year social work majors. Using a pre/posttest design, the researchers found that participants' attitudes only significantly changed regarding welfare programs and notions of equal opportunity. As a result, the researchers concluded a social empathy framework for understanding poverty could adjust student attitudes about poverty.

Wagaman, Compton, and Segal (2018) hypothesized that lower levels of social empathy as measured by the Social Empathy Index (SEI), a scale developed to measure interpersonal and social empathy, would make it more likely that a person believes people experiencing poverty are too dependent on government assistance programs. Using a cross-sectional survey design, the researchers collected data from 176 undergraduate students from a southwestern and mid-Atlantic university. After analysis, the researchers found that the data supported their hypothesis. An implication of this research is that increasing contextual understanding of poverty could lead to greater social empathy and, as a result, decrease an individual's belief that persons experiencing poverty are too dependent on government assistance. This research is important in supporting the use of experiential learning to affect social empathy as they found that increasing contextual understanding of poverty increases levels of social empathy.

Experiential Learning

Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). Both Knowles' (1984) and Kolb argue that experiential learning is the most effective way of teaching adult

learners. Knowles (1984) articulated the different needs of an adult learner in his

theory of andragogy, also known as adult education. He argued that traditional

pedagogies used on younger learners are not effective with adult learners. Instead,

adult learners need applicable knowledge. Thus, the most effective strategies for

adult learners involve experiences. Kolb's Learning Cycle (1984) provided a model

for this approach.

Figure 1.2 Kolb's Learning Cycle
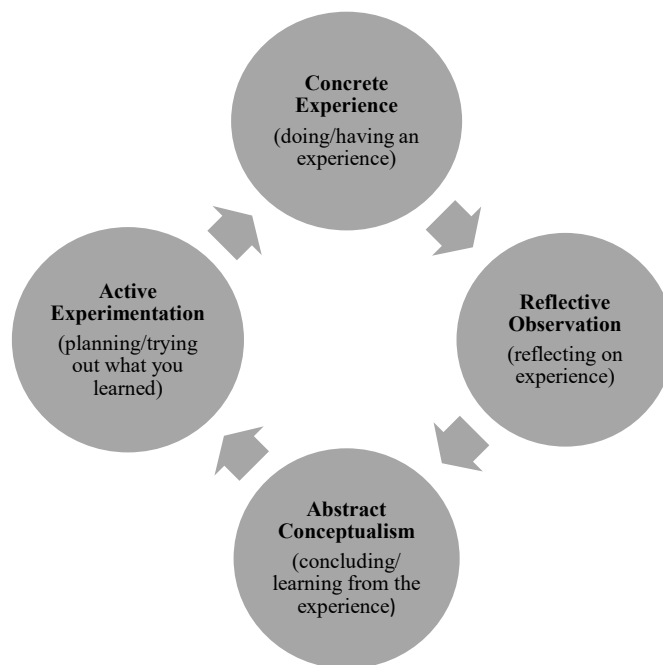
(Adapted from Kolb, 1984)

Kolb (1984) builds upon the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget to emphasize

essential factors in experiential learning. For one, Kolb argues that learning is a

continuous process grounded in experience. For another, a learner gains knowledge

from experiences that involve transactions between the learner and the environment. Thus, the learning cycle is a "process of creating knowledge" (p. 36).

Slade, Burnham, Catalana, and Waters (2019) explored the impact of reflective practice on pre-service teachers enrolled in a class with course-integrated field activities that involved experiences with students living in poverty. Two hundred and forty-three undergraduate students' written reflections were analyzed to determine outcomes. The researchers found that reflective practice coupled with experiential learning "can positively impact students' perceptions of target subject matter" (p.6).

These theories align well with Segal's (2011) ideas about increasing empathy. She states, "Experiential learning that taps into one's empathic neural system seems to be the most effective way to change one's feelings toward those who are perceived as different" (p. 96).

Poverty Simulation

One version of experiential learning is simulative learning. Bland et al. (2011) define simulative learning as "a dynamic process involving the creation of a hypothetical opportunity that incorporates an authentic representation of reality, facilitates active student engagement and integrates the complexities of practical and theoretical learning with opportunity for repetition, feedback, evaluation, and reflection" (p. 668).

In 2002, the Missouri Community Action Network copyrighted and began facilitating Community Action Poverty Simulations (CAPS). Since then, it has added

elements to the simulation and expanded to other states and even internationally

(Community Action Partnership, 2019). The simulation is grounded in Kolb's (1984)

experiential learning cycle and Mezirow's (1997) ten phases of transformative

learning.

The simulation includes fourteen agencies and twenty-six families. Upon

arrival, participants are randomly assigned a role with varying demographics (e.g.,

age, sex) and family configurations (e.g., single-parent, married with children, single-

older adult). Participants gather in designated families and receive instructions about

the simulation and are given time to review their family packets which includes

information about their employment, savings, bills, and benefits. Participants then

navigate four simulated weeks that last for 15 minutes each. The goal is for the

family to successfully meet basic needs, pay bills, get children to school, go to work,

obtain government assistance, and utilize community resources. Throughout the

simulation, participants encounter unexpected events like having to leave work to

pick up a sick child from school or additional costs like $5 for a school field trip.

One of the major challenges all families face is transportation.

A transportation pass is needed to engage with any agency and families have

limited passes at the beginning and must strategize how to use them efficiently

making difficult decisions about prioritizing needs of the family. If participants are

unable to meet obligations, there are consequences such as losing a job, eviction,

truancy charges, and utilities being shut off. Between each week, participants return

to their "homes" and discuss how they will navigate the next week. The entire

simulation lasts about 3 hours including a debriefing time led by the facilitator.

Researchers have explored how the Missouri Association of Community

Action Poverty Simulation affects participants' understanding of poverty (Hitchcock

et al., 2018; Vandsburger et al., 2010; Browne & Roll, 2016; Todd et al., 2011).

Hitchcock et al. (2018) used quantitative analysis to compare social work and nursing

majors to see if previous course content on poverty affected the learning outcomes of

the simulation. They determined there was no statistical difference.

Vandsburger et al. (2010) studied 101 undergraduate students' experiences of

the poverty simulation by quantitatively measuring critical thinking, active learning,

and understanding of others. They concluded that the poverty simulation did not

affect students' "thinking" but it did change their empathy levels for people living in

poverty.

Nickols and Nielsen (2011) used a mixed method approach to measure

changes in participants' attitudes towards poverty after participation in a poverty

simulation. They used a pre and posttest design, but postponed the posttest until two

weeks after the simulation experience. After combining this quantitative data with

qualitative data collected from student reflection papers, they concluded that students

increased empathy for persons living in poverty and shifted their attributions of

poverty away from individuals and toward society.

Todd et al. (2011) also utilized a mixed method approach to understanding the

impact of the poverty simulation on college students. This study's strength was its

sample size of 509 college students from three different universities. After collecting

quantitative survey data and qualitative data from open-ended questions, the

researchers concluded that the poverty simulation is an effective program for

changing students' attitudes and beliefs about poverty.

Steck, Engler, Ligon, Duren, and Cosgrove (2011) argued that teaching about

poverty by conveying *content only* does not challenge students to adjust their attitudes

and assumptions about people experiencing poverty. Instead, participatory,

experiential learning offers students an opportunity to engage in significant learning.

Using qualitative analysis, the researchers concluded that students developed "an

enhanced awareness of the social and material conditions of poverty at a level of

understanding that could not be attained from exposure to statistics alone" (p. 270).

As a counterpoint to the other studies, Browne and Roll (2016) challenged the

effectiveness of the poverty simulation by questioning if the poverty simulation

experience perpetuates inequality rather than propelling students to action. Using a

mixed method study, the researchers sought to examine the effectiveness of poverty

simulation experiences in changing students' attitudes about inequality. The

researchers used a case study approach to collect quantitative data (pretests and

surveys) and qualitative data (student reflection papers) to analyze data gathered from

undergraduate students who participated in the Missouri Association of Community

Action Poverty Simulation. The researchers' analysis of the merged data confirmed

their concern that poverty simulations used as stand-alone experiences could

perpetuate existing power imbalances. The researchers also questioned the efficacy

the typical measures used to assess impact of the poverty simulation experiences. This article provides an important counterpoint to the majority of research conducted on poverty simulations. It challenges assumptions about experiential learning and suggests continued research.

In addition to understanding the impact of the poverty simulation on college students, a few studies explored its impact on educators (Engler et al., 2019; Rice et al., 2017). Rice, McCall, and Ogden (2017) used pre and posttest data to determine if a poverty simulation experience increases teacher sensitivity for students experiencing poverty. After analysis, the researchers found that the largest increases in teacher sensitivity were in understanding the barriers to accessing resources and how difficult it is to improve ones' self-sufficiency with a limited income. Most striking was the finding that teachers reported on the post-simulation test commentary that these new insights would influence their practice in the classroom.

Engler, Strassle, and Steck (2019) used the attribution questionnaire (Cozzarelli, et al., 2001) to measure how poverty attributions changed between pretest and posttest after 161 educators participated in a poverty simulation. They found that attributions moved away from behavioral toward structural and this shift influenced intended future behaviors. As a result, the researchers concluded that a poverty simulation experience is an effective tool for challenging assumptions about poverty among educators.

It is important to note that there is not consensus in the literature about the best way to measure learners' attitude and perception changes about poverty after an

educational intervention (Roll & Browne, 2020; Vandsburger et al., 2010). For this reason, researchers typically utilize a variety of scales. Delavaga, et al. (2017) used the Blame Index, Perceptions of the Role of Government Scale, Adequacy of Social Welfare Benefits Scale, and Ease of Access to Social Welfare Benefits Scale to measure shifting attributions of the causes of poverty at the end of a social policy course in the social work curriculum at two universities. Frank and Rice (2017) used the Undergraduate Perception of Poverty Tracking Survey (UPPTS) to measure students' perceptions of poverty after participating in a semester-long course using a social empathy framework. Other researchers used the Critical Thinking Scale, Other Perspective Scale, Active Learning Scale, and various additional surveys created specific to the student population (Hitchcock et al., 2018; Browne & Roll, 2016; Todd et al., 2011; Vandsburger et al., 2010).

Poverty's complexity is reflected in the research about its impact on education, social empathy, and experiential learning. These broad concepts are well researched and provide a rich context for this research project. However, this study pulled strands from these concepts and connected them in a new way to explore a gap in the literature. The purpose of this study was to explore how a poverty simulation experience influenced educators' social empathy levels and educational practices. The following research questions were explored:

1. How does the poverty simulation experience affect educators' social empathy levels?

2. Does the poverty simulation experience influence educational practice? If so, how?

These questions explore the effectiveness of experiential learning through a poverty simulation as a pedagogical approach to increasing understanding and social empathy for people experiencing poverty and influencing empathetic educational practices. Based on Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory and Segal's (2011) belief that social empathy can develop as a result of experiential learning, the researcher hypothesizes the following:

Hypothesis 1: There will be an increase in educators' social empathy levels after participation in a poverty simulation experience as measured by Social Empathy Index (SEI) scores on the pre and posttests.

Hypothesis 2: There will be an influence on educational practices after participation in a poverty simulation experience as measured by a follow-up survey with two open-ended questions.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Research Setting

The research was conducted in a high poverty, rural school district located in Eastern Kentucky. The school district serves the entire county with 3,130 students enrolled in ten schools that range from pre-school through high school. Data from the 2021-2022 academic year shows that 65.9% of the students qualified as economically disadvantaged and 92% of students identified as White alone (Kentucky Department of Education, 2022). The county population is 24,662 and 95.6% identify as White alone. The median household income is $45,681 and 86.9% of the county population has a high school degree or higher. Twenty-one percent of the county population is experiencing poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2020). Table 1 shows additional data related to economic security of children and families in the county as compared to the state.

Table 1

Comparison of Economic Security Data

% of Children	County	Kentucky
Living in poverty (100% poverty level)	28.8%	19.4%
In low-income families (200% poverty level)	53%	44%
Living in food insecure households	20.5%	16.1%
Families experiencing high rental cost burden	47%	43%

(Kentucky Kids Count, 2022)

Participants

Twenty-nine public school teachers and administrators from across the district participated in a 3-hour poverty simulation in August of 2022. The simulation was part of a required professional development day but the participants selected to participate in the poverty simulation as one of the afternoon sessions. Additionally, participation in the research was voluntary and anonymous. All participants were given an informed consent form and a copy of the "Human Relations Survey" upon entering the simulation space. The researcher explained the purpose of the research before beginning the instructions for the simulation and participation was solicited but not required.

Demographic information was also collected from each participant on the pre-survey that included gender, age, ethnicity/race, and lived experience with poverty. Because of social empathy's emphasis on one's lived experience, the researcher was interested in participants' perceptions about their own experience with poverty rather than asking participants to identify an income category. In other words, the point of the question was to determine if a person believed they have a lived experience with poverty rather than if they actually fell under the poverty threshold. Participants were asked to respond to the following question with "yes, no, or unsure:" "Do you believe you have experienced poverty at some point in your life?"

Measures

Quantitatively, the Social Empathy Index (SEI) developed by Segal, Wagaman, and Gerdes (2012) was used to measure change in social empathy levels

of participants before and after the simulation. The SEI includes 40 questions that

respondents complete based on the answer that most closely reflects their feelings and

beliefs. Choices are 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Frequently, 5 =

Almost Always, or 6 = Always. The SEI measures components of empathy using

subscales: Affective Response (AR), Affective Mentalizing (AM), Self-Other

Awareness (SOA), Perspective-Taking (PT), Emotional Regulation (ER), Contextual

Understanding of Systemic Barriers (CU), and Macro Self-Other Perspective-Taking

(MSP). Questions 1-22 measure the first five (5) components (AR, AM, SOA, PT,

and ER). Questions 23-40 measure the last two (2) components (CU and MSP).

Examples of questions from each subscale include:

AR: When I see someone receive a gift that makes them happy, I feel happy myself.

AM: I am good at understanding other people's emotions.

SOA: I can tell the difference between someone else's feelings and my own.

PT: I consider other people's points of view in discussions.

ER: When I am upset or unhappy, I get over it quickly.

CU: I believe people born into poverty have more barriers to achieving economic well-being than people who were not born into poverty.

MSP: I believe my actions will affect future generations (Segal, Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012).

Scores are calculated by adding the answers (including 2 reverse scoring questions) for a total by subscale or overall. A higher total reflects a higher level of social empathy (Segal, Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012).

In order to reduce social desirability, the survey is titled "Human Relations Survey" rather than Social Empathy Index. This provides a generic title for the survey thereby decreasing participants' tendencies towards answering what they think they should answer, rather than what they truly believe or feel (Segal, Gerdes, Lietz, Wagaman, & Geiger, 2017).

Segal, Cimono, Gerdes, Harmon, and Wagaman, (2013) used an exploratory factor analysis to determine the validity of the SEI to ensure it accurately measures the full spectrum of empathy including interpersonal and social empathy. The analysis supported the validity of the instrument to measure both levels of empathy and suggests that this is an effective tool for measuring social empathy.

Qualitatively, a two-question survey was used to collect data about how educators would describe the experience and if and how it influenced their educational practices. The open-ended questions were as follows:

1. How would you describe your poverty simulation experience?

2. As an educator, did the poverty simulation experience prompt you to change any of your educational practices? If so, how? Provide examples if possible.

Data Collection

Because the study is exploring changes in social empathy levels and how those changes affect practice, multiple methods were used including a pretest-posttest method and a follow-up survey with open-ended questions. This aligns well with the purpose of the research in that it is seeking not only to measure quantifiable change in social empathy levels but also to explore how the simulation influenced educators' educational practices.

The first research question was examined using a one-group pre-experimental design to collect data through a pretest-posttest method. The Social Empathy Index (SEI) developed by Segal, Wagaman, and Gerdes (2012) was used to measure levels of social empathy before and after the poverty simulation experience. After obtaining informed consent from the participants (see Appendix A), they were asked to complete a pretest titled "Human Relations Survey" before beginning the instructions about the simulation (see Appendix B). The pretest included the following demographic questions: gender, age, race/ethnicity, parents' highest level of education, and experience with poverty themselves. The posttest (same version as the pretest) was given after the debriefing discussion that immediately followed the simulation (see Appendix B). All the participants completed the pretest including demographic information (N = 29). However, only twenty-five completed the posttest (N = 25). This resulted in an 86% response rate for the "Human Relations Survey." The researcher decided that it would be easier to have participants complete the posttest immediately after the simulation in order to have a high response rate. Of

course, the concern is that participants completed the posttest quickly and without much reflection.

The second research question was examined through a short, two-question follow-up survey that was sent to participants four (4) weeks after the poverty simulation through email using Microsoft Forms to collect responses (see Appendix C). The follow-up survey was sent again eight (8) weeks after the simulation in order to gather more responses. The response rate for the follow-up survey was 38% ($n =$ 11).

Data Analysis

Because of the specific focus on social empathy, the researcher chose to analyze the first research question by comparing the pretest – posttest change in total scores and only two of the SEI subscales scores: Contextual Understanding of Systemic Barriers (CU) and Macro Self-Other Perspective Taking (MSP). As discussed earlier, these two subscales focus more on social empathy than interpersonal empathy. With the focus of the research on the intersection of poverty, social empathy, and experiential learning, these macro-level questions from the CU and MSP subscales inform the research in a more meaningful way. Paired sample *t*-tests were used to determine if there was a statistically significant change in educators' social empathy levels after completing the poverty simulation. Additional paired sample t-tests were performed to further analyze these changes in scores by two variables: gender and lived experience with poverty. Finally, two specific questions were analyzed because of their topical relevance to poverty and education:

Q 33: I believe people born into poverty have more barriers to achieving

economic well-being than people who were not born into poverty.

Q 40: I believe there are barriers in the United States educational system that

prevent some groups of people from having economic success (Segal,

Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012).

The second question was explored using qualitative methods to analyze the

follow-up survey responses. The researcher used interpretive research practices to

identify patterns and themes in the written responses. This included reading through

all the responses multiple times then color-coding responses to determine emergent

themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Three themes emerged for Question #1 and

three were also identified for Question #2.

After analysis, the data provided interesting intersections of demographics,

social empathy levels, and changes in educational practices. These findings will be

discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 – Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how a poverty simulation experience influenced educators' social empathy levels and educational practices. The following research questions were explored:

1. How does the poverty simulation experience affect educators' social empathy levels?

2. Does the poverty simulation experience influence educational practice? If so, how?

Despite a small sample (N = 29) of educators, the quantitative and qualitative data collected provides a circle of data that deepens the understanding of the intersection of poverty, education, social empathy, and experiential learning.

Demographics

Table 2

Participant Demographics N= 29

Variable	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	8	27.6
Female	21	72.4
Age		
18-25	3	10.3
26-30	7	24.1
31-35	4	13.8
36-40	4	13.8
41 & older	11	37.0
Race/Ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino	1	3.4
White or Caucasian	28	96.6
Lived Experience with Poverty		

Yes	12	41.4
No	16	55.2
Unsure	1	3.4

The majority of the participants identified as female ($n = 21$, 72.4%), and White ($n = 28$, 96.6%). Fifty-seven percent of the participants were between the ages of 18 and 40 years old ($n = 18$). Categories that had zero responses were not included in the demographic table. For example, no participant identified as transgender or any race/ethnicity other than White or Hispanic, which reflects the county's demographics. Finally, twelve participants reported a lived experience with poverty (41.4%), sixteen reported no lived experience with poverty (55.2%), and one reported that they were unsure (.03%). As mentioned earlier, this question was intentionally vague because of the researcher's interest in the participant's *belief* that they had or had not experienced poverty.

Influence on Social Empathy Levels

Research question #1 was explored using quantitative measures and analysis of the changes between pretest and posttest scores on the Social Empathy Index (SEI). In particular, the total change in score from pretest to posttest was analyzed along with two subscales: Macro Self-Other Perspective Taking (MSP) and Contextual Understanding of Systemic Barriers (CU). Paired sample *t* tests were used to compare pretest and posttest scores including total, MSP, and CU scores (Table 3). Independent sample *t*-tests were used to compare change in scores by gender (Table 4), and change in scores by lived experience in poverty (Table 5).

Finally, Table 6 shows the results of a paired sample t test used to compare pretest

and posttest scores on two SEI questions that are specific to poverty and education.

Table 3

Social Empathy Index (SEI) Change in Score

	Total Score		MSP Score		CU Score	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Pretest	189.40	18.55	42.84	4.81	42.80	6.47
Posttest	194.12	19.95	44.68	5.32	45.12	6.55
Change in Score	+4.72		+1.84		+2.32	
t	-2.22		-2.87		-2.66	
p value	.036**		.009**		.014**	

Note: N = 25. Change is score was calculated by subtracting mean pretest score
from mean posttest score.
**$p<.05$

The data in Table 3 show increased scores from pretest to posttest after

completing the poverty simulation in total, MSP, and CU scores. Furthermore, these

increases were determined to be statistically significant after completing paired

sample *t* tests on all three scales. It is worth noting that the CU score fluctuated the

most in all of the analyses. In this paired *t* test, the change in score between pretest

and posttest was greater on the CU subscale compared to the MSP subscale. This will

be discussed in more detail in the conclusion section of this paper.

Table 4

SEI Change in Score by Gender

Gender	Change in Total Score		Change in MSP Score		Change in CU Score	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Male	-.67	7.99	.67	2.80	-1.00	3.03
Female	6.42	10.96	2.21	3.31	3.37	.97
t	-1.46		-1.03		-2.32	
p value	.159*		.315*		.029**	

Note: Male *n* = 6 and Female *n* = 19. Change is score was calculated by subtracting pretest score from posttest score.

*p>.05 and ** p<.05

Based on the *t* test, there were no statistically significant changes in total or MSP scores when comparing gender. However, the changes in CU score when comparing gender was significant (*p*<.05). The CU score (*M* = -1.00) for men actually decreased after completing the poverty simulation. Women, on the other hand, had increased scores in all three scales with over a 6-point increase (*M* = 6.42) in total score. Because of the small number of men in the sample (*n* = 6), the results could be skewed. It is interesting to note the decreased social empathy score when considering the CU score.

Table 5

SEI Change in Score by Lived Experience in Poverty

Lived experience in poverty	Change in Total Score		Change in MSP Score		Change in CU Score	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*

Yes	6.56	13.35	1.78	3.38	3.78	4.79
No	3.87	3.87	1.93	3.27	1.80	3.99
t	.580		-.11		1.09	
p value	.56*		.91*		.29*	

Note: Yes *n* = 9 and No *n* = 15. Change in score was calculated by subtracting pretest score from posttest score.

*p>.05

Based on the *t* test, there were no statistically significant changes in total (*t* = .58, *p* = .57), MSP (*t* = -.11, *p* = .91), or CU (*t* = 1.09, *p* = .29) scores when comparing lived experience in poverty. However, the positive change in scores indicate that the scores increased on the posttest with participants who have lived experience with poverty reporting a higher increase on changes in total score (*M* = 6.56) and CU score (*M* = 3.78) than those who reported having no lived experience with poverty. Persons with no lived experience in poverty, on the other hand, reported a higher increase on changes in MSP score (*M* = 1.93) than those who reported having a lived experience with poverty.

Table 6

SEI Change in Score: Questions 33 and 40

	Question 33		Question 40	
	Poverty		Education	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Pretest	4.92	.91	4.36	1.32
Posttest	5.16	.75	5.0	1.08

Change in Score	+.24	+.64
t	-1.24	-2.27
p value	.228*	.033**

Note: N = 25

*p>.05 and ** p<.05

Both questions are part of the CU subscale and focus on barriers to achieving

economic success related to being born into poverty (Question 33) and the education

system (Question 40). While there was an increase in score between the pretest and

posttest on both questions showing increased social empathy, only Question 40 which

focused on barriers in the education system had a statistically significant difference (*t*

= -2.27, *p* = .033). This is interesting considering all the participants were educators.

To summarize, the quantitative analysis of the changes in social empathy

levels of educators who experienced the poverty simulation revealed increased social

empathy, with the exception of male participants on total score and the CU subscale.

The change in overall scores from pretest to posttest was significant across all

measurements. Females had a greater increase in scores across all measurements.

Finally, there was no significant difference when comparing lived experience in

poverty. These mixed results can be further explored by adding qualitative analysis

of the follow-up surveys.

Influence on Educational Practices

Four to eight weeks after the poverty simulation, participants completed a

follow up survey and, through written responses, described the influence of the

poverty simulation and how it affected their educational practices. Although the

follow-up survey response rate was only 38%, the participants' responses added

insight to the understanding of the impact of the poverty simulation. Table 7 shows

the themes extracted from the participants' responses provided to the question "How

would you describe your poverty simulation experience?" Table 8 includes the

themes related to participants' responses to the question "As an educator, did the

poverty simulation experience prompt you to change any of your educational

practices? If so, how? Provide examples if possible."

Table 7

Question 1: Participants' Description of Poverty Experience (N = 11)

Theme	Example quote	Frequency, n (%)
Eye-Opening/ Thought-Provoking	"While it was just a simulation, it was a glimpse into the stresses that so many of our students experience in real life."	9 (82%)
	"It was eye-opening, in that, while I thought I knew hardships faced by impoverished folks, I always thought that they had plenty of help if they just looked for it. Looking for it is a full-time job though. Honestly, crime is a much easier way to go with only minimal consequences."	
Overwhelming Stress	"The poverty simulation allows participants to feel just a sample of the overwhelming decisions and choices that low-income families face."	6 (55%)

	"When overwhelmed, I shut down and just tried to survive the game."	
Hopeless	"I felt targeted and set for failure from the beginning."	3 (27%)
	"I almost felt like I was finished before it started."	

The first theme that emerged from the data was the description of the simulation as "eye-opening" or "thought-provoking." Eighty-two percent (82%) of the respondents included these terms in their responses. In fact, "eye opening" was the most used term. Recognition of the added barriers, stressors, and challenges that students and their families are experiencing in poverty compelled educators to "think about it for days afterward." Some expressed a realization about how much they take for granted. Others thought they understood what poverty was like but the simulation challenged them to think differently.

The second theme that emerged was the participants' experiences with "overwhelming stress." Fifty-five percent (55%) of the respondents described how "overwhelming" the poverty simulation felt. Many respondents explained that their response to this feeling of "overwhelming stress" was to "survive" by "shutting down" or staying in "survival mode." This is a particular interesting insight into people's experience of poverty and will be discussed later in the conclusions section. The third theme identified from the written responses was a sense of "hopelessness." The researcher named this theme as "hopelessness" to capture the responses that expressed terms like "targeted" or "set for failure" or "paralyze" and "finished before

I started." Another term for this theme could be "resignation." While only 27% of respondents described the experience in this way, it aligns with the fatalistic perspective on poverty.

Table 8

Question 2: Participants' Explanation of Impact on Educational Practices (N = 11)

Theme	Example quote	Frequency, *n* (%)
Raised Empathy and Understanding	"I have more of an idea about the home life of some of my students and, I believe, have become more cognizant to their issues."	8 (73%)
	"I understand that the simulation made bad decisions appealing and as an opportunity, this makes me think of students' decisions."	
Adjusted Approach to Students and Families	"It solidified my belief in allowing students to submit late work and complete retakes. Yes, I know some students might take advantage of these policies, but I think they are a lifeline for students experiencing the stresses and worry that was part of the simulation."	6 (55%)
	"I don't have a classroom of my own, but this experience made me value my parents' time and participation in conferences and meetings in a brand-new way."	
Helped Others Be More Understanding	"Able to coach my staff to be more understanding."	3 (27%)

"I can try to explain to my staff to
be more mindful of the kids'
backgrounds."

Seventy-three percent (73%) of the responses included reflections on how the

poverty simulation experience increased their empathy for and understanding of

students and families experiencing poverty. Participants referred to being "more

cognizant of students' home circumstances" or reminding themselves to be more

"understanding in all situations." This new awareness translated into adjustment in

educational practices for over half of the participants (55%). Some examples

included being more flexible with due date, "really following up on students who

seem to be struggling, not just for academic reasons," and re-thinking how to value

parents' time related to school meetings. An unexpected theme that emerged from

the written responses was the intentional efforts to help others, including staff and

students, to be more empathetic and understanding. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of

the respondents specified educational practices related to this theme including

coaching staff to be more understanding or "mindful of kids' backgrounds" and

focusing on "my teaching on empathy as well."

The follow-up survey responses gave depth to the quantitative data collected

on social empathy. All of the follow-up survey responses were positive about the

poverty simulation and described how the experience made them think about the

complexities of poverty and how that affects their students and families. Of course,

this may be explained by selection bias in that only participants with a positive

experience responded to the follow-up survey. Even with this consideration, their

reflections provided a richer understanding of their experience with the poverty

simulation.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions, Actions, and Implications

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore how a poverty simulation experience influenced educators' social empathy levels and educational practices. A small sample of educators who work in a rural, high poverty district in Eastern Kentucky participated in the research as part of a professional development day. The researcher hypothesized that (1) there would be an increase in educators' social empathy levels, and (2) there would be an influence on educational practices after participation in a poverty simulation experience. These were measured using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Quantitative analysis of the Social Empathy Index (SEI) pretest and posttest confirmed that educators' social empathy levels did increase. Recognizing that the small and homogenous sample size limits generalizability, the data showed trends that added to the complexity of understanding the development of social empathy after an experiential learning activity. In particular, there were some interesting findings related to contextual understanding of poverty, gender and lived experience in poverty.

The Contextual Understanding (CU) subscale of the SEI has nine (9) questions that focus on the contextual understanding of systemic barriers. Many of the questions relate to the role of government. For example, Q.36 is "I believe the role of government is to act as a referee, making decisions that promote the quality of life and well-being of people." Alternatively, Q. 23 is "I believe adults who are in

poverty deserve social assistance." Scores on this subscale had greater increases and even a decrease between the pretest and posttest. Of particular note is that males' scores actually decreased on this subscale between the pretest and posttest. This raises questions about perceptions of government and may support Browne and Roll's (2016) research conclusion that the poverty simulation can reinforce the existing distrust of government systems. Further research should be conducted to explore the intersections of gender, age, and lived experience in poverty through more in-depth data analysis like multiple regressions.

When comparing the variable of lived experience with poverty against the change in scores between pretest and posttest, the data revealed that participants who answered "yes" to a lived experience with poverty had a greater increase in social empathy after the poverty simulation ($M = 6.56$) as compared to those who answered "no" ($M = 3.87$). While this difference is not statistically significant, it is an unexpected result. The researcher expected participants with no lived experience with poverty to have a greater increase in social empathy because the simulation would broaden their understanding of or experience with poverty. While this finding merits a deeper dive, it raises questions about poverty attribution. Could it be that participants who experienced poverty and have "emerged successfully" as a professional educator are more likely to attribute poverty to individual behaviors and choices? In other words, is there a sense of "I made it by working hard. So, why can't everyone else do it too?" If this is the case, could it be that the poverty simulation broadened their understanding of structural barriers resulting in a greater

shift in social empathy? This does support previous research on the impact of a

poverty simulation on participants' attributions of poverty (Nickols & Nielsen, 2011;

Steck et al., 2011; Todd et al., 2011).

Finally, a compelling finding emerged from the qualitative data related to

educators' previous exposure to poverty. Some of the participants noted that they

thought they knew about the challenges of poverty but realized how little they

understood after completing the poverty simulation. One respondent stated, "It was

eye-opening, in that, while I thought that I knew the hardships faced by impoverished

folk, I always thought that they had plenty of help if they just looked for it." Other

educators mentioned a similar sentiment in the debriefing time at the conclusion of

the simulation. This response aligns with Rice, McCall, and Ogden's (2017) research

on the poverty simulation's influence of teacher sensitivity to poverty. An interesting

variable to explore in future research is to include the number of years of teaching

and explore how that relates to social empathy levels.

This finding also prompted the researcher to consider the context in which the

research was conducted. While this was not measured in the study, it was assumed

that because the participants were educators in a high-poverty region where 61% of

children qualify as low-income living at or below 200% of the poverty level

(Kentucky Kids Count, 2022) most of them had a minimal-level of exposure to

poverty through the school system. In addition, the district is located in a rural area.

Poverty in rural areas cannot be avoided like in many urban areas where

neighborhoods can be delineated by socio-economic class. In other words, one can

shop, work, or attend school in a part of the city where zoning laws, housing costs, or

school choice can limit exposure to poverty, for example. In rural areas, on the other

hand, one drives by run-down trailers and expensive homes along the same road and

most students attend public schools rather than private ones. This merits further

research into differences between rural and urban educators' understanding of and

social empathy for people experiencing poverty.

Overall, these findings provide a starting point for continued research. The

researcher hopes to replicate the study in other counties in the Eastern Kentucky

region. This would provide a larger sample that could enhance the statistical

significance of the findings.

Limitations

Because of the small and homogenous sample, the research is limited in

determining statistically significance of findings and is not generalizable. In addition,

a potential threat to internal validity was selection. The participants in the study were

public school educators who one could argue are already predisposed towards social

empathy. Furthermore, the follow-up survey results need to be considered in the

context of selection as well. With only a 38% response rate, the data could be skewed

towards participants who had a positive experience with the poverty simulation.

Another potential threat to internal validity was instrumentation. While the pretest

and posttest did not change, the reliability of the instrument must be considered. In

addition, the timing of the pretest and posttest immediately before and after the

simulation leaves the potential for quick answers rather than carefully considered

ones. Finally, a potential threat to external validity is that the research was conducted

within a 2-month timeframe with one group of educators from the same school

district. Thus, it limits the generalizability of the results.

Actions

While the findings are limited, the data collected provides information that

can be used to direct the development of a four (4) - hour professional development

module for public school faculty and staff. This module will consist of the 3-hour

poverty simulation experience and a 1-hour debriefing period that includes sharing of

resources and a creative problem-solving conversation for participants to explore

inclusive educational practices when working with students and families experiencing

poverty.

Returning to Kolb's (1984) Learning Cycle, the researcher found that the

participants in the study fully engaged in three of the four components of the cycle.

They had a *concrete experience* by participating in the poverty simulation. In

addition, participants engaged in *reflective observation* in the debriefing conversation

immediately after the poverty simulation. Finally, the follow-up survey prompted

participants to practice *abstract conceptualism* by explaining what they learned from

the poverty simulation experience. Some respondents ventured into the final

component of the learning cycle, *active experimentation*, but this was either not

measured well or most had not fully implemented new educational practices. Many

participants explained that they were thinking about how to add, remove, or adjust

educational practices, but there were limited examples provided on the follow-up

survey. This helped the researcher frame the limitations of the poverty simulation as

a stand-alone experience (Browne & Roll, 2016) and inform the development of a

professional development that includes strategies for active experimentation

  With these considerations in mind, the following plan was developed for

implementation in public schools in the Eastern Kentucky region:

Table 9

Plan for Poverty Simulation Professional Development

Instructional Plan for Poverty Simulation	
Program Title	Poverty Simulation for Educators: What Is It Like to Experience Poverty?
Date and Time Frame	Date: TBD Time Frame: 4 hours
Name of Facilitator	Becky Davison, MSW Morehead State University
Brief Description of Learning Activity	The Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) developed by the Missouri Community Action Network, requires participants to "live" in poverty for a month with separate 15-minute sessions representing each of the 4 weeks of the month. Participants are assigned a role to play in the simulation and must work with their designated families to interact with community agencies and ensure they "survive" the month by paying bills, working, caring for children, and having enough food. The 3-hour simulation includes an introduction, simulation, and debriefing.
Goal and Learning Objectives	**Goal:** To increase participants' knowledge of and social empathy for people living in poverty especially as it relates to educational barriers

	Learning Objectives: 1. Participants will increase knowledge of barriers experienced by people living in poverty as measured by pretest-posttest. 2. Participants will increase social empathy towards people living in poverty as measured by pretest-posttest. 3. Participants will feel empowered to engage in self-reflection and challenge personal assumptions and biases about people living in poverty. 4. Participants will identify two strategies to implement in their classrooms to address barriers related to poverty as measured by follow-up survey.
Instructional Techniques	Simulation Debriefing (Group Discussion)
Assessment Plan	Pretest/Posttest Periodic check-in's during simulation Follow-Up Survey
Estimated Time for Activities	Introduction and Directions: 20-25 minutes Simulation Activity: 90 minutes Debriefing: 45 minutes
Instructor and Participant Resources	20 + community volunteers to serve as Agency Representatives Poverty Simulation Kit (Facilitator)
Facilities Needed	Large enough space to accommodate up to 80 participants. Tables and chairs (Floor layout provided) Microphone

As mentioned before, the simulation creates a space for participants to learn about

themselves and persons living in poverty within the context of professional

development. In addition, three strategies for educational practices will be presented during the debriefing in an effort to prompt educators to take the knowledge and put it into practice in their educational spaces. These three strategies include:

1. Discussion of available resources to students and families by Family Resource/Youth Service Center staff from the district.

2. Provide specific strategies for engaging with students and families who are experiencing poverty. This can be tailored to the district's needs and preferences.

3. Explore how school policies provide barriers to students and families experiencing poverty (i.e. field trips, transportation for after-school activities)

An additional component of the professional development could be follow-up meetings during the academic year. For example, interested teachers and administrators could continue the conversation through a book group. The book group could read *Reaching and Teaching Students* by Paul Gorski (2013), for example, and assess and discuss how to address structural inequalities within their school. This would provide a chance for teachers and administrators to come up with strategies that are tailored to their school district. In this way, the poverty simulation is just the launching point for continued conversations and actions.

Implications

The results of this study provided additional evidence that an experiential learning experience like the poverty simulation can be impactful on educators' social empathy levels and educational practices. While the research is limited, it provided a

nudge for exploring opportunities to build partnerships between social work and education. Both professions work with people experiencing poverty and share an ethic of care and a desire to affect change. These overlaps create a real potential for mutually beneficial learning experiences.

For one, there are opportunities to partner in research. Roll and Browne (2020) conducted a unique study that used social work students as co-researchers in an action research model that explored how students learn about poverty through a poverty simulation. The social work students analyzed their own experiences as participants in the simulation and conducted interviews with the other participants to identify themes. This research design could be expanded to use both social work and education undergraduate students to conduct a poverty simulation for educators in other regional school districts. Involving students in the facilitation of the simulation and the research surrounding the pedagogical approach could create a complex and rich learning experience for students and participants.

For another, there are opportunities for social workers and educators to partner in solution-focused activities that remove barriers to people experiencing poverty. Weiss and Reville (2019) outline a framework and provide models for communities to build partnerships with schools in their book *Broader, Bolder, Better: How Schools and Communities Help Students Overcome the Disadvantages of Poverty*. More specifically, they discuss how Integrated Student Support (ISS) communities seek to provide wraparound services that create whole-child systems of education. The poverty simulation is a great launching pad to create a space where educators,

social workers, health providers, and other community members can engage in

conversations about the barriers in their own communities and brainstorm solutions

that build toward educational equity.

       While the research from this study is limited, it provided thought-provoking

questions that can be explored through continued research and the development of a

professional development that will guide participants through a potentially impactful

and transformative learning experience that challenges assumptions and biases about

students and families experiencing poverty, grows social empathy, and directs

educational practices towards inclusivity.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Dear Participant:

My name is Rebecca Davison and I am faculty at Morehead State University in the Department of Sociology & Social Justice, Criminology, and Social Work and a current student in the Doctoral Program in Education (EdD). I am requesting your assistance with a research project I am conducting on the poverty simulation experience. Let me emphasize that you do not have to participate. If you do not wish to take part in the pre/post and follow up surveys, you do not have to answer any of the questions. Completing the surveys is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time.

You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. This study has been reviewed to determine that participants' rights are safeguarded and there appears to be minimal risk or discomfort associated with the completion of the survey. All surveys are anonymous and you may choose to discontinue your participation at any time. You may also skip any questions you do not wish to answer. Also, you need to understand that participating or not participating in the surveys has no impact on your credit for completing the professional development.

The answers you provide will be kept strictly confidential and all research subject responses will be stored in a locked file drawer in Rader Hall 347A on Morehead State University's campus, accessible only to the researcher. In addition, digital files will be encrypted and accessible only to the researcher. Please feel free to ask for help if something does not make sense to you or if you have any questions. If you experience any discomfort, you may contact Pathways Help Line at (606) 324-1141. If you decide to volunteer, please be sure to print your name on the form and sign it to indicate your willingness to participate. That will be our indication that you understand the purpose of the survey and that you are willing to help.

NAME *(please print)*:

_____

Signature:

_____

If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact the researcher: *Rebecca Davison, 347A Rader Hall, Morehead State University, Morehead, KY 40351, 606-783-2446, or r.davison@moreheadstate.edu.* The Office of Research and Sponsored Programs oversees research initiatives at Morehead State University. For questions or

comments about this study, contact Janet L. Cline, Director of Research Integrity & Compliance, 901 Ginger Hall, 606-783-2541, jl.cline@moreheadstate.edu

Appendix B

Human Relations Survey (Pretest and Posttest)

PRE-SURVEY
Poverty Simulation Experience

Demographic Questions
Please complete this section by circling the following answers.

A1. Gender: What is your gender?
        A. Male
        B. Female
        C. Transgender
        D. Other

A2. Age: How old are you?
        A. 18-25
        B. 26-30
        C. 31-35
        D. 36-40
        E. 41 or older

A3. Ethnicity/Race: Please specify.
        A. Black or African American
        B. Hispanic or Latino
        C. Asian or Pacific Islander
        D. Native American or Alaskan Native
        E. White or Caucasian
        F. Multiracial or Biracial
        G. A race/ethnicity not listed above

A4. Parents' Education: What is the highest level of formal education completed by your parents?

1st Parent's Highest Education Level	2nd Parent's Highest Education Level
A. Less than high school	A. Less than high school
B. Associate or Technical Degree	B. Associate or Technical Degree
C. Bachelor Degree	C. Bachelor Degree
D. Master's Degree	D. Master's Degree
E. Doctorate Degree	E. Doctorate Degree
F. Unknown	F. Unknown

A5. Do you believe you have experienced poverty at some point in your life?
        A. Yes

B. No
C. Unsure

Human Relations Survey (PRE)

Please respond to the following questions by circling the choice that most closely reflects your feelings or beliefs.

QUESTION	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	FREQUENTLY	ALMOST ALWAYS	ALWAYS
1. When I see someone receive a gift that makes them happy. I feel happy myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Emotional stability describes me well.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. I am good at understanding other people's emotions.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. I can consider my point of view and another person's point of view at the same time.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. When I get angry, I need a lot of time to get over it.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. I can imagine what the character is feeling in a good movie.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. When I see someone being publicly embarrassed I cringe a little.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I can tell the difference between someone else's feelings and my own.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. When I see a person experiencing a strong emotion I can accurately assess what that person is feeling.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. Friends view me as a moody person.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. When I see someone accidently hit their thumb with a hammer, I feel a flash of pain myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6

12. When I see a person experiencing a strong emotion, I can describe what the person is feeling to someone else.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. I can imagine what it's like to be in someone else's shoes.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. I can tell the difference between my friend's feelings and my own.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. I consider other people's points of view in discussions.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. When I am with someone who gets sad news, I feel sad for a moment too.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. When I am upset or unhappy, I get over it quickly.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. I can explain to others how I am feeling.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. I can agree to disagree with other people.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. I am aware of what other people think of me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. Hearing laughter makes me smile.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. I am aware of other people's emotions.	1	2	3	4	5	6
23. I believe adults who are in poverty deserve social assistance.	1	2	3	4	5	6
24. I confront discrimination when I see it.	1	2	3	4	5	6

25. I think the government needs to be part of leveling the playing field for people from different racial groups.	1	2	3	4	5	6
26. I believe it is necessary to participate in community service.	1	2	3	4	5	6
27. I believe that people who face discrimination have added stress that negatively impacts their lives.	1	2	3	4	5	6
28. I am comfortable helping a person of a different race or ethnicity than my own.	1	2	3	4	5	6
29. I take action to help others even if it does not personally benefit me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
30. I can best understand people who are different from me by learning from them directly.	1	2	3	4	5	6
31. I believe government should protect the rights of minorities.	1	2	3	4	5	6
32. I believe that each of us should participate in political activities.	1	2	3	4	5	6
33. I believe people born into poverty have more barriers to achieving economic well-being than people who were not born into poverty.	1	2	3	4	5	6
34. I feel it is important to understand the political perspectives of people I don't agree with.	1	2	3	4	5	6
35. I think it is the right of all citizens to have their basic needs met.	1	2	3	4	5	6
36. I believe the role of government is to act as a referee, making decisions that promote	1	2	3	4	5	6

the quality of life and well-being of the people.					
37. I have an interest in understanding why people cannot meet their basic needs financially.	1	2	3	4	5	6
38. I believe that by working together, people can change society to be more just and fair for everyone.	1	2	3	4	5	6
39. I believe my actions will affect future generations.	1	2	3	4	5	6
40. I believe there are barriers in the United States educational system that prevent some groups of people from having economic success.	1	2	3	4	5	6

(Segal, Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012)

Human Relations Survey (POST)

Please respond to the following questions by circling the choice that most closely reflects your feelings or beliefs.

QUESTION	NEVER	RARELY	SOMETIMES	FREQUENTLY	ALMOST ALWAYS	ALWAYS
1. When I see someone receive a gift that makes them happy. I feel happy myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. Emotional stability describes me well.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. I am good at understanding other people's emotions.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. I can consider my point of view and another person's point of view at the same time.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. When I get angry, I need a lot of time to get over it.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. I can imagine what the character is feeling in a good movie.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. When I see someone being publicly embarrassed I cringe a little.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I can tell the difference between someone else's feelings and my own.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. When I see a person experiencing a strong emotion I can accurately assess what that person is feeling.	1	2	3	4	5	6
10. Friends view me as a moody person.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. When I see someone accidently hit their thumb with a hammer, I feel a flash of pain myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6

12. When I see a person experiencing a strong emotion, I can describe what the person is feeling to someone else.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. I can imagine what it's like to be in someone else's shoes.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. I can tell the difference between my friend's feelings and my own.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. I consider other people's points of view in discussions.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. When I am with someone who gets sad news, I feel sad for a moment too.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. When I am upset or unhappy, I get over it quickly.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. I can explain to others how I am feeling.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. I can agree to disagree with other people.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. I am aware of what other people think of me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. Hearing laughter makes me smile.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. I am aware of other people's emotions.	1	2	3	4	5	6
23. I believe adults who are in poverty deserve social assistance.	1	2	3	4	5	6
24. I confront discrimination when I see it.	1	2	3	4	5	6

25. I think the government needs to be part of leveling the playing field for people from different racial groups.	1	2	3	4	5	6
26. I believe it is necessary to participate in community service.	1	2	3	4	5	6
27. I believe that people who face discrimination have added stress that negatively impacts their lives.	1	2	3	4	5	6
28. I am comfortable helping a person of a different race or ethnicity than my own.	1	2	3	4	5	6
29. I take action to help others even if it does not personally benefit me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
30. I can best understand people who are different from me by learning from them directly.	1	2	3	4	5	6
31. I believe government should protect the rights of minorities.	1	2	3	4	5	6
32. I believe that each of us should participate in political activities.	1	2	3	4	5	6
33. I believe people born into poverty have more barriers to achieving economic well-being than people who were not born into poverty.	1	2	3	4	5	6
34. I feel it is important to understand the political perspectives of people I don't agree with.	1	2	3	4	5	6
35. I think it is the right of all citizens to have their basic needs met.	1	2	3	4	5	6
36. I believe the role of government is to act as a referee, making decisions that promote	1	2	3	4	5	6

the quality of life and well-being of the people.						
37. I have an interest in understanding why people cannot meet their basic needs financially.	1	2	3	4	5	6
38. I believe that by working together, people can change society to be more just and fair for everyone.	1	2	3	4	5	6
39. I believe my actions will affect future generations.	1	2	3	4	5	6
40. I believe there are barriers in the United States educational system that prevent some groups of people from having economic success.	1	2	3	4	5	6

(Segal, Wagaman, & Gerdes, 2012)

Appendix C

Follow-Up Survey

Please answer the following questions.

1. How would you describe your poverty simulation experience?

2. As an educator, did the poverty simulation experience prompt you to change your educational practice? If so, how? Provide examples if possible.

VITA

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EDUCATION

May, 1994   Bachelor of Arts
                     Calvin College
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May, 1999   Master of Social Work
                     University of Kentucky
                     Lexington, Kentucky

Pending   Doctor of Education
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PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES

2015 – Present   Instructor and Program Director,
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2014-2015   College Advisor
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2003-2014   Program Assistant, Morehead Writing Project
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2000-2002   Associate Director, Upward Bound
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1999-2000   Social Worker
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1994-1996   Admissions Counselor
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