

Five Myths about the Education of Children in Poverty: Addressing Family Issues

Author's Details:

⁽¹⁾ Dr. Jerry Aldridge-⁽²⁾ Dr. Jennifer L. Kilgo-⁽³⁾ Dr. Lois M. Christensen-⁽⁴⁾ Dr. Grace Jepkemboi
^{(1) (2) (3) (4)}The University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB)

Abstract

The article describes misconceptions concerning the education of children and families living in poverty. The myths include: (a) parents of children in poverty do not care about their children's education; (b) these children have limited experiences as evidenced by standardized tests; (c) their inadequate experiences result in less intelligence or knowledge; (d) children in poverty have the same access to high quality education; and (e) families in poverty are responsible for their economic situation. The discussion includes examples of each misconception using real-world vignettes. The article offers a beginning dialogue about the challenges in counteracting these myths.

Keywords: children in poverty, families in poverty, urban education, poverty issues

INTRODUCTION

During the 20th century, numerous misconceptions concerning poverty in the United States abounded; however, near the end of the millennium, many of those myths were seriously challenged. Frank McCourt addressed some of these through his memoir, *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir of a Childhood*. He stated, "You might be poor, your shoes might be broken, but your mind is a palace" (Mccourt, 1996, p. 17). From his own account, McCourt described the strength and perseverance that many children in poverty exhibit. Children in poverty are richly diverse intersecting with all identities, such as language, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES), sexual orientation, and religion. How educators approach personal prejudices, assumptions, and biases determine the relationships among children and families (Gorski, 2013). Learning to suspend judgment leads to validating lives and experiences of children in poverty. Indeed, the many myths about poverty represent a distorted, deficit view, which negates children and families' persistence and success that are economically challenged with heritages of inequality (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007; Gorski, 2013; Miler, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

An additional consideration is that in the 21st century, an increased number of children and families throughout the United States experience poverty and face challenges associated with poverty. People of all ethnicities, races, and ages experience poverty in the United States as illustrated in Figure 1 (Appendix), which shows the number of children in poverty broken down by race and compared to the national average (U.S. Census, 2015). Due to the number of children and families experiencing poverty and the numerous misconceptions, it is incumbent on teachers and other professionals to have the most accurate understanding of the issues, challenges, and opportunities involved in the education of children and families in poverty.

MYTHS, EXAMPLES, AND DIALOGUE

The purpose of this article is to (a) describe five misconceptions concerning the education of children and their families in poverty, (b) provide examples of each misconception through real-world vignettes, and (c) begin a dialogue with professionals and families about the challenges and opportunities in addressing and counteracting these myths. The explanation and discussion offer information about the challenges in counteracting these myths and strategies to facilitate greater understanding and recognition of the abilities and assets of children and families in poverty, which will benefit educators as they strive to provide improved educational opportunities for children and families. As Milner (2012) suggested, educators must recognize the strengths and assets of children and families and build on the array of resources in urban settings rather than focusing on the shortcomings of children, parents, and schools.

Myth One: Parents or caregivers of children in poverty do not care as much about their children’s education and are, therefore, not as active in their children’s education as middle or upper middle-class families.

Vignette

Jones Elementary School scheduled “Parents’ Night” for Thursday night. The school sent the parent(s) and families a letter explaining that Parents’ Night would be from 6:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m. In the letter, the principal instructed parents to go directly to their children’s classrooms, find their children’s desks or assigned seating, and sit in chairs next to their children’s desks. On Thursday night, Ms. L, a third-grade teacher, noticed that Flora’s parents were not there. She was not surprised. Flora receives free lunches. Further, she has only two or three sets of clothes, which causes the other students to tease her. Her school supplies are limited and are inexpensive and break easily. From these observations, Ms. L. has determined that Flora’s parents are irresponsible and do not care about her education.

Discussion—Additional information that Ms. L. needs to know...

Flora’s 75-year-old great-grandmother, Bertha, is rearing her. Bertha is also the guardian of four other children who are Flora’s cousins. Their home is 1500 square feet. All five children go to Jones Elementary School. It would behoove Ms. L. to consider the following facts about Flora’s home situation.

Bertha does not have a car. She pleaded with a nephew from a neighboring town to take her to Parents’ Night. Her nephew finally consented and drove Bertha to the school.

- Recall that Bertha is the guardian of five children who attend Jones. When she arrived at the school, she had to make a choice as to which great grandchild’s classroom she would attend because all classes were meeting at the same time. She chose the classroom of her youngest great-grandchild who is in first grade.
- The principal and the teachers determined the format of Parents’ Night. This venue made it impossible for any parent or guardian with more than one child to attend more than one classroom. Further, the term, “Parents’ Night,” was an assumption that marginalized any family where a guardian was the primary caretaker rather a traditional father and mother.

What could Ms. L. do to make a difference and improve this situation for Flora, her great-grandmother, and their family?

Myth Two: Children in poverty and their parent(s) or caregivers do not have as many experiences as middle and upper middle class families, which has been documented through standardized tests.

Vignette

Mr. J. is a beginning, energetic third grade teacher in an urban classroom in which 98% of his students receive free or reduced priced lunch. Most of the teachers at his school are dedicated, diligent, and go far beyond what is expected of them to provide the best possible educational experiences for their students. Several miles away, Mr. J.’s aunt, Mrs. G., is a veteran third grade teacher who is ready to retire. She teaches in an affluent school in which the families’ mean income is \$350,000 a year. Mr. J. has met many of his aunt’s colleagues who appear to share her work ethic. Many of them are not interested in professional development and do the minimum required. At the end of the year, the clear majority of Mr. J.’s students and the entire school score below average on the prescribed, mandatory standardized tests. However, Mrs. G.’s children all score above average on the same tests, as do most of the children in her school. Mr. J. is frustrated and does not fathom why his students are so far behind Mrs. G.’s students on standardized measures.

Discussion—It is time for Mr. J to learn about the children’s experiences children in poverty. A cultural deprivation approach is where the clear majority of educators assume that children and families in poverty are deprived. Assumptions about how students’ resourcefulness does not often translate to scores on standardized instruments. In the cultural deprivation, paradigm educators see students’ culture of poverty as the problem rather than the how the school culture might capitalize on students’ cultural capital and assets (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). The additional information Mr. J. needs to consider...

- Children in poverty participate in life and have myriad powerful experiences. The ways in which children in poverty may participate in life is not considered quantitatively different. In other words, children in poverty often have the same number of robust experiences as middle and upper middle class counterparts but vary due to access to stereotypical expectations. However, the nature or difference of life participation and lived experience is often quite different from more affluent children and families.
- One of the significant issues with standardized achievement tests is that they measure middle and upper class knowledge. Alfie Kohn (2000) has spent much of his career documenting this phenomenon. Kohn and others (Meier, 2000; Meier & Knoester, 2017) have found a direct correlation between parental income and scores on standardized tests. In fact, he suggests that standardized tests measure economics rather than institutional knowledge. Others suggest that standardized tests measure command of the language
- Other standardized measures also discriminate against children in poverty, including IQ tests. Cohen (2017) reported, “Many scientists, psychologists, educators and members of the public do not believe that the standard IQ test accurately measures intelligence” (p. 1). This is especially true of children who live in poverty (Kohn, 2000).

How can Mr. J. use this information to improve the situation for children in poverty in relation to standardized testing?

Myth Three: Because children in poverty do not have as many experiences, they are not as intelligent or knowledgeable as children from middle and upper middle class families.

Vignette

Ms. Q, a veteran kindergarten teacher, attended a required professional development seminar on children and families in poverty. The instructor of the seminar spent most of the morning showing how the vocabulary of low-income children and their parents or guardians is “deficient” when compared to middle class families. The instructor provided an interesting story about a low-income mother who took her three-year-old to the grocery store. Upon seeing and touching an eggplant, the child asked, “What day?” The mother responded, “Stop that!” and they moved on. The instructor then described an upper middle class mother family in the same situation, in which the mother described the eggplant, bought the eggplant, took the eggplant home, and continued to discuss the eggplant with her three-year-old. Using this example, the instructor reported that the upper middle class child by the age of four would probably have a more productive vocabulary than the parent of the three-year-old who lived below the poverty line. While the instructor did not actually say it, she implied that children of low income parents were not as smart or did not know as much because of their limited vocabulary.

Discussion—Additional information that both Ms. Q and the professional development instructor need to know...

- Most middle-class teachers and administrators from preschool through graduate school tend to equate, or at least correlate, intelligence and knowledge with language. However, several psychologists and educators have proposed numerous types of intelligence (Gardner, 1983, 1993; Goleman, 2012; Sternberg, 1985), linguistic intelligence is only one of them. Children in poverty are stronger in other types of intelligence, such as “street” intelligence. While encouragement and support for language should be provided to low income children, the recognition and encouragement of their intellectual strengths should be implemented over prevailing deficit views of intelligence related to students from low income families.
- While the gap in achievement, especially in language and math, between children in poverty and other children appears to widen as they get older, the education children receive exceptionally disparate due to tracking. For example, as middle and upper middle class students get older, they are more likely to be tracked into college preparatory classes while students of poverty experience classes designed for service professions such as cosmetology and “shop.” Tracking

limits the options and opportunities for children from low income families as they get older and is an unacceptable form of discrimination (Leinhardt & Pally, 1989).

- Finally, while the professional development instructor extols the virtues of vocabulary and language, who would she or Ms. Q want to assist them if their car breaks down on a country road in the middle of the night—someone with a rich vocabulary or an individual with exceptional mechanical intelligence?

How can Ms. Q and the instructor use this information to improve the emphasis that is placed on the strengths and unique knowledge and experience of students in poverty?

Myth Four: Children in poverty have the same access to education, and the education they receive is as good as that of middle and upper middle class children. Those who subscribe to this myth suggest that the government requires the same standards for all children and supports children in poverty through government programs such as Head Start, Title I programs, and other federally funded initiatives.

Vignette

Mr. M teaches fifth grade in a low-income urban school. The textbooks he has been provided for his class are outdated, and his students have limited access to a small number of computers found only in the library. There are no art, music, or physical education teachers at the school and his students have few opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. Mr. M's wife also teaches fifth grade but in a suburban, upper middle class school, 10 miles from Mr. M's school. Her students have state of the art, interactive texts and each student has a computer in the classroom. There is an art teacher, a music teacher, and a physical education instructor at the classroom. Further, Ms. M's students experience numerous extracurricular activities, including special clubs, field trips, and guest mentors who come to the school once a week to participate and support classroom activities.

Discussion—What Mr. M and Ms. M have learned about equal access and poverty...

- Separate is not equal. From the Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896) court decision through Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), separate but equal was the law of the land. However, separate classrooms based on race, ethnicity, and language acquisition were anything but equal. Mr. M and Ms. M found that the separate classrooms of today, based on economics, are not equal either. The disparity among classrooms as described in the vignette are found in classrooms and schools throughout the United States and beyond (Gorski, 2013). While both state and federal governments have poured large amounts of money into programs for students in poverty, many of these programs have not provided equal access to educational opportunities (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007; Kozol, 1992).

The problems are more intricately complex than adequate opportunities. (Gorski, 2013). Under-resourced schools are mostly situated in lower income neighborhoods of poverty. Inequitable funding of schools due to property tax inequities is an additional problematic aspect of under-resourced schools. Most students and schools that are underrepresented are often situated in high poverty neighborhoods. High stakes testing scores discriminate as students in high poverty schools and neighborhoods are set to achieve at the same level as students in middle and high-income schools.

- Further, as explained in Myth Three, children in Mr. M's school are more likely to be tracked into non-college preparatory classes while Ms. M's students are most often bound for academic tracks that open doors to post-secondary education. Students in poverty have less access to advanced coursework in secondary school preparation (Gorski, 2013).
- Students in Ms. M's class have had opportunities for quality pre-school, travel, technology, and "mainstream cultural studies" that have prepared them for the middle-class knowledge taught in schools (Kozol, 1992). Mr. M's students have skills and abilities that his wife's students lack; however, these skills are not valued in traditional schools. For example, many of Mr. M's

students are “street smart” but this is not tested or appreciated, and this knowledge is often denigrated and devalued in middle class schools.

How can Mr. and Ms. M use this information about equal access and poverty to improve the educational opportunities for children in poverty?

Myth Five: Families in poverty are wholly and personally responsible for their economic situation. Those who believe this myth suggests that parents or caregivers who live in poverty just do not try hard enough. They believe that anyone who is willing to work and works hard can make a living and support their children and their education.

Vignette

Ms. K. is a beginning teacher of kindergarten in an urban school setting with 99% of the students receiving free or reduced price lunches. Ms. K was assigned Ms. L, a veteran kindergarten teacher as her mentor. Ms. L quickly explained to Ms. K that the students’ parents or guardians in their school are lazy and do not work hard or value their children’s education. Ms. L provides several examples from her own classroom, such as the fact that one mother does not work and “drinks” the money she gets, leaving her children without enough food to eat. Ms. L is quick to give other stereotypes, all indicating that the families of the children are entirely responsible for the economic situation in which they find themselves. As a veteran teacher, Ms. L has attended several professional development seminars of poverty and has not changed her mind, mainly because of what she has learned based on what she has learned from Ruby Payne (1996) seminars.

Discussion—What Ms. K and Ms. L should know about the economic situation of the children they teach...

- Personal responsibility is a small part of poverty, but it is only one piece of a larger puzzle that determines the economic situation of a family. For too long, schools and society have been quick to “blame the victim” when it comes to poverty. Some researchers believe this has been perpetuated through the ideas of educators such as Ruby Payne (2005; Vandervalk, 2016). Researchers found that Payne’s unsubstantiated claims were not supported by research (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semington, 2008). Payne described hidden rules or class cultures that have been widely disputed. She has been criticized for focusing too much on what individuals of poverty must do to move out of poverty and not enough on the social structures that were responsible for them being poor in the first place (Gorski, 2008). To rectify much of the conflated language about people and students in poverty, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) explained that the notion of a culture of poverty is a misnomer. Rather than a “culture of poverty, Ladson-Billings preferred a more accurate, “poverty of culture.”
- Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems may clarify the many forces that contribute to poverty. According to Bronfenbrenner (1993), children are influenced by increasingly complex environmental systems that include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Microsystems are face-to-face contextual interactions. How a family interacts with each other and those outside the family is the only factor Ms. L believes is the result of the family living in poverty. However, the mesosystem involves other systems, such as the school, neighborhood, and local resources that influence the family and child. Finally, the macrosystem, which includes the government, laws, rules, and regulations are significant influences on families and can exacerbate or help alleviate poverty (Bloom, 2008).

How will the information about the economic circumstances of their students improve the effectiveness of Ms. K and Ms. L as teachers?

WAYS TO IMPROVE RELATIONS AND INTERACTIONS WITH FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IN POVERTY

What can be done to improve relations among professionals (e.g., teachers, teaching assistants, administrators) working with children and families in poverty? While there are a plethora of ways, they can improve interactions with children and families in poverty, where does one begin? The following suggestions represent broad categories that encompass numerous subcategories of intercommunication and cooperation with children and families who live near or below the poverty line.

1. Begin with self. Every professional has some preconceived assumptions about poverty. Ongoing questioning of these assumptions should be a continual process that everyone who works with children and families makes. One place to start is with the myths presented in this article. A specific way to begin with self is to seek out professional development and resources concerning poverty. A list of suggestions for further reading is provided at the end of this article. For example, *Understanding Families: Supportive Approaches to Diversity, Disability, and Risk* (Hanson & Lynch, 2013) has an informative chapter on poverty that provides teaching strategies as well as necessary information such as the fact that the percentages of Latinos and African Americans in poverty are twice as high as that of Asians and Caucasians.
2. Adopt a strengths perspective rather than a deficit model. As mentioned previously, middle class children and families have higher vocabulary levels than their weaker counterparts. However, children and families in poverty have myriad strengths and excel at different types of intelligence, and contextual micro-cultural knowledge that is brought from students' social spaces of home, neighborhoods, and interactions is the family network (Milner, 2012; Moll & Gonzalez, 1994; Souto-Manning, 2013). Children in poverty benefit when those who work with them seek out their strengths and use these strengths to improve areas that need attention. For example, a child with interest or knowledge about cars or trains can benefit from this strength in other ways if the teacher focuses on this interest to enhance language and math.
3. Work to promote appropriate grade level school policies related to poverty. While many teachers have worked to develop classroom and grade level policies with their colleagues, more scrutiny and vigilance needs to occur to serve children in poverty better. For example, in one school, teachers allow parents or guardians to bring a birthday cake on their child's birthday. Several parents (s) whose children attend the school have problems with this practice. Many families and parents in poverty work during the day and have trouble making ends meet; therefore, they do not have the money or time to participate in this practice. Many works at two and three jobs part-time jobs (Gorski, 2008). And, even though they take time off work and spend money to participate in this practice, they also lament that there is a competition for the biggest and best cake among the parents. Such practices cause hardships for families in poverty and alternatives should be sought to prevent injustice.
4. Work to promote appropriate school system policies. It is vital for teachers and administrators to go beyond their local classrooms and schools to advocate efficiently for school system reform and policies that are equitable and just for children in poverty. Many school systems allow teachers to collect money from children for book purchases, field trips, holiday parties, and other activities that place an unnecessary burden on needy families. As children become older this "collection of money" sometimes becomes extreme and prevents students from families with financial challenges from participating in the many opportunities available at the school. For example, during middle and high school, cheerleading, band, and sports uniforms are often costly, and this expense is passed on to the families. Such practices marginalize many who are economically challenged.
5. Finally, work to promote appropriate state and federal policies regarding poverty. In some ways, public policy has resulted in research that has translated into recommended practices for young children in poverty through early intervention and "work support for low-income parents" (Huston, 2011, p. 13). However, as Huston explained, our definitions of poverty are too narrow as the microsystem is presented as the primary source of poverty. She suggested that income level is only one indicator of poverty and our definitions should be expanded to include those who are socially excluded. Furthermore, the government focuses too much on individual responsibility as opposed to policies and

structures that are needed to support families and children who are economically challenged (Huston, 2011).

In order for teachers, administrators, and other professionals to advocate for improved state and federal policies, it would be helpful if they reviewed programs and policies that have produced promising results with families in poverty. As one example, The Next Generation studies examined parents' movement from welfare to work. In general, these studies found that parents of preschoolers who transferred from welfare to work were more stressed or depressed than similar parents whose children were school age (Morris, 2008). Still, "the most positive long-term effects of increased income and center-based child care on later achievement and intellectual development occurred for children in the preschool years (3-5 years old)" (Huston, 2011, p. 22). Every state does not have universal preschool programs and many of the states that do need to improve the quality of these programs. From The Next Generation group of studies and other research, teachers, administrators, and other professionals should advocate for preschool education as well as family and parent support during the early years.

SUMMARY

Children and families in poverty in the United States were examined through a deficit lens throughout the 19th and well into the 20th centuries. As a result, numerous myths and fallacies resulted from this perspective. Teachers and other education professionals have the challenge and obligation to examine and counteract these myths, develop a strengths-based approach, and work to improve the lives of all children and families, especially those who are economically challenged. While professionals should begin with a perusal of their own misconceptions of poverty, they have the responsibility to move beyond these myths and work for the betterment of children and families in poverty through advocacy and promotion of positive change in public policy as well as in their own individual classrooms and school settings.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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APPENDIX A

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN IN POVERTY: 2015

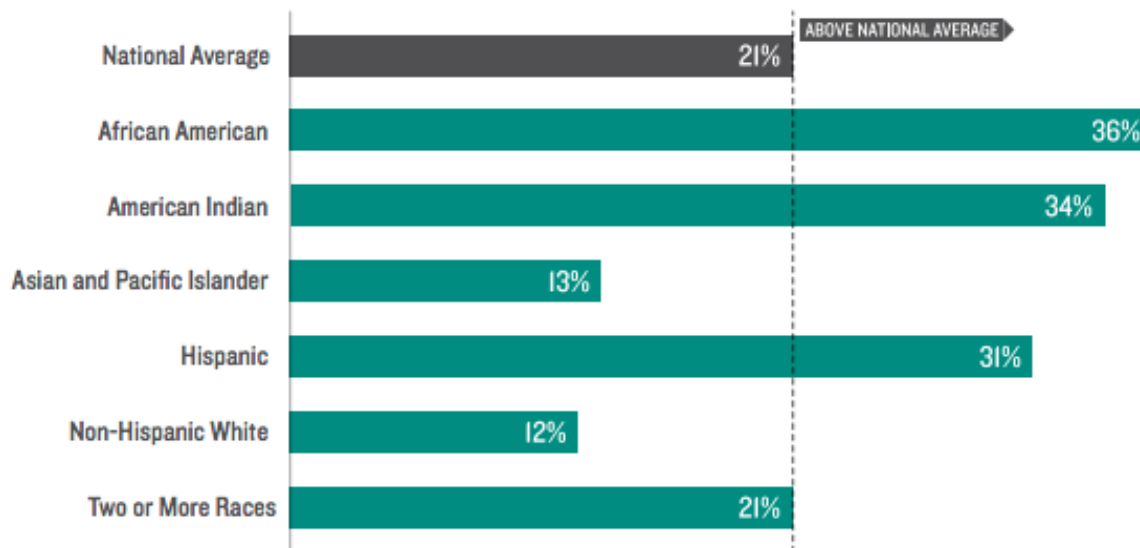


Figure 1: Percentage of children in poverty (2015)

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 American Community Survey