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EDITORIAL

The Hidden Dimensions of Poverty: Rethinking Poverty and Education

Lorraine Kasprisin
Editor

This issue on poverty was planned before the recent global economic crisis captured headlines in the world media. In some ways, current conversations about today's events mask the enduring problems of poverty that have long plagued a nation committed to equality and social justice. This issue of our journal steps back and examines the multifaceted dimensions of poverty and raises questions about the mindset that is too often perpetuated about those who experience it. How do teachers, human service providers, and other educational practitioners conceptualize poverty, and how do those ways of thinking affect their work and the relationships they have with those caught up in the throes of poverty? The way we think about a concept like poverty will determine the way we address it as well as the way we teach about it. Many of the authors in this issue are particularly critical of the kinds of workshops offered to teachers and human service providers that simplify both the problems and our understanding of the lives of those living in poverty. In this issue, the journal seeks to provide readers with a look at the multiple dimensions of poverty and the new ways of thinking that are required if we are to attack the problems systemically.

Any reexamination of the seemingly intractable issues of poverty will require imagination, innovation, and creative efforts and considerable courage in the face of entrenched beliefs and structures. One person who has opened new vistas for thinking about this issue has been Dr. Muhammad Yunus, the 2006 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. We are dedicating this issue to Dr. Yunus, who has graciously written a prologue for the issue.

In his prologue, Dr. Yunus writes, "We can reconfigure our world if we can reconfigure our way of thinking." His creation of the idea of micro-credits and the establishment of the Grameen Bank rest on a fundamentally different understanding of both the nature of poverty and the resiliency and potential of human beings. Dr. Yunus believes that "this is where education, one that encourages us to challenge conventional wisdom, can try to play a significant role."

To generate a discussion around this topic, we invited our authors to respond to the following controversy:

In an earlier issue of the Journal of Educational Controversy, we published an article critical of the Ruby Payne phenomena sweeping workshops for teachers, social workers, and human service providers across the country. Our author cautioned readers about the return of language that conceptualizes issues like poverty in a deficit mode, once again seeing the issue as a problem with the individual rather than a set of systemic problems found in the larger social order. We invite authors to reexamine our thinking about the intractable issues associated with poverty in this country. How should teachers and other human service providers think about issues of poverty? What are the advantages and disadvantages in conceptualizing the problem one way or another? What do students who are preparing to become teachers or human service providers need to know and understand about the lives of their students and clients? What should we be teaching them? We welcome articles that provide historical perspectives, social and political analyses, views on the economics of poverty,

examination of research, and conceptual and philosophical analyses. We are also seeking views by classroom teachers and their experiences.

Our first author places the problem within the broadest perspective – a global, ecological framework. In "Rethinking Poverty and Other Social Justice Issues within an Eco-Justice Conceptual Framework," C.A. Bowers contends that attempting to alleviate the problems of poverty while failing to question our culture of consumerism will only exasperate our plight. He calls for a whole new way of thinking about our place in the world - a larger ecological model within which to reconceptualize social justice issues. Writes Bowers, "Social justice thinking has largely been framed in terms of middle class assumptions about individualism, progress, a world of unlimited exploitable natural resources, and education as a source of individual empowerment. The ultimate goal of achieving greater social justice for marginalized groups has been to enable them to participate on equal terms in the areas of work, politics, and the culture of consumerism." But it is that culture that has led to the present ecological crisis that has impacted all of us and mostly those who have the least. Bowers' paper provides the reader with an alternative model and educational reforms that might make it possible.

In "Poverty's Multiple Dimensions," Kay Taylor provides us with an historical, multi-dimensional understanding of poverty using critical race theory and critical race feminism as interpretive models. These theories, Taylor contends, have the power to disclose and question many of our taken-for-granted assumptions underlying "the foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law" in ways that reveal the historical and institutional oppression of a capitalist economic system. For Taylor, theories like Ruby Payne's leave us with a one-dimensional, classist and paternalistic view that sees the problem in the individual and the solution to poverty in adopting middle class values. On the contrary, Taylor argues, "poverty is neither simple nor one-dimensional. Poverty is steeped in the historical, political, social, legal, and very personal intersections of multiple dimensions mired in racism and capitalism." Against this historical account, Taylor looks at the ideological role of the public schools and raises some serious questions for our readers. For readers who would like to read about some of these issues as they affected the city of Seattle, go to our article, "[Housing, Race and Schooling in Seattle: Context for the Supreme Court Decision](#)," by Douglas Judge, that was published in our Volume 2 Number 1 winter 2007 issue of the journal.

In "Pathologizing Poverty: Structural Forces vs Personal Deficit Theories in the Feminization of Poverty," Nandini Gunewardena criticizes the deficit or personal pathology theories of poverty. Like Taylor, her paper also uses a multidimensional model "to illustrate the confluence of gender, race/ethnicity, and socio-economic discrimination as an explanatory device for understanding the concentration of poverty among women of color." While providing statistical data on economic levels among different populations, Gunewardena argues that "reliance on income alone as the indicator for poverty levels obfuscates other hidden aspects of poverty." These hidden aspects of poverty are part of the deeply embedded structural inequalities in the economy and not deficiencies of the individual. Three of these hidden aspects of poverty are further explored. Gunewardena's analysis also provides insight into today's financial collapse.

Following these two papers that provide the reader with a sweeping historical and structural understanding of the forces contributing to the continuing existence of poverty, our next author describes her experience teaching Native American students living in a poverty-stricken county in southwestern Oklahoma. The course was to focus on the topic of poverty itself. In "YEE P'AY GYAH MAW TAME AIM: The Kiowa Clemente Course in the Humanities and Two Perspectives on Poverty," Rachel Jackson describes her use of the Clemente courses with an indigenous population. Created by Earl Shorris and now used across the nation, the Clemente courses use the study of the humanities to empower those seeking to change their lives and escape their poverty by helping them

gain a deeper understanding of their lives and the political uses of power through the reading of the great works of the humanities found in the Western tradition. The approach challenges the kind of workshops aimed at the poor that focus on the mundane - the writing of resumes, taking an interview, etc. Instead, it contends that it is the struggle to reflect on our lives on a deeper level made possible through the study of the humanities that enable individuals to empower themselves and become agents of change. Jackson adds another dimension to the traditional Clemente course by challenging the sole use of a Western model of the humanities with an equally powerful tradition of an indigenous people. Readers will want to see the way poverty is perceived by the students within these two different traditions.

Our next two papers address more directly Ruby Payne's "culture of poverty" theory. In "Problematizing Payne and Understanding Poverty: An Analysis with Data from the 2000 Census," Jennifer Ng and John Rury question some of the claims made in Ruby Payne's writings by comparing them with what the 2000 census tells us.

(It should be noted that the editors sent repeated invitations to Ruby Payne to argue her positions in this issue but to no avail.)

In "Cross-Cultural Communication: Implications for Social Work Practice and A Departure from Payne," Venus Evans Winters and Bevin Cowie also question Payne's thesis by comparing it with both their experience as social workers and the experience of their students. Critiquing "culture of poverty" theories "for pathologizing the language and mores of individuals living in poverty" as well as oversimplifying both the "causes and effects of poverty," Winters and Cowie recommend a cross-cultural communication theory as a more effective, ethical and sensitive alternative in working with their clients.

Our next author asks why it is so difficult to have these cross-class dialogues and why we avoid them. In "Poverty and Class – Discussing the Undiscussible," John Korsmo argues that our reluctance to talk about "socio-economic privilege associated with class" prevents human service practitioners and educators from connecting with and supporting those with whom they are working. Rejecting the top-down benevolent model of the expert who prescribes solutions, Korsmo describes a project in which authentic, reciprocal dialogue and relation-building take place. Called the "Community Engagement Group," it emphasizes positive relationships and mutual support in forming plans and actions to challenges that individuals were experiencing in overcoming poverty. This kind of engagement with the lives of others, argues Korsmo, empowers individuals as we "bring clarity and volume to the voices of those whom we are serving in our human service and teaching ventures." Quoting from humanitarian and social activist, Arundhati Roy, Korsmo ends his essay: "There is no such thing as the voiceless, there are only the silenced and the deliberately misheard."

Finally, we look at the way families, ethnicity and socio-economic status are portrayed in the dominant commercial readers to which children are exposed. In "Examining Images of Family in Commercial Reading Programs," Judith Dunkerly and Frank Serafini examine the hidden messages embedded in texts that shape how children come to see themselves and their world. The authors look at some of the widely adopted basal readers as social text and raise questions about whose experiences and stories are reflected in these children's readers. These data are then compared with the U.S. census to see how accurately the texts reflect the reality of children's lives and the structures of their families. Coming from a critical pedagogical perspective, Dunkerly and Serafini seek to understand the ways schools can privilege dominant social groups while marginalizing others through the use of these texts and the images they embed. At the end, the authors offer advice on ways teachers can broaden their classroom discourse to counter these messages even while using required texts.

We hope that this issue will open the door to new ways of thinking about the complex issue of poverty. We invite our readers to join the conversation by submitting a formal rejoinder or just share your thoughts on our new blog.

See the [REJOINDERS SECTION](#) to read reactions to the articles in this issue.

See our [Blog](#) to enter into a conversation with our authors and other readers.

See the “[TALKING WITH THE AUTHORS](#)” VIDEO SERIES for videotaped interviews with some of the authors.

Watch for our video of the **11th Annual Educational Law and Social Justice Forum** on the theme of this issue, "Finding Voice: Rethinking Poverty and Education" to take place on April 29, 2009 on the campus of Western Washington University.