"I Fight Poverty. I Work!"
Examining Discourses of Poverty and Their Impact on Pre-Service Teachers

Thalia M. Mulvihill
Ball State University

Raji Swaminathan
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

This paper examines some of the dominant discourses related to poverty and education such as those offered by the prominent political ideologies, those presented by educators who write about poverty, those embedded in popular culture, and those surrounding current teacher education curricula. Furthermore, this study evaluates the impact these discourses have on teacher education students, and ultimately on the students they engage. The results of a 15-item survey, distributed to teacher education students at a Midwest university, reveal their perceptions on poverty and offer many potential departure points for educators to consider. Additionally, this paper analyzes the implications of the data for teacher education curricula. The results of the study revealed that teacher education students employ conventional discourses and idioms in their understanding of poverty. The study makes clear that to adequately deal with issues of poverty in their classrooms, teacher education students need to be conversant with the multiple discourses of poverty and require opportunities to develop empathetic responses to poverty and learn to think about poverty from multiple points of view. Additionally, teachers need to learn a range of strategies that will shatter their assumptions about poverty and in turn prepare them to respond in a variety of ways.

Driving down Main Street in the year 2000, I (the first author of this paper) am delayed at a stop light just a few yards from a local restaurant/bar, centered within a small village next to the local Dairy Queen, the baseball card/Beanie Baby trading store, the post office, the gas station, and the public library that is often mistaken for a child's play house (it really is that small). I am confronted with a small designer license plate hung in the restaurant's window that reads "I Fight Poverty. I Work!" This village, surrounded by corn and soybean farms that often employ migrant farm workers, is a few miles away from one of the most impoverished communities in the state – a state that historically has had a very high poverty rate. In between this village – which is "fighting poverty" by adhering to the ideology that poverty is self-made by those individuals who refuse to work and can only be undone by deciding to work – and the impoverished neighborhoods a short distance away is a public university that graduates about 800 teacher education students per year, 80% of which come from its surrounding communities. I often wondered what situated knowledge my students bring into teacher education courses regarding issues of poverty. How do they build understanding about poverty, what discourses influence their understanding, and what impact might this have on their professional practice as teachers?

Understanding the discourses of poverty is crucial for teachers. Eradicating poverty is a global priority in which the role of education is central. As Julius Nyerere, former President of the United Republic of Tanzania asserts, "Education is not a way to escape poverty - It is a way of fighting it" (Nyerere, 1974, p. 24). In the last decade, the international community has

repeatedly committed itself to fighting poverty through education. In 1995, the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen asserted that poverty was a severe injustice and an abuse of human rights. The United Nations General Assembly declared the period 1997 to 2006 as the First United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty. In the year 2000, the theme of eradicating poverty continued during the World Education Forum held in Dakar where the international community underscored the need to eradicate poverty and declared that the only way forward was to work toward this aim through education. If the role of education in this process is considered crucial, it begs the question, what is to be done in this regard? In a keynote address at the American Educational Studies Association in 1999 entitled, "Critical Cultural Analysis: Understanding Systemic Poverty," Gordon Chamberlin claimed that scholars and statisticians have been studying "the Poor," not "Poverty," and he suggested that teacher education scholars ought to feel morally obligated to infuse issues of poverty into our university curricula. Chamberlin sharpened the focus and helped educators become better observers of teacher education students' perceptions. Their lived-experience was shaped by a dominant discourse that did not account for multiple interpretations of the causes of poverty and rendered them "helpless" and "unmotivated" as future educators to address such issues.

In this address Chamberlin outlined many hurdles, such as the myth that "everyone knows about poverty," the confusion between the terms "poverty" and "the poor," the invalid calculation of the "poverty line," the limited resources on the causes of poverty, our over-commitment to statistics, the distinctions made between

the "employed" and the "working poor," and the unexamined world of the non-poor, a view that is, in part, created and sustained by university culture. Chamberlin raised questions for teacher educators that presented them with a challenge to disrupt and displace teachers' perceptions about the poor and in place of these, to create an awareness and critical understanding of poverty. The conference helped to formulate the following research questions:

RQ 1:   What perceptions do teacher education students have about the poor?

RQ 2:   How do these perceptions influence their thoughts about teaching?

RQ 3:   How prepared do teacher education students think they are to encounter poverty issues in relation to their teaching?

Literature Review

In this section we explore several constructions of poverty. We begin with the official construction of poverty, represented by statistics and data about the poor, followed by perspectives on the causes of poverty, and finally with the responses of educators to reducing and eliminating poverty and its effects.
Data about the poor

Official figures on poverty in the United States come from the U.S. Census, conducted once every ten years, and the annual Current Population Survey (CPS), distributed to households in every state. The Annie E. Casey Foundation annually reports on the condition of the children in the U.S., including estimates of child poverty, through the *Kids Count* project. The Children's Defense Fund regularly publishes empirical data about U.S. children including poverty statistics.

The Census Bureau has revised its method of estimating the poverty threshold four times, in 1966, 1974, 1979 and 1981. These revisions changed the estimate of the poverty rate. The first two revisions slightly reduced the estimated number of poor, whereas the more recent revisions slightly increased the number. (*Who is poor?, n.d.*).

Additionally, the Institute for Research on Poverty reports:

[In the] late 1950s, the overall poverty rate for individuals in the United States was 22 per cent, representing 39.5 million poor persons. Between 1959 and 1969, the poverty rate declined dramatically and steadily to 12.1 per cent. As a result of a sluggish economy, the rate increased slightly to 12.5 per cent by 1971. In 1972 and 1973, however, it began to decrease again. The lowest rate over the entire 24-year period occurred in 1973, when the poverty rate was 11.1 per cent. At that time roughly 23 million people were poor, 42 per cent less than were poor in 1959. The poverty rate increased by 1975 to 12.3 percent, and then oscillated around 11.5 per cent through 1979. After 1978, however, the poverty rate rose steadily, reaching 15.2 per cent in 1983. In 1996, the poverty rate was 13.7 per cent. . . .In 2003, 12.5% of the total US population lived in poverty, up from 12.1% in 2002. (*Who Is Poor?, n.d.*).

Furthermore, "[t]here are substantial differences between the overall poverty rate and the poverty rate of individuals in certain demographic subgroups. Most notably, blacks, individuals in female-headed households, and Hispanics have poverty rates that greatly exceed the average." (*Who Is Poor?, n.d.*).

The Annie E. Casey Foundation "is the 12th largest private foundation in the US with assets of more than $3 billion. [They] rank 7th in the country for charitable giving. Established in 1948 by Jim Casey, founder of UPS, the Foundation is the world's largest philanthropy dedicated to improving the lives of disadvantaged children" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.)

According to the *Annie E. Casey Foundations' Kids Count Data Book 2000,* in 1989 4.3 million children in the U.S. were living in families defined as "working poor" ["working poor families" were defined as "families in which at least one parent worked 50 or more weeks a year, but family income was below the poverty level"], and in 1998 5.8 million children were living in working poor families. This represents a significant increase.

In 2002 the official poverty rate was calculated at 12.1%, and 34.6 million people fell below the official poverty thresholds. The number of children in poverty increased to 12.1 million up from 11.7 million in 2001. The poverty rate in the Midwest increased to 10.3 percent in 2002, up from 9.4% in 2001, while poverty rates in the South, West and Northeast did not change between 2001 and 2002. (U.S. Census, 2002).

The Children's Defense Fund reported the following in its August 2004 document, *Key facts about American children*:

- 1 in 6 children is poor now
- 1 in 3 children will be poor at some point in their childhood
- 1 in 8 children has no health insurance
- 1 in 8 lives in a family receiving food stamps

The School Lunch and Breakfast Programs

The federal lunch and breakfast programs divide children in need into three categories:

1. Free meals are provided to children if their family income is about $23,900 for a four person family in the 2003-2004 school year.
2. Reduced-price meals (not to exceed $.40 per lunch and $.30 per breakfast) are provided to children if the family income is between $23,900 and $34,000 for a four person family in the 2003 – 2004 school year.
3. A small subsidy (per meal) for full price meals is provided to children whose families do not qualify for free or reduced price meals.

Furthermore, if children are already being served by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and/or food stamp programs, they automatically qualify for free meals without further application. These breakfast and lunch programs often make children in poverty very visible within a school community.

The Relationship Between Poverty and Education

Research has found that concentrated poverty in schools is associated with lower achievement for both poor and non-poor students who attend such schools. Teachers in high-poverty secondary schools, whether urban or rural, tend to be the least prepared and the most likely to lack even a minor in the subjects they teach. Such schools also tend to have a larger share of new, inexperienced teachers. (*Education Week*, 2000).

Efforts to close the achievement gap between students might be better realized if we pay attention to the preparation gap in teachers with regard to a deeper understanding and knowledge of issues concerning poverty.

While statistical data, such as that presented in the previous section, are important to help set the stage, it does little to help us understand the "situations, procedures, attitudes and beliefs about poverty" held by teacher education students and what impact that understanding will have on their teaching.

Causes of poverty

Most explanations and theories about the causes of poverty fall into one of three categories – structural, individual, and cultural – and are reflective of differing world views and political positions. Shannon (1998), for example, categorizes the different explanations of the causes of poverty into conservative, neo-conservative, liberal, and radical democrat positions.

Structural

Structural theories understand poverty in terms of groups. For example, Marxism and other functionalist sociological theories focus on the exploitation of the poor by capitalists. These theories make these claims:

[P]overty serves some specific functions for the benefit of the affluent class, such as the performance of necessary menial and undesirable jobs . . . Welfare programs, according to this theory, are used by the affluent class to reduce the resistance of the poor class and insure continuation of such services at very low pay. (Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 2000, p. 24)

According to Shannon (1998) structural inequalities as a cause of poverty receive support from the liberals, but not from conservatives. Liberal explanations of structure also point out that the way to solve the problem of poverty would be to alter policies and change the way the system distributes income, a point that is stoutly denied by conservatives. Conservatives maintain that far from solving the problem of poverty, viewing poverty as caused by structural inequality perpetuates the problem and transfers responsibility for poverty from individuals to the system. Policies designed on the belief that middle and upper class society is responsible for sustaining poverty among the poor will lead to disincentives for individuals to work, marry, or become responsible citizens. Murray (1996), for example, argues that governmental aid increases social problems and hurts individuals. In his view, without aid, the poor will have the incentive to work hard and "pull themselves up by the bootstraps." Sowell (1993) not only criticizes government aid but additionally blames intellectuals who, in his view, theorize about the causes of poverty while not contributing to the creation of wealth themselves.

Conservatives and neo-conservatives offer up theories of poverty that focus on individuals.

Individual

The neo-conservative position on causes of poverty dovetails with individual theories of poverty that claim that the poor lack sufficient motivation to work hard enough to move out of poverty. Hence, the poor are entirely responsible for their own status. A second individual explanation that, according to Shannon (1998), falls under the neo-liberal umbrella is supported by recent US experience, which shows that there has been a significant shift in demand from manufacturing jobs, which generally do not require a high degree of

skill and education, to service jobs, such as financial and computer services, for which college education is almost a prerequisite. This view looks at education and job training as the more important remedies of poverty.

Cultural

Cultural theories of poverty make the following claims:

> [P]eople growing up among long-established poor communities learn a set of beliefs and styles of life, a so-called *culture of poverty*, which develop among poor communities. Such a culture . . .attaches no value to hard work and self improvement." (Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 2000, p.24).

Cultural theories of poverty support the stance that poverty is the result of poor life choices and an inability to be responsible. The cause of poverty is, therefore, lack of moral character, and the way out of poverty would be education that is aimed at improving moral character. Supporters of this view include William Bennett, who advocates moral literacy and moral education to correct the flawed character of the poor. This position also assumes that since character is learned, social intervention policies will help eliminate poverty. Wilson's words give us a succinct picture of the goals of eliminating poverty through cultural re-education, "We are trying to produce right behavior. We don't simply want to reduce poverty" (Wilson, 1996, p. 371).

Educators' Responses to the Theories

Ruby Payne has approached this issue of poverty and education from a teacher's point of view. An educator since 1972, she has worked as a consultant, an elementary principal, a high school teacher, a department chairperson, a central office administrator, and as a committee member on state-level committees. Her workshops and presentations on issues related to poverty and education are popular with school district staff development teams (*Understanding and Working with Students and Adults from Poverty,* n.d.). Payne believes that educators ought to be able to assist students in recognizing and using the "hidden rules" of the middle class. Payne delineates the following "key points" in her article, "Understanding and Working with Students and Adults from Poverty":

1. Poverty is relative. If everyone around you has similar circumstances, the notion of poverty and wealth is vague. Poverty or wealth only exists in relationship to known quantities or expectation.

2. Poverty occurs in all races and in all countries. The notion of a middle class as a large segment of society is a phenomenon of this century. The percentage of the population that is poor is subject to definition and circumstance. In the 1990 census data, 11.5 million of America's children (individuals under the age of 18) lived in poverty. Of that number, the largest group was white. However, by percentage of ethnic groups, the highest percentages are minority.

3. Economic class is a continuous line, not a clear-cut distinction. In 1994, the poverty line was considered $14,340 for a family of four. In 1994, seven percent of the population made more than $100,000 per year as indicated on U.S. tax returns. Individuals move and are stationed all along the continuum of income.

4. Generational poverty and situational poverty are different. Generational poverty is defined as being in poverty for two generations or longer. Situational poverty involves a shorter time and is caused by circumstance, i.e. death, illness, divorce.

5. These points are based on patterns. All patterns have exceptions.

6. An individual brings with him or her the hidden rules of the class in which he or she was raised. Even though the income of the individual may rise significantly, many of the patterns of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies, remain with the individual.

7. Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of the middle class. These norms and hidden rules are never directly taught in schools or in businesses.

8. For our students to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and at work. We can neither excuse them nor scold them for not knowing; as educators, we must teach them and provide support, assistance, and high expectations.

9. To move from poverty to middle class or middle class to wealth, an individual must give up relationships for achievement. (Payne, p.1-2)

Payne's solutions are based on several assumptions. She holds that middle class students' success is in large part due to their understanding and

practice of middle class values and norms that are learned at home. Poor students, however, lack the cultural capital of middle class norms and are consequently more likely to fail at school. In Payne's view, it is the duty of schools and teachers to teach middle class norms to poor students to help them become successful and break the cycle of the culture of poverty. In Payne's conceptualization of poverty, poverty is not characterized by a mere lack of income, but it is caused by a distinct set of behaviors, attitudes, personality traits, and habits. Payne's views have been articulated before by Myrdal (1944), Harrington (1962), and Lewis (1966). It was Lewis (1966) who coined the phrase "culture of poverty" that according to him moved from generation to generation. Lewis argued that because children absorbed the cultural values of poverty, they failed to recognize or take advantage of opportunities when they presented themselves in life. According to Payne's logic, the culture of poverty can be interrupted by teaching poor children to learn their way into the middle class. These assumptions absolve the middle and upper classes of responsibility for poverty and instead place the burden of moving and recovering from poverty squarely on the shoulders of the poor. In addition, Payne's suggestions have the effect of pitting the poor against their communities by constructing the values of the community from which students emerge as deficient.

Earl Shorris studies generational poverty by building case studies of families who broke the poverty cycle. He discovered two constants: these families learned new negotiation skills and engaged in higher order critical thinking that allowed them to successfully navigate the "politics of poverty." Shorris conceptualizes poverty as a consequence of not having the skills to navigate the political landscape. If poverty is primarily a political act then, as Shorris (1997) suggests, the corrective is skill acquisition. According to Shorris (2000), the study of the humanities provides a platform for critical thinking skills and reflection: a platform abandoned by radical thinkers of the left, as a result of which conservatives have appropriated the humanities. In Shorris' words, "In fact, the humanities should belong to the left, for the study of the humanities by large numbers of people, especially the poor, is in itself a redistribution of wealth" (Shorris, 2000, p. 105). Shorris and Payne agree on skill acquisition as necessary for eradicating poverty, although they interpret the meaning of skills and acquisition differently, and each has developed curricula to address the problem. Shorris's Clemente Course in the Humanities was designed to expose students in poverty to the humanities in an attempt to make them more fully functioning citizens by virtue of an expanded way to understand the complexities of life within a "political" system. (Shorris, 2000) The main difference between Payne and Shorris lies in their concept of the community. While Payne's solution is to move away from the existing community that she constructs within a deficit model, Shorris aims to reclaim the humanities to change society, not by abandoning "relationships for achievement" as Payne would advocate, but by using skills to situate learning and achievement within communities to create improved living conditions for the poor. For example, Shorris cites a case where students and staff at the Clemente Center on the Lower East Side conducted a needs assessment within their surrounding community. Based on what they learned, they bought a plot of land next to the Clemente Center and turned it into a community garden. In this way, the students gave back to the community the lessons they took from the Clemente Course (Shorris, 2000).

Martin Haberman, a Distinguished Professor of Education from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, has authored a book entitled, *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (1995). His work characterizes teachers working with children most affected by poverty. He flatly states in his introduction:

> For the children and youth in poverty from diverse cultural backgrounds who attend urban schools, having effective teachers is a matter of life and death. These children have no life options for achieving decent lives other than by experiencing success in school. (Haberman, 1995, p.1).

He addresses the next generation of teachers by asking them if they have what it takes to be among the star teachers, the 5 to 8 per cent of the teachers in the country who have been successful with children in poverty. Haberman (1995) claims that "completing a traditional program of teacher education as preparation for working in this emotional cauldron is like preparing to swim the English Channel by doing laps in the university pool" (p. 2). He continues this analogy by telling his readers:

> Swimming is not swimming. Have a warm shower, a clean towel, a private locker, your own lane, and a heated, guarded, chlorinated pool has nothing whatever to do with the grueling realities of eight-foot swells of freezing water for 22 miles without being certain of your direction, and persisting alone knowing that most "reasonable" people would never submit themselves to such a challenge. (Haberman, 1995, p. 2).

Haberman claims that the reason the "process of labeling children in poverty [e.g. "at risk"] never

ceases is that there are only two alternatives: either there is something wrong with the child and his or her background, or there is something wrong with the teachers' methods and school curricula" (Haberman, 1995, p. 51).

Shorris conceptualizes poverty as a consequence of not having the skills to navigate the political landscape. Shorris, Payne, and Haberman agree on this interpretation, and each has developed a particular curriculum to address skill-building. All three propose that the solution to eradicating or reducing poverty is in finding the right curricula and teaching methods within schools or even within classrooms. In this sense, the solutions proposed are individual solutions that place the responsibility for achievement on the shoulders of individual teachers and students. Acquiring the right skills and dispositions will help teachers teach better and students learn better, which leads to success. Other educators locate the political site not within the individual but rather within the larger societal system. These educators approach the subject not from the idea that skill acquisition alone will provide the corrective, but rather systemic change is needed. For example, Jonathan Kozol shocked the general public (and some educators and policy makers) when he described the U.S. public schools' collective neglect of the children affected by poverty in *Savage Inequalities* (1991) and in *Amazing Grace* (1995). These works detailed the harsh realities of abandoned urban areas.

Gordon and Mary Chamberlin would argue that Shorris, Payne, Haberman and other educators who focus on skill acquisition alone have missed the central point about the systemic nature of poverty that pits "student success" against "teacher success" and keeps invisible the greater contributing factors. The Chamberlins would no doubt also criticize educators' neglect of poverty issues outside of urban schools. According to a group of educators and religious leaders led by the Chamberlins, called the Poverty Coalition and headquartered in North Carolina, a renewed and more accurate description of poverty needed to be generated. They determined that poverty refers to a set of the following interrelated social conditions:

> [M]any businesses and other organizations pay low wages; low-paid work contributes to the benefit of other portions of the populace; people receiving low wages can afford to live only where there are concentrations of poor housing and where other dependent people are forced to live; those caught in these conditions must cope with the consequences of more health problems, legal problems, and social disruption; governmental and private agencies set up to serve the needy require extensive permanent bureaucratic structures to administer welfare programs; those providers of basic needs (food, education, medical care, etc.) determine what poor children can have; the needy young are exposed to a narrow range of opportunities for physical, intellectual and vocational development; social institutions established in poverty areas have limited resources; needy areas receive minimal general community services; and this portion of the population, with little influence or power, is looked down upon with disdain and blame. (Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 2000, p. 26).

The Poverty Coalition claims that the "perpetuation of poverty is structural, and is maintained by . . . institutions of the community and the state . . . the poor live with deprivation of many kinds; theirs is a communal (rather than a familial) cycle of poverty" (Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 2000, p. 26). "Systematic poverty is reinforced when cultural values of freedom, equality, individualism, charity, and competition are interpreted by the non-poor to justify the resulting limitations of opportunities and benefits to the working poor and their children." (Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 2000, p. 26).

It is clear that multiple definitions and readings of poverty reveal different ideological positions. They teach middle class populations and teachers how to think about poverty and the poor and offer solutions. Such solutions either invite the poor to be like the middle class or teach one to understand poverty issues in greater depth and move away from deficit positions to developing more complex pictures of poverty and the poor. Learning to read poverty from multiple stances in teacher education is crucial in that such readings challenge social constructions of poverty that seek to isolate the poor and diminish possibilities for democracy. By understanding and analyzing constructions of poverty, teachers begin to move toward a curriculum for social justice. In this article we take a step in this direction by contributing to the research that examines teacher attitudes towards the poor and their perspectives on poverty.

Methods

Construction of Instrument

We started with the instrument developed by the Poverty Coalition entitled, *Examining One's Own Exposure to Poverty*, and determined that we would construct our own instrument borrowing some of the questions, modifying others, and adding completely new questions. Gordon Chamberlin provided the necessary permissions, and we created the instrument found in Appendix A. This study obtained the required

Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission and agreed to not publish the research findings until at least four years following collection to provide further protections to the students agreeing to complete the survey.

Findings

The findings of the study are presented in two sections. In the first section we present a profile of the respondents and a summary of the places where they encountered the poor as well as the duration of their encounters. In the second section, we analyze the discourses students used to describe their perceptions of poverty and the poor, and finally, we analyze the implications for teacher education.

The Population

The survey was distributed to undergraduate students enrolled in teacher education courses spread across 7 sections in 2000. The decision was made to hold the results until the majority of students completed their baccalaureate program in 2005.

Survey Results

Demographics

The first run of the survey produced a 100% return rate (n = 182). The authors conducted a gender and age analysis for all results and did not find any significant differences in responses based on gender or age.

From Table 1 we see that, for the most part, respondents had little or no teaching experience, most of them did not have responsibility for dependents, and most saw themselves as belonging to the "middle class" or as being "comfortable."

Poverty Perceptions

From Tables 2 and 3 we learn that school represents the most likely place where students' perceptions of the poor were formed, followed by work and other places in the community. Additionally, for the most part, students perceived their encounters with the poor to be occasional and brief.

Tables 4 and 5 give us a picture of the words used by students to describe the poor and the words that they attributed to "others." We see that, while they described the poor in terms of personal traits, ethnicity and class and circumstances or living conditions, they attributed far more negative judgments in all categories to "others" descriptions of the poor, thereby holding "others" rather than themselves responsible for the more negative images.

TABLE 1
Participant Demographics

Gender	
Female	64
Male	36
Age	
18-20	31
21-22	27
23 & older	42
Income	
Upper	3.2
Upper middle	50.0
Lower middle	41.0
Low	4.3
Dependents	
None	78.0
1	9.3
2	5.5
3	4.4
4	2.2
5+	0.5
Teaching experiences	
Student teaching	5.4
Substitute teaching	9.8
Public school teaching	6.0
Private school teaching	0.0
Fieldwork observations	
Some observations	33.5
No observations	9.8

Note. All values are percentages.

TABLE 2
Places Respondents Encountered the Poor and Their Sources of Information about the Poor

Places encountering poor		Sources of information	
School	77.5	Teachers	67.5
Work	65.4	TV & Movies	67.0
Grocery stores	50.0	Newspapers	65.9
Public transport	45.0	Parents& friends	65.3
Religious settings	42.8	The poor	56.5
Colleges/Universities	34.0	Books	48.4
Recreational activity	33.0	Classmates	42.8
Doctors' offices	24.7	Co-workers	56.5
Libraries	20.3	Magazines	40.0
Community meetings	20.3	Religious leaders	39.0
Concerts	11.5	Music	24.4
No personal encounters	1.0	Other	6.0

Note. All values are percentages.

TABLE 3
Duration of Encounters with the Poor

Brief episode	23.0
Occasional	45.0
Frequently	12.6
Repeated over extended periods	17.0

Note. All values are percentages.

TABLE 4
Students' Descriptions of the Poor

Personal traits	Circumstances	Ethnicity/Class	Living conditions
Unstable	Less fortunate	Diverse	No food or shelter
Struggling	Broke	Homeless	Don't have good jobs
Hurting	Don't have enough	Low socioeconomic	Don't have possessions or money
Unclean	Unable to make enough money		Barely scraping by
Sad			Living in the bad side of town
Needy			
Lazy			
Give up easily			

TABLE 5
Students' Perceptions of Words Used by Others to Describe the Poor

Personal traits	Living conditions	Circumstances	Judgments
Dirty	Living in boxes	Impoverished	Worthless
Diseased	No food or shelter	Unemployed	Scum
Lazy	Homeless	No family	White trash
Alcoholics		Victims	Low-life
Vagrant			Drain on society
Bums			Expect taxpayers to give them
Helpless			things

TABLE 6
Students' Perceptions of People Receiving Community Support and Public Assistance

Perceptions of parents receiving community support as 'bad' parents		Perceptions of people accepting public assistance	
Depends of circumstances	79.7	System provides for less fortunate	36.0
Doing their best	16.4	Neutral	32.9
They should work	0.0	The government should not be responsible for those	3.3
No response	3.9	who can earn their living	
		Other (e.g. people should not abuse the system)	24.0

Note. All values are percentages.

TABLE 7
Students' Perceptions of the Causes of Poverty

Personal traits / Character	Cultural / Family/ Genetic	Structural causes / Circumstances
Poor planning	Don't have IQ permitting them to	Lack of well paying jobs resulting from lack
Irresponsibility	hold jobs	of training
Lack of control	Family disasters	Bad luck
Spend money on things not necessary	Generational curse	
Not working hard enough		
Unmotivated & lazy		
Poor choices		
Don't manage money properly		

Table 6 tells us that students saw community support as different from public assistance and looked upon community support favorably but were less likely to look upon those receiving public assistance with sympathy. Table 7 gives us a picture of the causes of poverty as perceived by the students. Students attributed poverty to poor choices made by individuals or to weakness in character and an inability to work hard. At times, they suggested that genetic or cultural causes could produce poverty, and only rarely did they suggest that structural causes of a lack of training or lack of jobs could be the cause of poverty.

As indicated in Tables 8 and 9, students indicated that some courses in their program discussed poverty,

and it became clear that the course content was limited to general information and to promoting a helping model or a deficit model, but did little to challenge their stereotypes.

Tables 10 and 11 tell us what students feel will be the impact of poverty issues on their teaching practice. Although students have good intentions, they fall back on strategies of helping or feeling compassion or pity for students they consider "poor" in their classrooms. The limited range of responses and strategies students bring into their teaching may be a result of the lack of direct attention and addressing of poverty issues in teacher education.

Discussion

Teacher Education Students' Perceptions of the Poor

According to the results of the survey, the majority of the information students gathered about the poor came from their schools and teachers, followed by the media. Survey results showed that students' thought of the poor in terms of economic deprivation or in terms of a deficit disposition. Descriptions of character and circumstances overlapped to weave together a pattern of the poor as most often choosing to remain poor rather than as victims of circumstances or structural inequality.

In describing the poor, students' definitions of poverty were held up against invisible or personal standards of what they perceived as "enough money." Their definitions were oftentimes extended to include the family living conditions and at times the neighborhoods where they lived. Some neighborhoods were cast as "bad"; for example, the term "bad side of town" suggests that in students' minds poverty was associated not only with a lack of good housing, but also with all the associative negative images that are encompassed by the term "bad."

Students' descriptors pointed to the cultural conception of poverty associated with a struggle to subsist. Students did not distinguish between subsistence and deprivation, a distinction that Vandana Shiva (2005) explains is the difference between a cultural conception of poverty where self-provisioning may get interpreted as poverty, and the material experience of poverty in the sense of being deprived or dispossessed.

TABLE 8
Number of University Courses Concerning Poverty Taken by Students

0	15.9
1	30.2
2	22.5
3+	30.2

Note. All values are percentages.

TABLE 9
Variety and Range of Course Content Regarding Poverty

General information	Teaching information
1. Statistics on poverty and the poor	1. Keep in mind that some students may not be able to buy materials
2. How to help families who are struggling	2. How to help in the classroom
3. Environmental differences in different economic areas	3. Teaching at-risk children
4. Poverty occurs in every community	4. Poverty is part of multiculturalism
5. Characteristics	5. How to deal with a child of a lower class

TABLE 10
Impact of Acknowledging Poverty Issues on Teaching

Perspectives and planning	Teaching practice
1. I will address every disadvantage students have	1. I will be lenient with hungry children
2. I will look at things from different sides before I teach so that it will help everyone	2. I will not require projects without ensuring there is money to buy materials
3. Poverty issues help me to understand different points of view	3. I will push the poor children more to motivate them
4. I will not be judiced against any socioeconomic class	4. I will model respect in my classroom
	5. I will be sad but not treat anyone differently

TABLE 11
Students' Projected Responses to Reactions of Non-Poor Students to Poor Students

Responses promoting equality	Responses that challenge students
1. I will expect and demand compassion and understanding	1. I will ask how and why they have their opinions
2. One rule will be RESPECT	2. I will ask how many poor people they know personally
3. All students will be equal in my classroom	3. I will tell them I was poor and see what they have to say
4. Everyone has something that makes them different	4. I will expect them to treat everyone with respect if they wish to be treated with respect
5. We will discuss issues	

In addition, poverty is associated with pain or with ill health as students described the poor as "hurting" or as "sick." In terms of individual character traits, "dirty and unclean" were both mentioned, and they point to habits of personal hygiene that students associate with the poor. Additionally, and perhaps the most compelling construction of the poor comes from descriptors that include "lazy" or "giving up too easily." Although some students acknowledged the element of luck by referring to the poor as less fortunate than others, overall, students appeared to understand poverty in terms of deficit or a lack of possessions or self-sufficiency coupled with a lack of right attitude to generate income. From the results of the survey we can surmise that students' understanding of poverty, its causes, and the degree to which different groups are held responsible is affected not only by their knowledge of poverty but the ways in which they assimilate such images. Lessons learned about poverty from school, teachers, and the media can either reinforce each other or present differential views.

Students' Discourses of Poverty and Thoughts about Teaching

Teacher education students revealed that the discourses that they employed in thinking about poverty issues influenced their thoughts about teaching. It was clear that students wanted to teach without prejudice against those experiencing poverty in their classrooms. The data reveals that they employed traditional discourses in their understanding of poverty issues, leading them to make decisions about classroom teaching in limited ways. They saw poverty as a culture, as a problem of the lazy or as material deprivation. Accordingly, they saw themselves as either pushing students who might need to be motivated out of poverty, or as being empathetic or feeling sorry for their inability to buy material goods. Their responses favored a "helping" model or one that "pushed" students. In both cases the views were a result of viewing students who were poor in their classrooms as deficient. Although the students intended to be respectful and responsive to their students, the range of responses were limited to feeling sad or sorry for them.

Additionally, these responses reveal an understanding of poverty as a problem of individuals and not the result of social injustice.

Students' Perceptions about Their Own Readiness to Address Poverty Issues in Education

From the results of the survey it appears that students would not be adequately prepared to encounter poverty issues in relation to their teaching if deliberate attempts were not made to introduce such issues in teacher education curricula that dispel existing notions of poverty and the poor. While students wanted to create a respectful environment in the classroom, their responses indicated that they had little idea as to how to tackle issues of poverty in the classroom. They equated poverty with difference rather than seeing it as an issue resulting from social injustice. Students thought that having knowledge of issues of poverty would create an awareness in them, leading to a wider range of responses in the classroom. Students' answers that projected what they might do differently as a result of learning about poverty issues were telling. With regard to change, most students did not think in terms of how to address change nor how to empower students to become change agents; instead, they discussed these issues in terms of classroom management or in terms of getting students to accept the differences between people living with poverty and others. Students' survey responses tell us that they are relatively unprepared to meet questions of poverty, and most important, they are unprepared to explain causes of poverty so that this impacts teaching for social justice.

We began this research in order to examine the perceptions teacher education students held about poverty. We found that the results of the survey reinforced Chamberlin's claim that the dominant understanding is that poverty is caused by the personal inadequacies of the poor, with little to no indication that students understand poverty as an aspect of a socio-economic system which requires that some people remain poor. Students see poverty as deprivation, or as a product of a culture that inculcates poor spending habits or produces social pathologies such as delinquency or substance abuse. All these explanations

of poverty lead one away from examining structural causes of poverty and from seeing poverty through the lens of social justice. Instead, individual causes lead one to think in terms of individual responses and not social responsibility. Such views lead one to solutions of hard work or, at best, leave the solutions of poverty in the hands of a few capable NGOs or on charitable responses taking poverty out of the political and electoral agendas. Perceptions of poverty determine and even create its future. Reading poverty as an inevitable result of individuals' bad luck, laziness, or even God's will leaves the status quo of social inequalities intact. As Michael Harrington (1962) in "The Other America" says, "the millions who are poor . . . tend to become increasingly invisible. Is a great mass of people, yet it takes an effort of the intellect and will even to see them."   It is therefore crucial for teacher education curricula to focus on explicit teaching of poverty issues in a way that will nurture teacher education students' ability to be empathetic and to develop a broader range of pedagogical approaches so that they will be able to address not only their own perceptions about poverty, but will also engage their students' notions of poverty. We argue that introducing poverty issues in teacher education from a social justice lens will lead teachers to develop empathetic responses while building diverse pedagogies that meet these issues in new and challenging ways.

The hope is that knowledge and understanding of the perceptions held by teacher education students will influence teacher educators' decisions about curriculum design and delivery. Future educators must be guided through a "demystification process" regarding poverty and be given opportunities within the teacher education curriculum to apply normative, critical, and interpretive perspectives in their analysis, as described by the Council of Learned Societies in Education (CLSE). This approach is the hallmark of social foundations of education. Our actions as educators are only as good as the quality of the information we consult when building professional practice. The quality of information most teacher education students possess about poverty is low. There are many forms of evidence that substantiate this claim, including the results of the small-scale survey study presented here and the available literature.

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THALIA M. MULVIHILL, PhD, is Associate Professor of Social Foundations of Education and Higher Education, Associate Director of the Adult, Higher and Community Education Doctoral Program, in the Department of Educational Studies, Teachers College, Ball State University. She was awarded a *Virginia B. Ball Center for Creative Inquiry Fellowship* for 2002-2003. Her research focuses on the history and sociology of higher education with a focus on women and gender issues, life histories of women educators, and pedagogies that focus on social justice issues. Recent publications have appeared in *Vitae Scholasticae*, *Initiatives*, *The Teacher Educator*, *Educational Studies* and *Teachers College Record.*

RAJI SWAMINATHAN, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Policy and Community Studies, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her research focuses on alternative education and students placed at risk and democratic practices in education. Her articles have been published in *High School Journal*, *International Journal of School Effectiveness and School Improvement* and *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice*. She has co-authored a book titled *Immigrant Women in the Academy*. Currently, she is engaged in examining the impact of students' involvement in the community on academic achievement.

Acknowledgements

APPENDIX A
Poverty Issues and Teacher Education Instrument

Directions: Please answer each question listed below by circling the correct response or by providing an answer in the space provided. Thank you for your participation.

Sex:
      i. Male
      ii. Female

Age:
      I.   18-20 years of age
      II.   21-22 years of age
      III.   23 years of age or older

Teaching Experience:
   i. pre-service (NO teaching experience/NO fieldwork observations)
        IV.   pre-service (NO teaching experience/SOME fieldwork observations)
        V.   student teaching experience
        VI.   substitute teaching experience
        VII.   public school teaching experience
          A. number of years _____
        VIII.   private school teaching experience
          A. number of years _____
        IX.   volunteer work _____
        X.   other _____

Number of dependents you are currently responsible for:
      1. 0
      2. 1
      3. 2
      4. 3
      5. 4
      6. 5
      7. 6+

1. What term best describes the family you grew up with?
      a. low income
      b. lower middle income
      c. upper middle income
      d. upper income

2. What term best describes the family you grew up with?
      i impoverished
      ii. comfortable
      iii. wealthy

3. My personal encounters with the poor have been through (circle all that apply):
     I.work
     I.religious settings
     II.community meetings
    III.concerts
    IV.schools
     V.colleges/universities
    VI.grocery stores

VII. doctor offices
VIII. public transportation
IX. libraries
X. recreational activities
XI. I have had no personal encounter with the poor

4. The duration of those encounters with the poor have tended to be
      I.   A brief episode
      II. Occasionally
      III. Frequently
      IV. Repeatedly, over extended periods of time

5. My sources of information about the poor have been (circle all that apply):
      I.   Parents
      II.   Friends
      III.   Teachers
      IV.   Religious leaders
      V.   Co-workers
      VI.   The poor
      VII.   Magazines
      VIII.   TV and Movies
      IX.   Music
      X.   Newspapers
      XI.   Books
      XII.   Classmates
      XIII.   Other _____

6. What words do YOU use to describe people who are poor?

7. What words do OTHERS use to describe the poor?

8. How many university courses have you had that have discussed poverty?
      I.   0
      II.   1
      III.   2
      IV.   3 or more
      Please describe how poverty was discussed:

9. Are parents who receive community support for their children bad parents?
      I.   Yes, they should be working to support their children
      II.   No, they are doing the best they can
      III.   It depends on the individuals and the circumstances
      IV.   Don't Know
      Comments:

10. What do you think about people who accept public assistance?
      i. It is not the responsibility of the government to provide for people who should earn their own living.
      ii. Neutral
      iii. I believe this is a good system to provide for those less fortunate.
      iv. Other

11. Do you feel the poor are at a disadvantage from the rest of society?
If no, why not? If so, in what way?

12. Do you feel it is the responsibility of educators to help the poor or is it their own problem and they should find a

way to fix it? Why?

13. Do you feel prepared to teach in a classroom where issues of poverty are present on a regular basis?

14. How will acknowledging poverty issues impact your teaching?

15. How do you imagine you will respond to the reactions of "non-poor" students to "poor" students?

16. What are the reasons you feel some people are poor?

 17. Do you feel prepared to teach what you know about poverty to others? Why or Why not?

18. What would you like to know about poverty and education issues that would assist you with your teaching?

 19. Other Comments: