

## AN EXAMINATION OF THE COMMUNITY ACTION POVERTY SIMULATION IN RURAL EDUCATION

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if participation in the Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) had an impact on rural educator candidates' and practicing rural educators' attitudes toward poverty (ATP). The group of rural educator candidates are students pursuing an undergraduate degree in education at a small, rural university in Alabama. Practicing educators who participated in the research were from a rural school in west Alabama. The CAPS is a one-hour simulation made up of four 15-minute weeks. Each 15-minute time segment simulates one week in poverty. In each week, participants have various tasks to complete in the allotted time. Participants in the simulation take on the roles of individuals living in poverty. Data was examined from two different simulation groups, rural educator candidates and practicing rural educators. All participants completed a demographic information sheet and the Pretest before participation in the CAPS. Following the simulation, all participants are involved in the debrief session. This session, led by the facilitator, allows participants to discuss the range of feelings they experienced during the simulation. After the debrief portion of the simulation, participants completed the Posttest. Statistical analysis using SPSS was conducted. Data were analyzed using a paired samples t-test. The results indicated an increased (more positive) ATP score ( $M_1 = 3.65$ ,  $M_2 = 3.68$ ) for rural educator candidates, but there was not a statistically significant difference ( $p=.578$ ). However, the data for practicing rural educators indicated an increase in the ATP score ( $M_1 = 3.51$ ,  $M_2 = 3.68$ ) and a statistically significant difference ( $p=.000$ ). Based on the data analysis, it was concluded that participation in the CAPS has a greater impact on practicing educators versus undergraduate education majors. Rural school leaders grapple with ways to ensure students living in poverty have the same learning opportunities as other students to thrive academically. Often school accountability is focused on high-stakes testing results. Across the nation, there is an increase of children from homes of poverty, who have unique educational needs. Rural schools are faced with barriers such as funding, isolation, and community support. School leaders must ensure faculty and staff have a clear understanding of poverty and how poverty can affect a student's educational journey; hence, the need to provide poverty simulation training.

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## **Introduction**

Researchers have established the Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) is has a positive impact on student attitudes toward poverty in multiple healthcare-related fields (Hitchcock et al., 2018; Lampiris et al., 2017; Northrup et al., 2020). The CAPS is an in-person simulation where participants work through the one-hour simulation, consisting of four 15-minute weeks simulating life in poverty. In each of the 15-minute time segments, participants complete many of the day-to-day tasks as a person living in poverty. Participants are given scenario cards and scripts that require prioritization of necessities, much like people living in real poverty situations. Little research has been done to determine if CAPS effectively improves educator attitudes toward poverty. This study focused on rural educator candidates and practicing rural educators to determine what effect participation in CAPS had on their attitudes toward poverty.

This study occurred at a small, rural institution in the southeast United States. The county seat of the location where the research took place has 46% of its children living in poverty, which is drastically higher than the national average of 18% (Alabama Possible, 2019). Based on the high rate of poverty in the area this study was conducted, providing educators with opportunities to understand poverty better may provide beneficial learning opportunities for K-12 students in the community.

According to Ajzen (2001), "strong attitudes are thought to have several interesting qualities. They are said to be relatively stable over time, to be resistant to persuasion, and to predict manifest behavior" (p. 37). Understanding that attitude is a predictor of behavior makes having a positive attitude toward poverty critical in the classroom. While studies show strong attitudes are resistant to change (Ajzen, 2001), other studies have shown that CAPS participants have a more positive attitude toward poverty after the simulation (Hitchcock et al., 2018; Lampiris et al., 2017; Northrup et al., 2020).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study aimed to determine the impact participation in the CAPS had on rural educator candidate and practicing rural educator attitudes toward poverty. Many research studies have been conducted to determine how poverty simulations impact participant understanding of poverty (Hitchcock et al., 2017; Northrup et al., 2020; Lampiris et al., 2017). However, each study was conducted with students pursuing healthcare-related fields, including dental, nursing, and pharmacy students. Few research studies can be found on how CAPS participation will impact attitudes toward the poverty of educators or those pursuing a degree in education.

### **Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the Pygmalion effect. This effect "usually refers to the fact that people, often children, students, or employees, tend to live up to what is expected of them, and they tend to do better when treated as if they are capable" (Chang, 2011, p. 198). Rosenthal and Jacobson (1992) conducted a study in which students were given an intelligence test at the beginning of the school year. The researchers informed teachers that a particular group of student test results indicated they were "showing unusual potential for intellectual growth" (Jensen, 2009, p. 114). However, this selection of students with advance intellectual growth, was actually selected at random. At the end of the school year, the students who were labeled as intelligent showed drastic improvement compared to those who were not

labeled as intelligent. This study showed that high teacher expectations could lead to improved student performance.

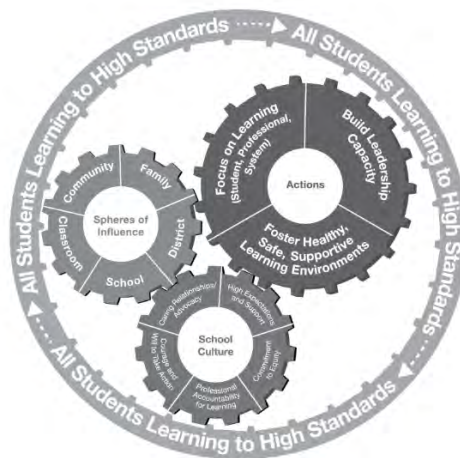
Jensen (2009) explained that teachers must of better understand all students. However, many middle-class teachers do not understand the behaviors of students who come from poverty (Jensen, 2009). Providing educators with a better understanding of poverty could benefit future student academic outcomes. Kannapel and Clements (2009) researched the successes of high-performing, high-poverty schools in Kentucky. The study results indicated that one of the factors contributing to student's success was "high expectations that were communicated in concrete ways" (Kannapel & Clements, 2009, p. 2). The high expectations were not just from the teachers to students; they began with the principal setting high standards for teachers. High expectations and school culture tend to go hand-in-hand. School culture is extremely powerful, often difficult to define, put the finger on. Focusing on what matters most, like a focus on high expectations, will lead to improved academic achievement for all students. Students tend to rise to the level of expectation. The Georgia Budget & Policy Institute (2017) if educators believe students are smart, students believe more in themselves. The school leader sets the tone at the school. It begins at the top. School leaders who set high expectations for all (teachers and students) typically have stronger, more academically rigorous schools. Additionally, findings showed that teachers and staff at the high-performing schools did not treat students in poverty any differently from other students. All students were held to high expectations, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Figure 1 shows Parrett and Budge's (2012) Framework for Action: Leading High-Poverty Schools to High-Performance. This figure, which is the premise for their text by the same name, shows that "All Students Learning to High Standards" is the critical thread for school-wide success. According to Parrett and Budge (2012, p. 15) this figure "attempted to illustrate the complex interactions between the three arenas in which leaders take action, the nature of the culture found in high-performing/high-poverty schools, and various spheres through which leaders influence the lives of students in poverty" However, when one has not experienced poverty, they may not understand the challenges faced daily. Participation in the CAPS may introduce some of these challenges to educators, helping them have a more sensitive attitude and higher expectations for students living in poverty.

Johnson (2015) stated, "poverty cannot be used as an excuse to educate students ineffectively" (p. 3). Historically, education has been seen as an equalizer among classes and the most efficient route to leaving poverty. Because of this, effective educators are critical for students in poverty. Academic performance in students is closely linked to socioeconomic status. Children living in poverty enter school at approximately 18 months behind their peers in cognitive development ("When Poverty Comes to School," 2014). Lavalley (2018) examined the relationship between reading scores and home literacy's importance. Conclusions were drawn that "rural students begin school with lower reading achievement than their suburban peers." These gaps, according to Lavalley (2018, p. 9) are bolstered by "deep, persistent rural poverty." Sosnowski (2020) concluded that "children of higher-income parents increased their vocabularies at twice the rate of children in poverty" (para. 5).

**Figure 1**

*A Framework for Action: Leading High-Poverty Schools to High-Performance*



Middle-class and low-income students can have many different characteristics in the school and classroom setting. Jensen (2013) identified seven of the most common: (a) health and nutrition, (b) vocabulary, (c) effort, (d) hope and growth mindset, (e) cognition, (f) relationships, and (g) distress. Educators having a solid understanding and focusing on these seven characteristics may help students in poverty work toward a more equitable education.

Taylor (2017, p. 1) stated "beyond education-related deficiencies, low-income children can experience inadequacies with physical and cognitive development and disparities regarding access to key resources that help ensure success." Understanding the extensive relationship between a child's socioeconomic status and classroom success is critical for change in poverty-stricken communities. Investing in change for the future of those students living in poverty may present in the form of early integration, more intense coursework, and a focus on college and career-ready standards (Taylor, 2017).

The Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS) was developed by the Missouri Association for Community Action (MACA) as a learning tool to help people better understand the effects of poverty. The CAPS consists of participants working through a one-hour simulation, to provide for their families necessities. Each week consists of a different scenario in which the participant must make decisions that people in poverty make daily. According to MACA, "the simulation was designed to sensitize those who frequently deal with low-income families, as well as create a broader awareness of the realities of poverty among policymakers, community leaders, and others" (2011, #20 Binder, p. 1). CAPS is a widely used simulation experience (Steck et al., 2011). The active participatory aspect of CAPS provides a unique experience for participants.

### **CAPS History**

The CAPS was developed as a training tool for the Missouri Community Action Network to bring awareness to those living in poverty. While the original simulation dates back to the 1970s and an organization known as Reform Organization of Welfare (ROWEL), the Missouri Community Action Network purchased the CAPS copyright in 2002. Since then, updates have

been made to the simulation to include a homeless shelter and inter-faith services (2007) and a community health center (2012) (About the Simulation FAQ, 2020).

### **CAPS Debrief**

"The debriefing is the bridge to transformation, outcome attainment, and social action" (Missouri Community Action Network, p. 17). According to Shinnick et al. (2011), knowledge scores increased from pretest to posttest when participants experienced the debrief process. In contrast, participants who were not a part of the debriefing process had decreased scores from pretest to posttest (as cited in Melkersman, 2020).

### **Simulation in Education**

Simulations allow participants to conduct themselves in any manner without receiving negative, real-life consequences. Simulations "allow users to encounter problem situations, try decisions and actions, experience the results, and modify their behavior without risking harm" (Kaufman & Ireland, 2016, p. 261). Hitchcock et al. (2018) concluded that "experiential learning using realistic poverty simulations appears to be an effective method to help the educator bridge the gap between theory and real-life" (p. 527). Situational simulations, as defined by Alessi and Trollip (2001), are "those that model aspects of working environments and interpersonal interactions, making them particularly applicable to teacher training and assessment" (as cited in Kaufman & Ireland, 2016, p. 262). Lunce (2006) concurs that situational simulations, similar to CAPS, "employ role-playing as a vehicle to allow students to explore different options and decision paths" (p. 38). Additionally, scenario/role-play simulations have enhanced participants' ability to prioritize and communicate with others (Kaufman & Ireland, 2016).

## **Methods**

This study used a quantitative within-subject research method that can be statistically analyzed (Patten & Newhart, 2018). This design selection allowed the researcher to study results from the same group of participants before (Pretest) and immediately following the simulation (Posttest). The data was reviewed for two groups of participants, rural educator candidates and practicing rural educators. The results yielded from these questions helped identify if participation in the CAPS results in a more positive attitude toward poverty. Based on literary research, many rural children who live in poverty have classroom teachers with no formal training on poverty (Bennett, 2008; Capra, 2009; Ryan, 2006).

Participants in this study were undergraduate students pursuing a degree in education at a small, rural institution and practicing rural educators. There was a decreased participation rate due to COVID-19 protocols in place when the simulation was completed. All educator candidate participants (n=31) were on-campus undergraduate students and had a declared major in an education field. The findings from that data may be generalizable to other rural institutions whose educator candidates serve high-poverty populations upon program completion. The second set of data gathered from practicing rural educators (n=61) contains results that may be generalizable to other rural schools, similar in size and demographics.

The procedure used in this study closely followed those outlined by the Missouri Community Action Network (2011). The host for the simulation was trained as a simulation

facilitator. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire and the Pretest before the simulation. Candidates were assigned an identifier that would link their data, but not their identity. This identifier was added to all submissions. Participants were then provided an overview of the CAPS, and the simulation began. At the conclusion of the simulation, all participants took part in a facilitator-led debrief session. In this time, participants were encouraged to share how they felt during their week in poverty. The simulation facilitators used open-ended questions to encourage conversations that would enhance the simulation experience. Upon completing the simulation and the debrief process, participants completed Posttest. The Pretest and Posttest were the same Yun & Weaver 21-item ATP short form.

## Results

Data analyses in this study were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. A paired samples t-test was used to independently compare the data for each set. Results indicated that participation in the CAPS statistically impacts practicing rural educators, but not rural educator candidates.

**Table 1**

*Rural Educator Candidates*

Category	N	M	SD	t <sub>31</sub>	p	95% CI
Pretest	31	3.65	.51			
Posttest	31	3.68	3.49	.563	.578	-.10, .17

Table 1 shows the data for the rural educator candidates indicating an increase (more positive) in the mean ATP score (M=3.65, M=3.68) but does not indicate a statistically significant increase (p=.578). Practicing rural educators' data is shown in Table 2 and indicates a more substantial mean increase from pretest to post-test (M=3.51, M=3.68) and a statistically significant difference (p=.000).

**Table 2**

*Practicing Rural Educators*

Category	N	M	SD	t <sub>31</sub>	p	95% CI
Pretest	61	3.51	.45			
Posttest	61	3.68	.48	3.913	.000	.09, .26

According to one rural school leader who participated in the CAPS, “sometimes teachers get caught up, and all they want to do is teach, which is not a bad thing, but until you can meet those basic needs of those students, the education is not going to happen, and they are not going to learn content.”

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to determine if participation in the CAPS would yield a more positive attitude toward poverty among rural educator candidates and practicing rural educators. This study's results indicate that the simulation experience results are more positive when the participants are practicing educators versus educator candidates. Effective school leaders recognize the importance of supporting all learners, particularly at-risk ones. Many rural students come to school with deficits. When you coming from an area of poverty and a rural area, many students struggle to succeed. It is widely believed that a good school leader is the key to a successful school. It is also widely believed for schools to thrive; all stakeholders must embrace and support one another. The best way to embrace and support others is to understand better the struggles one faces. The poverty simulation experience is an excellent way to ensure others within a school can better understand the struggles of others.

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