A Mile in Their Shoes:
What Poverty Taught Me About At-Risk Students

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The author begins this chapter by sharing her personal experiences growing up in poverty and how those experiences shaped school for her. Then, she shares the educational story of a childhood friend who struggled with school and eventually dropped out of high school despite only having one credit left to earn for graduation. Next, the author moves on to her personal experiences teaching students who were economically disadvantaged and the lessons she learned from those experiences. Finally, the author reflects over each of the stories she shared and how she has used those stories to shape her approach to teaching pre-service teachers.

INTRODUCTION

I never planned to become a teacher. In fact, it was never a career path that ever occurred to me. I grew up in an economically depressed area in Appalachia, so many people in the area made their living as laborers or farmers. I did not have exposure to many different occupations that required higher education other than common professions like teacher, doctor, and lawyer. I remember being asked in school, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" My answers changed over the years from artist, to zoo keeper, to astronaut, and by high school I had decided to become a veterinarian. Becoming a veterinarian was a career path that made sense to me because I grew up in a farming community and loved animals, so I thought having a job where I cared for people's livestock and pets was a great idea. Ultimately, I became a college professor, and while the path I took toward becoming a professor is a bit convoluted, the stories I share below highlight some of the important events that have shaped my life and career as an educator.

BACKGROUND

I am a first-generation college student. My father does not have a high school diploma because, like many teens who grow up poor, family circumstances required him to drop out of high school to help support his family. In low income families, working teens contribute roughly 22% to the family budget making their income vital for meeting their families' needs (Rosales, 2015). It is not uncommon, therefore, for poor teens to drop out of high school for no other reason than they need to work additional hours at an income earning job. When I was growing up, my father worked as a farm hand, milking cows and putting up crops. Despite my parents working long, hard hours, our family income was considerably lower than the federal poverty limit. Living in an impoverished area of Appalachia characterized by a generational cycle of poverty meant that many of my friends and extended family members found themselves in similar situations.

School was a place where the differences between those who were living in poverty and those who were not became very clear to me. While it wasn't always the case, the advanced classes seemed to me to be filled with children from middle class families, and peers from lower income families were in basic and remedial classrooms. I remember when my parents enrolled me in first grade, the school automatically placed me in a remedial reading group, which they said was because I did not go to kindergarten and would likely be behind my peers. My mother assured them that I had been reading for years and was not remedial, but they still placed me in the remedial group without even giving me the opportunity to show them that I could read. After our first reading assessment a month later, my teacher switched me into the advanced group. I never thought much of it at the time, but looking back on it now, I believe that the enrollment office at the school labeled me as poor and assumed that I would be low performing as a result.

According to Cummings et al. (2012), evidence suggests that teachers may underestimate the aspirations that poor families have for their children and falsely believe that they place less value on education than their higher socioeconomic status counterparts. Further, research suggests that poor people are often stereotyped as being lazy and linguistically deficit (Gorski, 2012) which may fuel the narrative that poor students will not perform well in school and result in teachers having lower expectations for low income children. Despite my teachers having low expectations for me, I performed well in school and my parents expected nothing less of me. Indeed, research has shown that low income parents work to do the best that they can to support their children's education (Cummings et al., 2012).

School always came easily for me. I loved to learn and enrolled in every honors and AP course in high school that I could fit into my schedule. It was while sitting in those AP courses in high school that I realized that most of my peers had parents who were college educated, and I knew that my parents' lack of college education impacted the jobs they could obtain and the lifestyle we could have. I knew that I wanted to go to college so I could get a good job and worked hard to complete the college preparatory curriculum my high school offered. I graduated high school and moved to college where I majored in Animal Science and pre-veterinary studies. While I was working towards my bachelor's degree, I worked for numerous veterinary clinics, but I did not like the work. I soon found myself graduating with a college degree but no direct career path, so I decided to go to graduate school. I enrolled in a master's program in Animal Science and worked on completing the required course work while I desperately tried to figure out what career I wanted for myself. While I was writing my thesis, I accepted a work study position as a tutor in a local school system, which is where I discovered my passion. Working with students brought

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