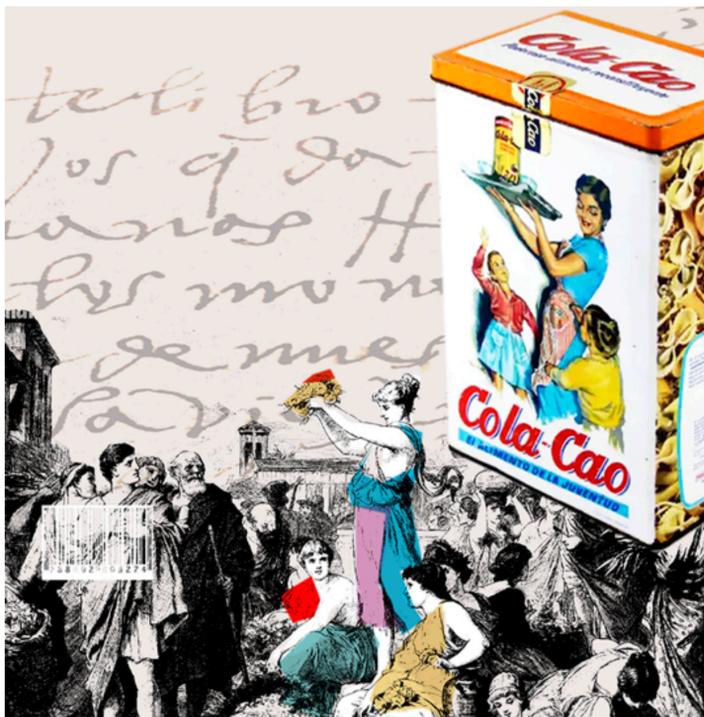




Poverty Awareness in Teaching

Although poverty has been featured as a concern for children's lives for several years, efforts have been largely unsuccessful in approaching it. The influence poverty can have on education is well documented, but the explanations for it can vary tremendously. However, these reasons can impact classroom techniques and approaches for students living in poverty. As such, being aware of these explanations and our personal biases, and engaging in discussions about the role of poverty in our students' lives, are critical to better address their needs.

Poverty is no longer recognised as simply the absence of material wealth. The perspectives we take to approaching it should echo this shift, to better reflect an understanding of it as a violation of human rights. This means understanding that poverty additionally impacts people's social opportunities. Poverty carries relational symbolic aspects that often lead people to face stigmatisation and their voices not being considered. Considering these aspects in the classroom is vital to better responding to the needs of students in a way that's empathetic and supportive.



The relationship between poverty and education has been well-documented in the past. On the one hand, there's a recognised link between higher levels of formal education and better life outcomes, including lower unemployment rates, higher wages, and a lower probability of substance abuse. At the same time, the gap in academic achievement between those who live in poverty and those who do not is vast. Schools' transformative power for social mobility is well recognised and yet limited by poverty's influence on dropout rates, opportunities for extracurricular activities, and time availability to devote to school endeavours.

As educators, our views on poverty will invariably impact our understanding of the poverty- school relationship and our interventions with a family (and child) affected by poverty. Adopting a more traditional, conservative view of poverty leads to placing the "blame" for a family's poverty on individual factors including deficiencies, pathologies, or personal choices. Educators can also view poverty as the result of a parent's inability to overcome adversity and economic hardship through hard work. What these approaches share is that they limit our capacity for understanding. They do not establish a cooperative relationship with the family, instead opting for one in which a professional (in this case, us as educators) tends to condemn the family for "not doing enough" to support the child. Educators may then view their job as that of "rescuing" the child, leading to a power imbalance with the family, further stigmatising them.

An alternative approach to poverty has been advocated for in recent years. It is one which considers the influence of structure in generating and maintaining social inequalities, and contemplates the previously mentioned breaches in academic achievement as resulting from gaps in social opportunities, fed by inequalities in institutions. These include those which impact the allocation of resources, leading to an uneven distribution of the budget (awarding less to institutions already in impoverished conditions), provision of books and technology, and even assignment of experienced teachers.

Understanding poverty in this way allows us to value the expertise of those who live in poverty and to fight alongside them for equity. In schools, this translates into being on the lookout for policies which might disproportionately impact those in low-income families — for example, imposing generalised infractions for incomplete uniforms, lack of course materials, or absences, without contextualising them regarding the students' living conditions. This kind of contextualisation requires establishing an ongoing, open dialogue with families. That can only happen if families perceive the teacher as someone who recognises their knowledge and will stand by them and advocate for them in the pursuit of equal opportunities.

Recommendations

- Question and challenge their biases: This involves teachers actively questioning their assumptions about the students and families they interact with and acknowledging their voice by accepting their role as experts of their own life story.
- Challenge conventional perceptions of poverty through reflection: be aware of the discourses around poverty and the proposed ways to face it. Nothing is apolitical, including interventions with the families living in poverty. It is therefore important to question whether these measures maintain a non-stigmatising, non-policing view towards the students impacted by poverty.
- Be aware of how important it is to listen to families' knowledge: this helps contextualise their behaviour, contributing to teacher sensitivity in explaining students' and parents' behaviour, challenging stigmatising beliefs, and avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to education.
- Maintaining a sense of indignation when listening to the students' and families' stories about their life experiences with instances of othering or microaggressions or macroaggressions is key to keeping a poverty-aware perspective which avoids ignoring the human rights violation that poverty represents.
 - Othering: refers to what occurs when some individuals are labelled as not fitting in with society and are therefore attributed less worth.
 - Microaggressions: these are everyday expressions of stigmatising beliefs (racism, classism, homophobia, etc), that are veiled enough that those who experience them are often left with the feeling that they've been discriminated against, but they cannot always pinpoint the specific action that led to this feeling.
 - Macroaggressions: stereotypical notions expressed in organisational and social policy contexts.
 - Training on poverty awareness should include opportunities for self-reflection and discussion and provide spaces for emotional responses. Stories about poverty can elicit strong emotions, which has led to the topic being avoided or unaddressed in various settings, including schools. Teachers should be awarded opportunities to reflect on the strategies they use in order to detach from the experiences of people in poverty. At the same time, their openness to self-reflection should be accompanied by non-judgemental and constructive discussions.
- Teacher training should also expose teachers to life stories told by those who experience poverty, presented as vignettes, for example, rather than stories based on pop culture representations of poverty. The portrayals of poverty shown on television and media exist in the context of a broader conversation about hardship which is often then aligned with conservative approaches that view poverty as stemming from individual choice. The stories told by people who experience poverty give a rounder picture and showcase their struggles and efforts to resist deprivation.
- Teacher training should approach poverty from a social justice-oriented perspective to enhance educators' skills and attitudes when working with low-income students.
- Teacher training should allow for opportunities to discuss issues regarding social class. Poverty is a socially complex issue and not a blame game where people are simply accused of not doing enough.