

Online Resources for Developing an Awareness of Poverty

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In the elementary school poverty, hunger, and homelessness are most often discussed in terms of a canned food drive conducted during a holiday season, but there are other options for activities in which children can learn about poverty, and to do something about it.

The generally accepted international poverty level is one dollar per day, which is difficult for many American children (and adult citizens) to imagine. The vast majority of the population in the United States lives well above the international poverty line, although approximately 13 percent of U.S. residents, or about 37.0 million people, live under the national poverty line of \$20,000 per year.¹ Many people living in poverty are made less visible because they work, and have homes or shelters. Ruby Payne's work on the psychology of the poor relates that those in poverty often do not see poverty as a rung on a movable ladder of economic hierarchy, but as a stable part of their self image. Teachers too may know little about economic stresses in the lives of their students or ways in which they could offer resources and access to make academic progress more possible in the lives of their students.²

Key to making any lesson or project on the topic of poverty a respectful and positive learning experience for all children in the class is being aware of any personal concerns a child may have regarding the discussion. For some children, the discussion and activities might mention assistance and programs in which their families may be participating. It is important for the teacher to be aware of language used in discussing public assistance programs and the "poor." Language

that patronizes or treats those in poverty as victims contributes to the mindset that poverty is a demographic characteristic rather than a condition. Avoid language such as "poor little children" or "people who don't work and don't have food."

Service-learning projects do not have to be large and complex. A second grade class made placemats (or tray liners) for a local soup kitchen on a weekly basis. The children drew pictures and wrote messages of hope and support on recycled office paper. Several children accompanied the teacher as she delivered the placemats to the soup kitchen after school. These children updated their peers in class on the following day. The activity was mentioned in a class newsletter each week, making parents aware of the local soup kitchen and the need to support it throughout the year. Such an activity makes it possible for children to become connected on a personal level to social issues, as well as preparing them as to be citizens in the 21st century.

Listed below are some print and online resources to investigate if you are considering a lesson or service-learning project that touches upon some aspect of poverty. Activities can be as simple as making placemats (as described above) and collecting cans of food on a regular basis for a local food bank, or as ambitious as helping to build an elementary school in a foreign country so that children can escape a pattern of child labor and exploitation (see the websites below). 

Recent SSYL Articles on the Topic of Poverty

Rahima C. Wade, "Beyond Charity: Service Learning for Social Justice," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 12, no. 4 (March/April 2000): 6-9.

John P. Manning and William Gaudelli, "Modern Myths about Poverty and Education," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 2 (November/December 2003): 27-29.

Lynne Bercaw, S. Colby, L. Pacifici, S. Oldendorf, R. Groce, and E. Groce, "Children of Migrant Workers: Exploring the Issues," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 19, no. 2 (November/December 2006): 8-12.

NCSS Publications on Service Learning

Rahima C. Wade, ed., *Building Bridges: Connecting Classroom and Community through Service-Learning in Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 2000).

Rahima C. Wade, ed., *Community Action Rooted in History: The CiviConnections Model of Service-Learning* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2007).

Notes

1. U. S. Bureau of the Census, factfinder.census.gov.
2. Ruby Payne, *Framework for Understanding Poverty* (Highlands, Texas: Aha Processes, 2001).

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Internet Resources on Poverty

Teacher Background and Preparation

National Center for Children in Poverty
www.nccp.org

NCCP at Columbia University is a leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health, and well-being of low-income families and children in the USA. NCCP uses research to inform policy and practice with the goal of ensuring positive outcomes for the next generation. NCCP promotes family-oriented solutions at the state and national levels. Reports and fact sheets are clear and readable.

NetAid
www.NETaid.org

NetAid was created to mobilize support through the Internet to end extreme poverty: These are high school activities, but some of them might be modified for the middle or elementary levels. Its programs include: (1) NetAid Global Citizen Corps: Empowers US high school students to educate and rally their peers in efforts to end global poverty; and (2) NetAid World Schoolhouse: Connects individuals and organizations to local projects that help the world's poorest children go to school and build brighter futures. These programs are complemented by a range of opportunities to learn about global poverty, raise awareness, join campaigns, and take action.

UNICEF
www.unicef.org/statis

UNICEF has excellent webpages that display various demographics by country and region. UNICEF measures the situation of children and women and tracks changes over the years. It promotes dissemination of evidence-based data for planning and advocacy. UNICEF is the lead United Nations (UN) agency responsible for the global monitoring of the child-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Lesson Plans about Poverty

Facing the Future
www.facingthefuture.org

Facing the Future offers curriculum resources on poverty and other interconnected global issues. FTF offers free online resources, as well as student textbooks, lesson plans and thematic units for sale. The K-4 curriculum guide *Teaching Global Sustainability in the Primary Grades* (\$19.95) contains four multi-faceted lessons covering topics such as identity and culture, food, biodiversity, and systems through diverse perspectives and learning modes. This book features hands-on activities, teacher background reading, vocabulary, extension and service learning opportunities, and assessment rubrics.

Heifer International
HeiferEducation.org

Heifer International provides "sustainable development" education resources and opportunities for all ages, including lesson plans, action ideas, activities, multimedia supplements and information about service learning programs. The simple idea of giving families a source of food rather than short-term relief was the founding idea for this organization over 60 years.

Teaching Tolerance
www.tolerance.org

Teaching Tolerance has activities for "kids, teens, parents, and teachers." An activity for teachers—working through a simplified U.S. family budget of \$18,810 a year for four people—will help you gain added perspective on "those of your students who are living below the poverty line." Then check out the free lesson plans.

UN CyberSchoolBus
www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/poverty2000

This free curriculum is designed for grades 5-12, but there are ideas that could be adapted for lower grades. There are seven units: Introduction, Food, Health, Housing, Education, Work and Economic Security, and Conclusion. The site, which is hosted by the United Nations, also has student-friendly webpages.

Inspirational for Students

Broad Meadows Middle School
www.mirrorimage.com/iqbal

In 1994, a 12-year-old Iqbal Masih told the Broad Meadows students about his dream when he attended their school in Quincy, Massachusetts for a day. On that day, students began to take action against forced abusive child labor. In addition to establishing "A School for Iqbal" in his home nation of Pakistan, students have undertaken other projects with grassroots non-governmental organizations in developing countries. Generations of Broad Meadows Middle school students continue to be inspired by Iqbal Masih's dream of freedom, education, and a childhood for every child. Teachers should view these webpages before recommending them, as some are emotionally strong. Young Iqbal was assassinated for his labor organizing, a story that is carefully told in the picture book for children *The Carpet Boy's Gift* by Pegi Deitz Shea and Leane Morin (New York: Tilbury House, 2004).

Free The Children
www.freethechildren.com

Free The Children is the world's largest network of children helping children through education, with more than one million youth involved in innovative education and development programs in 45 countries. Founded in 1995 by international child rights activist Craig Kielburger (who was 12 years old at the time), Free The Children has a proven track record of success. The organization has received the World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child (also known as the Children's Nobel Prize), the Human Rights Award from the World Association of Non-Governmental Organizations, and has formed successful partnerships with leading school boards and Oprah's Angel Network. Visit www.oambassadors.org/global.