Trauma as a Result of Under Resourced Communities (Poverty Based Trauma)

Competency

Educators identify the causes and implications of trauma that's linked to poverty and design a healing-centered learning environment to support affected students. Educators also promote empathy and the healthy development of social emotional skills among all students.

Key Method

Educators discover student needs, curate resources, and create a plan to address barriers to learning caused by poverty and trauma.

Method Components

What is Trauma?

According to the Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center, trauma "results from exposure to an incident or series of events that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening." These events, and a person's response to them, can lead to lasting adverse effects on how they function—impacting their mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being. Traumatic experiences can include abuse, neglect, sudden separation from a loved one, poverty, racism, discrimination, violence, war, natural disasters, and more. Traumatic experiences can also include other forms of social oppression, such as sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, etc.

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Historical trauma is also a part of the broader definition of trauma. It is loosely defined by the cumulative harm to a group caused by a historical event (such as genocide, violent colonization, slavery) and whose effects impact multiple generations.

Children who experience trauma can enter your class believing that the world and even school is a scary place and that trusting others is risky. Some children may be most impacted by racism and other forms of oppression through their experiences in schools that have policies and practices that overwhelmingly harm people of color, LGBTQ+ and other historically marginalized groups.

The impact of traumatic experiences are so significant that they can hinder the brain's normal development. This causes behavioral, emotional, academic, and other developmental changes that a person who has not experienced a traumatic event is far less likely to have. Seemingly simple things—a facial expression, one's proximity, or tone of voice—may trigger memories of a painful event. This can lead to various reactions, including aggression, isolation, perfectionism and more.

While research shows that trauma affects one in four children, evidence suggests that with supportive educators and a healing-centered school community, students can learn, achieve and begin to heal.

Trauma-Related to Poverty

At a basic level, poverty can be defined as the lack of necessities people need to survive (such as food, shelter, and clothing), but the topic has many complex components. Quality of life, basic human dignity and rights, as well as comparisons to other people in a given society all come into play. Consider poverty that is situational and may be temporary because it is triggered by an unfortunate event. Poverty could be generational because it involves a family cycle over time—and it can be difficult for family members to escape. Poverty as experienced in a rural area has different characteristics than that of urban areas. In the U.S. in 2020, the federal poverty line was $26,246 for a family of four, including two children.

Many educators are unaware of the prevalence of poverty in the United States—and how it can impact their students and learning. Consider these statistics:
- According to the USDA National School Lunch Program, 51% of public school students receive free or reduced lunches, which are available to children in households with incomes at or below 130% of poverty to 185% of poverty.
- According to U.S. Census data, the rates of childhood poverty vary across states—from 7% in New Hampshire to 27% in Mississippi. Due to systemic issues (racism, school funding models, gerrymandering, etc.) poverty levels are often concentrated and isolated across local communities and states.
- In 2011, more than 3 million children were living in the U.S. in households with an income of less than $2 a day, according to social scientist H. Luke Shaefer,

author of *$2 a Day, Living on Almost Nothing in America*. Nearly half of the world population lives with less than $2.50 a day.
- About 40% of all Americans will experience poverty at some point in their lifetime, according to a 2013 *New York Times* article "[Poverty in America is Mainstream](#)."
- School grading systems that rely on end-of-year academic testing reveal a strong correlation between high poverty and low academic achievement. One example is an analysis of PISA scores (https://www.oecd.org/pisa/) showing that in schools with 75% or more students on free or reduced lunch, scores averaged 429 and gradually went up to 547 as free and reduced lunch percentages dropped to less than 10%.

Studies about trauma reveal substantial overlap with poverty. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which **tallies different types of abuse, neglect, and other adverse childhood experiences,** for example, are closely tied to both the causes and effects of poverty:
- Incarceration of a parent or guardian can severely limit the economic resources of a family. The over-policing of communities of color adds to the trauma many children and families experience.
- Conversely, the stresses of poverty on a family can contribute to dysfunction, abuse, or neglect, especially if exacerbated by mental health issues.

In many ways, poverty and trauma are closely connected which makes it necessary to consider them in tandem.

Many causes underlie poverty, but these generally stem from systemic (institutional racism, unregulated capitalism, social oppression, income pay gaps, etc.) and often generational sources. However, many people teeter near poverty in such a way that one catastrophic incident—like major car trouble or a health emergency— can plunge them deeper into poverty and despair. At one time or another, more than 40% of Americans will experience one year of poverty. Even more people may experience poverty for a shorter time period. Once visited by poverty, families can find it difficult to escape or disrupt the cycle. These are some causes of poverty:
- Unforeseen illness or disability
- Loss of a family member to death, divorce, or incarceration
- Stagnant wages, even as the cost of living rises
- Job loss due to outsourcing, recession, or personal reasons

Poverty has both short- and long-term effects related to student needs. Student behavior is linked to their needs and can manifest in a myriad of ways. Often, what can be perceived as "bad behavior" may be a result of unmet social, emotional, psychological or physiological needs. When you observe "concerning behavior," consider [Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#) and the immediate effects of poverty on a student's life in these areas:
- Basic nutrition
- Sleep environment

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- Adequate shelter
- Physical safety
- Hygiene needs
- Health care
- Healthy relationships
- Developmentally appropriate responsibilities
- Enriching life experiences

The long-term effects of living with poverty are similar to the long-term effects of exposure to discrete traumatic incidents, but for the purposes of this micro-credential, we will focus specifically on student learning outcomes. You may wish to review the ACEs study to keep in mind other long-term effects that are poverty-related.

Signs of Trauma

Depending on the student's age, they may exhibit these signs of distress that result from trauma:

Preschool Students	Elementary School Students	Middle and High School Students
Bedwetting Thumb sucking Acting younger than their age Difficulty separating from their parents Temper tantrums Aggressive behavior like hitting, kicking, throwing things, or biting Not playing with other kids their age Repetitive playing out of events related to trauma exposure	Changes in their behavior such as aggression, anger, irritability, withdrawal from others, and sadness Difficulty adjusting to a new school Difficulty building friendships or getting along with peers Fear of separation from parents Fear of something bad happening	A sense of responsibility or guilt for the bad things that have happened Feelings of shame or embarrassment Feelings of helplessness Changes in how they think about the world Loss of faith Problems in relationships, including peers, family, and teachers Conduct problems

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Effects of Poverty-Related Trauma on Student Learning

It is important to remember that poverty is not a "culture." Rather it refers to families, children, communities, and others who lack resources to have the basic necessities of life—housing, food, clean water, clothing,etc. Today, it can also mean the lack of access to health care, education, and more. There are multiple studies that link income levels to brain development and function. There are many factors, but if you think of poverty as a lack of resources then it follows that the lack of sleep, nutrition, health care, and hygiene, for example, can detrimentally affect a child's growing body and brain.

Additionally, poverty can cause chronic stress, which also negatively impacts brain development and function. Brain scans show that students who experience higher levels of poverty also have lower levels of gray matter in the brain, where neurons exist and are responsible for what we know as thinking and learning.

- Neuroscience shows that living in poverty can affect the development and size of the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex-areas of the brain that are important for memory and complex thought, like reasoning and decision making.
- All the brain systems and functions can be harmed and disrupted by poverty, including the areas responsible for language, memory, pattern recognition, and processing of thoughts and feelings.
- The experience of poverty can look very different for individuals. No one situation is the same.

Therefore, trauma that is triggered by poverty can affect student learning. Educators may observe:

- Higher rates of absenteeism
- Impairment of attention and concentration
- Cognition, creativity, and memory issues
- Problems with social skills and judgement
- Apparent lack of motivation, determination, or effort
- Signs of depression and anxiety
- General lagging behind same-aged peers

These are challenges that can be overcome with immediate application of practical resources (money, housing, food, etc.). They can also be overcome with continuing social emotional support as the brain can rewire itself, a concept known as neuroplasticity. Environmental changes can have a huge impact on students' brains, including raising the academic achievement of students living in poverty.

Educator Supports for Students Experiencing Poverty

Poverty is systemic and entrenched, which means it can seem intractable and overwhelming to the educator working in a school or classroom with children who have experienced poverty related trauma. Ultimately, policy changes and the application of practical resources (money, housing, food, etc.) represent some

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solutions for alleviating the effects of trauma-related poverty, but for this micro-credential, the focus is on the school and classroom and educator actions within the school community.

Fortunately, educators who have chosen to participate in this micro-credential are already participating in one of the action steps that can support students experiencing poverty. Simply understanding and recognizing the effects of poverty on student learning is the first step. As educators in pursuit of more professional development and information, you will find a variety of resources to support your students.

- Considering poverty is a systemic problem often means families lack access to resources to get basic needs. As an educator you can:
    - Help families access necessary goods and services
    - Work to establish strong relationships with families so you can learn about their needs.
    - Inquire about family access to resources (food, clothing,housing,etc.)
    - Ask for permission to share information about different resources or services.
    - Share information about known resources in the community
    - Connect families with social work/case management service providers/charity institutions who can help youth/families access necessary resources.
- Apply classroom management that embodies empathy and respect for students.
- Embed social-emotional learning within academic tasks.
- Use inclusive terms and maintain unconditional positive regard for students.
- Alter the learning environment to make students feel safe and supported when taking risks.
- Include student interests and choice when developing curriculum. Ensure it connects with and is relevant to the lived experience of students.
- Teach mindfulness skills and metacognition.
- Develop or strengthen your own growth mindset as it relates to teaching children who live in poverty. Share your own feelings and model your thought processes.
- Use assessments to pinpoint student needs and build core skills in those areas.
- Develop enriching activities and make sure to provide the highest quality of educational experiences for students.
- Develop, maintain, and communicate high expectations for all of your students.

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Managing Your Own Trauma

As educators, we can become overwhelmed with the issues and problems that our students might bring to school. That is why it is important for you to take care of yourself and avoid compassion fatigue, burn out and/or secondary trauma. You should practice self-care strategies and know when and how to seek support from family, friends, and or professionals. In some cases, it may also be helpful to assess your own history of trauma and consider how it may be triggered while trying to take care of others. If this happens, please see the resources below for additional support. Remember this familiar airline adage: In case of an emergency, put your oxygen mask on first before helping others put on theirs. These are some suggestions for self-care:

Addressing Triggers in the Moment	Long-Term Care
- Breathing exercises - Yoga - Mindfulness activities - Journaling - Taking time away - Taking media breaks	- Cultivate and maintain healthy relationships - Attend workshops on social emotional skills - Journaling - Therapy - Developing a regular mindfulness and meditation practice

Supporting Rationale and Research

Budge, K. M., & Parrett, W. H. (ASCD) (2018). *Disrupting Poverty: Five Powerful Classroom Practices* [Webinar]
https://www.ascd.org/webinars/disrupting-poverty-five-powerful-classroom-practices

Collins, K., Connors, K., Davis, S., Donohue, A., Gardner, S., Goldblatt, E., Hayward, A., Kiser, L., Strieder, F. Thompson, E. (2010). *Understanding the impact of trauma and urban poverty on family systems: Risks, resilience, and interventions*. Baltimore, MD: Family Informed Trauma Treatment Center. Accessible via http://nctsn.org/nccts/nav.do?pid=ctr_rsch_prod_ar or http://fittcenter.umaryland.edu/WhitePaper.aspx

Edin, K. J., & Shaefer, H. L. (2015). *$2.00 A Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*. Mariner Books.

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Jensen, E. (2009). *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*. ASCD.

Jensen, E. J. (2013). *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind*. ASCD.

Liebtag, E. (2016 August 23). *Equitable Education for Students in Poverty Starts with the Teacher*. Getting Smart. https://www.gettingsmart.com/2016/08/equitable-education-for-students-in-poverty-starts-with-the-teacher/

Resources

Trauma
Principal's Research Review (2013) (.pdf)

Creating Trauma-Sensitive School

Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams Preventing Childhood Trauma

Attachment Trauma Network—Childhood Trauma

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network—Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators

NAEYC—Trauma Sensitive Classrooms

The Trauma Toolkit (downloadable .pdf)

Greater Good—Five Ways to Support Students Affected by Trauma

Trauma-Related Poverty
NEA Poverty Trauma Handbook (pgs. 19 – 36)

National Association of School Psychologists Recommendations

Baby's First Years study

Effects of Poverty-Related Trauma on Student Learning
Teaching Through Trauma: How Poverty Affects Kids' Brains

Poverty, Stress, and Brain Development: New Directions for Prevention andIntervention

Association between Income and the Hippocampus

Educator Supports for Students Experiencing Poverty

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[NCTSN—Understanding the impact of trauma and urban poverty on family systems: Risks, resilience and interventions](#)

[Equitable Education for Students in Poverty Starts with the Teacher](#)

Listicles
[Wikipedia article on listicles](#).

[The listicle as a literary form](#)

[Listicle examples](#)

What To Do If You Are Triggered—Helpful Resources
[Managing Your Triggers Toolkit](#)

[5 Steps for Managing Your Emotional Triggers](#)

[4 Steps to Dealing with Negative Triggers](#)

[Emotional Triggers and What to Do About Them](#)

[Self-Care Assessment Worksheet](#)

Where to Find School Demographic Data
[U.S. Department of Education: State Contacts and Information](#)

[The Nation's Report Card](#)

[U.S. Department of Education—Civil Rights Data Collection](#)

[U.S. Department of Education—Data & Statistics](#)

Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria

To earn the micro-credential, you must receive a passing score in Parts 1 and 3, and be proficient for all components in Part 2.

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Part 1. Overview Questions (Provides Context)

(250–500 words)

Please include answers to the following contextual questions to help our assessors understand your current situation. *Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to reviewers.

1. *What are the demographics of your classroom and school, making sure to include socio-economic data and disciplinary data?*
2. What are your students' needs? Are there specific needs related to socio-economic status?
3. What do you already do/know about the effects of trauma triggered by poverty and its impact on student learning?
4. *What is your intention and goal in completing this micro-credential? How do you think what you've learned in the process of earning this micro-credential will impact your students and your teaching?*

Passing: Response provides reasonable and accurate information that justifies the reason for choosing this micro-credential to address specific needs of both the teacher and the student. A learning goal that describes what educators hope to gain from earning this micro-credential needs to be clearly stated.

Part 2. Work Examples/Artifacts/Evidence

To earn this micro-credential, please submit the following three artifacts as evidence of your learning.

*Please do not include any information that will make you or your students identifiable to reviewers.

Artifact 1: School Demographics Infographic

Using the demographic information you provided in the contextualizing section, as well as any other relevant information gathered about your school community, create an infographic that illustrates the challenges students are facing in your classroom and school.

Use these guiding questions to produce your artifact:
- What factors contribute to poverty in your school community (e.g., food security, affordable housing, household income, quality healthcare, etc.)?
- What income and household member levels result in a poverty designation?
- How many children could be experiencing traumatic stress because of poverty in your school and/or district?

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- How does economic status relate to discipline data and/or academic data in your school community?

Consider using an infographic tool such as Adobe Spark, Canva, or Piktochart to design your infographic. Free options are acceptable to use for this micro-credential.

Artifact 2: School and Community Resources Listicle
Make a listicle of at least 10 resources that can be used in your classroom, school and or community. To complete this artifact, follow the steps below:
- Research and determine what the students in your classroom and or school and community need
- Brainstorm ideas for addressing these needs
- Categorize the needs into topics
- Develop these resources into a listicle

For each resource on your list:
- Short description of resource
- What audience this service would most benefit
- What needs will this address?
- How you can use this to support families
- How will you communicate the availability of this service to families?
- Image/visual representation

Artifact 3: Sharing your Resources
(100–200 words)
Write an explanation of how you intend to share your infographic and listicle with others. Include how you will share them with staff, families, and community members.

Artifact 4: Healing Centered Plan for Schools and Classrooms
(700–800 words)

Use the information you gathered for Artifacts 1 and 2 to help you identify at least the needs of two–three of your students who may be experiencing trauma related to poverty. Then write an action plan to address these needs(s).

Your plan should include:

Problem statement
(100–200 words)

A problem statement is a concise description of the problem or issues a project seeks to address. It identifies the current state, the desired future state, and any gaps between the two. Also, include a summary of any challenges you expect to face and how you will overcome them to meet your desired outcome.

(Source: https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/what-is-a-problem-statement)

Desired Outcome
(50–100 words)
What do you hope will result from this action plan?

Success Criteria
(100–200 words)
Describe how you will know that your outcome(s) has been achieved. Include any measurement tools you plan to use to determine results.

Proposed Solution
(300–400 words)
Write a narrative that describes one or more solutions. Include ways that you will incorporate the voices and opinions of students and families who are affected by institutional inequities. Also, include ways you can support and amplify local or community organizations that are already doing work in this area.

Action Steps and Timeline

If you were to break the solution down into small micro-steps, what would be the first 3–5 steps? When do you expect to accomplish it?

Dates the action will be started and completed	Action	Who will be involved

Results
(200–300 words)
Revisit your success criteria and write a summary of your results. Include: what went well, challenges, next steps, and what you learned from this work.

Part 2. Rubric

	Proficient	**Basic**	**Developing**

Artifact 1: School Demographic Infographic	Thoroughly considers and addresses all the questions: -contributing factors of poverty -poverty designation information -local demographics related to poverty -related discipline data and or academic data Includes a variety of student-centered needs. Facts strongly backed by strong evidence and reliable sourcing. Presented in a clear and visually appealing format.	Considers and addresses the questions but lacks details: -contributing factors of poverty -poverty designation information -local demographics related to poverty -Related discipline data and or academic data May focus on only a narrow aspect of student need. Facts backed by evidence and sourcing. Clearly presented.	Fails to consider or address any questions. Lacks focus or includes only one aspect of student need. Facts, evidence, and sourcing lack credibility. Presentation may be disorganized or otherwise unappealing.
Artifact 2: Listicle	Includes all required components: -10 resources -categories -visuals for each item -brief description of each item	Includes some of the required components: -10 resources -categories -visual for each item -brief description of each item	Is missing most of the required components: -10 resources -categories -visuals for each item -brief description of each item

	Resources are accessible and supportive of students and or family members who may be experiencing poverty-based trauma	Resources are of limited value or not accessible to students and or family members who may be experiencing poverty-based trauma	Resources are not accessible and or supportive of students and or family members who may be experiencing poverty-based trauma
Artifact 3: Sharing your Resources	Provided a clear and feasible plan for distributing this information to others in the school community. Audience includes staff, community and families	Plan may not be clear or feasible Audience is limited to one group	Plan is not feasible or inclusive of relevant audiences
Artifact 4: Healing-Centered Classroom Plan	Action plan includes all of the required components: -problem statement -desired outcome -success criteria -proposed solution -action steps -timeline -results And Each section was addressed completely in a thoughtful and reflective way and	Action plan includes some of the required components: -problem statement -desired outcome -success criteria -proposed solution -action steps -timeline -results And or Each section was completed And or Action plan is loosely aligned with the problem statement	Action plan is missing most of the required components: -problem statement -desired outcome -success criteria -proposed solution -action steps -timeline -results And or One or more sections were not completed and or Action plan is not aligned with the problem statement

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	Action plan is aligned with the problem statement throughout the document and The problem identified is reasonable and within the realm of influence of the educator	throughout the document And or The problem identified may not be reasonable or within the realm of influence of the educator	throughout the documents and or The problem identified is not reasonable and not within the realm of influence of the educator

Part 3 Reflection

(500–700 words)
Use the word count as a guide to write a personal reflection about your work on this micro-credential. For tips on writing a good reflection, review the following resource:

How Do I Write a Good Personal Reflection?

Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.

1. What observations did you make about how trauma-related poverty affects the students in your classroom or school community?
2. How did the strategies you chose impact your students?
3. What actions or strategies will you continue to use?
4. How will you share this experience so that school staff, teachers, administrators, and the larger community can begin to support students who are experiencing trauma-related poverty?
5. How will you be accountable to your students who have consistently implemented and reviewed the healing-centered practice you've developed?

Passing: Reflection provides evidence that this activity has had a positive impact on both educator practice and student success. Specific examples are cited directly from personal or work-related experiences to support claims. Also included are specific actionable steps that demonstrate how new learning will be integrated into future practices.