

# DISRUPTING POVERTY

Acknowledgments .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
<i>Voices from Poverty: Estella</i> .....	9
1. Classroom Cultures That Disrupt Poverty .....	11
<i>Voices from Poverty: Nina</i> .....	25
2. A Poverty Primer .....	27
<i>Voices from Poverty: Connie</i> .....	48
3. Disruption 1: Building Caring Relationships and Advocating for Students .....	50
<i>Voices from Poverty: Javon</i> .....	71
4. Disruption 2: Holding High Expectations and Providing Needed Support .....	74
<i>Voices from Poverty: Celia</i> .....	100
5. Disruption 3: Committing to Equity .....	102
<i>Voices from Poverty: Damon</i> .....	125
6. Disruption 4: Accepting Professional Accountability for Learning .....	128
<i>Voices from Poverty: Anna</i> .....	149
7. Disruption 5: Having the Courage and Will to Take Action .....	151
Appendix A: Application of Learning Matrices .....	155
Appendix B: Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning Summary Table .....	160
References .....	163
Index .....	176
About the Authors .....	184

# INTRODUCTION

There is no better driver than realizing one's moral purpose.

—*Michael Fullan, The Moral Imperative Realized*

Disrupting poverty—does that sound like an audacious unlikely possibility? Are you skeptical? Are you hopeful? If you are either, please continue reading. Any educator who has been “in the business” for more than even a handful of years has likely witnessed the sobering increase in the number of students who live in poverty and knows an educator’s job has become far more challenging as a result. The rate of child poverty is higher in the United States than in any other developed nation, and the percentage of children living in poverty continues to rise. A record number of families fell out of the middle class during the Great Recession, deepening the challenges created by poverty in urban and rural America, and increasingly in America’s suburbs as well.

In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson, envisioning a Great Society, declared a “war on poverty,” stating in his January 8 State of the Union address, “Our aim is not only to relieve the symptoms of poverty, but to cure it and, above all, prevent it.” Today, after more than five decades of “progress” toward this goal, more than 51 percent of public students in the United States arrive at school eligible for the free and reduced-priced meals program (Suits, 2015). In other words, more children are coming to school living in poverty than are not. We understand teachers and schools *alone* cannot “cure” poverty, or, for that matter, prevent it. We also know from studying high-poverty, high-performing (HP/HP) schools that “eliminating poverty is a *both/and* proposition—reforms must occur in *both* the broader society and in schools—and schools can (and do) make a considerable difference in the lives of children and youth who live in poverty” (Parrett & Budge, 2012, p. 49).

## It's More Than What You Teach and How You Teach It

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (2007) frames a thought-provoking argument about the kinds of questions we as a nation have attended to in our attempts to improve schools. Arguing that the national dialogue is only as good as the questions it raises, Palmer explains:

- The question we most commonly ask is the “*what*” question—what subject shall we teach?
- When the conversation goes a bit deeper, we ask the “*how*” question—what methods and techniques are required to teach well?
- Occasionally, when it goes deeper still, we ask the “*why*” question—for what purpose and to what ends do we teach?
- But seldom, if ever, do we ask the “*who*” question—*who* is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes? (p. 4)

As we talk about “what works” in schools, Palmer’s concerns about the questions being raised continue to be relevant. In large part, our effort to “raise the bar and close the gap” continues to focus almost exclusively on the *what* and *how* questions—what shall we teach and how shall we teach it. Rarely do we ask Palmer’s other two questions—*why* do we teach and *who* is the “self that teaches.”

In our research into high-poverty, high-performing schools, we find the *why* and the *who* questions to be critically important. It is not that the other two are unimportant; rather, they are insufficient. Succeeding with students who live in poverty involves more than *what* we teach and *how* we teach it. What makes a teacher (and other educators) successful with students who live in poverty (and in reality, all students) requires attending to the *why* and the *who* questions. These questions implore us to reflect on our beliefs and values, as well as perhaps reconnect with our hopes, our aspirations, and the moral purposes for which we became educators in the first place. Martin Haberman (1995), who spent his career studying the difference between teachers who succeed with students living in poverty and those who don’t (or who are less successful), found that the way teachers *thought about the work of teaching and the role of the teacher* were the

distinguishing factors. In essence, he came to understand the importance of the *why* and the *who* questions because they inform the *what* and the *how* questions.

## Moral Conviction Is Not Enough

On the other hand, in his profile of turn-around efforts in high-poverty schools, Michael Fullan (2011) points out that even when teachers tap into the moral dimension of teaching (the *why* question) and believe in every student's capacity to learn (part of the *who* question), they are addressing only half of the equation for success. In *The Moral Imperative Realized*, he illustrates this point through case studies of teachers in Chicago and Ontario, Canada, suggesting,

Moral purpose without experiencing success is empty. Realization [of moral purpose] on the other hand, makes teachers soar because they know *how* (emphasis in original) to get success, and thus they know it can be done. They become, whenever it happens at any stage of their career, the moral agents of change that drew them to teaching in the first place. (p. 20)

We know of the transformative power of educators, particularly teachers, to improve the life chances of children and youth who live in poverty. We have seen it and felt it in many schools. True of the schools Fullan profiled, as well as schools studied by others (see Chenoweth, 2007, 2009; Shyamalan, 2013; Singer, 2014; Wong, 2011), educators in the schools we studied developed a sense of efficacy that appeared to stem from inquiry and reflection into themselves and their professional practice. What set them apart from less successful educators was *living* the four questions—*who*, *why*, *how*, and *what*—personally and collectively.

## How Will This Book Help You Disrupt Poverty?

If you are a teacher, someone who supports teachers (administrator, counselor, psychologist, coach), or simply a person who advocates for all students, particularly those who live in poverty, this book will do the following:

- Help you gain deeper insight into yourself—your values, beliefs, biases, and blind spots, as well as prompt you to tap into the reasons you have chosen to do this work

- Provide you with strategies, examples, and possibilities from classrooms and schools across the country for disrupting poverty's adverse influence on lives and learning

In **Chapter 1**, we set the stage for the subsequent six chapters. First, we reintroduce the Framework for Action from *Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools* (Parrett & Budge, 2012), which encapsulated what HP/HP schools do, and specifically focus on the five dimensions of school culture. We suggest that those same cultural dimensions can disrupt (or mitigate) poverty's adverse influence on learning in classrooms. We describe what it means to be a proactive poverty-disrupting educator, and, to this end, we revisit the concept of mental maps to remind us of the importance of exploring the relationship between our mental map and professional practice. Next, we lay out our approach to the professional learning we are intending to foster throughout the book, including five specific tenets that are foundational to disrupting poverty. We describe how the book is designed to encourage personal reflection (to help you explore the *who* and *why* questions, in particular) and to increase your skills and knowledge (to better address the *what* and *how* questions). Additionally, we provide the Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning Summary Table (Appendix B), a tool designed to provide a model for exploring your mental map, reflecting on current practice, developing a theory of action, and planning next steps. Although the tool is presented in its entirety in the appendix, relevant sections are also provided at the conclusion of Chapters 2 through 6.

The Application of Learning Matrix in Chapters 2 through 6 will help you apply what you are learning directly to the students you teach. We strongly encourage you to use this tool, which has been field-tested with teachers. After using the matrix to answer the essential question in relationship to their students, teachers told us they were surprised and moved by what they discovered. For example, after reading Chapter 3, you will be asked to respond to the following question: *What assets, strengths, and/or cultural funds of knowledge does [insert name of each student] bring to the classroom?* Several teachers reported that although it was sometimes difficult to identify a strength or an asset in the students who most often misbehaved, they were more surprised by the realization that they did not know certain students as well as they believed they did. Interspersed between the chapters are seven profiles of teachers we interviewed. All of them have

lived in poverty, and their moving stories put a personal face on poverty and how it can be disrupted.

A primer on poverty is provided in **Chapter 2**, where we urge you to think about what you know and believe about poverty—how it is defined, its magnitude, who lives in poverty, why it exists, and what can be done in schools to disrupt its adverse influence on learning. After defining poverty and reviewing the poverty rate in the United States, we examine the intersection between poverty and race, gender, (dis)ability, immigrant status, and geography. The remainder of the chapter is intended to deepen your understanding of the demographic changes many of us are experiencing in our classrooms and schools. After describing income and wealth inequity, we summarize three hotly debated theories for poverty’s existence. We then describe nine poverty-related factors that often adversely influence students’ lives and their readiness to learn in school, as well as information related to generational poverty in particular. This is followed by a discussion of welfare designed to address the sort of questions we often hear from educators across the country. We conclude by answering the question: What does all this mean for our students and us?

**Chapters 3 through 6** present and discuss four of the Framework for Action’s five dimensions of a poverty-disrupting classroom culture: (1) caring relationships and advocacy, (2) high expectations and support, (3) commitment to equity, and (4) professional accountability for learning. Creating a poverty-disrupting classroom culture is likely to require both *unlearning* and *relearning*. Most of us need to *unlearn* the myths we have acquired about people who live in poverty. Challenging such stereotypical thinking is a critical component of gaining the capacity to disrupt poverty. To support this *unlearning* and *relearning*, we provide guiding questions for personal reflection at the beginning of each chapter. We then prompt you to move from reflection to action by providing a brief synopsis of research related to each aspect of a poverty-disrupting culture, followed by practical strategies gleaned from classrooms and schools across the country. Each of these chapters concludes with suggested high-leverage questions to prompt and extend your professional learning with colleagues. Myth-busting data and research intended to question and challenge stereotypes are included in each of these chapters. In **Chapter 7** we share a few thoughts and insights about *courage and will* from the teachers we

interviewed for the book. We conclude with a call upon each of us to find the courage to do what we can to disrupt poverty.

### **This Is Not an Ordinary “How To” Book**

*Disrupting Poverty: Five Powerful Classroom Practices* is designed to provide not only the information, background, and practical strategies needed to disrupt poverty, but also questions, protocols, and processes for personal reflection and ongoing collaboration with colleagues. It is intended to feed your head and your heart. It is our sincere desire to remind you of how critically important you are—not only to your students, your school, and your community, but also to the very foundation of our society. We sincerely thank you for choosing to be an educator.

### **Are You Ready to Disrupt Poverty?**

We urge you to use the self-inventory in Figure 1 as a reflection tool to gauge your learning. We recommend you complete the inventory before reading the book and again when you are finished reading.

FIGURE 1 | Are You Ready to Disrupt Poverty? A Self-Inventory

Beliefs	
Based on your personal perspective, rate/mark each statement as highly unlikely (-2), unlikely (-1), neutral (0), likely (1), or highly likely (2).	
1. Each individual's experience with poverty is unique.	-2 -1 0 1 2
2. Like any socioeconomic group, people who live in poverty are diverse in their beliefs, values, and behaviors.	-2 -1 0 1 2
3. People who live in poverty do not share a common culture.	-2 -1 0 1 2
4. Poverty adversely affects people's lives in probable and identifiable ways.	-2 -1 0 1 2
5. It is possible for educators to know and understand the adverse effects poverty has on their students.	-2 -1 0 1 2
6. People in poverty work, on average, more hours than those in the middle class.	-2 -1 0 1 2

7. Even though we have a free public schooling system in the United States, all students do not have access to an equally good education.	-2 -1 0 1 2
8. People who live in poverty value education as a means for breaking the cycle of poverty.	-2 -1 0 1 2
9. Poverty is primarily caused by conditions in the broader society (including schools) that create unequal opportunity.	-2 -1 0 1 2
10. Poverty is not primarily caused by weak moral character or poor choices.	-2 -1 0 1 2
<b>Knowledge and Skill</b>	
Based on your current level of knowledge and skill, rate/mark each statement as strongly disagree (-2), disagree (-1), neutral (0), agree (1), or strongly agree (2).	
11. I can explain why my expectations of my students matter and how they influence the kind and quality of learning opportunities I provide.	-2 -1 0 1 2
12. I can list 5 ways poverty adversely affects lives and learning.	-2 -1 0 1 2
13. I can name 3–5 mindsets or practices that perpetuate inequity in the classroom.	-2 -1 0 1 2
14. I can list 3–5 ways to “level the playing field” in the classroom.	-2 -1 0 1 2
15. I can debunk common stereotypes about people who live in poverty.	-2 -1 0 1 2
<b>Attitude/Disposition</b>	
Based on your current stance, rate/mark each statement as strongly disagree (-2), disagree (-1), neutral (0), agree (1), or strongly agree (2).	
16. I am confident in my ability to successfully teach all students.	-2 -1 0 1 2
17. I am professionally responsible for the learning of each of my students.	-2 -1 0 1 2
18. I make a positive difference in the lives of my students, despite the challenges many of them face.	-2 -1 0 1 2
19. I am willing to question my current assumptions and beliefs about poverty and people who live in poverty.	-2 -1 0 1 2
20. I am willing to make changes in my practice, even changes of a significant magnitude.	-2 -1 0 1 2