

The Elephant in the Room: Poverty, Disability, and Employment

Carolyn Hughes
Vanderbilt University

Selete K. Avoke
U.S. Department of Education

Despite more than 40 years of legislation to improve the outcomes of children and youth with disabilities and those growing up in poverty, vast numbers of adults with severe disabilities are unemployed or underemployed and living in poverty. This article suggests that one of the factors maintaining the problem is our failure to acknowledge the prevalence and complexity of poverty and its relation to disability and employment. We describe disability as both a cause and an effect of poverty, affecting employment and quality of life of people with severe disabilities—particularly those who are racially and ethnically diverse. We propose strategies to address the challenges caused by the intersection of poverty, disability, and employment and efforts to improve the adult lives of people with severe disabilities.

DESCRIPTORS: poverty, severe disabilities, diversity, employment

A major focus of early federal education legislation, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965) and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975, renamed Individuals With Disabilities Act), was to improve educational and postschool outcomes for students with and without disabilities who were underserved or growing up in poverty. However, more than 40 years later, large proportions of adults with disabilities—particularly those from high-poverty backgrounds—are unemployed or underemployed despite more recent legislative efforts (e.g., 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEA]) to address employment training and postschool outcomes while students with disabilities are still in high school (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009). This article traces the extent and root, beginning in school and neighborhood, of some of the problems that lead to high poverty and unemployment rates of people with disabilities, particularly those with severe disabilities and those from culturally diverse backgrounds. We suggest that one source of the problem is our national failure to acknowledge the extent and effects of poverty in the United States and its relation to

disability. We then provide recommendations to begin to address the challenges caused by the intersection of poverty, disability, and employment. Although our main focus is people with severe disabilities—those “who require ongoing support in one or more major life activities to participate in an integrated community and enjoy a quality of life similar to that available to all citizens” (TASH, 2000)—we also address the issue of “disability” in general.

Poverty in the United States: Persistently Underestimated

The U.S. Census Bureau reported that 43.6 million Americans (14.3%) were living in poverty in 2009, representing the second statistically significant annual increase in the poverty rate (up from 13% in 2008) since 2004 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2009; U.S. Census, 2009). Poverty rates were also found to differentially affect children and racial and ethnic groups. For example, 19% of U.S. children were living in poverty in 2008, an increase from 18% in 2007. In addition, poverty rates in 2008 were 25% for Blacks and 23% for Hispanics compared with 12% for Asians and 9% for Whites (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2009). Concurrently, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that in 2008 the United States had reached its highest rate of food insecurity (i.e., lack of access to adequate food) since annual reports were initiated in 1995 (Nord, Andrews, & Carlson, 2009). Specifically, in 2008, 17 million households (15%) nationally were experiencing food insecurity, with rates highest for families living in poverty and for Black and Hispanic households (Nord et al., 2009). Membership in a socioeconomic group also affects likelihood of access to health care. Currently, 25% of people with household incomes less than \$25,000 lack health insurance versus only 8% of those with incomes of \$75,000 or more; in addition, 31% of Hispanics are uninsured compared with only 11% of Whites (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2009).

Sobering as these figures may be, the U.S. Census Bureau has been criticized for undercounting people living in poverty (e.g., Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009; Fremstad, 2009). One problem is that the federal definition of poverty is outmoded at its current level of \$17,165 household income for a family of three. The official U.S.

Address all correspondence and reprint requests to Dr. Carolyn Hughes, Department of Special Education, Vanderbilt University, Box 228 Peabody, Nashville, TN 37203. E-mail: Carolyn.hughes@vanderbilt.edu

poverty measure was developed in the 1960s and based on food expenses representing one third of a household budget. The formula remains at three times the annual cost of food; however, food now accounts for only one seventh of a typical family budget. In addition, the poverty formula excludes expenses for child care, health insurance, transportation, and other family needs as well as noncash benefits, such as housing assistance or food stamps (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009). The National Academy of Sciences and others have proposed new poverty measures, but resistance to identifying more individuals in need of social services and thereby challenging the status quo of wealth distribution in the United States persists (Cassidy, 2006).

Meanwhile, increasing numbers of public school students are being identified as low income or living in poverty, as determined by their eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2007, the South became the first region in the United States in which low-income students were the majority of the public school population, increasing from 37% in 1989 to 54% (Suits, 2007). Three western states also serve a majority of low-income public school students, California, New Mexico, and Oregon, whereas the nation as a whole is approaching this threshold at 46% of the public school population (Suits, 2007). In addition, students from racially and ethnically diverse groups make up an increasing proportion of the school population. In the South and several western states, White students are now in the minority (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Orfield, 2009; Suits, 2010). By 2020, most U.S. public school students are expected to be of color and low income (Ball, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics, 2006; Suits, 2010).

Effects of Poverty and Impoverished Neighborhoods and Schools

The effects of poverty are more than simply a lack of money. Growing up in an impoverished home or blighted neighborhood can have profound influences on children and their families, including unemployment, underemployment, and job instability; school dropout; substance abuse; and incarceration (e.g., Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sharkey, 2009). Stressors associated with living in poverty, such as increased crime, persistent joblessness, limited health care and transportation, and inadequate housing, can affect children's and family members' overall mental and physical health, producing high levels of anxiety, hypertension, fear, or depression (Epstein, 2003; Shipler, 2004). Youth exposed to long-term poverty may have less opportunity to volunteer, to be actively involved in their communities, or to participate in organized sports, extracurricular activities, or community groups (Hughes et al., 2004).

Students from low-income neighborhoods are also more likely to attend schools that are racially and eth-

nically segregated and have limited resources and low graduation rates (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Orfield, 2009). These schools—typically located in communities with low property tax revenues to finance education—are historically underfunded and understaffed and have the highest dropout rates reported nationally. Almost 50% of Black and 40% of Hispanic students, as compared with only 11% of White students, attend high schools with dropout rates that average 50% or more (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Further, the average Black or Hispanic student attends a school where 60% of students live below the poverty line (Orfield, 2009). Research investigating the gap in academic achievement among students from different racial, ethnic, and economic groups indicates that the schools these students attend vary substantially with respect to factors such as rigor of curriculum, teacher preparation and experience, teacher expectations, use of technology, safety on campus, and parent participation (e.g., Barton, 2003; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004).

Interrelatedness of Poverty and Disability

Why such a focus on poverty for an article in *Research and Practice in Severe Disabilities*? First, more than one fourth of children with disabilities, in general, are living in families with earnings below the poverty level (Fujiura & Yamaki, 2000; Parish, Rose, & Andrews, 2010). Children with disabilities are also more prevalent among single-parent families and families of racial minority backgrounds (Parish, Rose, Grinstein-Weiss, Richman, & Andrews, 2008). These children face additional obstacles along with the educational, employment, and social challenges associated with poverty (Hughes, Stenhjem, & Newkirk, 2007). Moreover, racially and ethnically diverse and older students with disabilities and those with more severe disabilities are more likely to be identified for special education services and placed in restrictive educational settings (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) and less likely to receive appropriate services (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Donovan & Cross, 2002). In particular, more than one half of students with a label of mental retardation—of which Black students are three times more likely than their White peers to be identified—spend most of their school day outside the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Compounded with the disproportionate representation in some special education programs of Blacks and other racially and ethnically diverse groups is the fact that these students overwhelmingly attend underresourced, high-poverty schools (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Orfield, 2009) and have parents who report insufficient access to special education services to meet their children's needs because of unavailability or financial hardship (Levine, Marder, & Wagner, 2004).

Limited Opportunity in School

Second, few studies have investigated the effects that attending a high-poverty, underresourced school has on

students with more severe disabilities. Hughes, Cosgriff, and Agran (2010) found that students identified with severe disabilities (e.g., having extensive support needs and substantial delays in cognitive functioning, adaptive behavior, and verbal skills) attending a high-poverty urban high school spent significantly less time per week attending general education classes, participating in school-based job training, and receiving community-based instruction than did their counterparts attending three more affluent schools. Students attending the high-poverty school also scored significantly lower than their counterparts when asked to report their use of self-determination skills, including self-advocating, self-monitoring, choice making, and problem solving. They were also significantly less likely to agree with the statement “If I have the ability, I will be able to get the job I want” than were students from higher income schools.

Although the sample was small ($N = 54$ students), findings suggest that some high-poverty schools may provide limited educational experiences outside separate special education classrooms. The high-poverty school investigated—unlike the other three schools—was being taken over by the state because of a 53% dropout rate and failing to make Annual Yearly Progress on state exit exams and was identified as a segregated, high-need “dropout factory” (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Most households (56%) in the community were single-parent, and 42% had an income of less than \$25,000. Low employment and educational attainment of adults typified the neighborhood. It may be that limited opportunities associated with segregated, impoverished environments—whether in school or community—thwart the development of self-determination skills, such as choice making or self-advocating. For example, more than half of students with severe disabilities in the low-income school studied by Hughes et al. (2010) spent no time during the school day in the community, and 80% attended no general education classes, which may have related to their reported limited use of self-determination skills as compared with peers in more inclusive schools that incorporated community-based instruction.

Unless students with severe disabilities are exposed to stimulating environments with options to choose, solve problems, and make decisions, it is unlikely that they will develop self-determination and self-directed learning skills. Unfortunately, as true for the high-poverty school studied in which 81% of students were Black (Hughes et al., 2010), it is Black, Hispanic, and other racially and ethnically diverse students disproportionately attending underresourced, high-need high schools who are primarily affected (e.g., Artiles et al., 2010). Not only are these students likely limited in opportunities to develop needed job skills for employment (Kaye, 2009), they may be restricted in the opportunity to acquire critical self-determination skills demonstrated to relate to postschool and employment success (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). These students likely are

not making it into the pipeline leading to adult employment and economic mobility, in part, because of the limits of their schools and neighborhoods (Sharkey, 2009), underscoring the need to provide access to inclusive environments with a range of opportunities and to teach self-determination skills to high-poverty youth with severe disabilities (Agran & Hughes, 2008).

Postschool Youth Outcomes

Third, the co-occurrence of disability—including severe disabilities—and poverty is associated with poor postschool outcomes, such as low graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates and increased disengagement, unemployment, and underemployment (Newman et al., 2009). Although there is no category of *severe disabilities* in the IDEA legislation, Newman et al. (2009) reported that, after leaving high school, only 31% of youth with mental retardation—a category that overlaps to some extent with severe disabilities—are employed (primarily part-time), only 7% attend postsecondary school as a sole postschool activity, only 14% live independently or semi-independently, only 26% have a checking account, and only 11% participate in a community group, such as a sports team or church club. These percentages are considerably lower than those of most other disability categories (e.g., learning disabilities). Students with disabilities from low-income households also fare more poorly across these same postschool indicators than do their counterparts from higher income homes. In addition, White youth are more likely to be employed than Blacks (63% vs. 35%) or Hispanics (54%), to hold a skilled labor job, or to have a checking account (Newman et al., 2009).

Adult Outcomes

Fourth, currently, 54 million Americans (19%) are reported to have some type of disability, representing one of the largest and fastest growing minority groups in the nation (Brault, 2008). *Disability*, as typically defined in the adult literature as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” or “being regarded as having such as impairment” (Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990), occurs more frequently across different racial and ethnic groups. In 2007, disability rates in the United States for adults ages 21 to 64 years were 6% (Asian), 13% (White), 11% (Hispanic), 17% (Black), and 23% (Native American) (Erickson, Lee, & von Schrader, 2010). Adults with disabilities are more likely than the general population to experience the effects of poverty and material hardship, including food insecurity, inadequate housing and medical care, and difficulty paying bills (Fremstad, 2009; Parish et al., 2008, 2010; Yamaki & Fujiura, 2002). These outcomes are particularly salient for the two thirds (35 million) of the population with disabilities identified as having a disability substantial enough to interfere

with everyday activities (Fremstad, 2009). Notably, the definition of a *severe disability* used by the U.S. Census Bureau is much broader than that of TASH (2000) and includes physical limitations, such as the inability to climb stairs or prepare a meal, without the presence of an intellectual disability. At the same time, among adults aged 25 to 64 years identified with a severe disability by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2005, 27% were reported to be living in poverty compared with 12% of adults with a less severe disability and 9% with no disability (Brault, 2008).

Call to Address the Overlap of Poverty and Disability

The overlap of poverty and disability has resulted in a call for viewing disability as both a cause and a consequence of poverty (e.g., Blanchett, 2008; Emerson, 2007; Fremstad, 2009). For example, higher rates of poverty are experienced by families with children or other family members with a disability due in part to the extra costs of having a disability (e.g., home health care, assistive technology, transportation). In addition, having a disability—particularly an intellectual disability—can limit one's employability and wages earned (Brault, 2008; Emerson, 2007; Sinclair & Yeargin-Allsopp, 2007). For example, job training programs for people with intellectual disabilities often target low-paying, part-time, entry-level jobs that offer few benefits or opportunities for promotion or advancement (Metzel, Boeltzig, Butterworth, Sulewski, & Gilmore, 2007).

On the other hand, growing up in poverty increases the likelihood of having a disability because of a gamut of factors, such as exposure to environmental hazards (e.g., lead poisoning, unsanitary drinking water, preterm births), environmental stress (e.g., unsafe neighborhood or lack of transportation), or lack of material needs (e.g., inadequate food, housing, or medical care) (e.g., Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Shipler, 2004). In addition, poverty likely exacerbates an already existing disability. Research indicates that the increased risk of poorer physical and mental health and well-being among some children and youth with intellectual disabilities may be attributed to exposure to poverty and related inequalities and exclusion (e.g., Emerson & Hatton, 2007). Although rarely acknowledged or discussed in the poverty literature, current findings indicate that almost half (47%) of all adults who experience income poverty for a period of at least 12 months and nearly two thirds (65%) of those experiencing long-term poverty have one or more disabilities (Fremstad, 2009).

Unfortunately, rarely do the disability and poverty literatures acknowledge each other (e.g., Blanchett, 2008; Fremstad, 2009). Fremstad (2009) argued that any attempt to reduce poverty must take disability into account, and if the costs of having a disability are not considered, the income needs of individuals with disabilities or their families will be underestimated. However, the poverty lit-

erature largely fails to acknowledge or consider the prevalence and effect of disability. Conversely, others have argued that the disability literature fails to acknowledge the vast number of people with disabilities who are living in poverty and experiencing material hardship; until the literature does, inequities in experiencing quality of life (e.g., good health, safe and comfortable home, community participation) by individuals with disabilities will persist (e.g., Blanchett, 2008; Emerson, 2007; Gerber, 2009).

As the Twig Is Bent, so Grows the Tree

The overlap of poverty and disability conspires to exacerbate the challenges presented by financial and material hardship, underresourced schools and neighborhoods, and family and environmental stress. The long-term effect is an increasing number of children and youth with disabilities—including severe disabilities—growing up under conditions of poverty that are stunting and stifling, compounding the challenges of the disability itself. These students likely are attending schools and living in neighborhoods that are not nurturing and that limit students' opportunities to acquire essential life skills associated with successful adulthood. Poverty and disability together also synergize to affect a third outcome: employment.

Poverty, Disability, and (Un)Employment

Employment rates for individuals with and without disabilities differ considerably. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) reported that in July 2010, 18% of individuals with disabilities 16 years and older (excluding institutionalized populations) were employed versus 64% of individuals without disabilities. Adults with intellectual, developmental, or severe disabilities are even less likely to be employed, although reported rates differ across studies because of varying definitions of *employment* and *severe disabilities* and sources of support services (e.g., vocational rehabilitation). For example, Erickson et al. (2010) reported that only 14% of adults with *cognitive disabilities* (i.e., having serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions) and 9% with *independent living disabilities* (i.e., difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping), respectively, were employed full time. Metzel et al. (2007) reported that, nationally, employees with *intellectual and developmental disabilities* experience limited work hours and few wage increases or are restricted to working in segregated facility-based settings earning considerably less than minimum wage. These findings are corroborated by Butterworth, Smith, Cohen Hall, Migliore, and Winsor's (2008) national findings showing that workers with *intellectual and development disabilities* in integrated (non-sheltered) employment—typically entry-level jobs—work an average of only 26 hours a week, earning only \$211 weekly. Unfortunately, it is these workers in entry-level jobs who are often the first to be laid off or have their

hours further cut in times of economic hardship, such as the current recession (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009; Kaye, 2009).

These deplorable findings explain in part the prevalence of poverty among people of working age with disabilities, especially those with more substantial disabilities: Few are working, and those who are working are underemployed and working for wages below the poverty level. In fact, the percentage of adults with disabilities living in poverty is increasing despite increasing public expenditures for support (Stapleton, O'Day, Livermore, & Imparato, 2005). This seeming contradiction is partly due to what Stapleton et al. (2005) refer to as the "poverty trap" in which income supports (e.g., Supplemental Security Income [SSI]) and other benefits, such as health care, are reduced or lost if an employee earns over a federally determined threshold, which itself is set below a living wage. Piecemeal efforts to decrease disincentives for workers to earn more (e.g., Ticket to Work) fail to address the complexity of the challenges that working and living in poverty present (e.g., lack of health care, few neighborhood resources, increased stressors associated with daily living) or the increased expenses of having a disability (e.g., home health aide, ongoing therapy, accessible transportation).

Well-Being and Quality of Life

The repercussions of mass unemployment or underemployment and poverty-level wages on the daily lives and well-being of adults with severe disabilities are not trivial. The sixth National Organization on Disability (NOD, 2010) *Survey of Americans with Disabilities* conducted by telephone with almost 2000 respondents with and without disabilities 18 years and older or their proxies (10%) revealed disturbing findings regarding the quality of life of adults with disabilities—and, in particular, a subset of respondents identified with *severe disabilities* (NOD, 2010). *Disability* is defined broadly in the survey (e.g., a physical, health, cognitive, or emotional condition that prevents full participation in daily activities) and includes a wider population than *intellectual or developmental disabilities*. In the 2010 survey, 57% of participants with disabilities also identified their disability as *severe* (no definition provided). These individuals reported that they were less likely to socialize with friends or family, attend religious services, or go to a restaurant or an entertainment event than did respondents without disabilities or respondents identifying having less intensive disabilities. For example, only 37% of respondents self-identifying with a severe disability reported eating at a restaurant at least twice a month compared with 63% of adults with a mild disability and 75% without a disability. In addition, 41% of respondents with a self-reported severe disability considered access to transportation to be a problem (vs. 24% = mild disabilities; 16% = without disabilities), 23% reported having gone without needed health care during the past year

(13% = mild disabilities; 10% = without disabilities), and only 27% reported feeling very satisfied with life (44% = mild disabilities; 61% = without disabilities). Further, when asked in the previous NOD (2004) survey, participants with disabilities in general reported being (a) more worried about their future health and well-being (e.g., not able to take care of self, losing health insurance, becoming disconnected from family or friends) and (b) more likely to feel that their lives would get worse rather than better over the next 4 years than did respondents without disabilities (NOD, 2004).

Compounding the limited experiences, opportunities, resources, and levels of satisfaction reported by people who identified having more substantial disabilities in the NOD surveys is the lack of affordable housing for the great majority of adults with disabilities who are unemployed or underemployed and receiving federal SSI payments. The latest yearly housing report conducted by the Technical Assistance Collaborative, Inc., and the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities Housing Task Force concluded that "there is not one state or community in the nation where a person with a disability receiving SSI payments can afford to rent a modest—not luxurious—one-bedroom or efficiency housing unit" (Cooper, Korman, O'Hara, & Zovistoski, 2009, p. 1). On average nationally, people with disabilities in general must pay 112% of monthly income to rent a modest one-bedroom unit (range = 100% of income in Vermont to 178% in Washington, DC). Cooper et al. cited (a) the failure of SSI payments (average monthly SSI income = \$688) to match the increasing cost of basic human needs; (b) inadequate funding, support, and implementation of federal housing programs for people with disabilities (e.g., public housing or Section 8 programs); and (c) limited community supports as partial causes of the chronic lack of affordable housing for people with disabilities, resulting in unsafe and unhealthy residential situations, unnecessary institutionalization, and homelessness.

Having a safe and comfortable home environment is fundamental to quality of life; the failure to provide access to adequate subsidized housing for large numbers of people with disabilities—including intellectual and developmental disabilities—is deplorable. As argued by Barney Frank, Chairman of the Committee on Financial Service in the U.S. House of Representatives, which has jurisdiction over federal housing programs, "A lack of adequate housing is a serious obstacle to a decent life for anyone. It can be particularly troublesome for people dealing with disabilities, for whom the physical and emotional stresses of a lack of decent shelter are added burdens" (Frank, 2009, p. ii).

The Elephant in the Room

Relegating a group of people to chronic exposure to the stressors associated with lack of adequate income, health

care, housing, transportation, educational opportunities, and supports on a daily basis is unconscionable. Poverty is not just a lack of money. It is cumulative series of barriers to well-being and economic independence. *We suggest that we indeed have an elephant in the room, and we don't seem to want to look at the problem.* Neither the disability literature nor the poverty literature seems to want to acknowledge that a large proportion of people living in poverty do have a disability and that having a disability—particularly one that is severe—can profoundly affect one's earning potential and access to material needs. The interconnection of the environmental, educational, and social effects associated with poverty and their impact on the risk for disability, however, require an approach to the problem that goes beyond a narrow disciplinary niche (Fujiura & Yamaki, 2000).

In his keynote address at the 2009 TASH Conference, Keith Jones asked “Why are we putting a person with a disability on a path to poverty instead of a path to prosperity?” (Jones, 2009). There is an urgency with which we must address the situation. Emerson (2007) argued that it seems obvious to try to reduce exposure to poverty for individuals with disabilities and their families in order to address the social and economic inequalities they face; however, public policy fails to do so. As observed by Kaye (2009), “workers with disabilities cannot achieve parity with their nondisabled counterparts in terms of earnings, benefits, and job security until they have equal access to and equal representation in better-paid and more highly skilled occupations” (p. 125). Service providers and special education personnel must challenge themselves to look beyond entry-level, low-paying jobs for employment options for people with severe disabilities. Research shows that individuals with severe disabilities *can* be successfully employed in well-paying jobs requiring complex skills (e.g., Brown, Shiraga, & Kessler, 2006; Certo et al., 2008). However, these jobs need to be the norm—not the exception. As argued by Wehman (2006):

There is no reason why individuals with significant disabilities should not contribute to the nation's productivity and gross national product. There is no reason to exclude these persons from the opportunity to participate in the American dream of greater wealth and economic independence because of a label of severe disability (p. 123).

What Can We Do? Recommendations to Address the Challenges

The first step to address the challenges derived from the intersection of poverty, disability, and employment is to acknowledge that there is a problem. When the third largest minority group in the United States—people with disabilities and, in particular, those with intellectual and

developmental disabilities—is experiencing mass unemployment and underemployment; lack of affordable housing, food scarcity and material hardship; limited health care and transportation; few education or job training opportunities; and limited socializing, community participation, and satisfaction with life, we cannot keep our heads in the sand. Educators, policy makers, adult service providers, parents, and advocates need to ensure that providing quality employment with health care and other benefits, sufficient community and residential supports, and appropriate education and employment training opportunities for people with severe disabilities—and disabilities, in general—is on the national agenda as legislative and funding priorities.

Second, we need a media blitz to make the public aware of the combined effects of poverty and disability. Public awareness efforts must address the hidden aspects of disability, such as its underestimated pervasiveness (e.g., many people with severe disabilities may rarely be seen in public), the high percentage of people with disabilities living in poverty, and the obstacles arising from poverty (e.g., lack of transportation or a safe home environment) to combat the tendency of an uninformed public to blame disenfranchised individuals for their own unemployment. Advocacy efforts should focus on policy reforms to expand disability support programs, such as SSI benefits, job training programs, and supported employment to allow individuals to achieve maximum economic self-sufficiency. At the same time, disability advocates need to publicize “illustrations of competence” that highlight examples of the many people with severe disabilities who are gainfully, skillfully, and successfully employed (e.g., Brown et al., 2006; Certo et al., 2008) to educate the public and raise expectations for what people with disabilities can do. The presumption held by the public should be that, with appropriate supports, individual with severe disabilities *can* work (Stapleton et al., 2005).

Third, the disability and poverty literatures need to recognize and learn from each other (Fremstad, 2009). Disability research needs to systematically address the socioeconomic status of participants with disabilities, whereas poverty studies must incorporate the effects of disability (e.g., increased expenses and support needs) into research designs. Considering that two thirds of adults experiencing chronic poverty have a disability, poverty researchers and antipoverty advocates must take disability into account as both a cause and a consequence of poverty (Fremstad, 2009). Further, the current literature must acknowledge the inadequacy of the federal measure of poverty, which sorely underestimates prevalence and fails to address the multidimensional aspects of poverty. An expanded definition of poverty beyond a simple lack of income and one that incorporates the added expenses of a disability needs to be proposed and adopted by both the poverty and disability literatures.

Fourth, the interconnection of poverty, disability, and employment does not appear to be on the radar of cur-

rent educational initiatives, which seem to be more concerned with accountability and academic proficiency (Bouck, 2009; Johnson, 2004). No Child Left Behind (now ESEA; 2001) legislation does hold schools accountable for state exit examination scores and graduation rates, but not for the success of postschool outcomes. Although the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, established a research funding priority in the 1990s focused on improving outcomes for high-poverty youth with disabilities, no such priority has existed in the U.S. Department of Education for over a decade (S. Avoke, personal communication, July 20, 2009). The ESEA and the IDEA legislation need to revisit the early goals of the 1965 ESEA and 1975 IDEA to compensate for the effects of poverty and disability, particularly among racial, ethnic, and other minority and disenfranchised groups that experience the highest rates of unemployment, such as the near 50% unemployment rates of Black urban males who were high school dropouts (Mincy, 2006).

Fifth, the 2004 IDEA has new requirements for transition services that mandate high schools to provide exiting students with a summary of performance that includes documentation of students' performance and postschool goals. States are required to monitor students' transition-related goals and postschool outcomes as well as graduation and dropout rates and to report findings to the U.S. Department of Education and ultimately to Congress. However, the only compliance indicator that schools must meet is whether students' individualized education programs contain transition goals; therefore, schools are only accountable for identifying versus attaining postschool outcomes (Rusch, Hughes, Agran, Martin, & Johnson, 2009). If we intend to improve postschool outcomes for students with disabilities as they enter their adult lives, including employment, postsecondary education, independent living, economic self-sufficiency, community participation, social engagement, and quality of life, compliance to existing federal transition mandates must increase, and the responsibility of schools for the achievement of students' postschool outcomes must be expanded (Rusch & Braddock, 2004; Rusch et al., 2009; Wehman, 2006). As recommended by Rusch et al. (2009), high schools should have primary responsibility and be held accountable for (a) ensuring that students have identified a desired postschool placement—postsecondary education or employment—before school exit, (b) assisting students and their families in making the transition to this placement, and (c) coordinating postschool services and supports to ensure placement and outcome success. In addition, while students are still in school, opportunities to participate in stimulating environments outside the special education classroom in which students can make choices, problem solve, and learn self-determination skills must be provided, particularly in low-income schools where these opportunities may be less likely to occur (Hughes et al., 2010).

Sixth, for many students with severe disabilities, the desired postschool outcome likely will be work. Rusch et al. (2009) and Wehman (2006) argued that, for these students, achieving paid employment before leaving school is mandatory. Students need to develop necessary employment and work-related social skills while they are still in high school. Building a job history in a chosen field while still in school can start students on the road to career development, resume building, and upward career mobility (Wehman, 2006). Students can begin to learn professional skills required for skilled, higher paying jobs beyond the entry-level service positions in which employees with severe disabilities typically have been stuck, relegating them to a life of poverty as described in this article. Addressing the future earning power of students while they are still in school in coordination with vocational rehabilitation and other adult service agencies can help (a) alleviate the risk of individuals with severe disabilities ever falling into the poverty trap and (b) provide a pool of job-ready candidates to meet hiring needs. Doing so will require teaching new skills to address the expanded role of secondary education and transition teachers, ideally, while they are still in preservice teacher preparation programs. It will also require the involvement and buy-in of parents by providing them with support, assistance, and training and by seeking their input and incorporating their suggestions for change. We must challenge the status quo by providing opportunities for people with severe disabilities to own a home, to have a career, and to become a major player in controlling how resources are dispersed, in other words, to have personal power that others cannot ignore.

Seventh, we faced two obstacles in writing this article. One is that there is no universal definition of *severe disabilities*; in fact, such a category does not exist in special education legislation. The adult literature, on the other hand, has a range of definitions of the term, typically much broader than the TASH (2000) definition. Some readers may argue for a more standard definition of *severe disabilities*, although such definitions are often value based or lack universal acceptance (e.g., level of required support vs. personal deficits; see Thompson et al., 2004). A universal definition of severe disabilities does not currently exist; thus, to incorporate findings from disparate sources in this article, we sought to clarify definitions of the populations addressed across studies. Readers should be aware as they read the literature, however, that similar terminology across studies may not indicate similar populations. Second, we discussed issues in this article that we believe apply to both the narrower population of individuals with severe disabilities and those with disabilities in general. We caution against having a restricted view of the interconnections between disability and poverty. We argue that there are many contemporary issues relevant to both populations, such as expanding the role of schools in addressing students' postschool outcomes and ensuring that the intersection

of poverty and disability is on the national agenda. These issues apply to people with disabilities, in general, as well as people with severe disabilities. There are, of course, issues that are more disability specific, such as assuring accessibility in the community for people with physical or sensory impairments. At the same time, we suggest that there are benefits to placing some of the challenges of severe disability in the larger context of disability and poverty.

Conclusion

Conventional wisdom tells us that recognizing that there is a problem is the first step toward finding a solution. As people concerned with the quality of adult lives, well-being, and employment outcomes of people with severe disabilities, there is much we can do to expand our awareness of the interaction of poverty, disability, and employment and to share this knowledge with the general public. Let us then act in concert to address the complexities of the problem. For example, federal and state policy makers must work in collaboration with the business community to ensure that individuals with disabilities are provided the tools needed to experience successful postschool outcomes. In addition, there are many other places for us to act—schools, communities, media outlets, adult services, legislative bodies, or our next-door neighbors. As a nation of extreme wealth, we no longer have an excuse for inaction. We all benefit when individuals with severe disabilities—and disabilities, in general—are experiencing the full employment and enjoying the quality of life that we all aspire to attain in life.

References

- Agran, M., & Hughes, C. (2008). Asking student input: Students' opinions regarding their individualized education program involvement. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 31*, 69–76.
- Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, Pub. L. No. 101-336, 42 U.S.C. §§ 12101 *et seq.*
- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2009). *Counting what counts: Taking results seriously for vulnerable children and families*. Baltimore: Author. Retrieved from http://datacenter.kidscount.org/Databook/2009/OnlineBooks/AEC186_essay_FINAL.pdf
- Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E. B., Trent, S. C., Osher, D., & Ortiz, A. (2010). Justifying and explaining disproportionality, 1968–2008: A critique of underlying views of culture. *Exceptional Children, 76*, 279–299.
- Balfanz, R., & Legters, N. E. (2004). Locating the dropout crisis: Which high schools produce the nation's dropouts? In G. Orfield (Ed.), *Dropouts in America: Confronting the graduation crisis* (pp. 57–84). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Ball, A. F. (2009). Toward a theory of generative change in culturally and linguistically complex classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal, 46*, 45–72.
- Barton, P. E. (2003). *Parsing the achievement gap: Baselines for tracking progress*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. Retrieved from <http://www.ets.org/Media/Research/pdf/PICPARSING.pdf>
- Blanchett, W. J. (2008). We've come a long way but we're not there yet: The impact of research and policy on racially/ethnically and culturally diverse individuals with disabilities and/or those affected by poverty. *TASH Connections, 34*, 11–13, 20.
- Bouck, E. C. (2009). No Child Left Behind, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and functional curricula: A conflict of interest? *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities, 44*, 3–13.
- Brault, M. W. (2008). *Current population reports. Americans with Disabilities: 2005. Household economic studies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Brown, L., Shiraga, B., & Kessler, K. (2006). The quest for ordinary lives: The integrated post-school vocational functioning of fifty workers with significant disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities, 31*, 93–121.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2009). *Economic news release: Mass layoffs summary*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/mslo.nr0.htm>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2010). *Economic news release: Table A-6. Employment status of the civilian population by sex, age, and disability, not seasonally adjusted*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst.it06.htm>
- Butterworth, J., Smith, F. A., Cohen Hall, A., Migliore, A., & Winsor, J. (2008). *StateData: The national report on employment services and outcomes, 2008*. Boston: Institute for Community Inclusion. Retrieved from http://www.communityinclusion.org/pdf/statedatabook_F.pdf
- Cassidy, J. (2006, April 3). Relatively deprived: How poor is poor? *The New Yorker, 42*–47.
- Certo, N. J., Luecking, R. G., Murphy, S., Brown, L., Courey, S., & Belanger, D. (2008). Seamless transition and long-term support for individuals with severe intellectual disabilities. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities, 33*, 85–95.
- Cooper, E., Korman, H., O'Hara, A., & Zovistoski, A. (2009). *Priced out in 2008: The housing crisis for people with disabilities*. Boston: Technical Assistance Collaborative, Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.tacinc.org>
- DeNavas-Walt, C., Proctor, B. D., & Smith, J. C. (2009). *Income, poverty, and health insurance in the United States: 2008*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p60-236.pdf>
- Donovan, M. S., & Cross, C. T. (2002). *Minority students in special and gifted education*. Washington, DC: National Research Council.
- Duncan, G. J., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). Family poverty, welfare reform, and child development. *Child Development, 71*, 188–196.
- Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, Pub. L. No. 94-142, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 *et seq.*
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Pub. L. No. 89-10, 20 U.S.C. §§ 241 *et seq.*
- Emerson, E. (2007). Poverty and people with intellectual disabilities. *Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews, 13*, 107–113.
- Emerson, E., & Hatton, C. (2007). Contribution of socioeconomic position to health inequalities of British children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities. *American Journal on Mental Retardation, 112*, 140–150.
- Epstein, H. (2003, October 12). Enough to make you sick? *The New York Times Magazine, 74*–81, 98, 102, 104–106.
- Erickson, W., Lee, C., & von Schrader, S. (2010). *2008 Disability Status Report: United States*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability De-

- mographics and Statistics. Retrieved from http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/edi/disabilitystatistics/StatusReports/2008-PDF/2008-StatusReport_US.pdf?CFID=22676777&CFTOKEN=24228431&jsessionid=f0304d2203a01c3210764143d88123739545
- Frank, B. (2009). Foreword. In E. Cooper, H. Korman, A. O'Hara, & A. Zovistoski (Eds.), *Priced out in 2008: The housing crisis for people with disabilities* (pp. i-ii). Boston: Technical Assistance Collaborative, Inc. Retrieved from <http://www.tacinc.org>
- Fremstad, S. (2009). *Half in ten: Why taking disability into account is essential to reducing poverty and expanding economic inclusion*. Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research. Retrieved from <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/poverty-disability-2009-09.pdf>
- Fujiura, G. T., & Yamaki, K. (2000). Trends in demography of childhood poverty and disability. *Exceptional Children*, 66, 187-199.
- Gerber, M. (2009, July). *Special education: Our future role and needed policy supports*. Keynote session presented at the 2009 OSEP Project Directors' Conference, Washington, DC.
- Hughes, C., Cosgriff, J. C., & Agran, M. (2010). Student demographic and interview responses across four high schools. Unpublished raw data.
- Hughes, C., Stenhjem, P. H., & Newkirk, R. (2007). Poverty, race, and youth: Challenges and promising practices in education. *International Journal on School Disaffection*, 5, 22-28.
- Hughes, C., Wehby, J. H., Carter, E. W., Plank, D., Wilson, L., Johnson, S., & Berton-Arwood, S. (2004). Summer activities of youth with high-incidence disabilities from high-poverty backgrounds. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 27, 27-42.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, Pub. L. No. 108-446, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1400 *et seq.*
- Johnson, D. R. (2004). Supported employment trends: Implications for transition-age youth. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities*, 29, 243-247.
- Jones, K. (2009). *The now and forever: Bridging the theory and practice of inclusion*. Keynote session presented at the 2009 TASH Conference, Pittsburgh, PA.
- Kaye, H. S. (2009). Stuck at the bottom rung: Occupational characteristics of workers with disabilities. *Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation*, 19, 115-128.
- Levine, P., Marder, C., & Wagner, M. (2004). *Services and supports for secondary school students with disabilities. A special topics report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Retrieved from http://www.nlts2.org/reports/2004_05/nlts2_report_2004_05_complete.pdf
- Metzel, D. S., Boeltzig, H., Butterworth, J., Sulewski, J. S., & Gilmore, D. S. (2007). Achieving community membership through community rehabilitation provider services: Are we there yet? *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, 45, 149-160.
- Mincy, R. B. (Ed.) (2006). *Black males left behind*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2006). *Characteristics of the 100 largest public elementary and secondary school districts in the United States: 2003-04 statistical analysis report*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006329.pdf>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2007). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic minorities*. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/minoritytrends/tables/table_7_2.asp?referrer=report
- National Organization on Disability. (2004). *NOD/Harris 2004 survey of Americans with disabilities*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.nod.org/assets/downloads/NOD-Harris-Summary-2004.pdf>
- National Organization on Disability. (2010). *Kessler Foundation/ NOD 2010 Survey of Americans with Disabilities*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.2010disabilitysurveys.org/pdfs/surveyresults.pdf>
- Newman, L., Wagner, M., Cameto, R., & Knokey, A. M. (2009). *The post-high school outcomes of youth with disabilities up to 4 years after high school. A report of findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International. Retrieved from www.nlts2.org/reports/2009_04/nlts2_report_2009_04_complete.pdf
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425, 20 U.S.C. §§ 6301 *et seq.*
- Nord, M., Andrews, M., & Carlson, S. (2009). *Household food security in the United States, 2008*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture. Retrieved from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err83>
- Orfield, G. (2009). *Reviving the goal of an integrated society: A 21st century challenge*. Los Angeles, CA: The Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA. Retrieved from <http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/>
- Parish, S. L., Rose, R. A., & Andrews, M. E. (2010). TANF's impact on low-income mothers raising children with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 76, 234-253.
- Parish, S. L., Rose, R. A., Grinstein-Weiss, M., Richman, E. L., & Andrews, M. E. (2008). Material hardship in U.S. families raising children with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 75, 71-92.
- Rusch, F. R., & Braddock, D. (2004). Adult day programs versus supported employment (1988-2002): Spending and service practices of mental retardation and developmental disabilities state agencies. *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities*, 29, 237-242.
- Rusch, F. R., Hughes, C., Agran, M., Martin, J. E., & Johnson, J. R. (2009). Toward self-directed learning, post-high school placement, and coordinated support: Constructing new transition bridges to adult life. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*, 32, 53-59.
- Sharkey, P. (2009). *Neighborhoods and the Black-White mobility gap*. Washington, DC: Economic Mobility Project, The Pew Charitable Trusts. Retrieved from http://www.economicmobility.org/assets/pdfs/PEW_NEIGHBORHOODS.pdf
- Shieler, D. K. (2004). *The working poor: Invisible in America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Sinclair, L. B., & Yeargin-Allsopp, M. (2007). Racial and ethnic minorities with intellectual disabilities: A public health perspective. *TASH Connections*, 33, 20-23, 37.
- Somers, C. L., & Piliawsky, M. (2004). Drop-out prevention among urban, African American adolescents: Program evaluation and practical implications. *Preventing School Failure*, 48, 17-22.
- Stapleton, D. C., O'Day, B., Livermore, G. A., & Imparato, A. J. (2005). *Dismantling the poverty trap: Disability policy for the 21st century*. Ithaca, NY: Rehabilitation Research and Training Center for Economic Research on Employment Policy for Persons with Disabilities. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/edicollect/124>
- Suits, S. T. (2007). *A new majority: Low income students in the South's public schools*. Atlanta: Southern Education Foundation. Retrieved from www.southerneducation.org
- Suits, S. T. (2010). *A new diverse majority: Students of color in the South's public schools*. Atlanta: Southern Education Foundation. Retrieved from www.southerneducation.org
- TASH. (2000). TASH resolution on the people for whom TASH advocates. Retrieved from <http://www.tash.org/IRR/resolutions/res02advocate.htm>
- Thompson, J. R., Bryant, B., Campbell, E. M., Craig, E. M., Hughes, C., Rothholz, D., et al. (2004). *Supports Intensity Scale: Users manual*. Washington, DC: American Association on Mental Retardation.
- U.S. Census Report. (2009). *Poverty and health insurance coverage*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

- U. S. Department of Education. (2009). *28th annual report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2006*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Wehman, P. (2006). Integrated employment: If not now, when? If not us, who? *Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities, 31*, 122–126.
- Wehmeyer, M. L., & Palmer, S. B. (2003). Adult outcomes for students with cognitive disabilities three years after high school: The impact of self-determination. *Education and Training in Developmental Disabilities, 38*, 131–144.
- Wehmeyer, M. L., & Schwartz, M. (1997). Self-determination and positive adult outcomes: A follow-up study of youth with mental retardation or learning disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 63*, 245–255.
- Yamaki, K., & Fujiura, G. T. (2002). Employment and income status of adults with developmental disabilities living in the community. *Mental Retardation, 40*, 132–141.

Received: April 28, 2010

Final Acceptance: November 1, 2010

Editor in Charge: David Westling

Copyright of Research & Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities is the property of TASH and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.