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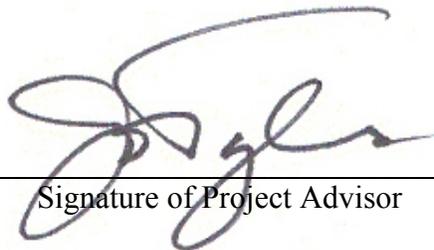
Johnson, Jena R., "Teacher Perceptions of Students in Poverty" (2015). *Student Research Submissions*. 217.

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**Teacher Perceptions of Students in Poverty**

**Jena R. Johnson**  
**EDCI 590 Individual Research**  
**May 1, 2015**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jo Tyler", is positioned above a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive.

Signature of Project Advisor

**Dr. Jo Tyler**  
**Professor of Linguistics and Education**

## Table of Contents

|                               |    |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Introduction .....            | 3  |
| Literature Review .....       | 8  |
| Methodology .....             | 20 |
| Analysis and Discussion ..... | 25 |
| Conclusion .....              | 35 |
| References .....              | 38 |

## Introduction

Poverty in the United States has been a constant over many decades. It is not just an on-going issue for adults but also for many children. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2014) shows that there has been a consistent achievement gap between low income children and their peers for many years with no improvement. One example of this is in fourth grade reading. Over the past 15-years there has been almost no improvement in the achievement gap for this subject area. In 1998, students in poverty scored an average of 31 points below students not in poverty. By 2013 this gap was 29 points, showing that almost no progress has been made. In comparison the fourth grade reading gap between English language learners and non-ELLs was reduced 11 points during the same 15-year period (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2014).

Gorski (2013) writes about socio-economic status (SES) and refers to it as, “students’ or families’ access to financial resources” (p.7). He also explains that he means specifically, “resources they can exchange for food, clothing, lodging, and health care” (p.7). In the United States the federal poverty line was set at \$22,400 as of 2011 (Kaufmann, 2011). Despite the cut-off, which is an exact number indicating poverty, other families lurk near this point but are not officially poor. Gorski (2013) describes poverty as a complex condition and explains that this monetary estimate is not a perfect solution for determining poverty. This determination impacts children in the school setting in a multitude of ways, one of which is the eligibility for free and reduced lunch. This eligibility is determined by guidelines that are set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. To determine eligibility for free or reduced lunch cost, a formula is used that is based off of the federal poverty line. For reduced lunch prices a family of four must make no

more than \$41,348 as of 2011. To qualify for free lunch a family income must not exceed \$20,055 as of 2011 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2011).

There is research which demonstrates that teachers often hold negative perceptions about students living in poverty and about the abilities of those students. Many educators are operating their classrooms under ideas based on the “culture of poverty.” This is the idea that people in poverty share a set of beliefs that can define them as a group and a “culture” (Gorski, 2008). A common teacher in-service program that has been used frequently over the past decade has been based on the work of Ruby Payne and is closely related to the culture of poverty concept. Her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2003), characterizes people in poverty through describing common qualities, behaviors, and attitudes that those people may have. Some examples of behaviors that Payne generalizes for children in poverty are classroom behavior problems, developmental delays, teen pregnancy, and single parent homes (Payne, 2003, p.10-11). However, critics of her work suggest that it is important to examine the legitimacy of her claims because they are so heavily impacting the field of education and perceptions teachers have of students in poverty. Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson (2008) assert that people in poverty are misrepresented in Payne’s writings and are lumped together as a culture rather than allowing them to be viewed as individuals. They describe Payne’s ideas as a form of deficit thinking which may cause teachers to lower their expectations for students in poverty.

Furthermore, the research indicates that some educators also hold negative views toward families of low SES students. For example, Stipek (2004) assessed instructional methods for 314 kindergarten and first grade classrooms, from 155 schools, across three states. The schools that were a part of the study had high numbers of low income students. The study found that low income schools tended to have more didactic instruction, allowing for little student centered

learning. These schools were also rated by teachers to have more negative social climates. In the classrooms within these schools teaching approaches were predicted by three factors: teacher goals, the ethnic make-up of the class, and teacher perceptions of students facing family financial challenges (Stipek, 2004). These findings demonstrate that teacher perceptions about students in poverty can strongly influence student learning, as the study found student centered learning can be limited when teachers attribute negative characteristics to students due to their socio-economic status.

The current climate in education today is focused on meeting the needs of all students including those who have historically been underachieving. Children in poverty are one of the groups of students that are often in this category. Legislation such as the NCLB Act of 2001 has been one attempt aimed at meeting the needs of these students and bridging the gap between them and their peers. For example, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 requires adequate yearly progress for all schools, regardless of the school's population. School districts with high student poverty rates and limited access to educational opportunities have the same requirements as affluent school districts (Gorski, 2013). For schools with 30 or more students in a subcategory, meeting the adequate yearly progress markers is another challenge that has to be faced. One of the sub categories is economically disadvantaged students. Students who qualify for free and reduced lunch fall into this category. Although aspects of NCLB are changing over time, testing standards remain in place for all states and impact students, including those living in poverty.

The number of students meeting the low SES criteria has been growing steadily in recent years. According to Gorski (2013), every 32 seconds a baby in the United States is born into poverty. He also cites another important statistic from the Children's Defense Fund (2010)

which estimated that one in five people under the age of 18 would be designated as poor by the end of 2011 (as cited in Gorski, 2013, p. 41). These statistics validate a need for concern in the field of education. Large portions of our student population are facing or may potentially face poverty in the near future. Rates of childhood poverty have been growing faster than adult poverty since the year 2000. Also growing is the population of students in the United States who have experienced homelessness. Approximately 1.6 million children were homeless in 2010 and about 40% of them were under five years old and more than one million homeless children attended public schools in 2011 (Children's Defense Fund, 2012, as cited by Gorski 2013, p. 42). Although this issue is not a new concern for educators, it is a growing concern. According to Snyder and Dillow (2013), the percentage of teachers that expressed concern about poverty being an issue in their school grew from 19.5% in 1994 to 32.4% in 2012.

In this research project I have explored the perceptions that teachers hold toward students living in poverty. I have also examined how those perceptions impact teacher-student interactions and relationships. In order to accomplish this, I utilized in-depth interviews with four teachers at the school where I currently teach and with a social worker for our county's population of homeless students. Qualitative research was used for this project and I did a detailed examination of the interview results after transcribing the interviews. I used literature review information as a basis for creating quality interview questions and for analyzing and interpreting the interview data.

When I started to think about ideas for my research project I kept coming back to one particular topic, poverty in the classroom and how teachers view those students living in poverty. Coming from a disadvantaged background, I am personally aware that some teachers can hold biases against students who are impoverished. There are members of my family that also

experienced similar teacher bias during the course of their public school education. They felt these experiences were directly related to their low SES status. Currently, as an elementary school teacher, I have witnessed situations where it appeared that students were being judged unfairly based on teacher perceptions about students' low SES or even their culture. Although these situations were negative, I have also seen teachers whose positive expectations were evident for all students, even those who were impoverished. Sometimes this showed in small acts such as belief in a student's abilities. Other times it was present in acts that were grander, such as school wide efforts by staff to collect extra supplies and book bags to make sure all students had the needed school supplies. Based on these experiences, I began to question the impact of poverty on how teachers perceive their students, whether positive or negative.

One of my classes at UMW also prompted me to think further on this topic. The course on the Characteristics and Education of Gifted Students brought up the idea that many groups of students are underrepresented in gifted programs, including students from low SES families. This discussion led me to think about how those students are represented in my school's gifted program. After learning in detail about characteristics of gifted students, I considered that teachers at my school may be overlooking students that have those characteristics. I wondered if Deficit Theory had a role in this. In my class on multi-cultural education I learned about Deficit Theory and understood that it is based on assumptions that educators make about students. These assumptions are based on the idea that students from low SES backgrounds are automatically behind and at a deficit academically.

In thinking about these issues, I began to consider questions that I wanted to explore. Are there students from impoverished homes that showed the characteristics of giftedness but were being overlooked due to their socio-economic status? Would teachers ever consider a

student who appeared impoverished as a candidate for the gifted program or would those students be overlooked? I also considered how teacher perception may influence the way teachers interact in the general education classroom with students from low income homes. If teachers are aware of a family's low income status, do they assume that the students from that family are not on grade level or are they viewed with an open mind? Does the Deficit Theory play a role in these situations?

I am also interested in exploring how teachers' perceptions of children in poverty impact teacher-student relationships. As Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder (2004) suggest, teacher-student relationships may play an important role in student success and student discipline issues in schools. Underlying negative teacher perceptions of students in poverty may hinder development of positive teacher-student relationships. Since teachers can inadvertently become aware of a family's financial status, examining their attitudes towards a student based on the SES may provide valuable information. My goal is that this research provides meaningful information in the field of education so that all students, including those living in poverty, can reach their full potential.

### **Literature Review**

For the purposes of this review I will examine several key areas of literature that directly, and at times indirectly, relate to the topic of students in poverty and how teacher perceptions and attitudes impact them. First, I will explore childhood poverty and how children living in poverty are impacted. Next, I will examine opportunities and barriers facing these students within the public education system. I will also investigate teacher perceptions of students living in poverty

and how those perceptions can impact students' educational achievement. Lastly, I will examine how schools can address the needs of students from low SES backgrounds.

### **Childhood Poverty**

One of the key aspects to students in poverty succeeding in school is teacher understanding of poverty. For example, according to the Children's Defense Fund (2010), low-income children do not achieve as well in school as their wealthier peers. They are also less likely to graduate from high school. This issue is addressed by Howard and Dresser (2009). They note that often the teacher and principal expectations may not mirror the life experiences of students living in poverty. Due to low expectations, students from impoverished backgrounds may not be aware of the connection between their own efforts and success or failure (Howard & Dresser, 2009). This lack of understanding may leave them short of meeting school expectations and does not show their true cognitive abilities. Howard and Dresser (2009) added that when students fail to meet these expectations, eventually the expectations are lowered. This sets the student on a path of continued failure in school. In reality many of these students have skills and abilities to succeed, but they may not display characteristics of independence or of being intrinsically motivated based on their own experiences. Howard and Dresser (2009) also note that when students are in school and faced with experiences that are new and unfamiliar to them they may think and act in ways that are very different from the way they would act in their own home or neighborhood. These behaviors may present a picture of the student that is not accurate. Educators can help students by preparing them for the expectations of the school environment, such as preparing them to work in a large group and completing seat work independently (Howard, & Dresser, 2009, p. 21).

Neuman (2009) too, explores the issues of educational inequality for students in the United States. She uses several Philadelphia neighborhoods as examples to show the stark contrast between affluent and poor neighborhoods. One of the things she points out is material differences, even in something like reading materials. Billboards are vibrant and clean in one neighborhood yet tattered and in disrepair in another. Neuman points out that a wealthier neighborhood has more restaurants and stores and readily available newspapers and it is not unusual for people to linger and read the paper. In one of the poor Philadelphia neighborhoods there are fewer of these places, less reading material available, and the environment is not conducive to relaxing and reading. Neuman (2009) also notes that these inequalities exist throughout these neighborhoods, including places such as libraries and schools. These differences impact the exposure to literacy and school readiness of students and other areas of their lives as well (Neuman, 2009).

The impact of poverty is more than just access to things provided by the school system. It is the overall picture of the difficulties faced by students living in poverty. Not only can school be a hardship for students of low SES, others areas of life can be challenging as well. As noted by Howard and Dresser (2009), the access to opportunities is not the same. They assert that money is a key necessity for resources of all kinds. Families in poverty do not have enough money for the resources they need. They explain that even in circumstances where a family may be able to obtain the funds for something like a summer camp, or new learning tools, these opportunities are often not available or offered in impoverished areas. Howard and Dresser (2009) cite research statistics on poverty that show more of these disadvantages. One that stands out is that 48% of students in the poorest homes compared with those in the wealthiest homes had moved at least three times before kindergarten (Lee & Burkham, 2002, as cited by Howard

& Dresser, 2009, p. 8). Howard and Dresser (2009) also explain that although parents from impoverished homes don't care any less about their children's education, long work hours at low paying jobs may make it difficult for them to participate in the educational system.

There are other factors that also serve as obstacles in the lives of these students. Neuman (2009) describes lack of health care as a prominent area of struggle for families living in poverty. She notes that nine million US students, about 12% of our total student population, have no health care coverage (Neuman, 2009, pp.1-2). Lack of health care may be a lack of insurance but could also be the ability to get health care even when insured. As Neuman explains families must still be able to afford co-pays and transportation to a provider. It is another aspect of life in poverty that plays a critical role in a student's development in school. Gorski (2013) asserts that without adequate health care students may struggle to focus, face more health issues such as anxiety and depression, and may deal with more chronic stress which can impact overall health (p.75). Attendance and concentration issues may arise for low income students due to these concerns (Gorski, 2013).

### **Educational Opportunities and Barriers for Students in Poverty**

Gorski (2013) writes about poverty and educational opportunities through the use of seven key principals. He suggests that four of those principles focus on the lack of equal educational opportunities for students of low SES. The basis of these four principles is as follows:

- The right to equitable educational opportunities is universal.
- We cannot understand the relationship between poverty and education without understanding biases and inequities experienced by people in poverty.
- Test scores are inadequate measures of equity.
- The inalienable right to equitable educational opportunities includes the right to high expectations, higher-order pedagogues, and engaging curricula. (Gorski, 2013, p. 85)

One aspect of opportunities that Gorski (2013) explores in relation to the first principal is the notion that schools are intended to be an equalizer in our society. He explains that for most children in poverty our educational system actually works in the opposite way. It instead works to keep inequalities in place. One of the biggest reasons for this is that low income students often attend schools that do not have the same basic amenities that schools in more affluent areas have. Many times the basic needs of schools in low income areas are not met. He further explains that extra resources that would benefit students are also lacking within these communities. When students attend schools with old textbooks and out of date facilities and equipment, they are already at a disadvantage when compared with their middle and upper class counterparts (Gorski, 2013, p. 87). When this occurs students are not getting the same benefits in preparing for standardized testing. Gorski's (2013) principle about test scores can be applied in this area because academic opportunities and test equity are related. He explains that one of the key issues that cause these disparities among schools is funding them with property taxes. This method of funding schools sets up an almost automatic opportunity gap (Gorski, 2013, p. 90). Based on this assessment the current U.S. educational system is not fulfilling the four principles that Gorski (2013) discussed by ensuring that there is equal education for all.

Gorski (2013) noticed that some of the other inequalities of schools with high percentages of students in poverty are: access to opportunities for family involvement, access to highly qualified teachers, access to an affirming school environment, and access to shadow education. He uses the term *shadow education* to refer to opportunities that are indirectly related to school such as extra-curricular camps and SAT prep courses (Gorski, 2013, p. 17). These are things that may be available to those that can afford to participate and have transportation to and from the classes. Without access to these, opportunity gaps inevitably form

between those who can afford them and those who cannot (Reardon, 2013). These inequalities indicate a failure of schools to meet the second of Gorski's principles, a willingness to first acknowledge that inequalities exist in order to comprehend the connection between poverty and education (Gorski, 2013).

Noguera (2011) also reinforces these ideas about education inequalities. He cites sources that show low income families are able to provide access to fewer resources for their children that may support them academically. Lareau (2003) explained for example, that children from middle and upper income homes may have access to private tutors, homework support, enrichment camps and other activities that reinforce their academic requirements (as cited in Noguera, 2011, p.10). Students in poverty are at a disadvantage because of insufficient academic support, whether due to an inadequate school system failing them or their families being unable to provide it (Gorski, 2013). In terms of barriers Noguera (2011) explains that environmental circumstances may make school success more difficult. Students growing up in high poverty areas are more likely to experience bullying and live in conditions that are more likely to have a negative impact on their emotional and physical health. These things all influence how well students do in school (Noguera, 2011, p. 10). Both Gorski (2013) and Noguera (2011) make a claim that opportunities are limited for children in poverty and that these limits influence their academic success. They agree that without a fair distribution of resources and opportunities in addition to engaging curriculum and instruction, schools cannot ensure that all students are fairly educated.

### **Teacher Perceptions of Students in Poverty**

One step toward creating a fair education for all students may be to evaluate how teachers perceive students in poverty. Pascopella (2006) suggests that teachers may be an important

influence for students in poverty and therefore recommends more extensive training for teachers about poverty and student achievement. Lazar, Edwards, and McMillon (2012) elaborate on this by discussing the disconnect that sometimes occurs (p. 103). The importance of this relates directly to negative perceptions that teachers may have about students in poverty, many of which the teachers themselves may be unaware of (Lazar et al., 2012). By examining their own culture and getting to know the backgrounds of their students they may be more apt to recognize that some of their biases are unfounded.

Cuthrell, Stapleton, and Ledford (2010) also discuss teacher bias and teacher expectations as important. They examined the practices of schools that were highly successful despite high levels of economically disadvantaged students. One of the common strategies they found in these schools specifically focuses on hiring highly qualified teachers. One important qualification is that teachers see the potential in all students and believe that all students can and should take responsibility for their learning. They also describe another strategy used by these schools which focuses on the use of assessments. The authors suggest that rather than putting a large amount of emphasis on end of the year testing, on-going assessments should be highlighted. Daily and weekly assessments that are collaboratively planned are recommended as a means of keeping records of and monitoring student growth (Cuthrell, et al., 2010). By using such strategies schools are more likely to provide students with the learning they need. For example, students who exhibit characteristics of giftedness are much less likely to go unnoticed in such an environment, showing the power of high expectations for students in poverty.

The Deficit Theory is a biased view or theory that teachers may hold toward low SES students and students of color. It is also referred to as Deficit Perception and is described by Howard and Dresser (2009) as the belief that because of students' lack of knowledge and

experiences it is inevitable that these students will perform poorly and therefore expectations for those students are lowered (Howard & Dresser, 2009, p. 10). According to Valencia (1997), the Deficit Theory is based on a much earlier model of Deficit Thinking. Valencia (1997) explains that as far back as the 1600's this model of thinking was used. He elaborates that the basis of it was often racist, and depending on the times, claimed various reasons for the so called deficit within a given group of people. The reasons ranged from genetics to class and culture to familial socialization. Today the vestiges of the original Deficit Thinking models still permeate American education. For example, one assumption underlying the Deficit Theory is the longstanding myth that children living in poverty do not reach high academic achievement because of lack of effort or because they are not capable. Gorski (2013) addresses both of these myths and explains that rather than lack of effort, it is lack of opportunity and access to educational services and activities that so often work against struggling families. He explains that for many families hard work is often a low paying, physical labor job that leaves little financially for extra educational opportunities like camps or tutors.

Powell (1998) explains that the Deficit Theory, as applied to the field of education, emerged in the 1960's and was intended as an explanation for the high failure rates of low income students. She relates the Deficit Theory to literacy by explaining that the theory assumes children from low income homes are deprived because of their family's financial disadvantage and that they have less verbal stimulation in their homes. This deficit view assumes that they enter school without the verbal resources that they need, which makes academic success difficult. She goes on to explain that this form of thinking, which she has witnessed among many educators, is the deficit theory in action. However, she points out that although the deficit theory from the 1960's claimed verbal inadequacy in poor children, later research proved this to

be unfounded. In the 1970's researchers realized that when low SES children were in a comfortable environment that was not intimidating, they were extremely capable language users if allowed to speak using their own vernacular (Powell, 1989).

Ladson-Billings' (2006) examines how biases espoused by deficit thinking can play a role in the academic lives of students. In a series of interviews, student journals, and electronic portfolios of pre-service and novice teachers, Ladson-Billings (2006) has analyzed what these teachers perceive culture to be in relation to students and themselves. The common threads that she found among many of them is that they associated culture with students of color and often identified schools where they worked as diverse if there was a population of minority students. Ladson-Billings (2006) found that when asked about their own culture, these teachers described themselves as normal or having no culture. This implies that culture, something the teachers attribute to these students, is outside the norm. One student even identified her school as diverse even though the student population was one hundred percent African American. The author found that many teachers are also attributing a wide range of behaviors that are seen in schools to what they define as culture. Another blanket assumption these teachers are making is that students who are difficult to handle have low self esteem. Ladson-Billings (2006) attributes the generalizations that these teachers are making to a problem in teacher education, rather than a shortcoming of the teachers themselves.

The ideas in Ladson-Billings (2006) article relate to students in poverty and the Deficit Theory because they show the way that negative teacher perceptions can create an unfair bias against students. It also demonstrates how the Deficit Theory can operate. For example, when educators associate negative qualities with students because of their culture, it may be difficult to have high expectations for those students and to create a positive teacher-student relationship.

This is evident in some of the examples the author gives, such as: teachers associating all matter of behavioral issues to low self esteem, a teacher stating that having children out of wedlock is part of “their” culture, and a principal having a “Restitution Room” filled with only African American boys and referring to them as “these students.” She also shares a pre-service teacher’s journal entry in which the teacher tells of two African American students who did participate in the class’s “Special Day” program. The teacher stated, “I wonder if there is something cultural going on here.” Ladson-Billings (2006) notes that the student teachers failed to make the connection to the socio-economic aspect that may have been playing a role here. The school was in an affluent community and this special day had turned into a day to show off one’s multitude of toys and to bring a luxuriant treat to share. The two students who did not participate were bussed in from one of the poorest areas nearby. The pre-service teacher did not attribute the lack of participation to finances but automatically linked it to culture (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Cuthrell et al.(2010) agree that these types of teacher biases are detrimental to students and that key to helping students in poverty is to hire teachers who espouse the potential of students rather than see them as deficient (Cuthrell, et al., 2010). One of the aspects they discuss is the importance of the school environment as being essential in meeting the needs of students in poverty. They specifically speak to the importance of a positive classroom environment as one of the most powerful ways that teachers can ensure that all students feel included, especially those of low SES. Cuthrell et al. (2010) also cite research which has found one person can make a difference in a child’s life. The same is true of ongoing relationships with families in the community. This can also have a positive impact in the classroom (Cuthrell, et al., 2010).

### **Addressing the Needs of Students in Poverty**

Although the systems that are in place create inequities in schools, we can attempt to address them within our schools and classrooms (Gorski, 2013). Engaging students in their own learning may be one of the best ways that we can work to help them become more invested in their own education. Jensen (2013) has researched and described seven factors of engagement that are strongly linked to socio-economic status. The seven factors that he identifies are: health and nutrition, vocabulary, effort and energy, mind-set, cognitive capacity, relationships, and stress level. He explains that educators have for years had an easier time connecting with students from higher income groups, but notoriously fail to engage low SES students in learning (Jensen, 2013, p. 7). For educators to build stronger relationships with economically disadvantaged students, understanding these seven factors and how they impact students is essential. All of these things can have an effect on cognition and behavior (Jensen, 2013). For example, regarding health and nutrition, Jensen (2013) explains that quantity and quality of food can be directly related to health, which in turn, impacts students' education. Living conditions can also be an issue for the health of low SES students. People living in poverty are more likely to live in homes with inadequate plumbing and peeling paint, which increases their exposure to lead. This exposure can lead to poor working memory and weaker capability in identifying the connection between cause and effect.

Another factor of engagement mentioned by Jensen (2013) is effort and energy. Jensen (2013) asserts that students who appear uninterested or may slouch in their chair are likely to be viewed differently according to their SES. He states that uninformed teachers may be likely to see students of low SES as lazy but may view their middle income students as lacking potential. These two different points of view regarding students who are disengaged from the learning

shows how teacher perception can affect student performance in school. For example, Jensen (2013) explains the power of the “buy in.” It is basically a teacher’s ability to “sell” students on learning. In order for low SES students to “buy into” the academic game and see it as valuable, teachers must gain their trust. This should be done by learning about the student and their background in a true and meaningful way. This also requires that the teacher is genuine with the student in their interactions. Failure to make these connections is likely to de-motivate low income students, whereas working to do these things may build relationships that make an important association between home and school life (Jensen, 2013).

Jensen (2013) elaborates further on these factors of engagement by explaining how educators can use strategies relating to them to better connect with and engage students. He doesn’t just tell teachers that this is what they need to do; he provides ideas and examples on how to do it. One step he recommends that teachers take is to recognize stress in students. What may appear to be apathy or misbehavior may be signaling feelings of hopelessness or anguish in a student. Jensen suggests that if this is a problem for students, a teacher can alter the environment to make it less stressful. An example would be to provide in class time to complete homework so that it is less of a stressor for the student. These and other examples provided focus on how educators can bond with students and alleviate some of the stress they may feel regarding school and home life (Jensen, 2009, pp. 27-30).

The literature clearly demonstrates that teachers’ biased assumptions about poverty can have negative impacts on how low-income students perform in school (Cuthrell et al., 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Students in poverty face daily obstacles and often do not have equal opportunities in the classroom (Gorski, 2013; Noguera, 2011). In addition, the relationships that teachers have with students in poverty are affected (Jensen, 2013). The review of this literature

has prompted me to further examine ways that schools can strengthen the connection to all of our students and their families and provide a meaningful educational experience for each one of them.

### **Methodology**

Based on this review of the literature, I have investigated teacher perceptions to find out how they play a role in teachers' relationships with students and in the educational inequities that exist. Consequently, my research project sheds light on teacher perceptions of students in poverty and on how those perceptions impact the education of those same students. The goal of my research is to investigate teachers' perceptions of students in poverty through qualitative interviews with teachers. I based the interview questions on the background provided in the scholarly literature from a sociological and educational perspective. Doing so helped me to better understand the importance of teacher perceptions of students in poverty and how they play a role in teachers' relationships with students and in the educational inequities that exist. I conducted in-depth interviews with four teachers and one social worker in the elementary school where I teach. It is a suburban county in Virginia and approximately 35% of the students are classified as low income. However, some of the schools within the same county have an economically disadvantaged (ECD) population as high as 80%. Before beginning my interviews, I obtained approval for this research from the IRB and the appropriate school officials in my school division.

In developing interview questions, I based my question formulation on the literature that I reviewed in order to better create an open dialogue with my research participants. Using information from Rubin and Rubin (2005), I carefully developed questions that were meant to

elicit both details and depth of information from the participants. These types of questions allowed me to have clearer ideas of each participant's experiences. For the creation of my interview questions I began with a standard question for all participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). However, from there each interview was unique. As described in Rubin and Rubin (2005, pp. 4-5), qualitative researchers should draw out responses from participants based on the answers and information that the participant shared in the previous answer. The purpose of using this technique is to gain depth of answers from participants. Within this technique, the qualitative interviewer may utilize broader questions to get a general feel for something. A narrow focus can lead the subject to provide information about that specific area of interest. I began with questions that were broader in focus to establish a relaxed conversation where the participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. As the interviews progressed I used a narrow approach as needed to elicit responses about specific information if the information I was looking for had not come up in the responses given up to that point. For example, I asked a broad question such as "In general, what do you think are teachers' perceptions toward poverty at this school?" Then if the participant gave a vague answer or was unclear, I chose a narrower approach by asking something like, "Can you tell about any times when you have witnessed a teacher interact positively or negatively with a low SES student?" or "How do you think that interaction impacted that teacher's relationship to that student?" or "What was your reaction to the situation you witnessed?" These narrower questions allowed for detailed answers but still helped the participant to focus on information that shed light on teacher perceptions. With this approach each interview was completely independent and unique in comparison to the other interviews.

My opening question was, “Describe any childhood experiences you have relating to poverty.” I used a narrow approach to get more specific information. For example with follow-up questions such as:

- Tell me about any low SES students that stand out in your mind.
- What have you done in your class that you felt was helpful to low SES students
- Describe the learning styles of your low SES students.
- How do your low SES students perform academically?
- Describe the communication you have with the families of your low SES students.

These follow up interview questions were useful in focusing on the individual teacher’s view of low SES students and were used as needed to assist the participants in sharing information and personal experiences and world views. I used my questioning to prompt the participants to answer in ways that created a vivid picture of what they were attempting to describe. For example, if a participant were to tell a story about someone living in poverty, I used follow-up questions to further evoke the participants’ memories of both the details and the vividness I was looking for (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, pp. 131-132). Another example of how I sought the nuances in my dialogue with participants is the following type of question: “As a child did you ever experience judgments about you or your family because of money?” If needed I also asked the question in a different way to bring forth the nuance I was looking for in answers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, pp.132-133). So I instead asked “Tell me about your childhood experiences regarding your family’s socio-economic status.” Digging deeper for depth, details, vividness, and nuance to gain understandings of the participants’ perceptions, was the plan of action that I used as I wrote my interview questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

To select interviewees I began by asking several teachers from the school where I teach if they were willing to participate in this research project. Then I chose four of those teachers to participate in the research. Although I aimed for some diversity in race, age, and teaching experience, I was not able to achieve all the diversity that I wanted with my group of participants. I did, however, find a range of experience among the participants who were educators. Their experience levels range from nine to 22 years. The majority of teachers at the school where I work are Caucasian females so all of my participants were female. We have very few staff members who identify as a race other than Caucasian, so I had only one participant that was not Caucasian. That participant is African American and is also a Special Education teacher. I also asked one of our county school social workers to be a participant. She is one of two social workers specializing in working with our population of homeless students in the county where I teach. Her role as a professional dealing with students in poverty provided some valuable insight into the lives of students in poverty and their educational experiences.

All of the interviews were done after school or on a day when there was no school. For the social worker, I interviewed her in my classroom after school was over. I interviewed two of the teacher participants in their classrooms and the other two were interviewed on snow days. One of those interviewed on the snow day came to my home and the other participant asked me to do the interview at her home. My only requirement was that the interview locations be private and free of interruptions. I ensured that this occurred and I reassured the participants that their responses were confidential and would not be heard by others. The completion time for each interview was between 35 minutes to one hour. I verified that each participant was aware of the approximate time needed to complete the interviews and had the time to commit before they consented to participate.

During the first interview, which was with the social worker, I used a digital recorder. This method was useful; however, I switched methods of recording for the other interviews. After transcribing the first interview myself and realizing that it was a lengthy process, I decided to apply for a student research grant to cover the cost of having the other interviews transcribed. For this reason, I decided to use my laptop to record the other interviews as it made uploading the files for the transcriber easier.

Upon completion of all interviews and completion of the transcribing process, I began to analyze the qualitative data I had collected. One aspect I was looking for in the answers given by participants is vividness. When specific details of an event or situation were provided I analyzed the data to develop a clearer understanding of the meanings behind those experiences and how they shaped the views and attitudes of the participants. These exact descriptions were used as a means of gaining the nuances of the participants' experiences. As Rubin and Rubin (2005) explain, all of the details and vivid descriptions were important for shedding light on the nuances, which show glimpses that are beyond the surface. They show us the grey areas, the deeper meanings to the thoughts and feelings, rather than just the first reaction answers to questions. During this analysis process I also searched for evidence of commonalities and differences within the interview data and my literature resources. The teachers each provided perspectives of their own, the social worker provided another, and the third aspect was gained from the literature itself. In order to find similarities and differences I searched for the convergence of ideas within these three components of my research.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

The perceptions of teachers toward students in poverty was the focus of five interviews I conducted with five individual participants in a suburban Virginia county elementary school. Four of the participants were classroom teachers and one was a social worker for homeless students in the county. All of the participants were open and willing to share their personal experiences as well as the insight they have gained as educators. The interviews allowed the participants to examine their own experiences with poverty and to search for connections from their own lives to their experiences in the classroom. Throughout the interviews there was a comfortable conversational tone. The participants did not seem reserved when talking, with the exception of one participant who asked that recording be stopped part of the way through a interview. She had a thought to share regarding race and was unsure if it was acceptable to say it. I stopped recording as she requested, heard her concerns, and assured her that she was free to share whatever was on her mind. Once the interview resumed she expressed her thoughts clearly.

Although the goal of the interviews was to gain insight into the teachers' perceptions about students in poverty, some of the participants shared more regarding their personal experiences. Therefore the direction of this analysis will turn toward how the participants views of poverty may have been shaped by their own life experiences, as well as how they perceive students in poverty. I conducted the interviews with five different participants and each one was done individually. There were three Caucasian participants, one person of Hispanic descent, and one teacher who is African American. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants and "South Hill" is the pseudonym for the school and the school division where the research was conducted.

Martha is a Caucasian female and has spent her adult years as a social worker. For 22 of those years she was a social worker for a non-profit group and then for South Hill County Schools. In the school system she has specifically been working with the county's homeless students and their families for seven years. Martha was the first participant to be interviewed and the interview took place at South Hill Elementary School. She was passionate as she talked about her clients and expressed genuine concern for their well being. Delores was the second participant to be interviewed and is a teacher with nine years of experience and is a Mexican-American. She possessed a friendly demeanor throughout the interview and gave thoughtful answers. She was also interviewed at South Hill Elementary School. Dee was the third teacher to be interviewed. She is a Caucasian female with 22 years of teaching experience. Due to snowstorms closing schools, I interviewed Dee at her home. Dee has a lively personality but was quite serious during the interview process, wanting to clearly express her thoughts about the questions. Next I interviewed Kate at my own home, due to another snow storm. She is a Caucasian female educator with nine years of experience. During her interview she became emotional early on because the topic felt very personal to her. She had much to offer in relation to this study. The last participant to be interviewed was Eva. She is a special education teacher from South Hill Elementary and her interview took place there. She is an African American female. Eva was soft spoken and gave a slightly different perspective since she was the only interviewee that was not a general education teacher.

### **Participants' Experiences with Poverty**

Based on the data, it is evident that each participant has a view of poverty that was somehow shaped by their own life experiences. However, not all of the participants expressed the same views about students in poverty and their families. There were also some varying

views as each of the five participants discussed their own personal early life experiences with poverty. However, each of their experiences was not the same. For example, while both Kate and Eva grew up in poverty, only Kate seemed to be negatively impacted by her impoverished background and they both spoke of the way their teachers treated them; there was a definite difference. Kate seemed to be burdened so much more by her experiences with poverty than Eva was. Eva even explained that she did not know she was poor or that her family was poor until she was in high school, while Kate seemed to be acutely aware. On the other hand Martha, Dee, and Delores grew up in middle class homes, but were indirectly impacted by poverty in different ways.

Martha the social worker grew up as a military child and expressed that she was unaware of differences in class or income until high school age. She felt that being a student at schools on military bases insulated her from the world outside. She explained that her knowledge of class differences wasn't apparent until she started high school in a public school. Dee had a similar situation growing up. Her family was not military but was middle class. Martha had also described her family as middle class. Martha pointed out that she was also really unaware of racism because of what she called a "melting pot" environment that she grew up in. Yet, Dee said her early perception of poverty was when her school bus would drive through a poverty stricken part of town and she saw that the inhabitants were mostly black. This was her only exposure to poverty as a child, yet she wanted to point out that she did not necessarily associate being black with being poor because she also went to private school with black students and she was aware that it cost money to go to her school. So while Martha didn't seem to have race or poverty on her radar until her teen years, both were something that Dee was aware of but had no personal experience with.

Delores on the other hand was very aware of poverty through the experiences of her parents and extended family. She gave great detail about the poverty that both her mother and father grew up in and that her extended family still lives in. Yet for Delores, it still did not impact her daily life because her parents had made it out of their impoverished homes. So growing up Delores's only exposure to her family's poverty was during family visits but it wasn't a part of her daily existence. This knowledge of her parents' backgrounds and the financial hardships faced by her extended family did seem to play a role in how Delores perceived children and families in poverty. Although she did not directly experience poverty, she expresses empathy for the the feelings of students who may have to deal with it. She explained that she understood students who receive help from school for extra supplies or clothes may be embarrassed and may want to be discreet about it. On the other hand, Delores, gave an example of a student who was given a new, free coat at school and she told about how excited and proud the student was to have it. Delores is observant of what students in these situations may be feeling. She notes about that same student that no one knew the student had been given the coat except her and that he could have kept it to himself and no one would have ever known if he hadn't told. Her parents experiences have been shared with her and she is aware that poverty can take a toll on a young person. Delores spoke in a proud way about the choices her parents had made in order to get out of the poverty they were surrounded with while growing up.

Eva and Kate described their own families as "poor" during their childhoods. While they both used the term "poor" to describe their circumstances, Eva wasn't really aware that her family was poor until her high school years, while Kate was profoundly impacted by the knowledge. The key difference for these two participants seems to stem from two areas. One is family support. While Eva's mother had passed away there still seemed to be a strong support

network within the family. On the other hand Kate did not have a strong support network within her family. Her father was not involved in her life, she was an only child, and lived alone with her mother. She discussed the struggles her single mother had in making ends meet. The jobs that her Mom held were low income and often did not provide enough income to take care of their basic needs. During her senior year of high school Kate was homeless, living with a friend in order to finish school.

The second area of difference between Eva and Kate seemed to be the way their teachers reacted to and treated them. Both participants described their poverty as something the teachers were aware of. Eva said her teachers were sympathetic and wanted to help and that others were in the same situation. On the other hand, Kate felt ignored because of her poverty. She had thoughts and ideas in the classroom and yet felt she was overlooked because her teachers knew she was poor. Kate also expressed that her teachers tended to shower attention on the wealthy, popular kids, even complimenting them on their hair and clothing. Kate came into contact with many students from wealthier families when she was taking honors classes. However, there were times when she felt she needed help in certain subjects but felt too insecure to ask for it and her teachers never reached out to her. She described writing assignments that would be returned to her with a low grade and with written criticisms but no verbal feedback from the teacher. Kate stated, "She never taught me how to fix it, just something I had to do on my own." She also felt embarrassment because her mother at times worked delivering papers to the homes of the other students. The biases that she felt her teachers had toward her and her social isolation created a situation where she felt all alone and that her education was all up to her. It was obvious from her emotion that these experiences caused Kate pain but they were also something that motivated

her. She said that she knew she had to do it on her own and pushed to get herself through high school and college.

Kate also has a philosophy today that impacts how she teaches her students. Kate expressed that she never wants her students to feel the way she did, so she makes a point to try to reach out to them in ways that her teachers did not. She stated that she prefers to work with struggling students because she feels that she can better relate to them and she knows how much it may benefit them to have someone who knows what they are going through. Kate even shared a story of how she told about her own low grades and struggles in math because she did not receive the help she needed. She said after sharing that story one of her own students broke down and cried in her arms saying that she did not have any help at home. It is evident that although Kate has suffered some painful life experiences, she has used those to be a better teacher and to relate to students in ways that many of them may need.

At least one of the participants was taken aback by their first experiences with students in poverty and their families. After graduating college Dee landed her first teaching job in a Head Start program. She had 18 students and had to do home visits. The home visits were useful because Dee could glean much more information about students based on visiting their families. During these early experiences she was shocked by the living situations of her students. One of the biggest things that she was surprised to learn about was the lack of running water in some of their homes. The size and condition of her students' homes was also something that she was not expecting. After describing her first home visit, she expressed that she was in complete shock saying, "I had never seen anything like that, smelled anything like that." This student lived in a home that was very unclean and had no sink except a utility sink near the outside of the home. Dee conveyed that she had grown up in a four bedroom, two bath home and was truly surprised

by the way some of her students were living. She also shared that her view of her students' needs changed and she began to change her approach in the classroom to better meet those needs. What I found insightful is that Dee recognized that teaching only in the classroom leaves teachers with a lack of information about students and their families. The home visits reveal much more about the lives and can be more telling.

In contrast, Delores did not express surprise at her students' poverty, but she did notice that it seemed more accepted because almost all of them were impoverished, so no one stood out because of what their family lacked. However, within South Hill Elementary there isn't really uniform poverty and it is more noticeable if a student doesn't have what they need. As Delores pointed out, nobody wants to be singled out. Since many students and their families are uncomfortable asking for help, it is up to the teacher to be observant about the needs of students and their families. The teacher may have to offer help rather than waiting for families to ask for it.

### **Teacher Perceptions of Students and their Parents Living In Poverty**

Teachers enter their first teaching experiences with a world view that has already been formed by what has occurred in their own lives. Similarly the participants in this study all had ideas about the world based on their own lives. I wanted to look at how their own life events had shaped how they saw children in poverty. Once these educators entered the classroom and began working with children in poverty and their families for the first time, did their world views change? I found their views did change. Delores had her first experiences with teaching children in poverty when she was a college student and got a job tutoring middle and high school students from low income families. Many of these families did not speak English and Delores saw the weight of responsibility that fell on the shoulders of these students as they often had to

be translators for their parents. She described the daily routine of some of these students and the adult tasks they had, which in turn made them behave in a more adult way. Delores expressed how her perspective was changed as a result of this early teaching experience, saying, “So that in itself was, you know, kind of of getting that big perspective on, its not only about school. Yes, schools are important but, then you have kids that are going, that getting up, you know, 6 o’clock and doing A, B, C, and D before they can even get to school, are late every day because they are taking care either waiting for younger siblings to go to school and then coming to school late....” Another aspect that she noticed was that parents wanted to be involved but seemed to be intimidated by the school system because of language barriers and a lack of resources but she also commented that once the parents were more comfortable they would open up and would ask questions for the help that they needed.

Other participants also found themselves surprised by the families that they worked with. Eva commented that she cringes when she hears people say that parents don’t care. Like Delores, she also thought that parents were likely intimidated by the school setting, stating that it is likely someone told them that they were underachievers. She said, “They are intimidated because you know they have this perception that it is above their head.” Each of these teachers recognized that although parents want to help their children succeed in school , they are often too afraid or insecure about becoming involved in the process.

Martha, too, expressed that parents often want to take care of their children’s needs but don’t have the resources to do so. She spoke about times when teachers may witness students in need of things like a winter coat or shoes that fit. Often those teachers will wonder why the parents aren’t getting those things for their child when there is obviously a need and they assume that the parent does not care or is not making their child a priority. Her description of the parents

not buying those things is not from a lack of caring but from life circumstances that made it difficult for them to have the money for the items. Martha expressed frustration at the judgment she has seen and heard teachers make against parents of students in poverty. She exclaimed during the interview, “If I hear THOSE parents or THOSE kids , those are like fingernails on a chalkboard to me because you’re referring to them as they’re THOSE, as though there’s something wrong or something less than.” She then went on to clarify that often parents who may owe money on a lunch account have just forgotten because they have so much else going on. She then went on to make the same comparison to herself, explaining without checking her personal email daily, she could just as easily forget to add money to her children’s lunch account. Martha seemed to want to express that parents living in poverty are no different than other parents in what they want for their children and trying their best to take care of their children.

A common thread that the participants shared is that they have all been impacted by poverty by varying degrees and at different points in their lives. Kate and Eva were the only ones to deal directly with the struggle of poverty. Kate, however, did not have a family support system in place and therefore felt the effects of poverty in a much more obvious way. She also felt that she did not fit in because the majority of her classmates were from families that were well off financially. Kate worried that they all knew of her mother’s job as a newspaper carrier and felt embarrassed by that. Eva expressed that although poverty was a part of her life, she did not feel the pain of it in her childhood years because she was insulated from it. Her family made sure her needs were met, her teachers were supportive, and she was surrounded by others whose families had similar financial strains.

Delores, Dee, and Martha all have been indirectly impacted by poverty. Delores’s parents grew up in poverty and struggled to get out of the depressed area they grew up in;

however, she had a middle class upbringing. She was clearly aware of and influenced by her parents backgrounds. Dee and Martha also grew up in middle class families but did not express any impacts of poverty on their parents generations or other members of their families.

However, both Martha and Dee described the needs of the students they work with and are acutely aware of how poverty creates difficulties for them. Each of these participants has dealt directly with students and their families regarding the families' financial struggles and each of them has attempted to help these students in various ways.

Another topic that was expressed by participants throughout the interviews was the way impoverished students and their families are viewed by others, even within the school system. Martha noted that the tone or atmosphere of a school and how they will treat families living with poverty is clear from the demeanor of the office staff. She explained that the vibe within a school is set by the administration and explained that some schools within South Hill County are very open and friendly, searching for ways to make families feel comfortable and to help when they can. However, she expressed that other schools seem to have an atmosphere that is not welcoming and described how families may feel intimidated by that. Martha also shared that some schools clearly have staff members that are burnt out due to the vast needs of large amounts of students and families. She told about how staff at those schools are almost numb to the needs because it is so great and so on-going.

The impact of staff attitudes towards students is clear from Kate's experiences. She stated, "Not a single teacher stood up for me. Not until my senior year." She then shared a story of the impact that one teacher who cared had made on her life. Kate also told about an early teaching experience she witnessed when another teacher lifted a little boy by his shirt so that he was at eye level with her, his feet were dangling in the air. Nobody did anything to stop it. Kate

said that it was just the norm within that school but also expressed that the student in question was misbehaving but was likely one who “probably didn’t get any love at home and he probably didn’t get it at school either.”

The other participants also thought that educators and schools weren’t always doing all they could to help students in need, but their examples were not as extreme. However, the connections are still there demonstrating that these participants believe that educator relationships with impoverished students are important for their educational success.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this research project I explored the ways that teachers perceive students in poverty. Over the course of the five interviews I saw things from the teachers’ point of view and from the point of view of a social worker who works with educators to help students in poverty. There were some themes that emerged through all of the interviews. All of the participants gave a lot of description regarding their own lives and personal experiences. This was helpful in determining how their views were developed and influenced. There were also common themes when they discussed their early experiences with students in poverty and when they shared their views about how teachers perceive students in poverty. For the participants who had not directly experienced poverty, they experienced surprise at the conditions that students and their families often lived in when dealing with extreme poverty. There were multiple comments from participants regarding the ways that educators may not see the needs of families struggling financially or may judge these families and parents as uncaring. Among the participants there seemed to be a shared sense that these judgements were unfair and often that students living in poverty are disregarded by schools.

Overall there were clear indications that these participants want to do what they can to help students in poverty succeed. It was also evident that they do not hold poverty against their students and recognize it as a condition that is beyond their student's control. They also expressed throughout the interviews support and positive feelings toward their students who were living in poverty. Some of the participants also expressed praise and came to the defense of the parents of impoverished students, defending them from the judgements that are often made about them.

What was most obvious is that the participants did not apply the deficit theory (Gorski, 2013; Valencia, 1997) to their impoverished students. Eva specifically stated that she thought that term was offensive for what it implies. It is clear that this group of participants has seen these students mistreated over the course of their careers. It is also clear that each of them has worked to create environments that are positive for students in poverty because even if they see a student's needs, that knowledge does not blind them to the student's potential. Kate explained her ultimate hope for her students, "That's what I hope and that's what I try to instill in my students, those especially that I know are poverty stricken, it is that they want it in their hearts, for themselves." She goes on to explain that it won't matter how much everyone else wants it for them but that they must want it for themselves in order to overcome the obstacles that they will face because of poverty. Much is expressed by Kate in these statements because she has no doubts about her students abilities, just the wish that they will have the will and the heart to overcome adversity that they will likely face because of poverty. Her belief in them and commitment to them is unwavering and shows no evidence that she finds her impoverished students lacking in abilities but instead sees them as strong enough to face what may challenge them.

Upon completion of this research, I find that there are areas of information that I would have liked to investigate more thoroughly. For example, I prefer to have gotten more details about how the participants perceive students in poverty. After reviewing the interview transcripts, it is clear that I focused a larger portion of the interview on the backgrounds and personal connections that each participant had to poverty. In hindsight, I would ask more questions pertaining to the participants experiences as educators working with students and families who are impoverished and I would attempt to get them to express their thoughts about those experiences.

If other researchers were to continue in this same line of research they could gain a great deal of knowledge in this area by further probing participants about specific experiences they have had relating to students in poverty, both their own students and students within their schools. By digging deeper into this topic, researchers may be able to shed light on the relationship between teachers' perceptions and the educational experiences of students.

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