

5-2019

# Poverty in the School Setting

Brienna Wolf

Follow this and additional works at: [https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education\\_masters](https://nwcommons.nwciowa.edu/education_masters)

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

Poverty in the School Setting

Brienna Wolf

Northwestern College

A Literature Review Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

May 9, 2019

Dr. Sara Waring Tiedeman

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT..... 3

POVERTY IN THE SCHOOL SETTING ..... 4

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ..... 5

ANALYSIS..... 22

APPLICATION ..... 24

CONCLUSION..... 28

REFERENCES ..... 30

### Abstract

Poverty effects nearly every school district in the United States to some degree. This literature review explores the impacts poverty has on children in the school setting. This paper examined studies that looked at children ages six months through eighteen years of all socio-economic statuses and compared them specifically to children living below the poverty line. Through examining the significance and detriment of poverty in schools, I explain the different forms of poverty, myths and misconceptions about people living in poverty, the effects poverty has on brain development, barriers to accessing education, barriers within the educational system, and strategies to engage students and families living in poverty. The results of the various studies included in this paper determined poverty effects nearly every form of development in youth and has lasting repercussions into adulthood.

### Poverty in the School Setting

Poverty and social classes have been around as long as time. It is not until recently that people have taken an interest into poverty and the negative side effects it has on children and schools and how those effects last beyond childhood and well into adult life. There are numerous inspirational sayings about working hard and achieving goals and dreams, but there are not any with a clause about working hard and still not achieving those goals and dreams. Poverty is that clause. The 39.7 million Americans living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017) are most likely hard workers who have goals and dreams for themselves, just like everyone else. Achieving goals and dreams is no longer just about working hard. It is about working hard and having the appropriate resources. Very rarely do the Pursuit of Happiness stories happen, that is why major box office movies are made when they do!

It is a fair assumption to say that all schools want their students to succeed both in and out of the school system and think the education they are providing students is enough, but in today's world, especially in today's world, it just is not. A quality preschool through twelfth grade education is no longer an equalizer to success or an instant way out of poverty. That is not to say that a quality education does not give them a boost in the right direction, but there are countless other boosts a child needs than just a quality education alone. There are a multitude of barriers students living in poverty face to even be able to access an education. Schools and school districts often have barriers in place preventing students and families to appropriately accessing a quality education and they may not even realize it. Academic and societal barriers have become so ingrained and part of normal lives that they are often overlooked as a barrier and instead seen as part of normal day-to-day living.

Things need to change. Of the 39.7 million people living in poverty in the United States, 12.8 million are children. Children who will be in our school systems. There are many schools in the United States with over half of the student population living in poverty. There are nine states where fifty percent or more students qualify for free or reduced lunches (Templeton, 2011). Schools need to know how to reach these students and how to best serve their needs. Today's schools can no longer be solely focusing on the child in the academic sense, but instead need to have a holistic approach. Schools need to be concerned with what is happening in and out of the classroom. A student's daily life outside of the classroom directly impacts their life and learning within the classroom.

Teachers and school staff need to be taught strategies to help all their learners succeed, especially those who are battling poverty. They also need to teach strategies to the students so they can help themselves be successful both in and out of the school setting. However, this cannot be done by just the school. Communities need to rally together and provide support to children and families who are impacted by poverty.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **What is Poverty?**

Eric Jensen (2009) defines poverty as, "income less than sufficient to purchase basic needs – food, shelter, clothing, and other essentials" (p. 6). Jensen claims there are six types of poverty people can experience: situational poverty, generational poverty, absolute poverty, relative poverty, urban poverty, and rural poverty (2009). Situational poverty is defined by how one experiences a sudden crisis like a natural disaster, divorce, or health problem. Situational poverty is temporary and is often resolved quickly (compared to other types of poverty). Two or more generations born into poverty is considered generational poverty. Typically, people

experiencing generational poverty are unable to move out of their situation and remain in poverty for their entire life. Generational poverty often involves incarceration, periodic homelessness, underemployment or unemployment, violence, and recurrent exposure to addictions (Payne, 2019). Absolute poverty forces its victims to focus on day-to-day survival. People experiencing absolute poverty are lacking basic human needs (food, water, shelter). Relative poverty is poverty where members of the household are working, but their income is unsuccessfully keeping them above the poverty line. Urban poverty affects metropolitan areas with populations of more than 50,000 (Jensen, 2009). People experiencing urban poverty usually have extra stressors like overcrowding, noise pollution, and violence (Jensen, 2009). The last type of poverty, rural poverty, is the most common type of poverty. People who experience rural poverty live in non-metropolitan areas and often have fewer job opportunities than people who live in more populated areas (Jensen, 2009). People experiencing rural poverty are often also experiencing generational poverty and relative poverty. Rural poverty often extends over a life time and into the next generation even though the members of the household are typically working (Irvin, Byun, Farmer, & Hutchins, 2012). In the United States, the majority of continually poor counties are considered rural counties (U.S. Census, 2018). People can experience more than one type of poverty at the same time, or move from one type of poverty to another.

### **Poverty cycle.**

The poverty cycle is a misunderstood term. 'Poverty cycle' makes it seem like people who are living in poverty are not trying to actively get out of poverty and that they are content with continuing the cycle of being poor. This is not true. The poverty cycle is the cycle in which multiple generations are born into poverty. Some people might even get out of poverty for a brief

time and then fall back into it, creating a whole new cycle. The cycle of poverty begins with one person. That person works extremely hard, may even have all the right resources, but is unable to sustain life above the poverty line. Said person has a child. The child is now born into poverty, continuing the cycle. Nowhere in that description was a sentence describing a person who was not trying his or her hardest, working their hardest, or underutilizing resources and materials to get out of poverty. Sometimes it just happens and it can feel next to impossible to break the cycle.

A study completed by Lee and Jackson called, *The Simultaneous Effects of Socioeconomic Disadvantage and Child Health on Children's Cognitive Development* has recently suggested that a child's health may directly impact a family's socioeconomic status and the child's development (2017). Children's health affects families directly through monetary costs and impacts on parent employment and indirectly through strained parental relationships, stress, and amount of time spent caregiving. Children in poor health are also more likely to have parents in poorer health and the increased likelihood of only having one parent in full-time employment (Lee & Jackson, 2017). Some researchers have suggested that children with health issues can cost their families thousands of dollars per year in doctor's office fees and hospital stays (Lee & Jackson, 2017). This creates a massive amount of stress and pressure on families. Having an ill child makes it that much harder to break the poverty cycle, especially when only one parent can work full-time and medical bills are piling up by the thousands.

### **Culture of Classism**

A culture of classism is different from a culture of poverty. The culture of classism is a dangerous culture that is present in schools. It leads us, "into low expectations for low-income students. It makes teachers fear their most powerless pupils" (Gorski, 2008, p. 34). This is most

evident in the deficit theory. The deficit theory is the thought that, “poor people are poor because of their own moral and intellectual deficiencies” (Gorski, 2008, p. 34). People who believe the deficit theory also believe in poverty stereotypes and ignore the inequalities poor people often face.

### **Myths and stereotypes about poverty.**

There are many myths and stereotypes about students and families who are experiencing poverty. The culture of poverty is a common term used to describe the myths and stereotypes of people living in poverty. Gorski proposes the culture of poverty is a myth (2008). He believes there is no such thing as a culture of poverty and that instead there are wide differences among poor people just as there are among everyone else in the world. Ruby Payne argues this theory in her book, *From Understanding Poverty to Developing Human Capacity* (2012). She claims people living in poverty are virtually the same. They need to be taught how to be in school, how to talk appropriately, how to respect others, and how to ask questions. She believes teachers need to have a plan in place for how they will adapt their teaching to meet their needs because they will more than likely enter the classroom behind their middle or upper class peers (Payne, 2012).

Often low-income families are thought to not care or not value their child’s education. This is not true. Low-income families value and care about their children’s education just as much as non-low-income families (Gorski, 2014). Many low-income families place a higher emphasis on education as they believe education is one way out of poverty. Because schools often believe this myth too, low-income families are encouraged or coerced into attending classes or workshops on parenting or educating and playing with their child at home, or how to take care of their finances. These workshops are often targeted only at families living in poverty and coach them to ‘act’ like the middle and upper classes. This makes poverty seem like it is a

cultural problem (Shuffelton, 2013). Shuffelton theorizes school districts that partake in workshops for families in poverty are following Ruby Payne's book, *A Framework for Understanding*, which teaches poverty as a culture or mindset instead of an absence of money (2013). The children and children whose parents have taken these courses are no more likely to get out of poverty than if they had not taken the courses. This also reverts to the myths of people living poverty are inferior (Shuffelton, 2013). Low-income parents and families are also believed to be uninvolved in their child's education because they are less likely to attend school events or functions or volunteer in the classroom. This is not because they do not see the value in school events. Families in poverty often have less access to transportation, paid time off, and affordable childcare, making it difficult to get to a school function, event, or volunteer in the classroom. Schools often do not take these circumstances into consideration when planning school events.

Poor people who are not native English speakers are frequently thought to not be linguistically complex (Gorski, 2008). This is especially true in other varieties of the English language like Black English Vernacular or English dialects spoken in the Southern states. However, all languages are highly structured and complex. The person may not speak "standard" English well, but chances are they can understand and speak their native language or dialect fluently. Almost anyone who speaks a language is linguistically complex. "More than 100 years of linguistic research clarifies that all languages and language varieties are communicatively equal because in their contexts they are equally complex and coherent," (Gorski, 2018, p. 80). Studies have shown that students experiencing poverty do start school with less literacy skills than their more well-off peers. However, this is typically due to lack of literacy resources and not because the family is linguistically deficient (Gorski, 2018).

Families and children in poverty are also assumed to be exposed to frequent violence and drug use. This is not always true. People in poverty are no more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol than wealthier people. They are more likely to be convicted of a drug or alcohol charge, but are not any more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol than well-off people. Violence, drugs, and alcohol are more evident in poor communities and neighborhoods, but it is equally distributed among social classes (Gorski, 2008). In fact, wealthy white people are more likely to abuse alcohol and illegal substances than poor people.

### **Why do Students Experiencing Poverty not do as Well as Their Wealthier Peers?**

There are several reasons why students experiencing poverty do not do as well as their wealthier peers. One of them being parental involvement. Often parents of children in poverty are working multiple jobs to make ends meet. This gives little time to spend playing, reading, talking to, or interacting with their children (Gordon & Cui, 2014). “Development is rooted in normative family interactions that occur over a long period of time” (Ackerman, Brown, & Izard, 2004, p. 367). Parents living in poverty have a higher separation or divorce rate than wealthier parents. Single parenting is linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, chronic irritability, and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. It is very difficult to want to interact with a child when the parent is struggling themselves.

Poor people are more likely to attend schools with less funding, lower teacher salaries, larger class sizes, have limited technology and Internet access (Gorski, 2008). These schools also typically have higher student to teacher ratios, less rigorous curriculum, and less experienced teachers. Poorly funded schools are more likely to have pest infestations, non-working bathrooms, large amounts of teacher or substitute teacher shortages, and more teachers not licensed in what they are teaching. The materials in poorly funded schools are usually outdated,

scarce, or non-existent. They are also more likely to not have the extra learning facilities like science labs, music rooms, gymnasiums, or art rooms (Gorski, 2008).

Research completed by Ackerman et al., concluded children who experienced poverty in their preschool years suffer its effects for their entire lives, even if they no longer are experiencing poverty (2004). Poverty limits the growth of children's cognitive ability in the preschool years, which are some of the most important years in a child's development (Ackerman et al., 2004). In their preschool years, children learn how to self-regulate their emotions, handle conflict, and identify and balance their own needs amongst other children's needs. Children experiencing poverty in their preschool years can experience low self-esteem, increased rates of depression, and difficulty with peer relationships for much of their lives. These effects seem to be more prevalent in boys than girls (Ackerman et al., 2004).

Children living in poverty also tend to not do as well as their wealthier peers because of teacher bias and low expectations. One study conducted by Hecht and Greenfield (2002) studied kindergarten and first grade teachers' perceptions of their students who are living in poverty and the effect it has on the students' literacy skills later in elementary school. The study found that teachers generally have lower expectations for their students living in poverty. They do not hold them to the same high standards as children who are not living in poverty. This bias directly affected their ability to read later in third grade. Sixty-six percent of the students living in poverty were still struggling readers in third grade and still not being held to the same high expectations as their peers. (Hecht & Greenfield, 2002).

### **Effects of Poverty on Children**

There are four main risk factors for children in poverty. First, emotional and social challenges, second, acute and chronic stressors, third, cognitive lags, and fourth, health and

safety issues. Forty percent of children living in persistent poverty have deficiencies in at least two of the seven major areas of functioning (language, working memory, cognitive control, reward processing, memory, spatial cognition, and visual cognition) by age three (Jensen, 2000). Typically, one problem or deficiency created by poverty creates another, causing a cycle. Each risk factor or deficiency presents major challenges on a child's brain development.

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) focused on children over a four and one half year period, beginning at nine to eleven months through age five. The children were assessed yearly in six developmental areas: personal, social and emotional, communication, language and literacy, and mathematical development. Each year the child's family had to report their annual family income. As they monitored each child's progress, the researchers noted the children whose families whose income was below the poverty line at each yearly check-up, only twenty-six percent of the children were making adequate progress. Of the children, whose families experienced episodic poverty, forty percent of them made adequate progress, and of the children whose families were never at or below the poverty line at the check ins, sixty percent of them made adequate progress (Kiernan & Mensah, 2011).

**Effects of poverty on the brain.** Poverty impacts many areas of the brain beginning in utero (Payne, 2019). Mothers of low-income status are more likely to smoke or drink alcohol during their pregnancy. Both smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol cause low birth weight. They can also cause cognitive delays, behavioral difficulties, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Children in poverty experience stress at a much higher rate than their wealthier peers. Stress inhibits the brain's working memory, causes anxiety, and can make children emotionally unstable (Payne, 2019).

Poverty effects four main areas of the brain (Payne, 2019). The left occipitotemporal and perisylvian regions of the brain are where language and reading are processed. Children who experience poverty hear about 13 million less words by age four than their wealthier peers (Payne, 2019). These words come from being read to and talked to within the home. The left perisylvian part of the brain is the language system, and is responsible for semantics, phonological, and syntax of language (Payne, 2019). Children in poverty may have a harder time learning the complexities of a language. The parietal area of the brain helps to represent the spatial relationships among objects. Lastly, the occipitotemporal portion of the brain is responsible for translating visual representations into more abstract representations and translates visual memory into mental images. Children in poverty may have a harder time with short and long-term memory (Payne, 2019).

**Effects of poverty on children's behaviors.** "In conditions of poverty, those most likely to survive are those who have an exaggerated stress response" (Jensen, 2000, p. 26). Children experiencing poverty are frequently exposed to intense and often destructive adult conflict. Adults who partake in this type of conflict are not self-regulated. Children who observe intense conflict frequently do not have appropriate self-regulation models to learn from. This limits the child's ability to self-regulate in physically or emotionally stressful environments, creating a cycle for many years to come. Ineffective or absent parenting also have detrimental effects on a child's ability to self-regulate (Jensen, 2000).

Studies have shown up to one-third of young children living in poverty have behavior difficulties (Fox, Mattek, & Gresl, 2011). Research has shown behavior difficulties in childhood strongly correlate with lower socio-economic status later in life, thus continuing the poverty cycle (Fox et al., 2011; Kiernan & Mensah, 2011; Lee & Jackson, 2017). These behavior

difficulties are often accompanied by a mental health disorder like attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, conduct disorder, or oppositional defiant disorder (Fox et al., 2011). Fox et al, conducted a two-year study at a large Midwestern university to address mental health issues in young children living in poverty (2011). Parents, doctors, or other care givers could recommend children to be a part of the study to receive mental health services. The child had to be under the age of six and have a significant behavior concern such as excessive aggression, destructiveness, separation anxiety, self-injurious, extreme hyperactivity, or oppositional behaviors. Children were not allowed to participate in the study if they had other medical conditions like a major physical anomaly or other serious medical condition. By the end of the two-year study, only 148 children finished the program and followed the doctor's plan of treatment. The majority of those children received a psychiatric diagnosis and also were discovered to have a developmental disability. Sixty-five percent of families of children completing the study reported that their child's challenging behavior had decreased and their pro-social behavior had increased. They also reported that the challenging behaviors had dramatically decreased in intensity and duration. Parent behavior was also examined as part of this study. Before beginning the study, parents were observed and interviewed asking their preferred method of discipline. Many parents reported using verbal and physical punishment. At the end of the study, parents were again observed and interviewed asking their preferred method of discipline. The use of verbal and physical punishment decreased and was replaced with nurturing language and explicitly expectations (Fox et al., 2011).

### **Barriers**

There are many barriers people living in poverty face. Often people who have grown up with poverty barriers become accustomed to them and see them as a normal part of life and

attempt to adjust to meet their needs (Gorski, 2014). There are barriers children face accessing education and more barriers in the actual education system itself. Often, schools and teachers do not realize they are unintentionally placing barriers in the way of a child's education. However, there are many things teachers and school staff can do to provide more equitable access to education, beginning in elementary school.

**Barriers to accessing education.** There are many barriers to accessing education including, "unequal access to healthcare, safe and affordable housing, and living wage jobs," (Gorski, 2014). Children who live in poverty must overcome these barriers to even make it to school regularly. Once they get to school, there are a completely new set of barriers to overcome. Children of poverty have less books, visit libraries less often, and watch TV more often than well-off children (Jensen, 2000). This makes it extremely difficult to enter school in preschool or kindergarten and be on target to meeting district or state set learning goals. Young children tend to not realize these things are considered barriers. They are all a part of their normal routine. It is not until they get older that the differences between their lives and their wealthier peers becomes more evident.

**Barriers in the educational system.** A barrier in education is an, "unequal access to educational opportunity" (Gorski, 2014, p. 15). There are many barriers that prevent students from all areas of poverty from reaching their fullest potential, but none more prevalent than students who experience rural poverty. Rural youth experience more difficulty reaching post-secondary goals, specifically college degrees (Irvin et al., 2012). Rural youth have the highest dropout rate in the United States, two times higher than the national average dropout rate. Students in rural schools are four times less likely to make yearly adequate progress in all learning areas (Irvin et al., 2012). They are also less likely to attempt to pursue goals after high

school due to both perceived and actual barriers in their lives. These perceived barriers predict their career goals, school engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy. Students in rural communities cite several unique barriers hindering their education: employment in the area typically does not require any post-secondary degree or training, fewer economic resources, geographic seclusion, generally having to move away from their support system to pursue a degree or training, and they are often less interested in the more modern world (Irvin et al., 2012). Rural schools have the same barriers as the rural community and their effects are much the same. Rural schools have a hard time providing school activities due to financial constraints, long traveling distances between the school and the activity, and limited or lack of public transportation. Rural schools have less access to advanced high school courses because they do not pay as well as larger more urban school districts. They are unable to attract or retain qualified teaching staff to teach the advanced courses. Students in rural school districts are less likely to have access to an on-site guidance counselor, go on college visits, or have the opportunities for job shadowing or apprenticeship (Irvin et al., 2012).

*Deficit theory.* Gorski believes schools, teachers, and school staff may unknowingly have a deficit mindset about low-income students (2014). A deficit mindset is one where the adult defines students by their weaknesses instead of their strengths; children cannot overcome their shortcomings (Gorski, 2014). In school, this looks like less rigorous goals for low-income students because they have not had the experiences, encouraging low-income families to attend workshops and classes, or thinking if a student worked harder, they would do better. Schools tend to place focus on building resiliency in their current condition instead of how to help students and families get out or change their situation. Teachers need training on how to work with students and families who are in poverty (Templeton, 2011). They need to be explicitly

taught on what to expect from students experiencing poverty and strategies to help them succeed in the classroom.

### **Strategies**

There are a multitude of strategies teachers and schools can use to better engage families and students in poverty both at the district level, school level, and individual classroom level. All school personnel need to be aware of individual student needs and the resources to best meet students' needs as no two children are alike. Many students and families will need assistance with multiple factors or access to multiple school or community services. The most important strategies all school staff can utilize when working with students and families in poverty are patience, empathy, and understanding. All students deserve to be listened to, valued, and cared for, regardless of their individual situations.

**Strategies for supporting students.** Teachers and schools need to stop trying to fix poor students. Instead, they need to begin to look at how they implement the culture of classism (Gorski, 2008). Teachers need to be reflective and acknowledge their biases of students in poverty and begin to change their attitudes and behaviors toward these students. They need to reflect on their interactions and expectations of all students and hold all students to the same high expectations. Within the classroom, teachers need to stop ability grouping and tracking, and instead focus on what the individual student can do and what his or her goals are. Teachers and schools need to quit supporting the deficit theory and deficit mindset and replace them with a growth mindset for all students. All school staff need to be aware of poverty stereotypes and myths and know how to respond and educate when others (staff or students) stereotype students.

At the district level, schools need to stop the implementation of residential segregation redistricting (Gorski, 2008). This concept places students in a school based on where they live in

town. This often groups all the low-income students in one or two schools and the wealthier students in one or two separate schools. Families need to be able to choose what school they want their child to attend on a first-come, first-serve basis. School districts need to make sure all schools have rigorous and relevant curriculum available, proper learning materials, and enough learning materials for all students (Gorski, 2009).

Children living in poverty are often lacking in social skills. There are six emotions that all humans are hardwired with: sadness, joy, disgust, anger, surprise, and fear. However, there are several more emotions or feelings that humans must be taught: humility, forgiveness, empathy, sympathy, compassion, patience, cooperation, gratitude, shame, and optimism. Children living in poverty are frequently lacking many of the emotions that must be taught (Jensen, 2000). School districts, especially school districts with high poverty rates, need to incorporate explicit social skills lessons into the curriculum. Even basic social skills need to be taught to children of all ages. Children need to be taught how to greet others, take turns, work together, and handle conflict (Jensen, 2000).

Teachers and schools can empower students living in poverty. Students can be taught to take charge of their situation and how to manage stressors better to help break the cycle of social-emotional dysregulation. Instead of telling students how to behave properly, they need to be taught how to behave properly (Jensen, 2000). This includes adult modeling, facilitated peer interactions, coping strategies, and time to practice and develop the skills. Classrooms that give students jobs teach responsibility, goal setting, problem-solving, and pride. Schools can also promote positive attendance among all students offer incentives to students or families for coming to school regularly.

Children in rural environments may need additional strategies specific to their environment. To support all students in rural environments, rural school districts need to make sure all students, early childhood through twelfth grade have access to a guidance counselor who has experience working with rural youth. Irvin et al., (2012) suggests having the guidance counselor check in regularly with all students at least yearly and more often for students who are more at risk of educational barriers. The guidance counselor should create a plan with each student and help them follow through with their plan to reach their post-secondary goals, whether it be working for the family business or attending a college or university. If guidance counselors are not available to the students, then school districts should reach out to the community or county resources to help students overcome their barriers. This could include mentoring or providing opportunities for students to job shadow and learn more about specific careers within the community.

**Strategies for supporting families.** Family involvement often comes in different forms for low-income families. Often low-income families do not come to school related events and functions like school concerts, parent-teacher conferences, or sporting events. Schools and teachers need to continue to reach out to these families, even when they do not respond (Gorski, 2008). They need to continue to try to communicate with parents and families because not doing so conveys that the school does not care or value the child or family. Before planning any major school function, families can be given a time preference survey asking a day or time that might work best for their family. If a family does not respond to the survey via paper, the teacher can try to reach the family in a different method like phone call or email. When possible, schools could hold the same event multiple times at different points in the day or on different days of the

week. While many low-income families may not attend school functions or events, this does not mean that they are not involved in their child's education at home.

Families can stay involved by helping their child with homework and assisting with school projects (Gordon & Cui, 2014). Parent involvement has been positively associated with better grades, higher test scores, and overall greater achievement (Gordon & Cui, 2014). One study looked at the performance of African-American students living in poverty and the amount and type of home and family involvement. The researchers studied African-American students who were in the top portion of their class and the parental involvement of African-American students who were in the bottom portion of their class. Much of the African-American students' parents were involved in some way with their child's education (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). However, the type of involvement varied between groups. The study showed certain types of involvement were better than others (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). Better family involvement included monitoring homework, engaging in educational discussions, posing problem-solving tasks, and discussing post high school plans (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). Families that helped with homework instead of just monitoring seemed to hinder their child's academic growth (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000).

The same study concluded that parents who are involved in parental leadership opportunities within the school system, like the Parent-Teacher Organization, had children who were typically higher achievers (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). These types of parents made frequent contact with their children's teachers (both parent and teacher initiated) and stayed up to date with how their child was performing in school both academically and behaviorally. Parents who were not in a Parent-Teacher Organization typically did not contact any school personnel unless it was to discuss an academic or behavioral issue their child was having (Gutman &

McLoyd, 2000). The contact was mainly initiated by the teacher and rarely by the parent (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). To combat this issue, teachers and principals need to make positive contact with all students' families, regardless of type of parental involvement. This shows the parent, family, and the student the school does care about the success of the student.

Children living in poverty frequently encounter many health issues. Schools and school districts can support children in poverty by providing dental services like sealants and cavity screenings, making sure a school nurse is available at all times, provide tutors to work with students who are frequently absent or who need to catch up, and make all staff aware of students' health issues. School staff can also help educate parents and families about what services and resources are available in the community whether it be free or reduced cost health services, free rides to health appointments, or agencies that can aid in covering medical costs. By providing these services to students and families, the school is giving the student and family a fighting chance. Children are not able to be successful in school if they are not healthy enough to attend!

**Equity literacy.** Gorski (2018) defines equity literacy as, "the knowledge and skills educators need to become a threat to the existence of bias and inequity in our spheres of influence" (p. 17). It is an equal access to opportunity. Equity literacy focuses on the strengths of the students experiencing poverty rather than their short-comings or barriers they may face. Empathy, compassion, and caring are the main features of equity literacy. Equity literacy is comprised of four abilities and twelve principles. Someone who is focused on equity literacy must be able to recognize biases in the classroom, school culture, school policies, and society. They must also recognize how these inequities harm students and their families. An equitable literacy leader must be able to respond to the biases and inequities immediately as they are discovered. They must possess the ability to redress the biases and inequities so they do not

return and must have the ability to create and sustain a bias free classroom and equitable learning environment for everyone (Gorski, 2018). Educators who know and respond to the four abilities must also know the twelve principles behind equity literacy and be able to follow the principles (Gorski, 2018). Gorski's twelve principles are: "people experiencing poverty are the experts on their own experiences, the right to equitable educational opportunity is universal, poverty and class are intersectional; people experiencing poverty are diverse, what we believe about people experiencing poverty informs how we teach, interact with, and advocate (or fail to advocate) for them, we cannot understand the relationship between poverty and education without understanding the barriers and inequities people experiencing poverty face in and out of schools; test scores are inadequate measures of equity, educational outcome disparities are the result of inequities, of unjust distributions of access and opportunity, not the result of deficiencies in the mindsets, cultures, or grittiness of people experiencing poverty, equitable educators adopt a structural view rather than a deficit view of families experiencing poverty; strategies for creating and sustaining equitable classrooms, schools, and school systems must be based on evidence of what works, simplistic instructional strategies, absent a commitment to more robust institutional change, are no threat to inequities, and lastly, there is no path to educational equity that does not involve a redistribution of access and opportunity." It is through these abilities and principles all school staff will be able to better provide an equitable education to all students.

### **Analysis**

Poverty is a problem of some magnitude in almost every school district in the United States, and it does not look to be going away any time soon. Because of this, educators and all school staff need to be prepared and well-versed in how to teach youth who are living in poverty. All educators and school staff need to be aware of the myths and pre-conceived notions of what

living in poverty means (Gorski, 2008). Personal biases need to be addressed and eliminated. Compassion, understanding, and empathy matched with high expectations for all students, need to be radiating through every classroom in every grade level (Hecht & Greenfield, 2002; Shuffelton, 2013; Templeton, 2011). Without these policies in place, students will not be successful, nor will they feel like a valued and cared for member of the school community.

The implications of poverty in the education setting are huge. Poverty not only impacts the students while they are attending school, but also how they get to school, the quality of education they receive, and their plans post-graduation (Irvin et al., 2011; Jensen, 2010; Templeton, 2011). Poverty affects how students learn and function on a day-to-day basis. Children living in the most extreme form of poverty, absolute poverty, will struggle the most. They often fit the classic stereotype of poverty. They may be undernourished, improperly clothed, hungry, and possibly experience periods of homelessness (Gorski, 2008). While the students living in absolute poverty may struggle the most with day-to-day living, this does not mean these students are not capable of learning and have the potential to be highly successful like any other student in the classroom.

The most common form of poverty, rural poverty, affects both schools and the students attending the schools (Gorski, 2008). Rural schools often do not receive as much funding as urban schools due to a less populous student body. Less funding means fewer resources for students – students who, due to rural poverty, may need extra support to be successful in and out of the classroom. Rural schools have many more barriers to providing education than their urban counterparts. Beyond the funding issue, rural school districts are frequently spread over many square miles making transportation to and from school difficult (Gorski, 2008; Irvin et al., 2011).

They are typically less able to find the highest quality teachers because they are unable to pay them as well as a more urban school district could.

While rural poverty is the most common, urban poverty is more severe. Rural poverty can, in a way, be brushed under the rug, whereas urban poverty is very observable. Urban poverty is where the myths of violence and drug become relevant. It is a myth people in poverty are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol and have regular encounters with violence (Gorski, 2008). However, extreme violence and drug abuse are more prevalent in urban poverty than any other form of poverty (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). Students in urban poverty are far more likely to experience gang violence both in and out of the school. Similar to rural schools, urban schools may have a more difficult time hiring and maintaining high quality teachers due to the extreme violence urban schools and communities may face (Gorski, 2014, Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Irvin et al., 2011; Lee & Jackson, 2017).

Poverty affects every aspect of a child's life, beginning with brain development (Payne, 2013). Children living in poverty are literally underdeveloped cognitively, emotionally, sometimes physically, and socially compared to middle and upper class same-age peers. This presents a huge problem for teachers and schools. All teachers and schools need to be aware of the challenges of living in poverty and need to be trained on how to help and teach the most vulnerable children of the student body (Gorski, 2018). Poverty affects how children get to school, how often they come to school, their mental state when they arrive at school, and their attitudes toward learning.

### **Application**

Poverty is unavoidable in today's educational system. The research discussed shows the importance for children living in poverty to have the highest quality education possible (Gorski,

2014; Gorski, 2018; Hecht & Greenfield, 2002; Jensen, 2010; Kiernan & Mensah, 2011; Templeton, 2011). When teachers have admitted and corrected their biases and misconceptions about poverty, they may begin to understand how to best serve their neediest students (Gorski, 2008). Teachers must consider the impact they have on students and their later achievement and be able to hold all students to the highest standards of achievement, regardless of their socioeconomic status. It is important for all school staff to understand the importance of having high expectations, while also understanding that some students may need extra supports to achieve the high expectations that have been set and maintained.

As an early childhood educator, I can see the impact poverty has had on my students and their families. It is imperative that my early childhood colleagues and I find ways to support students and their families who are living in poverty. Helping students in poverty is a team effort and I am unable to accomplish a lot of change without the support of my teammates. First, and foremost, my colleagues and I need to sit down and discuss our own biases and beliefs toward people living in poverty. We need to figure out why we have those biases and beliefs and discuss what we can do to change. Our classrooms need to be bias and stereotype free. The research suggests focusing on students' strengths and interests and not on the things we or they cannot control (like their socioeconomic status) (Gorski, 2018). At least once each quarter, I will write down at least three strengths of each of my students and continue help build on those strengths and even help them find new strengths they may not have known they have.

Children living in poverty enter school cognitively, socially, and behaviorally lower than middle and upper class same-age peers. Typically, children living in poverty are lacking in experiences and vocabulary. Field trips are one way to provide students with real life experiences, possibly somewhere they may not typically venture to. Field trips give the chance to

learn new vocabulary, build schema, and correct misconceptions. I can seek donations from local community members or grants to help provide the money needed to go on the field trips.

One challenge families living in poverty face is being involved in their child's education, whether that be talking with a teacher, coming to a parent-teacher conference, or attending a school event (Gorski, 2008). While being involved is a challenge for many families in poverty, students who have involved families have higher rates of success (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). I want my students' families involved in their education. When planning family events throughout the year, I will be sensitive to the needs of all my students' families and plan a variety of events at different times of the day. In the past, I have held events during the school day like, "Donuts with Dad" or "Muffins with Mom." Neither of these events were being inclusive to all families. I was holding the events at the same time of day (first thing in the morning) and not being sensitive to the fact that not all my students have a mom or dad in their home. Many of my students live with their grandparents, other relative, or are in foster care. In the beginning of the year at home visits, I will ask parents their preference of days and times that work best for them to be able to come to family events. I will also ask what types of involvement they would be interested in such as family events, parent-teacher conferences, reading to the class, monthly updates about their child, parent-teacher organization, volunteering in the classroom, or any other idea a family may have. As much as possible, I will try to honor their preferences and hold family events throughout the day and evening and on different days of the week. I will also ask families their preferred method of contact and the best time to reach them to be able to maintain frequent contact with families. Gorski recommended that even if a family does not come to any event or respond to any form of contact, to never quit trying and be persistent in efforts to get them involved (2008). In the past, if a family did not respond when I initiated contact several

times, I stopped trying. This is not helping the student or their family. I plan to incorporate many modes of contact including email, telephone, notes, text messages, in-person at drop-off or pick-up, or by parent-teacher communication applications like SeeSaw and Remind.

Students and families often face many barriers making it to school. As much as I can, I will be an advocate for my students and their families including helping them find adequate transportation, assisting filling out any necessary paperwork, connecting them with community resources, and providing learning materials when possible. I will work with my school's guidance counselor in order to be knowledgeable about all of the local, state, and national agencies I can refer families to. I want my students and their families to know I am on their side and I want their child to succeed just as much as they do. Once students get to school I want their families to know I will hold them to the highest standards and will expect them to meet those standards (Hecht & Greenfield, 2002). However, I will be there to support and coach them along the way so they can meet the high standards and level of rigor I hold all my students accountable to. I will not give up on my students or their families. Many school districts have begun implementing a food or clothing pantry for families in need. I am going to work with my principal, school social worker, and guidance counselor to get a food and clothing pantry set up within my school district. The school district is partnered with three of the local grocery stores. I can reach out to the partnered grocery stores to gauge interest in donating to a food pantry. Clothing can be donated from other members of the community or purchased using donations.

A lot of research has been done on children living in poverty and challenging behaviors (Ackerman et al., 2004; Hecht & Greenfield, 2002; Lee & Jackson, 2017; Payne, 2013). Being an early childhood educator, I will place more emphasis on teaching pro-social behaviors and coping skills to my students. I would like to talk with my district curriculum director about

looking at and purchasing a social skills curriculum appropriate for early childhood with emphasis on students in poverty. When possible, I will connect students and families with school or community resources to maintain positive behaviors or address challenging behaviors. I want my students and their families to know I will not give up on them even if it gets tough. I have always believed the neediest children will ask for love in the most unconventional ways.

### **Conclusion**

Everyone has preconceived notions and biases about people living in poverty. Many of these biases and stereotypes are not based on facts or place a blanket over an entire group of people unfairly. People living in poverty are no more or less likely to be bad people than people who are wealthy. People living in poverty are no more or less likely to be hard workers than their wealthier counterparts; they have goals and ambitions just like everyone else in the world. Their goals may look or sound different from someone not experiencing poverty, but that does not make them any less important.

Research shows students who have access to resources and support are more likely to get out of poverty than students who do not (Gordon & Cui, 2014; Gorski, 2018; Hecht & Greenfield, 2002). All students, but especially those living in poverty, need access the highest quality education possible. All educators and school personnel need to be aware of their own personal biases toward people who are experiencing poverty. The hardships students in poverty face may be hard for some people to picture and accept, but the reality is that poverty is a real problem and schools need to be prepared to help these students in any way they can. School districts need to remove as many barriers to accessing education as possible and remove any barriers within the educational system. When both of these things are done are students in poverty given more of an equal chance in the educational system. When students feel successful

early on, they are more likely to continue trying to be successful as time continues, especially with the right supports from the school district, community, and teachers. When school districts, parents, and communities all work together, everyone wins.

### References

- Ackerman, B. P., Brown, E. D., & Izard, C. E. (2004). The relations between persistent poverty and contextual risk and children's behavior in elementary school. *Developmental Psychology, 40*(3), 367-377. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.40.3.367
- Gordon, M., & Cui, M. (2014). School-related parental involvement and adolescent academic achievement: the role of community poverty. *Family Relations, 63*(5), 616-626. doi:10.1111/fare.12090
- Gorski, P. (2008). The myth of the culture of poverty. *Educational Leadership, 65*(7), 32-36.
- Gorski, P. (2014). Poverty, class, and the cultivation of economically just educational policy: the role of ideology. *Research Intelligence, 125*, 14-15.
- Gorski, P. (2018). *Reaching and teaching students in poverty: Strategies for erasing the opportunity gap*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Gutman, L., & McLoyd, V. (2000). Parents' management of their children's education within the home, at school, and in the community: An examination of African-American families living in poverty. *The Urban Review: Issues and Ideas in Public Education, 32*(1), 1-24. doi:10.1023/A:1005112300726
- Hecht, S. A. & Greenfield, D. B. (2002). Explaining the predictive accuracy of teacher judgments of their students' reading achievement: The role of gender, classroom behavior, and emergent literacy skills in a longitudinal sample of children exposed to poverty. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 15*, 789-809.

- Irvin, M. J., Byun, S., Meece, J. L., Farmer, T. W., & Hutchins, B. C. (2011). Educational Barriers of Rural Youth. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 20(1), 71-87. doi:10.1177/1069072711420105
- Jensen, E. (2010). *Teaching with poverty in mind: What being poor does to kids brains and what schools can do about it*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Kiernan, K. E. & Mensah, F. K. (2011). Poverty, family resources and children's early educational attainment: the mediating role of parenting. *British Educational Research Journal* 37(2), 317-336.
- Lee, D. & Jackson, M. (2017). The simultaneous effects of socioeconomic disadvantage and child health on children's cognitive development. *Demography* 54(5) 1845-1871. doi: 10.1007/s13524-017-0605-z
- Payne, R. K. (2013). *A framework for understanding poverty: A cognitive approach*. Cheltenham, Vic.: Hawker Brownlow Education.
- Shuffelton, A. (2013). A matter of friendship: Educational interventions into culture and poverty. *Educational Theory* 63(3), 299-316.
- Smith, W. (Producer), Black, T. (Producer), Blumenthal, J. (Producer), Lassiter, J. (Producer), Tisch, S. (Producer) & Muccino, G. (Director). (2006). *The Pursuit of Happyness* [Motion Picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures Corporation.
- Templeton, B. L. (2011). *Understanding poverty in the classroom: Changing perceptions for student success*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2018, September 12). *Income, poverty, and health insurance coverage in the United States: 2017* (Release No. CB18-144). Retrieved from

<https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/income-poverty.html>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2018, December 6). *Poverty rate for counties that are mostly rural: 2013-2017*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2018/comm/acs-5yr-poverty-mostly-rural.html>